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Introduction

This book rethinks the place of language and materiality in politics by bringing the cultural and material turns into conversation. To be sure, a curious gap permeates cultural and material understandings of political transformations. The cultural turn in the human sciences in the 1980s and 1990s put language at the center of our understanding of social relations. Language, whether backed by power (Bourdieu 1991) or as a form that power takes (Foucault 1972, 1990, 1995), was seen to occasion matter so that materiality came to be understood, in part, as an “effect” of language (Butler 1993:63). The theoretical canon that emerged in the fields of sociology and anthropology, however, fell short of offering an analysis of the reciprocal role of the properties of material objects in the formation of language.

Conversely, the interdisciplinary material turn (the new materialism) has sought to illustrate that materiality is just as integral as language to social life (see Latour 2005; Keane 2006; Alexander 2008; Mitchell 2011; Mukerji 2012; Braidotti 2013; Kohn 2013). Yet by seeking to release matter from its subordination to language, many scholars of the material turn largely ignore language. Rather, they turn to studies of the political impact of materiality by focusing on the senses: taste, sight, sound, smell, touch, and the intersection of these sensory perceptions (see Pinney 2006; Farquhar 2006; Biddle and Knights 2007; DeSoucey 2010; Levitt 2015; Sherman 2009; Surak 2017; Zubrzycki 2011, 2017a; Benzecry 2017). Thus mutual relations between language and material objects as social phenomena remain largely unexamined in the canons of both the cultural and material turns, leading to the failure of the human and social sciences to properly tackle this question: What are the political implications of the different ways in which things and terms are interwoven?

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I bring this question to bear on the social and political history of postrevolutionary Iran. Influenced, in part, by the logocentric tradition in Western human sciences, the canon of revolutionary Iran tends to ignore everyday objects as key political drivers in the Islamic Republic. As Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist theory has demonstrated, pairs of opposites such as nature/culture, body/soul, matter/mind, and form/content play a fundamental role in ordering discourses in Western cultures (1977). This is a hierarchy of value in which one side is given priority over the other. Another opposition of subordination that is less talked about is language over things, which renders material objects marginal and derivative. This hierarchy of value may be seen as related to the human exceptionalism that permeates the field of Iranian studies whereby attributes that are distinctive to humans—discourse, culture, religion, economy, ideology, and propaganda—are fashioned as tools to understand both humans and politics. This approach tends to generate, to use Eduardo Kohn's terminology, a "circular closure" that confines us to understand the distinctively human by means of that which is distinctive to humans, conflating analytical objects with analytics in the process (2013:6). As a result, scholars of Iran have overlooked the myriad ways in which people and politics are connected to a broader world of *things*, or how this fundamental connection changes what it might mean to conceive of agency, resistance, and the political.

This is not to say that the canon of revolutionary Iran completely ignores the object world (see Bayat 2007; Sohrabi 2016; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2019). Rather, discussions of Iran tend to treat materiality insofar as objects are seen as *extensions*. Influenced by *historical materialism*, some scholars of Iran highlight the importance of material things to the extent that they plug into the production process. Others view objects as having agency with which they are endowed by means of some form of extensionality, whereby things either *reflect* already existing norms and values, as in Jean Baudrillard's sense of *consumer society/culture* (1970), or are *inscribed* with meaning and value by the political field, as in Arjun Appadurai's sense of *the social life of things* (1986). And yet, others view the efficacy of objects through the prism of Foucault's *dispositive* (1977), where material objects are *endowed* with utility at the juncture of a heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, regulatory laws, administrative measures, and so on. As anthropologist Webb Keane explains, these approaches "invite us to dematerialize materiality once again by finding the ultimate locus, the source of that agency in some kind of will, or some kind of agentive project for which itself there is no material account" (Keane and Silverstein 2017:33). This book seeks to move beyond such logocentric and human-centric approaches to materiality and politics in the Islamic Republic.

In doing so, the ensuing chapters also take issue with recent phenomenological studies of materiality that strive to illuminate the agency of objects by

showing how things affect persons through their senses (see Pinney 2006; Farquhar 2006; Biddle and Knights 2007; DeSoucey 2010; Levitt 2015; Sherman 2009; Surak 2017; Zubrzycki 2011, 2017a; Benzecry 2017). This literature has made a tremendous contribution to our understanding of objects not as mere facilitators of action that point the source of agency back to humans but as things that expand, or bring into existence, the subject. And yet these works have unnecessarily ignored language. “There is no way of speaking about materiality,” says Judith Butler, “that is outside of language” (1993:36). And since language is not simply a tool of power but a form that power takes, the more we speak of an object, the more that object comes into formation. Thus, while it is true that the sheer materiality of things provides openings to new systems of meaning and languages that traverse processes of subject formation (Keane 2006), we must also remember the organizing structural role that language plays in forming our material world. As such, it is important to establish a dynamism between materiality and language that enables us to better understand how their merger permeates subject formation, political action, and resistance.

Revolution of Things addresses these problems by telling the story of political transformations in Iran from the vantage point of the relationships between everyday objects and words. Drawing on twenty years of involvement with Iran and twenty-five months of fieldwork in Tehran, this book explores politics in terms of the discursive possibilities that the presence and absence of material things generate. It shows that material objects from the moon to corpses to walls can reveal the ontological indiscernibility of medium and world for many Iranians, affording distinct sets of signifiers that are part of the provincial historical text, even if those signifiers have not been extensively used before. In the process, the book illustrates how everyday objects act, by means of their very materiality, as political players that mobilize Islamist and post-Islamist discourses in revolutionary Iran, with wide-ranging consequences.

Taking things and terms as generative actors, the book then explores how shifting relations between the two occasion different kinds of politics. Specifically, it shows that the different confluences of the material and linguistic worlds have brought about qualitatively distinct social fields, with each affording unique possibilities for subjectivity, resistance, and thought in Tehran. So doing, the book seeks to contribute to: first, posthuman critiques of the ways in which we have treated humans as the primary source of agency (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Mukerji 1994; Miller 1998; Latour 1991, 2005; Gell 1992, 1998; Keane 2006, 2017; Tilley 2006a; Mitchell 2011; Braidotti 2013; Kohn 2013; Peters 2015; Molnár 2016, 2017; Zubrzycki 2017a); second, the material turn critique of post-structuralist models of resistance, which are linked to the internal dynamics of referential systems, and not the relations between those systems and the object world (see Giddens 1979; Spivak 1985b; Latour 1991;

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Mahmood 2005; Oslen 2006; van Dommelen 2006; Kohn 2013); and finally, our understanding of how shifting relations between things and terms have brought about structural political transformations in postrevolutionary Iran. In the process, the book provides what is, to my knowledge, one of the most sustained empirical and analytical studies of how the confluence of materiality and language shapes our social and political world.

These arguments are cultivated in four chapters. The rest of the introduction develops a theoretical and historical framework drawing on the concepts of *affordance*, *disaffordance*, *resistance/resignification*, and *form/social structure*. These concepts are situated within the relevant literature in the fields of sociology, anthropology, political science, and literary studies, and posited against the backdrop of revolutionary politics, the rise of political Islam, and international conflict. The introduction provides a synthesis of these concepts in order to fashion an analytics that explores the fundamental ways in which things and terms have brought about different forms that the social takes in Tehran.¹ By social I mean relations not just between humans but also between humans and things. This is followed by a brief discussion of how empirical sources are used in relation to the examination and theorization of the relations between materiality, language, and politics.

The introduction then provides an overview of the book's empirical chapters, each of which focuses on the political implications of the distinct ways in which things and terms became intertwined. Chapters 1–4 provide an empirical and analytical account of the specificity of the relations between things, terms, and politics that progresses chronologically from the dawn of the 1979 Revolution to the Green Movement uprising in 2009. The book concludes by providing an alternative schema for conceptualizing the political transformations that have occurred in revolutionary Iran.

Material Affordances and Disaffordances of Language

In thinking about the revolution of things, we need to reflect on how everyday objects *act*. Bruno Latour's contention in this regard is that if action is limited a priori to what intentional meaningful humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer or a table or human hair could act (2005). By contrast, if we take agencies as anything that does make a difference, we have an additional set of actors to consider. As Shalini Shankar and Jillian Cavanaugh (2017) have shown, everyday objects can authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, and block political words and concepts. In other words, material things are complicit in the formation, efficacy, and lived experience of our political vocabularies, alternative languages, and revolutionary discourses.

The first step in fashioning an analytics that addresses the relations between materiality, language, and politics, therefore, is to consider a conception of

language that is not restricted to the internal dynamics of the signifying chain in the way that the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure has formulated it (1960). As Anthony Giddens rightly points out, the French school of structural analysis pays little attention to, or finds no way of coping with, the object world (1979). Even Derrida's radical critique of the sign, which reworks the relations between signifier and signified, fails to consider the materiality of the latter (1967, 1972). Thus, a more suitable starting point might be a conception of language that is not *about* the object world but *part of it* (see Wittgenstein 1998; Austin 1962; Cavell 1996; Peirce 1931). Semiotics, that is, the study of sign processes, takes on added significance here.

Material objects play a key role in Charles Peirce's remarkable semiotic schemata (1931, 1992, 1998). Smoke, says Peirce, comes to represent fire, but only because of the causal relationship between the sign (smoke) and its referent (fire). Which is to say that if not directly generating its sign, fire places constraints and conditions on how it can and cannot be represented. Relations between signifiers and their material referents, however, need not always be casual. Rather, processes of signification can be deeply rooted in convention (Peirce 1992). The dead body of an Iranian soldier killed during the Iran-Iraq conflict, for instance, imposed constraints on what words came to successfully represent it socially. "Renegade," "rebel," and "mercenary" are all terms that failed to signify the corpses of Iranian soldiers at the level of multitudes in Tehran during the 1980s. Conversely, the politico-religious term "martyr," which is embedded within provincial historical text and speech in Iran, was disseminated widely during this time even if it had not been extensively used before. The institutionalization of martyrdom that followed in Tehran between 1981 and 1989, therefore, was also a process by which the proliferation of dead bodies mobilized provincial terms into an Islamist discourse of martyrdom (Sefat 2020). But was the specific way in which corpses and the vocabulary of martyrdom merged together in Iran inevitable?

"Affordances" is a productive term with which to think about this question. Ecological psychologist James Gibson introduced affordances as the *potentialities* held by an object for a particular set of actions (1979). The chair, for instance, invites us to sit down. Or, a plunge into a river's pool invites the indexical name/signifier *ta ta* for the Runa in the Amazon (Kohn 2013). Tim Ingold (1992, 2018) and, more recently, Webb Keane (2018) have helped develop this concept by arguing that the sheer materiality of things can provide openings to new possibilities, systems of meaning, and languages that traverse processes of subject formation. Indeed, this insight shapes Keane's (2018) attempt to replace the term "precondition" with "affordances."² To call something a precondition, he explains, suggests that there is only one relevant outcome. "Affordances," Keane continues, "leave things more open-ended—without, however, turning people into Promethean creators of their worlds,

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as if from scratch” (2018:32). This is why Keane considers affordance as an alternative to the more reductive versions of determinism.

Let us, however, move beyond the classic example of the chair’s affordances and ask: What are we to make of the profound asymmetries, the muffling of radical contingency, or the radical elimination of chance that the vast sociological literature on domination has brought to light (see Thompson 1984; Scott 1990; Bourdieu 1991)? Can there really be more than one relevant outcome under domination? Does the concept of “affordances,” as formulated by Keane, retain its relevance in such a context? As Gayatri Spivak deftly inquired, when the robber presents the non-choice of “your money or your life,” what voice are you really *afforded* (1985a:129)?

While the attempt to develop a more dynamic and flexible alternative to determinism is understandable, the notion of affordances does not offer an adequate matrix for understanding how the materiality of things, in their presences or absences, generates various forms that the social takes, including domination. Affordances, I wish to contend, is a more useful concept if deployed in juxtaposition to *disaffordances*. Whereas affordances is about how the presence of certain kinds of materiality occasions various outcomes, disaffordances is about how the absence of distinct kinds of materiality stifles certain possibilities. This includes unique kinds of representation, like how the absence of fire disaffords smoke. It also includes alternative referential systems, like how the disappearance of a great many things from the public in Tehran during the 1980s disafforded a liberal vocabulary.

Indeed, just as women’s hair, bright attire, luxury items, Western foods, and so forth—all discursively relating to bodily pleasures—were pushed out of the public and into the private domain in Tehran between 1981 and 1989, liberal terms such as “freedom,” “plurality,” and “rights” vanished from public use for these words no longer had material things to refer to and circulate through, highlighting the ontological linkages between things and terms. In other words, the elimination of distinct kinds of materiality *disafforded* an alternative liberal vocabulary at the level of multitudes during Khomeini’s leadership in the Islamic Republic, and this was but one way through which domination was established under his reign. This book, as such, seeks to explore politics in terms of the affordances and disaffordances that the presence and absence of things generate. In so doing, it offers, on the one hand, a material account of the Islamist and post-Islamist discourses that emerged in postrevolutionary Iran while, on the other hand, it shows how the absence of certain kinds of materiality suppressed the formation of various alternative referential systems, impeding distinct kinds of political action and resistance in the process.

This analysis paves the way for critical engagement with post-structuralist conceptions of agency and resistance, which have found it difficult to cope

with the social implications of the presence or absence of materiality and are formulated on the basis of the subversion of existing referential systems instead.

The Material Decolonization of Resistance

By the 1970s, many theorists had found in post-structuralism something the economic determinism of orthodox Marxists could not offer in its own terms, that is, a special attention to difference, but also a new conceptual schema for exploring and understanding resistance in its multifaceted forms (Young 1990). Edward Said (1978, 1983), Homi Bhabha (1983, 1984), and later Judith Butler (1990, 1993) all produced remarkable works that showed how colonial and phallogocentric representations of the subaltern, gender, and sex were shaped by power.

Emerging postcolonialist/Marxist and feminist theorists, therefore, turned their attention to colonial and patriarchal modes of symbolic representation. The urgency to do so was explained by Baudrillard: “As soon as the other can be represented, it can be appropriated and controlled” (1983:20). A new battlefield thus emerged centered on the domain of representation itself, which, as in the case of Orientalism, did not refer to a material existence or reality outside of that representation (Young 1990). Indeed, a material account of representation and discourse did not seem necessary. This ethos was captured by Baudrillard, who insisted that “the worst error of all our revolutionary strategies is to believe that we will put an end to the system on the plane of the *real* . . . we must [instead] displace everything into the sphere of the *symbolic*, where reversal is the law” (1993:33; emphasis added).

Derrida’s concept of *breakage* (1978), Bhabha’s *mimicry* (1984), Butler’s *resignification* and *performativity* (1990, 1993), and Baudrillard’s own notion of *reversal* (1993) were all formulations of resistance rooted in the possible failure of the sign or the norm and their reappropriation *within* the dominant systems of representation. Where the material realities of those systems were addressed by Spivak (1985b), they were shown to have been displaced by epistemic violence and thus pushed out of the domain of intelligibility altogether. And when they were addressed by Butler, they were shown to be nothing given, being neither a site nor a substance, but a “process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (Butler 1993:9). As Bjornar Oslen observes, such formulations are based on an inverted hierarchy of opposition in which materialization is seen solely as a process in service (or an effect) of power. “Materialization and its by-product matter,” Oslen continues, “end up as epiphenomena of something more primary (power, regulatory ideas, etc.) . . . well in concordance with the effective history of modern Western thought in which materiality continues to

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be viewed with suspicion and contempt, entailing the old vision of freedom and emancipation as that which escapes the material” (2006:96).

For Latour (1991), the strength of this literature and its critique of representation was to show that text and language make meaning and even produce references internal to discourse and to the speakers installed with discourse. Its weakness, however, was to render more difficult the connections between the domain of representation—discourse—and what was shelved: materiality and the subject (Latour 1991:66). Objects are simultaneously real, discursive, and social. “If one atomizes discourse by turning materiality over to epistemologists,” says Latour, “and gives up the subject to sociologists, one makes it impossible to stitch back together these three fundamental resources [the object, language, and the subject]” (1991:66).

This book explores how we might rethink processes of subject formation and resistance by considering the generative materiality of discourse, along with its lived experience. It does this by endowing semiotics with sociological and anthropological depth. Specifically, the book connects semiotics to two other levels of analysis, that is, the political economy of things and terms, and the lived experiences of those things and terms. Continuous movement through these three registers for social analysis enables us to consider the possibilities for subjectivity and resistance not within language *but at the intersection of language and materiality*. Indeed, the book explores whether shifting relations between things and terms generate different kinds of *structuralities* altogether, with each affording and disaffording distinct prospects for subjectivity, agency, and resistance.

Materiality, Structure, and Agency

“Social structure” and “form” are terms regularly used in sociology, a discipline known for its interest in structural transformations. Both terms, however, present certain problems in anthropology for they are often associated with the search for ultimate truths—the kinds that E. B. Tylor’s social Darwinism (1871), Bronislaw Malinowski’s functionalism (1944), and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism (1968) sought to uncover and failed to do so. I wish to convey that social structure and form need not be linked to the quest for laws that govern society and culture. Rather, understanding both concepts as processes of structuration (Giddens 1984) and pattern production and propagation (Kohn 2013) offers a conceptual schema that might produce useful perspectives on the multifaceted relations between materiality, language, and resistance.

When “one is inside it [structure/form],” Kohn explains, “there is nothing against which to push it, it cannot be defined by the way it resists. . . . It is not amenable to this kind of palpation, to this way of knowing” (2013:20). Form is also “fragile and ephemeral,” Kohn continues, “it may vanish when

the constraints and possibilities that sustain it disappear” (2013:20). It thus remains largely hidden from our conventional modes of analysis. Structures are invisible, as Bourdieu would say (1991).

And yet, form and social structure exhibit peculiar generative logics, which permeate materiality and language as they harness it. They display their own kind of efficacy and come to be interwoven with agency and resistance. The sublimation of the kinds of politics a certain structure affords and disaffords distinguishes one form that social relations takes from another. And shifting relations between materiality and language are at the center of these various social forms.

Anthropologists have been good at considering the materiality of the different structures and forms that the social takes, even if they have substituted “structure” for similar concepts (see Descola 1994; Viveiros de Castro 2015). This attention to materiality, however, has been largely overlooked in the sociological canon of structural analysis. While Giddens (1979), for instance, acknowledges the importance of materiality to processes of structuration, that is, the forces that shape structures, his theoretical schemata overlooks the implications of the specificity of the object world for different structures. Instead, the main burden of explaining structuration is carried by the descriptive term “power,” for which there is no material account. Similarly, while Walter Powell and Paul DiMaggio (1991) direct our attention to the myriad actors involved in the structuration of various organizational and political fields, public objects are not considered key actors in these processes.

And yet, Giddens, Powell, and DiMaggio cannot be blamed for this gap in the literature as their work appeared before the material turn. A distinct kind of human exceptionalism, nonetheless, still pervades most, if not all, recent sociological literature whereby the structural analysis of organizational and political fields is rooted in attributes that are distinctive to humans, including *ideology* (see Feldman 2003; Henry 2011), *technical media* (see Arsenault and Castells 2008; Castells 2009; Mehri 2017), and *intentional meaningful action* (see Maoz 2012; Hassanpour 2017). In other words, a human-centric model of evaluation shapes the canon of structural analysis, which is firmly embedded within the domains of the subject, intentional meaningful action, and social motivation and aggregate. By neglecting contingent material objects, this literature disregards a different set of actors central to the formation and conceptualization of social structures and to our understanding of how the confluence of materiality and language permeates the different forms that social relations take.

Revolution of Things addresses this gap. Each ensuing chapter explores a distinct structurality that has formed at the merger of materiality and language in postrevolutionary Tehran and probes the sorts of agencies it occasioned. Specifically, the book shows that relations between objects and words can be

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both stable and unstable. Chapter 2, for instance, illustrates that once public objects were regularized in Tehran in such a way so as to muffle an alternative referential system during the 1980s, relations between words and their material referents became stable at the level of multitudes. What developed was a unique social structure in which distinct kinds of resistance, such as public processes of resignification and performativity, were impeded in ways that might have threatened the centrality of the revolutionary leader, Imam Khomeini. Conversely, chapters 3 and 4 explore a different relationship between things and terms. They demonstrate that once new imported objects emerged and were regularized in such a way so as to afford two competing referential systems in Tehran after 1990, relations between words and their material referents became highly unstable, harnessing a new social structure in which processes of resignification and performativity became the norm, threatening the centrality of the new revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. These chapters demonstrate that in all of these instances, the distinct ways in which things and terms merged generated qualitatively different forms that the social took, with each affording unique kinds of political action and resistance.

Why Iran? Where Is Iran? What Is Iran?

Revolutionary Iran provides an ideal object-domain for exploring relations between objects, words, and politics. This is because Iran has undergone fundamental political changes over the past four decades. The different strategic contexts that situated Iran's two revolutionary leaders, that is, Imam Khomeini and his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei, speak to the scale of this political shift.

From 1981 to 1989, many anti-regime dissenters inside Tehran began to view Imam Khomeini as beyond their reach, as beyond the law, and as interchangeable with the Islamic Republic. This condition propagated two primary fantasies about the end of Khomeini's reign among these dissenters in Tehran, that is, the regime's implosion or a foreign invasion. Moreover, many of the same dissidents saw—and this is key—no role for themselves in either scenario. Rather, the regime's "backwardness," it was primarily thought, would lead to its own demise so that Khomeini's unraveling seemed inconceivable short of the implosion of the totality and the subject saw no role for itself in bringing about such an outcome. In other words, so long as the totality remained, Khomeini appeared as beyond the dissenters' reach, and beyond the possibility of defeat for that reason. This was, therefore, a context in which one faction—Imam Khomeini and his followers—never seemed to face the possibility of political defeat.

Imam Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Khamenei, emerged into the center of realpolitik amid a transforming political context. By the time the mass

uprising known as the Green Movement erupted in 2009, protesters did not view Ayatollah Khamenei as beyond their reach, as beyond the law, and as interchangeable with the Islamic Republic. Rather, many protesters sought to force him to retreat and allow an election recount in 2009; they claimed the presidency had been fraudulently handed to Khamenei's close ally at the time, Mahmood Ahmadinejad. Remarkably, even Khamenei's key security and intelligence lieutenants were unable to predict with confidence the outcome of the mass uprising at its apex. Thus, whereas Imam Khomeini was situated by a context in which he did not seem to face the possibility of political defeat, Ayatollah Khamenei found himself in a new kind of context in which all factions—including Khamenei himself—had to face this possibility. The movement from one political formation to another provides a fertile ground for examining relations between objects, words, and politics. More specifically, it enables us to examine how different relations between objects and words assembled these two qualitatively distinct forms that the social took.

To be sure, however, the study of “Iran” presents a number of problems underscored by anthropologist Mazdak Tamjidi, who asks, “*Where is Iran?*” Is it Tehran? Isfahan? Or is it the marginalized and forgotten city of Zabol in the south? The prevalent temporality in Zabol, Tamjidi explains (2020), is more bound by seasonal floods, droughts, and sandstorms than presidential elections and international agreements centered on Tehran. While it is not uncommon for a book or a research project to be about a country, what one means by that country remains less clear. The problem of studying Iran is further exacerbated by disciplinary differences. We often assume that it is possible to advance an account of modern Iran that is not prefigured by disciplinary boundaries. While there is considerable overlap between various disciplines—sociology, anthropology, history—their respective questions, interests, and methodological tools illuminate different aspects of social phenomena.

Having been trained as a sociologist and an anthropologist, I particularly value the insights that the two modes of inquiry make possible. As a sociologist, I do not shy away from speaking about “Iran” or “Tehran” even if I understand the terms as signposts rather than homogeneous totalities. The signpost is used to explore processes that cannot be reduced to a locality. Take, for instance, many of the material objects that this book tracks, which circulate globally and link international processes such as economic sanctions, the global flow of capital, and geopolitics to social and political transformations across Iran. Or take the geopolitical conflict between Iran and Iraq during the 1980s, which engulfed the entire topography that we call Iran. While border cities in the south and the east endured most of the fighting, state centralization—the hallmark of international conflict (Skocpol 1979)—changed the social and political geography of the entire country (Harris 2017). These are all processes that occur at the national level—they are “objective” conditions, as it were, which

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occasion a multiplicity of experiences. I find the terms “Iran,” “Tehran,” the “Islamic Republic,” and so on useful in addressing these broad processes.

And yet, as an anthropologist, I seek to remain vigilant in exploring the lived experiences of these national trends so as to avoid advancing totalizing accounts. The bulk of Afghans, Baluchis, Baha’is, Kurds, and so forth have never been included within the dominant discourses that arose in the Islamic Republic and with which this book is concerned. Indeed, no political horizon (not even the reforms/post-Islamism) has included any of these “sociological groups.” Moreover, the experiences of different concrete-abstract social fields, which will be discussed in chapters 2, 3, and 4, were never encompassing forms that the social took from the vantage point of many Afghans living on the border of the Khorasan province, the Baluchis in the south, the Baha’is in hiding across the country, and the Kurds under constant state surveillance in eastern Iran. The only political field for the subaltern in Iran was and remains domination.

Finally, I wish to briefly discuss the contentious task of writing an account of postrevolutionary Iran, particularly for an author like me, who teaches at the University of Tehran but speaks to the Anglo-Saxon canon of revolutionary Iran. The tension implicit in this position, in part, has to do with the two contesting historiographies of the Iranian Revolution that have emerged in the Islamic Republic and the West. As Naghmeh Sohrabi (2018) correctly points out, the literature on the Iranian Revolution produced in the Islamic Republic tends to privilege Khomeini’s role in the revolutionary process over Leftist revolutionary groups. Conversely, the literature on the Iranian Revolution advanced chiefly by Iranian scholars in diaspora tends to emphasize the significance of revolutionary groups that were pushed out of the political geography of the Islamic Republic shortly after its inception (Sohrabi 2018). The result has been two contending narratives, each interwoven with distinct power/knowledge relations that trace the revolution to different origins.

The victory of Islamists led by Khomeini is widely seen as a first critical turning point in the short history of the revolution. Many researchers who were excluded from social and political life in Iran following that event attained positions in Western institutions and wrote prolifically about the Iranian Revolution. While many of these works have been translated and published in Iran, the literature produced in the Islamic Republic remains available only in Persian. As Sohrabi explains, this one-way street has helped perpetuate the hegemonic position of diaspora scholars so that the history of the 1979 Revolution has, indeed, been written by the losers of that revolution (2018:6).

This hegemonic position may be part of the reason colleagues in the West generally view scholars who live in Iran with some degree of suspicion. While language disparity is a factor, and the politics of publishing is another, this suspicion may also play a role in preventing scholars in Iran from intervening

in the Anglo-Saxon canon of revolutionary Iran. Even when scholars who live in Iran are featured in works produced by diaspora researchers, they are, more often than not, depicted as “intellectuals,” “social and political actors,” and so on, whose works need to be addressed as the manifestation of power and politics in the Islamic Republic. This does not mean that all diaspora scholars present scholars in Iran in such a way. Nor does it mean that these persons in Iran are not intellectuals or key social and political actors. Rather, most of these intellectuals are also university professors whose academic texts do not seem to always merit scholastic engagement.

And yet, many diaspora scholars in the West present their findings as knowledge without acknowledging how that knowledge is itself shaped and sustained by imperial power and diaspora politics. Indeed, knowledge and values cannot be clearly separated. The values and interests we hold will, in part, determine what we believe to be knowledge. This is but one reason why writing about revolutionary Iran is particularly contentious. On many occasions, associates in the West have stated that I underplay Khomeini’s violence in my discussion of Islamism. Conversely, colleagues at the University of Tehran accuse me of overplaying Khomeini’s violence. It is as if one’s work has to address two contradictory sets of checklists—a difficult, if not impossible, task since neither side seems satisfied with anything less than full adherence to its own narrative.

For Sohrabi (2018), life history is one way to problematize the neatly cut narratives of the revolution that have emerged in Iran and the West. To illuminate her point, she highlights two remarkable biographical and autobiographical accounts by Roy Mottahedeh (1985) and Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016), respectively, which capture the muddled, fractured, and messy feel of the Iranian Revolution at its genesis. Certainly, I agree with Sohrabi’s assessment about the possibilities that are implicit in life history accounts and have, indeed, centered my book on two biographical accounts that link matters of social structure to personal belief, prayer, and the experience and understanding of politics and God, while capturing the radical contingencies that permeate these processes. But there is another, often overlooked, way of recovering the contingencies that have been integral to the revolution and its aftermath—one that revolves around the multifaceted ways in which revolutionary Iran has been connected to a broader world of *things*.

Objects can reveal untold stories if brought into the fold. Since the materiality of objects affords and disaffords our interpretations of them, writing a story from the vantage point of objects is a matter of *recovering*. Material things retain an unpredictable range of concealed possibilities. And yet, objects themselves bind each of these possibilities. When I construct the political history of Iran at the merger of materiality and language, I try to show the distinct ways in which that merger formed the grounds for various modes of action whose limits, if

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any, may be unknown. In this way, we might come to see that as violent as he was, Khomeini was but one player among many—mostly nonhumans—who became complicit in institutionalizing a “culture of martyrdom” in Iran. Or we might come to notice that just as Islamism fashioned its own objects by means of violence, tyrannical objects violently generated a distinct form of Islamism by means of their immanent properties. Or we may come to better understand the complexities of President Rafsanjani’s “liberalization” during the 1990s, based not merely on his policies and post-Islamist ideology but on the unlikely *things* that helped engender and sustain “liberalism” in Iran.

The point here is not—not necessarily—to alter historical facts but to show how we can rethink the *matter* of those facts. It is an attempt to recover the possibilities that our dominant historiographical and analytical forms have stifled and to prepare ourselves for the possibility of a new critical scheme with which to scrutinize the present and its formative absences. I thus hope that *Revolution of Things* will be received by scholars of Iran in relation to the goal it has set for itself, that is, to politicize objects in the field of Iranian studies and to create an alternative framework that moves us beyond the cultural schemata when we think and write about the revolution and its aftermath.

Methods and Sources

We sometimes assume that research projects inspired by the recent material turn must necessarily draw from the literature on Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Indeed, Latour and ANT have become synonymous in some corners within the academy. This is partly linked to ANT’s emphasis on the relational character of our being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Law and Hassard 1999), which constitutes a fitting approach for dealing with the complex hybridity we call “things.” However, not all objects are products of their position in a relational web. A blade has competences that cannot be replaced by just any other signifier so that even if it is activated or realized as part of a relational whole, its immanent properties matter. As archaeologist Bjornar Oslen explains, “If we avoid the fundamentalist trap of swearing allegiances to this or that theoretical regime, in other words caring more for things’ needs than of the purity of philosophies, we may also dare to develop an . . . approach that acknowledges that there are qualities immanent to things (beings, actants) themselves” (2006:99).

Indeed, Latour’s stipulation of ANT seems to be more concerned with highlighting several “controversies” in social scientific research than with developing a homogeneous methodology (1999, 2005). Some of these controversies include: (a) not thinking in terms of groups but group formation; (b) providing a narrative on figuration, that is, how action comes to be carried out; and (c) rendering the agency of objects visible by situating one’s inquiry not

within a certain social context after it has been brought into being but at the moment of its assemblage or disintegration. These are immensely insightful, if not original, perspectives that I bring to bear on a different sociological system of inquiry, that is, the *tripartite approach*. This approach, I believe, not only addresses the qualities of objects but illuminates the relations between objects, language, and politics.

What is the tripartite approach? Hermeneutic phenomenologists and ordinary language philosophers have long considered different modes of access to social phenomena in general, and social change in particular. By offering a synthesis of these two traditions, John B. Thompson has argued for the disclosure of social phenomena by way of multilayered forms of contextualization (1981, 1990). In the process, he has delineated three interrelated object-domains for social analysis: (a) the context of the production, proliferation, and disclosure of the thing, the utterance, or the action, generally analyzed by way of social and historical methods and political economy approaches; (b) the thing, the utterance, or the action as text, analyzed by way of semiotics and discursive approaches; and (c) the way the thing, the utterance, or the action constitutes being as it lives and is lived, analyzed by ethnographic methods and life history accounts. The three object-domains are of course interrelated; understanding any one of them feeds into and sheds light on the other two.

The power of this approach is rooted in its ability to overcome the economic and technicist reductionism in some versions of Marxism and the timeless synchronism of various versions of structuralism by relying on ethnography and life history. It also overcomes the lack of consideration of power and domination in much phenomenological thought by relying on political economy. And it overcomes the lack of attention to the materiality of things in various cultural renditions of objects by relying on Peirce's semiotics.

The tripartite approach is thus a good fit for this study, as the relations between materiality, language, and politics in Iran cannot be comprehensively explained without bringing together aspects of political economy, discursive methods, and interpretive approaches. Continuous movements through these three registers constitute my empirical chapters. I draw on twenty years of involvement with Iran and from my fieldwork in Tehran between 2013 and 2015. In doing so I use a significant array of primary and secondary sources, including relevant literature, politically instrumental media, and critical information secured through interviews with political insiders in Iran. In addition to recording two life history accounts, to which I shall return shortly, I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty-two individuals. Of these, eighteen were women and fourteen were men; fourteen were former regime dissenters, eight of whom were affiliated with the Mojahedin-e Khalgh (MEK), two with Aghaliat, two with Aksariat, and two with Arman. Six were Hezbol-lahie revolutionaries at the dawn of the revolution. Of these, two are now state

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officials, and four work in the private sector. Overall, six of the interviewees were journalists who wrote for key newspapers during different epochs in postrevolutionary Iran.

I conducted these interviews in order to understand how objects from bodies to attire to foods were regularized in Iran between 1981 and 2009, and focus on the policies and contingencies that enabled their proliferation. I ask: How did distinct sets of objects and signs disappear from the public or proliferate in Iran during different epochs? And what were the policies and contingencies that enabled these processes? Addressing these questions makes possible a social and historical analysis of the proliferation of everyday objects and words that came to signify them.

Moreover, I conducted quantitative sampling of newspapers to explore the relations between the circulation of distinct objects and words. I analyzed the most important newspapers from 1977 to 2009 in Iran, including *Kayhan*, *Jomhuri-e Eslami*, *Etelaat*, *Resalat*, *Hamshahri*, *Salam*, *Yalasarat*, and *Shalamcheh*. The research design aims to examine whether the increased circulation of certain public objects is associated with the increased circulation of certain terms, and whether the decreased proliferation of certain public objects is associated with the decreased dissemination of other terms. My sampling of newspapers is *purposive*—a nonprobability sampling method that enables the selection of newspapers that are considered important (Wells and King 1994; Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005). It is imperative to bear in mind, however, that the research design is not concerned with the editorial attitudes of individual newspapers or even with meaningful content. Rather, the research design aims to illustrate the usage of distinct terms by popular newspapers. The terms searched for in all the pages that were randomly selected were “freedom,” “plurality,” “rights,” “martyr,” “sacrifice,” and “justice.” These terms were selected in light of scholarly and literary contributions by Mohammad Javad Gholamreza Kashi and Morteza Avini. Both researchers highlight the significance of these terms to the culture of martyrdom during the 1980s and to the discourses of reformists and second-generation Hezbollahies during the 1990s and 2000s (Kashi 2002; Avini 1983).

I cross-referenced my findings from the content analysis of newspapers with interviews and over a hundred hours of films produced in the Islamic Republic in order to examine whether the terms that were eliminated from newspapers were also not used in films and television programs around the same time. I then looked for the objects that were eliminated from the public during this time frame. Specifically, I examined whether the exclusion of certain terms such as “freedom” and “plurality” from popular newspapers converged with the removal of certain material things from the public, such as women’s hair and skin. As we shall see in the ensuing chapters, a time frame is designated during which a positive correlation is shown to exist between

certain objects and certain terms that either emerged simultaneously or were eliminated together from the public. This analysis is central to understanding the links between words and their material referents, as well as their political implications in Iran.

I then offer visual and textual semiotics and content analysis of prevailing public objects and discourses by reading them as text. To focus on this object-domain is to give priority to formal discursive analysis, that is, to analyze content as a complex symbolic construction that displays an articulated structure. Specifically, I analyze the works of documentary filmmaker Morteza Avini to show the linkages between Khomeini, the “culture of martyrdom,” and different material things from bright attire to corpses during the 1980s. Moreover, I analyze the aesthetics of second-generation Hezbollahies, including that of Mahmood Ahmadinejad, to illustrate the interconnections between the reconfiguration of the discourse of martyrdom and cheap Iranian-made objects during the 1990s and 2000s. At the same time, I analyze the aesthetics of young reformists to illuminate the linkages between a liberal vocabulary and imported foreign objects during the same period. This analysis sheds light on what sorts of words were afforded and disafforded by the appearance and disappearance of different, and often asymmetrical, material things.

Next, I offer an analysis of how these things and terms were lived and made sense of by drawing on life history accounts. I rely on the biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM) (Wengraf 1999), which, in part, draws from the sociological tradition of in-depth hermeneutics (Roseneil 2015). This method is “oriented to the exploration of life histories, lived situations and personal meanings, and seeks to attend to the complexity and specificity of lived experience” (Roseneil 2015:149). It requires tracking the individual and the particular within the social historical processes that situate them.

As Sasha Roseneil explains, the assumption of this approach is that individuals make sense of their experiences by telling stories. Life history interviews thus enable researchers to draw out more complex and richer information about personal meanings and emotions. (2015:151). While many researchers, such as Roseneil (2015) and Thomas Scheff (1997), use this method primarily to showcase particular case studies of “lived experiences” of specific historical moments and processes, I deploy this method for broader objectives.

On the one hand, I am interested in the lived experiences of the different concrete-abstract social fields that emerged in postrevolutionary Tehran, while on the other hand, I use life histories to arrive at a generalized understanding of the various concrete-abstract discourses that brought these structures into being in postrevolutionary Tehran. More specifically, I ask: What are the systems of belief and values and the different logics within a particular discourse? What are the terms and objects that occasion this discourse? And how does this discourse generate distinct kinds of politics? Given that individuals are

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generative subjects and thus implicated in all the processes mentioned, life histories are an ideal vantage point for addressing the questions I ask. Thus while I begin with the assumption that no discursive formation is experienced in the same way for all, I show that we can still draw from a particular life history a level of generalizability about any particular discourse within which that life is entrenched.

I turn to Stanley Cavell's development of the notion of the "voice" to further explain this point. For Cavell, the voice is the accumulation of the operations of discourse (its languages, objects, logics, disciplinary techniques, etc.) and historically specific events that have shaped it (1996:1–50). The voice is particular because despite being pervaded by discourse it is endowed by capitals that generate different experiences of a social field. The voice, however, can also be generalized in relation to a social structure, for it emerges *within* the public languages and by way of the public objects—including one's body—that together constitute that structure. Indeed, for Cavell, the particular and the general are never separate accounts (1996:1–52).

The two persons whose life histories I offer have been immersed in the three main concrete-abstract discourses that came into formation in post-revolutionary Iran and generated distinct social structures in the process. So while these life histories provide case studies on the "lived experiences" of these social structures, they also show us the objects, languages, logics, and systems of belief and values and their relations that together occasioned these distinct discourses and forms of structuralities.

Mahdi and Reza are the two individuals whom this book features. Mahdi was a devoted Hezbollahie and one of the most important political players of his generation when I met him. I have known him since 2009, when he was a senior political consultant to the mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Baghir Ghalibaf. At the time, I was an amateur ethnographer interested in understanding how Ghalibaf devised his media strategy to advance his political ambitions. While that study never amounted to much, it helped establish a strong working relationship between Mahdi and me.³ Because Mahdi had a PhD in political science, he looked favorably upon my numerous research projects on the media and politics in Tehran. So when I asked him if I could record his life history between 2013 and 2015, he agreed. All in all, I recorded about one hundred hours of interviews and discussions with him, which enabled me to link his status as a Hezbollahie to matters of God, politics, and objects, as well as providing a front-row seat to Iranian politics.

Reza is the central interlocutor of this book. He is a legendary figure among students, intellectuals, politicians, and those interested in Iranian politics because he was a key member of the infamous *halghe kian* (Kian Chain) that many deem responsible for creating the horizon of the reforms. Reza was also a prominent professor before he was suspended by the Ahmadinejad

administration.⁴ He has fiercely loyal students, and his counsel is often sought after by a range of politicians that at different points included former reformist president Mohammad Khatami and the leader of the Green Movement, Mir Hossein Musavi. This extends to Reza a form of mystique that is augmented by the fact that he rarely responds to phone calls and emails.

I came into contact with Reza through Mahdi. Reza was one of Mahdi's PhD examiners at the University of Tehran. For Reza, Mahdi's remarkable rise as a political player meant access to firsthand political data few others could provide. The 2013 election cycle was close, and Mahdi's boss, Ghalibaf, had decided to run for president. This was an ideal time for Reza to respond to Mahdi's calls and emails. Mahdi had organized a study group of four people, of which I was one. While I knew within the first ten minutes of meeting him that Reza had to be the central figure of my work, I waited until four meetings later to ask. He agreed to conduct a single interview.

Once we began, I learned that Reza had been involved in writing an autobiography, which was the result of having thought about his life in a systematic way for over a decade. He offered remarkable perspectives in the process, which led me to almost beg him for a second interview. And this is more or less how things progressed. I would never know whether each interview would be my last, as Reza would only make that decision based on his assessment of the current session. In total, he gave me about twenty interviews and a remarkable story, saying all that both he and I felt needed to be said. This is despite the profound asymmetry between us, something I am still painfully reminded of as I listen to the recordings of my interviews of Reza, and the sheer folly of some of my comments and interventions. I can almost hear the frustration in Reza's sigh after a number of my comments. On so many occasions I was out of my depth.

During my interviews with both interlocutors, I focused on how they had immersed themselves in different discourses to gain insights into how these discourses came into being. I concentrated on each discourse's key terms and tried to look at how both Reza and Mahdi had understood them. What I found was that concepts registered with them by way of certain objects, whether these terms were "justice," "freedom," or "Evil." This enabled a perspective that the empirical chapters illustrate vividly: discourses come into formation in relation to objects they speak about and proliferate through.

Moreover, I sought to home in on Reza's and Mahdi's voices. For Cavell, hearing the voice requires tracing and interrogating the individual amid a transformation between discourses (1996:1–50). The self's distinctness, the *voice*, comes into view amid these transformations. Thus I focused part of my interviews on Reza's and Mahdi's major life transformations. In so doing, I produce general and particular accounts of the discourses that emerged in postrevolutionary Iran and illuminate what it means to live each of the

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concrete-abstract worlds of the reforms and the Hezbollahies. More specifically, we see their objects, terms, logics, and the relations between them. As I weave these two biographies with the other two object-domains I discussed earlier, we begin to see links between objects and words that constitute different discourses, and the relationships between the latter and politics. In the process, the tripartite approach enables a perspective on major political transformations in postrevolutionary Iran.

I wish to state three brief points about the way I write Reza's and Mahdi's biographical accounts. First, while I include many of their quotes, most of the text consists of my narration of their stories based on our interviews. Second, at times my narration of Reza's life might seem fictionalized. But I merely relay what Reza says. For instance, Reza might say, "Time slowed down on that evening." Then he speaks as though time had really slowed down. Reza often uses this technique to convey certain feelings about a particular situation. I did not change any of these sorts of commentary. Finally, at times I did take some editorial liberties to capture a certain feeling that he may have had. For instance, when he said that he had fallen in love with a woman, I asked, "What was she like?" More specifically, I asked if she was "cute, pretty, or beautiful." "The latter," he responded. So I wrote, "She was beautiful."

Finally, I would like to mention what I believe are three weaknesses in my work. First, both of my interviewees were men. By the time I was able to establish a link with female interlocutors, and began to record data, I was at the very end of fieldwork. I will certainly include biographical accounts of some of the female interlocutors whom I have begun working with as I further develop this work in the future. Nevertheless, not having biographical accounts of women in this work has at least one important implication. Discourses come to constitute and signify gender. A clear implication of this in Iran is the forced hijab for women. Thus women in Iran enter into discourse and decipher it in ways that are profoundly unique and fundamentally different from men. By not including women as the central components of this work we lose further particularities with regard to subject positions within any given discourse.

The second, and equally disheartening, weakness of my work is that neither of the interlocutors is from a minority group. As I have already explained, the bulk of Afghans, Baluchis, Baha'is, Kurds, and so on have never really been included within the three centers in postrevolutionary Iran. In other words, no political horizon (not even the reforms) has included them. For these groups, then, the only political field was and is domination.

Third, as Roseneil points out, any account that the interviewee offers "must always be understood in relation to the particularity of the intersubjective context of the interview situation and its specific relational dynamics" (2015:150). While I try to provide enough information about myself, and the power dynamics between Reza, Mahdi, and me, to show the intersubjective

context in which these accounts are told, I recognize that one is always limited in trying to achieve this objective.

Book Outline

Chapter 1, which explores the years leading up to the 1979 Revolution, differs from the chapters that follow. It does not deal with the political economy of things and terms. Rather, by focusing on the connections between semiotics and life history, the chapter traces the development of the *voice* of this work's main interlocutor in order to show how the asymmetry between everyday material objects endowed Ali Shariati's texts and sermons with radical fervor for a revolutionary subject. In the process, the chapter illuminates the interconnections between the vocabulary of an ideologue of the Iranian Revolution, Shariati, the object world, and the formation of a revolutionary subject in Tehran. This analysis progresses by examining the fusion of things like the moon, women's bodies, and expensive cologne, on the one hand, and Shariati's key terms such as "Good and Evil," "oppression," and "Imperialism," on the other. It concludes by illustrating how the confluence of these material and linguistic worlds endowed Khomeini with transcendental status for many of his followers in the lead-up to the 1979 Revolution.

Chapter 2 progresses by a continuous movement through three registers for social analysis, that is, the political economy of things and terms, the content analysis of things and terms, and biographical accounts of the lived experiences of those things and terms. In so doing, it argues that shifting relations between materiality and language occasion different kinds of politics. Specifically, the chapter provides a new interpretation of one of the most critical epochs in the political history of modern Iran by illustrating that the confluence of the material and linguistic worlds in the Islamic Republic during the 1980s brought about a distinct social field in which relations between words and material referents became stable at the level of multitudes. This stifled public processes of performativity and resignification of signs in ways that might have threatened the centrality of the revolutionary leader, Imam Khomeini. As a result, Khomeini never seemed to face the possibility of political defeat between 1981 and 1989. The chapter concludes by theorizing this social field as *domination*. This analysis is undertaken not only in relation to the theoretical canon of domination and to publicly available discourses—television, newspapers, and the like—but also through a careful exploration of how domination was lived and how its public objects were seen from the vantage point of a key social actor who was involved in political events as they unfolded.

Chapter 3 illuminates the ways in which the physicality of Tehran was interlinked with what was politically *thinkable* there between 1989 and 1997. This analysis is centered on how the globalization of objects engendered and

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sustained the “post-Islamist” liberal discourse of the *reforms* and the “Islamist” vocabulary of the second-generation Hezbollahies. This process destabilized the prior relations between words and their material referents, permitting not only the substitutions of signs with astounding speed but also the rapid disintegration of the “culture of martyrdom,” which had been prevalent in Iran under Khomeini’s reign. The chapter theorizes this new social field as *rupture*.

Chapter 4 moves the analysis of materiality and language further by exploring their relationships between 1997 and 2009. It illustrates that once the reformist and Hezbollahie modes of life, along with the objects that generated them, began to vie for centrality, processes of resignification became the norm, generating a context in which all sides—including the new revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Khamenei—came to face the possibility of strategic defeat in politics. The Green Movement uprising in 2009 was the apex of this feud. The chapter concludes by theorizing this distinct structurality as *war*. Again, where this work is particularly insightful is through its exploration of how political objects and terms—and their radical contingency—operated through the vantage point of life history accounts. It provides a particular understanding of the mechanism through which political defeat, and the terror of failure, took hold in Tehran.

In sum, the book demonstrates that shifting relations between materiality and language afforded unique social fields in revolutionary Tehran that were sequentially connected, with the movement from *domination* to *rupture* to *war*. In so doing, it contributes to the canon of Iranian studies by mapping out postrevolutionary Tehran’s successive social fields and illuminating how each field’s structurality afforded distinct modes of public action while foreclosing others. In light of these insights, the book concludes by revisiting and revising numerous theoretical positions advanced by scholars of post-structuralist theory, sociological and anthropological theory, and media studies.

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