



# FRANCE XII(C). IRANIAN STUDIES IN FRANCE: SOCIAL SCIENCES AND MODERN PERSIA

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## FRANCE

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*Beginnings.* The history of French scholarship on modern Persia particularly in the field of social sciences was shaped by major external factors including the overall political relationship between the two countries and the radical changes which took place in the French university system and the organization of its scholarly missions to Persia in the latter half of this century.

Unlike Britain, Russia and later the United States, France has never exerted a sustained political influence in Persia. That mixture of political and economic aspirations and detailed first hand observations on local customs, geography and history encountered so frequently in British consular reports or journals of learned societies of London, Calcutta or Bengal and perhaps best exemplified on a grander scale in Lord Curzon's *Persia and the Persian Question* (1892), is on the whole absent in French writings of the period. But this very detachment from day to day political entanglement fostered the



creation of more balanced and long-lasting cultural relations between the two countries. The large number of Persian students who were sent to study in France, and the granting of the monopoly of archaeological excavations to France by the Persian government (1312/1894-95) are both a reflection of these cultural relations and a factor in their later progress and formation. The work of French archaeologists in Persia combined with an already existing strong and internationally recognized tradition of excellence in comparative philology and later linguistics in France, meant that French studies of Persia became dominated by the deep erudition and bold theoretical speculations of succeeding generations of French scholars of Indo-Iranian languages and culture including James Darmesteter, Antoine Meillet, Émile Benveniste, and Georges Dumézil, whose lasting influence on philology, linguistics and anthropology is recognized worldwide.

Nevertheless, tentative beginnings of a slowly emerging interest in the immediate social and economic conditions of the country can be traced to both direct official measures by the French government as well as in individual accounts of French travelers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. For example, the observations made by Jean-Baptiste Feuvrier (q.v.) in *Trois ans à la cour de Perse* (Paris, 1900) are a valuable source for the social and economic life of the country after the debacle of the Tobacco Régie. Other and less well known travelers provided data for the burgeoning scientific theories of the time. Émile Duhouset, for example, made detailed anthropometric skull measurements of members of a Persian regiment in his *Études sur les populations de la Perse et pays limitrophes pendant trois années de séjour en Asie* (Paris, 1863) which were later used by Nicolas de Khanikoff (Chanykov) and Henry Field (Field, pp. 47-48, 57-58). To these must also be added the work of individual orientalist curious about all things eastern and ready to venture into different fields. Henri Massé's *Croyances et coutumes persanes* (q.v., 2 vols., Paris, 1938) is perhaps his most lasting contribution to Persian studies, even though his primary interest was the teaching of classical Persian literature.

The most important example of a direct and official measure, apart from that of Flandin and Coste (q.v.), whose work included sketches of modern Persian scenes, was the scientific mission sent by the French government in 1890 under the leadership of Jacques de Morgan (q.v.), a mining engineer, to conduct a comprehensive survey of western Persia. The outcome was the monumental *Mission scientifique en Perse* (5 parts in 10 vols., Paris, 1894-1905)



covering a multitude of topics: archaeology, botany, anthropology, demography as well as Mandaean texts and Kurdish dialects (de Morgan, pp. 427-509, 540-41). French diplomatic, religious and educational archives of the period, including those of the Lazarists and the [Alliance Israélite universelle](#), remain largely unexplored.

*Post-war institutions.* The gradual end of colonial rule after the Second World War and the concomitant growth of international organizations, and most notably UNESCO (with its headquarters in Paris) to some extent loosened the direct relationship between spheres of political and economic influence and academic and cultural concern. While Great Britain and the United States continued to play dominant parts in the political, military and economic life of the country, France embarked on new cultural initiatives of her own. An office of cultural relations, set up under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was responsible for the creation of the Institut franco-iranien de Téhéran with a Département d'iranologie directed from 1946 to 1975 by Henry Corbin (q.v.). A year later, in 1947, the Institut d'études iraniennes was created at the Sorbonne. But although the intended aim of both these institutions was to cover all aspects of Persian civilization, ancient and modern, in practice, the focus of interest remained on ancient Iran and to some extent and largely because of Corbin, on the study of Sufism and "Islam iranien." The study of social sciences in Persia began, therefore, outside these two academic institutions. In this respect, the enlargement of the role of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) in the 1960s, which provided an institutional framework for scholars to pursue their studies either individually or collectively, provided a much needed venue.

*Geographers as pioneers.* The first steps towards specialized and intensive study of modern Persia by French scholars was taken by the geographers Xavier de Planhol and Jean Dresch. The former began his research in Persia with fieldwork in Azarbaijan in 1958, and afterwards in the central Alborz region (Lārījān, Kalārdašt), culminating in the publication of his *Géographie humaine de l'Iran septentrional* (Paris, 1964). But it is de Planhol's later and more theoretical works delineating the interaction between culture, history and geography in the Islamic world which have had a seminal impact on the study of geography (de Planhol, 1968 and 1993). Although widely different in his theoretical approach, Dresch has also had a strong influence on the succeeding generations of geographers. He organized the first French geographical expedition to Persia in 1958 within the framework of the CNRS. A



later and much more important project, namely a detailed and comprehensive study of the Lūt desert (Kavīr-e lūt), began in 1968 as a joint venture with the CNRS under the leadership of Dresch and the Center for Geographical Research of the University of Tehran headed by Aḥmad Mostawfī. Although the project remained unfinished, several monographs based on the combined inter-disciplinary research of the French and Persian members of the project were published in Persian. This close co-operation between French and Persian researchers, particularly in the domain of social sciences during the middle decades of this century, was made possible partly because the CNRS system was inherently conducive towards collective projects and partly because of the continuing tradition of Persian students pursuing further education in France. Many Persian academics specializing in geography had been former students of Dresch and Planhol in France (Hourcade 1988, pp. 51-52), including Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Pāpolī Yazdī, Parīdoḳt Fešārakī, Ašḡar Nāzeriān, and Sīrūs Sehāmī.

A new generation of French geographers began their field work in the 1970s, and their work extends from the last decade of the Pahlavi regime to the present. They include Marcel Bazin (studies on Qom and Ṭāleš), Bernard Hourcade (on the central Alborz region and on urban geography in post-revolutionary Persia), Hubert de Mauroy on the Assyro-Chaldean community and their internal migration to Tehran and Daniel Balland on Afghanistan (see under individual authors in the bibliography below).

*Sociological studies.* The development of modern sociological studies of Persia by French scholars was even more closely connected with the development of research institutions in Persia and the active contribution of UNESCO. The Institut d'études et de recherches sociales (IERS, Mo'assassa-ye taḥqīqāt-e ejtemā'ī) was founded in 1955 as part of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Tehran. It was chaired by Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Ṣadīqī (Gh. Sadighi) and directed by the French trained sociologist Eḥsān Narāqī (Ehsan Naraghi) and partly staffed by French sociologists who were employed through UNESCO. For example Jean-Claude Chasteland produced several demographic studies which remain indispensable tools of reference and trained a number of Persian demographers who later dominated the field for two decades (Hourcade 1988, pp. 52-53). Another influential scholar associated with the institute, Paul Vieille, was the first French sociologist to specialize on Persia. He also collaborated very closely with his Persian colleagues and wrote influential works on urban sociology during his long residence in Persia. After



his return to France as a CNRS research scholar he has continued to publish studies on Persian social history and class structure from a Marxist perspective and in 1977 founded the journal *Peuples méditerranéens*, which remains the only journal published in France with regular studies on the social sciences in Persia.

*Ethnology and the establishment of the research group on contemporary Persia (“Iran contemporain”)*: Vincent Monteil’s monograph on the tribes in Fars (Monteil, 1957) was perhaps the first French anthropological monograph on Persia. In 1969, Jean-Pierre Digard began his research on the Baḳtīārī tribe. He was also part of a small group of ethnographers at the CNRS who formed a research unit in 1972 to establish ethnographic charts of Persia: Programme d’établissement de cartes ethnologiques de l’Iran” (PECEI). This was an important landmark. For the first time a French academic institution had undertaken to support a diversified project in social sciences related to Persia. The young scholars who participated included, apart from Digard, the anthropologists Christian Bromberger and Anny Tual and, slightly later, the geographers Marcel Bazin and Bernard Hourcade, all of whom knew enough Persian to carry out their fieldwork without the need for interpreters and maintained close collaboration with their Persian colleagues, including Aṣḡar Karīmī and Anūš ‘Askarī Kānaqāh. The results of their research were published both in French and Persian in the journal *Mardom-šenāsī wa farhang-e ‘amma-ye Īrān* and later as monographs (for list of topics, see Hourcade, 1988, pp. 54-55). From 1975, the PECEI group expanded to include other scholars and new research topics from other disciplines including sociology, modern history, political science. After becoming a full fledged *équipe de recherche* of the CNRS in 1982, it was given the comprehensive title of Sciences sociales du monde iranien contemporain and included almost all those scholars engaged in research on social sciences relating to Persia and Afghanistan.

*Recent conferences.* In 1985, an international colloquium, the first ever in France on ethnicity in Persia and Afghanistan, was organized by the research team “Iran contemporain” under the direction of J.-P. Digard, and its proceedings were published in 1988 (Digard, 1988). Research on contemporary Persia from a more historical perspective was the subject of a conference on questions of cultural tradition, assimilation and modernity, organized by Yann Richard in 1987 (Richard, 1989). The proceedings of another multi-disciplinary conference, on various aspects of the social history of Tehran, were published



by the Institut Français de Recherche en Iran (IFRI) in 1992 (Adle and Hourcade, 1992). Thierry Coville edited the proceedings of a seminar on Persian economy after the Islamic revolution (1994). French scholars have also contributed detailed and pioneering articles on various topics on modern Persia and Afghanistan in this encyclopaedia, the article on the political history of Afghanistan by Daniel Balland (see AFGHANISTAN x) and Charles M. Kieffer's contribution to the languages of present day Afghanistan (see AFGHANISTAN v) have already become established works of reference.

*The Islamic Revolution.* From its very inception and as a result of its world wide repercussions, the Islamic Revolution in Persia has inspired a plethora of publications in French, ranging from first hand accounts by journalist like Paul Balta and Pierre Blanchet to general works of historical analysis by academics such as *L'Iran au XXe siècle* (Paris, 1996) by Jean-Pierre Digard, Bernard Hourcade, and Yann Richard, which studies Persian history over the entire century. Side by side these overviews and *ŷuvres de synthèse*, French historians and social scientists have also published monographs on various personalities and movements and aspects of contemporary Persia such as on the Fedā'īān-e Eslām (Richard, 1985), on 'Alī Šarī'atī (Yavari-d'Hellencourt, 1985), on women after the Revolution (Adelkhah, 1991), and on urban problems and internal migration, as well as the sociology and political discourse in Persia after the Revolution (Khosrokhavar, 1980, 1993; with Vieille, 1990).

The study of contemporary Persia is at last firmly established on the academic map in France. The CNRS research team on contemporary Persia and Afghanistan does not have an equivalent in the academic world outside Persia. In 1995, when Yann Richard succeeded Charles-Henri de Fouchécour as Professor of Iranian Studies at the Sorbonne and Bernard Hourcade succeeded Jean-Paul Digard in Social Sciences, further general reorganization of Persian studies also took place in Paris. The research groups working on social sciences, history, and language and literature, were amalgamated into a single research team under the name of Monde iranien, jointly sponsored by CNRS, Sorbonne Nouvelle, Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, and EPHE. The range of topics studied by the members of this research group encompasses the whole gamut of Iranian culture and civilization, from ancient to contemporary societies in the entire Iranian world (Persia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Central Asia as a whole, as well as studies on Baluchi, Pashto and Kurdish studies). Although the vagaries of contemporary politics remain a



perennial problem, the resumption of its public activities by the Institut français de recherche en Iran (IFRI) in 1993 with a resident director (initially Rémy Boucharlat, succeeded by Christophe Bala) is a hopeful sign for further research and new opportunities for younger scholars.

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