

29 October 2018

Dear Editor of *Iranian Studies*,

I thank you, as Editor of *Iranian Studies*, for inviting me to respond to Dr. Thomas Ricks, a scholar whose early life and work figured in my analysis of Iranian studies and anti-shah politics in the United States prior to the 1979 revolution. I appreciate Professor Ricks' commendation of my "brilliant documentation" and "impressive research skills," but I will spend my time here addressing our interpretive differences.

First, Professor Ricks either misinterpreted or ignored my analytic framework. My article is not intended to be a history of the Association for Iranian Studies or its predecessors. Like others of my generation, I appreciate the plurality of individuals, ideas, and organizations that have, over the years, helped the study of Iran reach many historical subfields and interdisciplinary modes of inquiry. The history that I tell is but one history of many, as I mention in note 17. Given Ricks' distortion of my framework, some clarification is in order. The point is, as I indicate in the epigraph, that, contrary to many assumptions, there was no monolithic American view of Iran during the cold war, in the academy or elsewhere. My framework rests on a "critical genealogy" that, for decades, fused scholarship and activism to expand the purview of Iranian studies, challenge the hegemony of an economically determined modernization theory, and contest US support for Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. I find the origins of that genealogy in the life of T. Cuyler Young—an individual who opposed the shah and seemed, to some, to represent that "other" America from the epigraph. That Young had such an influence on figures such as James Bill, whose works continue to enjoy wide readership, meant that the time had come for a critical analysis of the knowledge–power relationship in US–Iran relations.

Second, Ricks and I disagree on how to periodize the origins of the field. As I make clear in note 15, I build on a historiography that has demonstrated how the securitization of area studies in the postwar years affected the production of knowledge in the United States. This work focuses on the recruitment of American specialists into the Office of Strategic Services during the war, the move of British Orientalists to the United States after the war's conclusion, and the harnessing of America's intellectual power to the ends of "modernization" during the 1950s and 1960s. I argue that this

scholarship has focused on the Arab Middle East at the expense of Iran, and that it has too monolithic an understanding of the American academy (pp. 290–91). That being said, I agree with Ricks about the importance of the proliferation of area studies centers that, after the passage of the 1958 National Defense Education Act, began to produce results during the 1960s. While I discuss (p. 292) how the programs grew in two phases, I do focus more on the students of the pre-1958 programs than the post-1958 programs like Indiana University. I would invite Ricks or other scholars to write other histories of the many Iranian studies communities that were active in the United States at this time. I chose to focus on the actors that I did because, quite simply, they were the ones who appeared in my documents. In other words, Ricks himself was testifying before Congress in the late 1970s—the others he mentioned, by contrast, did not.

Third, and more troubling, is that Ricks erroneously accuses me of oversights while overlooking some of my most important evidence. Here are two examples, the first relating to the question of Iranian actors and agency. Ricks charges that I “missed the more dominant and newer role of the ‘young guard’” during the 1960s, particularly Iranian and Iranian-American scholars. These topics are a focal point of pages 295–98. My argument in this section is that, as the field coalesced, “Iranian studies was, from the beginning, international in composition and critical in perspective” (p. 298). Rather than repeat well-trodden ground, I cite Houchang Chehabi’s analysis of the “*Maktab*” group (p. 298), which includes many individuals that Ricks claims I omit. I also note the importance of the Iranian Student Association in the United States in this section and elsewhere. Rather than “ignore” Iranian contributions to the field in the 1960s, I used new archival findings to show how Majid Tehranian and others were particularly important to the field’s evolution. Is his point that I attached too much significance to the Harvard and Maryland conferences?

The second example is Ricks’ claim that my “characterization of [his] activism distorts [his] own career research.” He writes that, had I focused less on politics, I would have known that he and his contemporaries “were grounded in the British School of Social History and the French *Annales* school and armed with newer methodologies and theories of the social sciences with which to assault the then current modernization theories of the cold war era.” I could not agree more. As I write on page 300:

“Many of the field’s leading scholars served in Peace Corps Iran, and while their views vary considerably, Thomas M. Ricks was the most active during the 1970s.... Ricks’ intellectual pursuits were Iran’s literary and social histories.... Distressed that the historiography was ‘decidedly biased towards political and literary history,’ his research was influenced by British Marxism, especially Eric Hobsbawm, and the social history of the French *Annales* School.”

Third, I say more about the “newer guard,” to borrow from Ricks’ language, on pages 299–301, to demonstrate how some of The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) original members were returned Peace Corps Volunteers

from Iran and how new methodologies moved the study of Iran away from the elite focus of the earlier social scientists. As Ricks writes in his critique, these scholars “emphasized the founding principle of US foreign policy for national self-determination, and, by the 1960s and 1970s, human rights issues as bellwether concepts for a future progressive Iran and US policies.” Had he responded to either of the two electronic communications that I sent as I researched the article, I would have used this as a quote to support my point.

Fourth, nowhere do I argue that any American scholar made Iran’s revolution happen. The article is about American discourse on Iran, and one of the perennial questions that scholars address is how the “experts” allegedly got the revolution so wrong. My answer is that, perhaps, they were not all as wrong as we previously thought. Conservative scholars like George Lenczowski, along with many reformist liberals, misread the situation. By contrast, the authors of “revolutionary scholarship”—defined on page 299, to borrow from Fred Halliday, as scholarship “antagonistic to that of the present Iranian government and its international allies” and “written in solidarity with those opposed to it”—understood that, as Ricks wrote in a 1978 issue of *MERIP Reports*: “the question for the monarchy now is not if the Peacock Throne will fall, but when ... and only the Iranian people know the answer to that timetable” (p. 303). Still, as I argue in the final section, the teleologies of the cold war made it difficult for even the most knowledgeable Americans and, of course, many Iranians, to know what was coming next.

In conclusion, I agree that there is more to be written on the many histories of Iranian studies, whether in the United States or elsewhere, and whether focused on the political questions of the time or relegated to more narrow organizational questions. It is unfortunate that, in many cases, Professor Ricks faults me for not writing the history that he would have preferred while, in others, he simply distorts my research.

Nonetheless, as I noted to Ricks during our two collegial interactions in recent months, I hope that this dialogue can push forward the scholarly inquiry into the histories of Iranian studies around the world.

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