

# Gramsci, Passive Revolution and 20th Century Iran

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*The struggle for democracy, development, independence and an egalitarian society in Iran is a century old. While colonial and imperial dominance, including economic-political interventions, were key factors in shaping the (under)development of the country during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant liberal approaches have tended to seek explanations for Iranian underdevelopment in a failure of Iran's own socio-political fabric.*

*Stanford professor Abbas Milani, for instance, claims that the British were simply "[looking after their own interests](#)" when they dominated Iran in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his view the underdevelopment, social disintegration, dysfunctional economy and the condition of what could be seen as a failed state in that period was due to Iranian "collaborators" with the British. Therefore, the burden of responsibility does not lie with the imperial structure itself and its role in Iran but with the agent, in this case the "collaborator", even though they would not exist in the first place if there was not a specific structure for that function.*

Moreover, Milani's micro-focus on the Iranian collaborators as the cause of the country's underdevelopment is simply not consistent with the history of colonialism and imperialism, their relationships with the countries on which they impose themselves and the material conditions which result from dominance and exploitation.

The macro-systemic fact about European colonialism is that it relied on collaborators in all its colonies and subordinate territories. Imperial expansionism through collaboration by the local elite was considered "cheap" expansion and avoidance of costly clashes with the locals was at the heart of European imperial policies. Critical theorists such as Johan Galtung also suggest that the dynamic between the elite in the Centre and the elite in the Periphery continued to exist in the post-colonial period, and its effects continue to this day. Therefore, the correlation between the British imperial forces and local Iranian collaborators in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century can be viewed as part of a larger structure in which capitalist/imperialist Core states exploit the Periphery.

One of the problems arising from the view that local actors are primarily responsible for underdevelopment in the Periphery is the ease with which this slips into an Orientalist form of analysis. By contrast, critical theories provide more useful insights into understanding underdevelopment in the Periphery. Our own focus here is on a specific aspect of the Gramscian concept of 'passive revolution'. This aspect can be interpreted and hypothesised as *the route to progress and development in the Periphery is obstructed by Core states due to their exploitation of the former*. We can apply this approach to four periods in 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran, as a case study, showing that, to a significant extent, underdevelopment is due to

colonial and imperialist interventions.

### Gramsci and the Concept of Passive Revolution

✖ 'Passive revolution,' in Gramsci's writings, is part of a broader concept of 'hegemony'. For Gramsci, hegemony, as a complex and systemic form of social control by a ruling elite, is a dialectical product of history or what he referred to as an 'historic bloc'. Moreover, the success of the social forces of an historic bloc in altering an older regime, through establishing their own hegemony, is, for Gramsci, a feature that accompanies industrial and advanced capitalist states. Passive revolution occurs when the historic bloc was unable to completely alter or abolish an older regime and the social forces of the new historic bloc were not capable of establishing their own hegemony. Indeed, Gramsci referred to several elements that lead to the situation of passive revolution or as he put it a "'revolution' without a 'revolution'."

He also highlighted the interference of 'international forces' in the affairs of weaker states as a crucial factor in the development of the condition of passive revolution and the underdevelopment that results from it. As to why a passive revolution is a *half way revolution* which is disturbed by external factors, Gramsci wrote:

... one can see how, when the impetus of progress is not tightly linked to a vast local economic development which is artificially limited and repressed, but is instead the reflection of international developments which transmit their ideological currents to the periphery – currents born on the basis of the productive development of the more advanced countries – then the group which is the bearer of the new ideas is not the economic group but the intellectual stratum, and the conception of the state advocated by them changes aspect; it is conceived of as something in itself, as a rational absolute.

What Gramsci had in mind here was 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy. He viewed the Italian reformist Risorgimento movement during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a passive and uncomplete revolution, given that it lacked other social elements which were necessary for a historic bloc. The movement was ideas from intellectuals without an efficient, organic and local economic group or class. However, it must be noted that Gramsci was writing and applying his elaboration of the concept of passive revolution within the European context. In contrast to the Middle East, Europe has no history of suffering from modern colonialism, nor did it experience consistent foreign interventions in the modern era. However, Gramsci referred to the French revolution in 1789 and its uneven effect on the rest of Europe, when he wrote about the 'reflection of international development' on the 'periphery'. In relation to Italy, he suggested, it was haunted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the 'passive' effect of the French revolution.

Robert Cox has interpreted the Gramscian notion of passive revolution and its implications today to refer to 'industrialising Third World countries'. Without providing much information regarding the effect of external forces, or the characteristics of such effects, he argues that Third World countries have 'imported or had thrust upon them aspects of a new order created abroad, without the old order having been displaced'. Using the Iranian case, we can read the broad 'external effect', elaborated in Gramsci and Cox's frameworks, within the

Middle Eastern historical context. Accordingly, colonial and imperial domination of countries in the Periphery prevent the formation of new historic blocs that can transform these societies and subordinate local needs to imperial terms and interests. In relation to Iran, imperial forces changed the course of history towards the condition of passive revolution four times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Roots of Underdevelopment in Iran**

The [Constitutional Revolution](#) in 1906 was the first victim of imperial interference in Iran. European power over the Iranian economy, widespread poverty, underdevelopment and dysfunctional absolute monarchy had already provoked several Iranian social forces to take action to change the *status quo* by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A new historic bloc was constituted by politicians, organic intellectuals, peasants and the clergy. It was eventually able to reduce the power of the monarchs of the time, Muzafaraldin and his son Muhammad Ali who succeeded him, through the establishment of the first modern Iranian constitution. However, the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907 saw Iran divided into two areas of influence: British in the south and Russian in the north and centre. The latter bombarded the nascent Iranian parliament with the collaboration of Muhammad Ali. Ervand Abrahamian refers to this external intervention as a “typical military coup” whose subsequent economic-political aftershakes continued to haunt Iran up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. To put it another way, the structural underdevelopment resulting from the role that British and Russian intervention played in beating back the Iranian progressive constitutionalist movement; potentially progressive and modernising change gave way to passive revolution and thus continuing economic underdevelopment and political stagnation.

The second Iranian socio-political upheaval during the 20<sup>th</sup> century took place in the mid-1920s under the leadership of military figure Reza Khan, later Reza Shah. Gheissari and Nasr describe modern Iranian politics as a controversy between democratic idealism *and* a stable state with a developed economy. Reza Khan stood for and prioritised the latter. Having sufficient reasons not to trust the British, he became known as the father of modern Iran and unified, built and stabilised the state through cooperation with the Germans. However, despite being officially neutral in the Second World War, Iran was invaded and occupied by [Soviet, British and American](#) forces which replaced Reza Shah with his young son. This was ‘justified’ by claiming they needed to get US aid to the Soviets via the Iranian railways and secure the country’s oilfields for the Allies.

The third episode took place in the 1950s. By the early 1950s, many Iranians wanted more than nine percent of the revenue derived from the country’s oilfields and also to establish economic and thus political sovereignty. However, British Petroleum (BP) wanted to cling on to its monopoly over Iranian oil, so the democratically-elected prime minister, Muhammad Mosaddeq, moved to nationalise the oil industry. [The CIA and the MI6](#) responded by organising a coup in 1953 to overthrow Mosaddeq. Progressive and democratic change – in effect, political and economic development and modernisation – was derailed. Moreover, in different ways, the aftermath of the 1953 coup affected the outcome of the 1979 ‘revolution’ and therefore its impact continues to this day.

The aftermath of the 1953 coup brings us to the fourth and final episode. Following the 1953 coup, the political parties functioning within the parliamentary system, including Mosaddeq’s National Front and the socialist party Tudeh, were banned. While political

suppression accompanied the entire Cold War era, political Islam was systematically viewed as an anti-communist force and became allied with the [Shah](#). Indeed, the history of employing Islamic forces in favour of imperial interests goes back long before the 1953 coup in Iran. The fact that the Islamists became the *de facto* winners of the 1979 revolution in Iran tends to support the view of scholars such as Tariq Ali; Islamism emerged as a political force in the Middle East to fill the political vacuum created by imperial policies in the region. The suppression of progressive, secular forces impeded the emergence of a modernising historic bloc. Instead, the way was opened for the Islamists to install a socially repressive regime and economic, political and social underdevelopment continue to characterise Iranian society.

Some local elements may deserve consideration as part of the cause-root of underdevelopment in the Periphery. However, the limitation of any approach that focuses predominantly on local actors in the Periphery is that these are abstracted from material relations shaped by more powerful players such as imperialist powers and past colonial subordination and/or ongoing economic exploitation and subordination is downplayed or even ignored.

The Iranian case indicates that on four occasions during the last century imperial forces have turned progressive movements and potentially progressive outcomes into passive revolutions, thereby maintaining their dominant economic position and political influence; in other words, their hegemony. Perhaps, then, it is time for a reconsideration of just why and how underdevelopment in the Periphery is produced and reproduced by Core-Periphery relations themselves.

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## Notes

1. Abbas Malini was delivering his speech in November, 2013 for lunching his book *the Shah* in Vancouver, Canada. The event was sponsored by the book publisher *the Persian Circle*.

2. Robinson, R. Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism. In Owen, R and Sutcliffe, B. (1972). *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*. (ed). London: Longman, pp 117-140.

3. See: Galtung, J. (1971). A Structural Theory of Imperialism. *Journal of Peace Research*. Vol. 8. No. 2, pp 81-117.

4. Gramsci, A. (1992). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Hoare, Q and Smith, N, G. (ed). New York: International Publishers, pp 179-180.

5. See: Robert Cox interpretation of the Gramscian concept of Passive Revolution in: Cox, W. R. (1983). Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method. *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*. Vol. 12. No. 2, pp 162-175.

6. Gramsci, p 276.
7. Ibid, p 59.
8. Ibid, p 116.
9. Ibid, p 119.
10. Cox, pp 166-167.
11. Gheissari, A and Nasr, V. (2006). *Democracy in Iran*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 23.
12. Except the peasants, each of the elite on the politicians and the clergy part also had counterparts who stood for the absolute monarchy and opposed constitutionalism. These two groups were also defeated by the constitutionalists. See: Kasravi, A. (1984). *Tarikhe Mashrote Iran (The History of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran)*. Tehran: Amir Kabir. (Farsi).
13. Abrahamian, E. (2008). *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 49-50.
14. Gheissari, A and Nasr, p 23.
15. Reza Khan Administration provided the finance for its projects, such as building the first railway, from creative economic management such as implying local tax on imported goods. See: Gheissari, A and Nasr, pp 40-41.
16. For more figures and statistic data, see: Ferrier, R. W. (1982). *The History of British Petroleum*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
17. Behrooz, M. (1999). *Rebels with a Cause*. London: I. B. Tauris.
18. Abrahamian, E. (2001). The 1953 Coup in Iran. *Science & Society*. Vol. 65. No. 2, pp 182-215.
19. See: Ali, T. (2002). *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*. London: Verso.

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