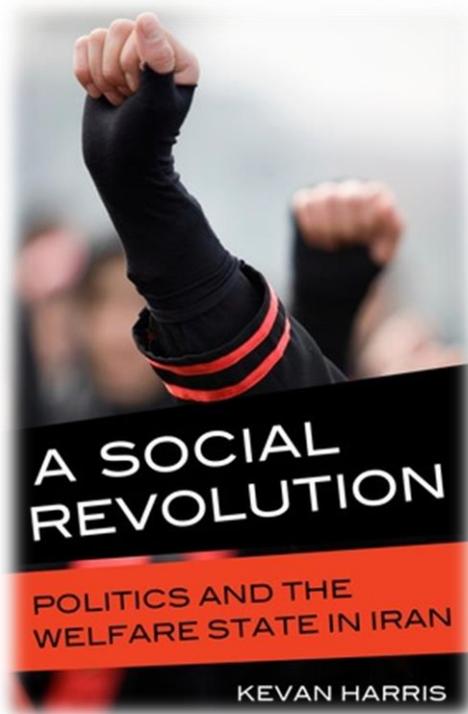




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No, it isn't!

A Critical Review of
"A Social Revolution; Politics and The Welfare State in Iran"



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Is it possible not to know the alleys and streets of a city, but to generate knowledge of the totality of that city? Is it possible to know a whole without having knowledge of its parts? Is it possible not to have mastery over the many details of the history of welfare policies but still have various macro and grand hypotheses about that history? Kevan Harris in his book *The Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran*, has made big-scale claims, correct or incorrect, about a long history that are not very well-matched to his familiarity with this history. In this essay, I will go into details (of history) rather than his grand claims. I will argue that, no, it is not possible to speak of the totality of the same city, when one has no knowledge of its alleys and streets, nor of a whole of when one doesn't know much about its parts.

The title of the book is very interesting, considering the lack of resources about Iran in this field. It heralds a new approach and knowledge and arouses the desire to read. The editor of the book series "Shirazeh Ketab-e Ma" publishing house also adds to this enthusiasm. Especially since he says that "the book begins with an overview of the establishment of the first social security system in Iran during the Pahlavi dynasty, and the author then goes into detail on several factors that led to the rapid development of the system of social security and welfare in the government since the 1979 revolution."

The author also writes: "This book argues that the politics of social policy and welfare organizations provides a lens through which to understand the surprising dynamics of social and political change in Iran since the 1979 revolution." The author says the sparks for writing this book came during his travels to Iran, from observing the juxtaposition of the images that newspapers and research [in English language] give of Iran with the reality of the country itself. The research method is introduced in the same section as field work with a historical sociological approach.

The book's claim is to open a new window into social developments in Iran. In a note presented at a meeting to review the book on December 30, 2019 (published on Maidan's website), the author says, "Many people outside of Iran believe that the only social welfare organizations in the Islamic Republic are the Foundation for the Underprivileged, the Martyr's Foundation, and Astan-e Quds-e Razavi. This perception is due to the fact that researchers outside Iran have focused solely on these organizations and have portrayed them as strange and unconventional organizations compared to institutions in the West. I disagree with this point of view." All the claims made in the book creates the anticipation for seeing a text based on strong theoretical foundations, historical facts, a new approach, and the promise that this book may be able to help reduce weaknesses and gaps in the social policy literature of Iran.

In terms of research method and approach, the author of his book considers himself committed to a form of historical sociology and implicitly considers his method to be the field method. In his memo published in the Meydan website, he highlights his "meso level methodology" that pays attention to organizations and institutions. The field work material is only mentioned in the book in reference to irrelevant observations such as when the author went on a trip, or to a restaurant or a party. He also sometimes quotes interviews that justify the book's *a priori* idea without a historical examination of those quotes.



The author's approach to quotes and statistics is rhetorical rather than critical. Without the use of critical analysis, he uses only the material supporting his view and puts aside that which opposes his argument. Accordingly, the evidence has been organized to support the author's view, rather than to discover a reality through research.

Despite all this, the book's claims are still not as great as its errors, both minor and major. One would expect a book with such vast claims to avoid errors at this scale. Here, I will limit myself to these very errors and mistakes rather than the book's ideas and approaches.

Let's review a sample of these minor and major claims and inaccuracies.

The title of the book is "*Social Revolution*," but the author does not absolutely clarify how he defines a social revolution. He considers Iran a developmental state, without offering any definitions of the concept, and when he discusses the term *development*, the discussion does not reach any conclusion. Even the terms he combines such as the "martyrs' welfare state" or "health-developmental state" makes no sense.

The author says on p. 20 "Although I discuss the formation of social policy during the first half of the twentieth century, I focus primarily on the post-1953 period during the Pahlavi monarchy." However, as we proceed through the book, we see nothing about the first half of the 20th century, but even when discussing the Pahlavi era, social policy has only been examined in terms of insurance (although with plenty of false information).

On p. 104, the text notes that "after initial pay raises during the first years, the salaries of public-sector workers were inflated away as the war economy took priority." However, he does not offer any statistics or supplementary evidence to bolster this claim.

On page 147, the author also claims: "Though all sides spoke of fulfilling the revolutionary promises of 1979, it was the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War that laid the foundations for a set of surprising and unintended shifts during the 1990s and 2000s. Along the way, the Islamic Republic's technocratic crusade helped to create the grievances that Green Movement protestors would later express against the government itself." This is an extremely erroneous (and, of course, biased) claim. It is a strange claim that 2009 protests were against the transformations under Hashemi and Khatami [during 1990s and 2000s]. Of course, the author does not provide any evidence to support this claim. As we also fail to see with other concepts, the author does not define this idea of a "technocratic crusade." In the same page, the author claims "The welfare state born from the war, it turned out, extracted heavy costs on the government that became apparent only well into Iran's developmental push." The two parts of welfare state that the author focuses on (quotas in universities and rural health clinics) do not provide any evidence for this claim.



Another approach that the author adopts, similar to those mentioned above, is to make claims without analysis, and based only on the subjective presumptions of the author. The book is full of such instances. For example, on p. 73, he says “After the revolution, many literacy and health corpsmen returned to villages for new rural-development projects under the Islamic Republic”: this claim is not supported by any statistics or evidence, it is merely the author’s opinion.

Another facet of the book is its reductionist and generalizing approach. For example, to compare the welfare system and social policy both before and after the revolution, he simplifies both concepts. He reduces the welfare system in place prior to the revolution to insurances, and in discussing the post-revolutionary system, he adds two more topics: quotas in universities (which some people consider discriminatory and the cause of social fragmentation), and rural clinics. Other important issues in social policy such as housing, education, and employment either do not receive much attention or are ignored entirely. The generalizing approach can be seen in all-or-nothing statements, but also come up in other discussions. For example, on p. 9 he expresses that the welfare system is the main cause of the decline in infant mortality. It seems the author uses these generalizations to support his ideas and assumptions, e.g.: “Abdi expressed a view held well beyond Iranian intellectuals”, and phrases such as “social scientists,” “according to researchers,” and “almost all Iranian intellectuals.” With this tactic, the author pretends that all Iranian intellectuals and social scientists are on his side.

The author also only brings in quotes that support his claims. Many quotes are incomplete, one-sided, biased, without critical engagement, and exist only to draw the author’s desired conclusion. One can see this cherry-picking approach in all of the discussions in the book. Here is an example: on p. 2 he cites Jack Goldstone regarding the 4 elements that comprise a revolution: “There must be a weak and economically uncompetitive state, a divided internal elite, popular social groups that are mobilized to protest the regime, and an ideology, new or reinvented, that justifies rebellion against the state.” The author then adds, “Iran appeared to contain all these elements.” This is only an assertion, and does not present an argument as to why this is the case in Iran. Also, it is not clear which ideology or mobilizing force he is referring to. In this and dozens of other instances, the author does not provide any support for his opinions and assertions. He positions himself as a preacher who does not see any need to provide evidence and arguments to persuade the readers.

Another aspect of this research is its presentation of dubious and false information and statistics. These are important because it is upon such information that the author makes his analysis and claims. I mention only a sample of such inaccuracies in the following examples.

On p. 61 he says “From 1954 to 1960, the number of workers insured under various public social-insurance programs remained unchanged at around a hundred and eighty thousand, which meant about seven hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand people including dependents.” First, it is not clear what these public social-insurance programs are, and secondly, does he mean state employees or some other workers? According to the Social Security Organizations Statistics (issue 2) published in 1972, the number of insured persons has increased from about



153,000 people in 1954 to 306,000 people in 1960. Interestingly, the author has also drawn conclusions based on such erroneous statistics.

On p. 69, he talks about the Social Security Organization: "Over the 1960s, the number of individuals enrolled by the SIO tripled from fewer than two hundred thousand to over six hundred thousand workers... In 1974, social-insurance laws for manual workers were changed to centralize social-insurance funds under a single organization ... As a result, the Social Security Organization (SSO) was created under the Ministry of Welfare, also founded in 1974. Coverage was extended to urban salaried workers in the private sector ... Civil servants were insured through a separate fund, the Civil Servants Retirement Organization." Almost all of this information is wrong. First, according to newsletters of the Social Security Organization, the number of those insured in the beginning of 1960s was above 300,000, and at the end of the decade it reached over 800,000. Second, there is no such thing as social insurance for manual workers for that to be centralized in one organization; in previous laws, all urban labor forces were covered. Third, the insurance was not extended to workers in the private sector in 1974, they were already covered. Fourth, some state employees were covered by the Civil Servants Retirement Organization since 1921, not 1974.

On p. 148, he says in the 1990s "various laws and regulations" were enacted to extend social services, but only mentions two laws with descriptions that are often wrong. For example, he writes "All formal workers in the private sector were required by law to be enrolled in the Social Security Organization's social-insurance plan". However, this was already required by social security law passed in 1975. Or "In 1994, the Comprehensive Welfare and Social Security Law was passed (also called the Basic Insurance Act)." This is entirely wrong: the Welfare and Social Security Law was passed in 2004, and it was also not called the Basic Insurance Act. The complete name of the Basic Insurance Act is the "Public Health Insurance Law," and, as it is obvious from its name, it was about health and the time of its ratification was ten years before the Comprehensive Welfare and Social Security Law. On p.151, he mentions a quote that says "Only in the Ahmadinejad administration did it spread further to those groups without insurance. . . . So the plan changed, from just expanding the existing insurance system to spreading coverage to poorer groups." However, such a change has not occurred and insurances are based on employment. Again, he says on p. 151 "The second expansion happened during the Ahmadinejad years, when the government merged insurance funds and opened up the social-insurance system to the entire workforce (2006–14)." This is of course not true. Particularly in this period, the government created "individual accounts," removed tripartism and administrative autonomy, and heavily damaged social insurances (especially the Social Security Organization). It is also not clear which insurances he is referring to when he talks about merges, but such a merge has not happened.

On p. 166, he writes based on a citation that "The SSO remained heavily underfunded by the state, reportedly to the amount of over \$20 billion (US) in 2011 (roughly 5 percent of GDP)." According to a report published by Social Security Organization (SSO) under the title of "Social Security Organization from a Statistical Perspective 1961-2011," this organization had resources of up to 27.9 million toman in 2011, and its costs were also 15.9 thousand tomans. The price of the dollar in this year was 1200 tomans. Accordingly, the costs of the organization



were 13.2 billion dollars and its resources 23.2 billion dollars. It is not clear how the Organization had 20 billion in deficits.

On p. 119, he writes that the network of Public Health Clinics “bolstered the tremendous changes in everyday life that altered Iran’s social and political horizons.” This is a big claim to make without illustrating some aspects of these changes in everyday life. This is a reductionist outlook to changes, especially tremendous ones.

In p. 224, he writes that “the new Islamic Republic arguably contained greater possibilities for democratization than had its predecessor.” This is yet another claim made without elaborating on its elements. Ignoring different contexts and possibilities, the author has not felt the need to present any arguments and has simply expressed his subjective presumptions.

On page 166, he writes “71 percent of the SSO’s total portfolio was composed of direct and indirect investments in riskier assets.” It is not clear what the author means by “riskier assets.” It is also not known that SSO has actually done this. There is no evidence for this statement. This is just anecdotal.

On p. 180, he writes “the generation that voted overwhelmingly for Khatami during the late 1990s partly came from families often connected to state social policies in wartime.” Since the author had previously depicted “social policies” to be university quota for war veterans and health clinics, the major supporters of Khatami should have been villagers and war veterans. The author does not present any evidence for this claim, and existing analyses of Khatami’s vote also does not support such a claim.

On p. 67, he describes Iran’s GNP growth average in the 1960s as 8 percent, while the statistics of Iran’s Central Bank shows an average of 11 percent in this year.

On p. 95, the author quotes article 43 of Iran’s Constitution, which is actually very relevant to discussions of social welfare. One part of the article is shortened, one part is missing from the quote, and also there is a wrong translation in the beginning. The author says provision of certain services are under the government’s purview, while the text of the constitution says “The economy of the Islamic Republic is based on these principles.” This is different from government purview.

On page 119-120, he writes “Even though a pilot group of health houses was tried out under the Pahlavi monarchy, as I discuss below, the main health care available to rural Iranians before the 1979 revolution were the mobile clinics of the Health Corps.” The first health house started operation in Qara Chorlu village in West Azerbaijan in 1977 and is still active. In 1977, there were 1422 active health houses in Iran. Even the graph on page 120 that has 1983 as the starting year has 4000 as the starting point in the graph. It doesn’t make sense to have 4000 cases in the first year that did not exist before.



On p. 124, he says "as of the mid-2000s, absent village residents can utilize rural insurance in urban hospitals and clinics." However, this insurance from mid-2000s (Villagers and Nomads Fund) was for retirement, not healthcare. Healthcare was already provided.

On p. 126, the text says "Most families in Iran have naturalized the shift from having around six or seven children in 1979 to fewer than two today." The source for this claim is not provided again. According to Iran's statistical center and the census, the average family size at that time was about 5.02, meaning that the average number of children in 1979 was about 3.

On p.133 the text says "It is well known that the Islamic Republic lowered the legal age of marriage from 15 to 13 for girls and from 18 to 15 for boys." This is not accurate. According to the Family Protection Law of 1974, the legal marriage age for women was 18: that was changed to 9 lunar years in 1982, and to 13 in 2000.

On p. 134, the text says "because the marriage rate went up, the fertility rate did also." First, no evidence or statistics is presented for this claim. Second, when we look at the existing statistics about the size of families, such a claim is not supported. The average size of families before the revolution increased from 5.02 individuals to 5.11 in 1986 (this implies more children were born rather than more marriages took place)

On p. 143, he says that after the revolution "Millions of people went to school for the first time, ..., read newspapers for the first time." According to Iran's Statistical Yearbook from 1976, by that year 13 million Iranians had attended school, and in that year 7 million were going to school. It is not clear where "for the first time" has come from.

On p. 154, he says "the framework for universal social insurance exists in Iran because of the legal expansions of the postwar social compact over successive administrations." First, it is not clear what this "postwar social compact" is. Second, it is noteworthy that comprehensive insurance coverage existed in the Social Security Act of 1975, but it was stopped. The Comprehensive System of Welfare and Social Security was defined 16 years after the war and was not much related to the postwar period.

On p. 154 he says "The price of bread in the early 1990s, in real terms, stood at nearly 20 percent of the price at the time of the revolution. The price of petrol was halved over that period. Electricity and other public utilities were so cheap that many households let their bills run up for months. This remained the case for the next two decades." This means that this was the case in the early 2010s, which is not true. The price of petroleum had reached 1000 toman, bread had become extremely expensive, and subsidies had also reached an all-time low.

On p. 163 he says regarding retirement and social security funds: "In addition to providing retirement pensions, both of these social-insurance funds also covered unemployment insurance, disability compensation, and health-care coverage for the employee's family up to three children." The Retirement Fund provides neither unemployment insurance nor healthcare.



Unemployment insurance has a separate law but it is provided under the Social Security Organization. Its account is in fact separate from that of the Social Security Fund.

On pgs. 163-164 he provides information with a lot of mistakes. I mention some of them here. For instance, he writes “Because of its obligations to pay health, pension, and disability costs, the government was already in debt to the SSO by the early 1990s. Since, the SSO was a state organization...” First, SSO is not a state organization, rather, according to law it is a “nongovernmental public institution.” Second, the government did not come to be debt in in the 1990s: it was in debt from two decades before, and this debt was being accumulated. Third, this was not because of health and pension, but was because of 3% that the government was obliged to pay for insurance and unemployment.

He writes “After the 1979 revolution, the retirement age was favorably lowered. Women aged 42 with twenty years of employment were eligible for a reduced pension, ... and men aged 60 could retire with only sixteen years of employment,” p. 164. This was the case from before the revolution for women, and it is not clear where the case for men (60 years of age and 16 years of employment) has come from. The existing laws say something different.

On p. 266, footnote 44, he says as of 2012, voluntary insurance could be obtained for those in self-employed sector with rates of 12, 14, and 18 percent of earnings. This was the case before 2012.

On p. 170, he says “the Health Minister had lobbied to create a referral system in urban areas, he decided to take the funding and implement it for a rural-referral system.” First, the referral system does not have an urban or rural distinction. Second, the system did not start in cities, but only was a pilot in two provinces (Mazandaran & Fars), and for some reason it has not extended beyond yet.

On p. 171, he brings in a quote without critical assessment: “And because medical education was transferred to the Ministry of Health, the number of doctors had doubled just during the war years alone, as well as nurses, mid- wives, and so on.” First, there is no evidence presented for this claim. Second, this is not even plausible, because universities were opened in 1983 (after closure under the Cultural Revolution from 1980 to 1983) and were not able to graduate medical students right away. The first graduates of this period should have finished in 1988 and 1989, which was after the war. Third, there is still conversation about the lack of doctors in medical centers. How is it that this problem had been resolved back then?

On p. 178, both the diagram presented and the explanation for the \$5 poverty reduction are absolutely incorrect. First, such a comparison must be made with the purchasing power parity index, which is not the case here. Secondly, because on the one hand the dollar price has been kept constant and on the other hand we have seen a sharp rise in prices, it is clear that the individual's expenses would increase accordingly and exceed the target dollar. Based on this distorted argument, it has been concluded that poverty has decreased over time.



On p. 180, he writes "State-welfare efforts during the 1990s and 2000s were not targeted just at the poor. Instead, the largest expenses were directed at expanding the social insurance, health-care, and retirement systems of the country. These measures tended to benefit the middle and upper strata of the country, with households linked in some fashion to formal labor markets." I wish some evidence were presented for these claims and that he specified which expenses. In these years, the government allocated the smallest budget to retirement funds, particularly social security. Healthcare insurance also did not grow as much also at the per capita level. Also, people covered with these insurances according to statistics available for income are mostly at the second to sixth deciles, not the people at the top of the society.

On p. 185, he writes "the administration also attempted to streamline the existing parallel welfare system in the Third Development Plan (2000–2004). The Ministry of Welfare was to be merged with extant pension and health- insurance bodies under the Social Security Organization and the Civil Service Pension Fund." First, at the time of writing this Plan the Ministry of Welfare did not exist, either to be named in the plan or to have obligations. I wish he had mentioned the respected article in the plan. If he means article 40 in this law, that article does not say such a thing. Second, this obligation is not even specified in the Structure of the Comprehensive Welfare and Social Security System, according to which the Ministry of Welfare was founded.

On p. 196, he writes "a population-wide bimonthly cash transfer" to describe cash-transfers in Iran, but cash-transfers in Iran are monthly; only in the first round were they paid bimonthly.

In the acknowledgment and introduction section, the author considers the book a theorization for analysis of the relationship between state and society in Iran. On page ix, he writes "his book argues that the politics of social policy and welfare organizations provides a lens through which to understand the surprising dynamics of social and political change in Iran since the 1979 revolution." He also adds on p. 3 "This book argues for a different view. We cannot understand the surprises of postrevolutionary Iran without examining interactions between state and society." Thus, the book claims to have a new theory. Theorization of course should be based on concrete knowledge of contexts, reliance on accurate information, and objective and solid theoretical foundations. However, none of these conditions are met in this book. None of the book's major concepts, such as "social revolution," "welfare state," "developmental state," and "martyrs' welfare state" have been the subject of serious examination.

Perhaps it is because of this approach that the book emphasizes quantity over quality. For example, the book talks about an increase in the number of students without paying attention to the fact that this might be because of a previous increase in fertility, and mentions the increase in university students without addressing quality in schools and universities.

This book uses grand titles without presenting evidence and content suited to such big titles. One cannot reach a clear conclusion about many of them. It seems that the author has sought to use a journalistic style, but has forgotten to make the rest of the content match. Some of these titles are "duality of modernization," "Iran's color revolution," and "nationalism from the below,



imperialism from the top.” Using a compilation of quotes and memories confirm that this is a journalistic approach rather than a scholarly one. Making grand claims without evidence and support also is another effect of this style.



Epilogue

What I mentioned here is only a small section of inaccuracies and errors in this book. The fact that big claims are made without presenting evidence or without a clear methodology is self-evident throughout the book.

The data and analyses presented in this book lack support, argument, and complete theorization. As a result, we witness a compilation of abstract facts and quasi-facts, in a selective and cherry-picking manner, regardless of their accuracy. In terms of methodology, the author relies on field work, while mentioning some of his travel memories and interviews, without referring to the most available documents on the subject. This is a serious methodological weakness of this book.

Finally, it is obvious that this book is not a reliable source for learning about welfare policies in Iran after the revolution let alone "a lens through which to understand the surprising dynamics of social and political change in Iran since the 1979 revolution."

