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HOW RESEARCH TAKES SHAPE. REMARKS ON MY BOOK *POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN IRAN FROM KHATAMI TO THE GREEN MOVEMENT* (2020)

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Books are the testimonies of an intellectual journey that starts with personal preoccupations. As Aslı Vatansever (2020) wrote, scholarship is about making the personal relevant to others. Even in academic books, apparently impersonal elements such as theoretical discussions and the literature review are woven together with the authors' life. We write books to do more than "filling a gap in the literature."

When the attacks on the Twin Towers took place on 11 September 2001, I was a fresher at the University of Turin, where I completed my studies five years later. Like many others, I have a clear memory of where I was when I received a phone call from my partner at the time, who urged me to turn on the TV. I was home with my flatmate and I did so. I clearly remember that huge, red title on the TV screen reading "Attack on us". I also remember that the first reaction we had in that student apartment was a sarcastic half-laughter – "Us? What are they talking about? We're in Italy" – quickly replaced by the grim awareness that the "us versus them" rhetoric was here to stay. Since that day, the Italian press and public debate started to be filled with discussions about Islam, its supposedly natural inclination towards violence, Surahs and random citations from the Qur'an to prove the point. Muslims were invisible but Islam was hyper-visible, and even those who called out Orientalism and Islamophobia did play the game of defending Islam as a religion – instead of showing the limitation of treating religions as something un-worldly and never-changing, instead of talking about religions as something defined by human action and not by some abstract forces. Since then, academics have made consistent progress in debunking such standpoints (Bayat, 2007). Back then, however, the best readings we had available appealed to the progressive nature of Islam, visible in some exegetic traditions, and Islamic reformism to show that Islam can be a religion of moderation and peace. As I became interested in Islamic reformism, I started reading widely about Iran's president, Mohammad Khatami, an Islamic *eslahtalab*, an Islamic reformist, par excellence.

Certainly, as a person who transited to adulthood in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was familiar with political reformism. In Western Europe, reformism was presented as a balanced way to get the "best" of liberalism (the free market, human rights, democracy) and keep some good things about socialism. Reformism was Blair's third way and a way to enter the modern world leaving behind the ruins of the old world, troubled by ideology.

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Islamic reformism preached something similar, as I explain in chapters 1 and 2 of my new book *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*. It was about re-interpreting Islamic texts and precepts in a "modern", "liberal" way, as its proponents argued. They posited that Islamic reformism was about reconciling Islam with the modern world and modern values (Filaly-Ansari, 2003). As I landed in Iran for my first fieldwork experience in 2005, I was constantly told by research participants (NGO workers, journalists, progressive intellectuals and university students) that the Islamic Republic was going in the direction of bridging democracy and Islam, modernity and Islam, human rights and Islam through Khatami's reformism, which, so the story goes, was positive because it was helping Iranians to access the boon of the modern, post-ideological world.

In chapters 1 and 3 of my book, I explain how the scientific literature echoed this interpretation. Many books from the time focused on perceived dichotomies such as "Islam and…", with the second term being something seen as the contrary, the negation of Islam – modernity, democracy, civil society, etc – and posited that reformism was the bridge between Islam and its opposites. Khatami's Iran was often narrated as "a country at a crossroads" between tradition, or Islam, and modernity, democracy, human rights, what-have-you. Reformism was there to bridge that divide. Yahya Sadowsky's "The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate" helped me to articulate in academic terms what I felt like an inexplicable uneasiness every time I encountered these analyses, as I later elaborated in my review article "Democracy and secularism in Iran: lessons for the Arab Spring?" (2013): their Eurocentrism, intrinsic Orientalism, and their almost Hegelian understanding of history, seen as a linear transition from "bad" to "good", from tradition to modernity, or from Islam to liberal democracy. As I got access to the vocabulary and concepts of critical thinking, I finally had the certainty that my work had a different identity from the dominant scholarship on Iranian/Islamic reformism. I knew what reformism was not. But what was reformism, then?

To answer this question, I could only shift my attention from scholarly work to the lived experiences of my friends and research participants. By doing so, I could appreciate the contradictions that inhabited reformism in its "Khatamist" Iranian version. For example, while the reformist government called on Iranians to become more active in participating in society and the national political life, the repression of activists who responded positively to that call was common. While it is true that the security and judiciary apparatuses are out of the control of the government, Khatami's government had supported the repression of activists and dissenters at times (Rivetti & Cavatorta, 2014). On other occasions, the government had instead supported the victims of that same repression. Why? Was the government differentiating between "good" and "bad" activists? And what was its goal? These simple questions led me to understand governmental reformism in Iran as a disciplinary project, as I detail in chapter 3 of my book, with more or less codified behaviours, political beliefs and mobilisational strategies. Political participation became the privileged "site" of observation to capture the boundaries, the characteristics, the "dos" and "don'ts" of that disciplinary project.

While thinking, reading and travelling between Iran and Italy, and later Iran and Ireland, I realised another simple fact, that disciplinary projects have proponents, supporters and opponents, and that these are not uniform groups. When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president, many of my contacts in Iran were nostalgic about the Khatami era. Others had grown critical of the reformists' political choices and of reformism in itself, which now to them looked like a disabler of democratic political participation, rather than an enabler, as I explain in chapters 4 and 5 of my book. Most of the critical voices that had become disillusioned with Khatami's politics suffered political exclusion and some forms of repression, even when Khatami was in power. They were those who struggled to adapt to the "discipline of reformism" and who had developed a critical mindset which eventually led them to formulate a refined critique of Khatamism, including Khatami's limited vision for political change and the reformist government's willingness to bridle and control grassroots activism. The survival of these voices, in spite of the political exclusion and repression they had suffered, suggested that something in the "discipline of reformism" did not work out. Subjects who were supposed to adapt and embody governmental reformism, unexpectedly radicalised. Unintendedly, by asking the people to become more active and participate politically, Khatami's government had created a civil society it could not control, a reserve of residual counter-power which was now operating outside of the governmental discipline. Using political exclusion and repression was a way to "pastorate" those "rebellious" activists back into the space of permitted participation, but the strategy did not work out for all. Those activists who embodied the unintended consequences of reformism – the radicalised, the disillusioned, the critical ones – had developed the ability to produce "surpluses of activism" – that is, initiatives, networks and campaigns that were unwanted by the government but had survived and circulated in society during Khatami's presidential terms and after.

For me, thinking about "surpluses of activism" was a fecund way to expand on the idea that activism survives political constraints in authoritarian countries. I was not only interested in the strategies the activists adopted to elude authoritarianism, something the scholarship had already looked into. I was also interested in how such a surplus of activism and the critical mindset of activists, who wanted more than reforms, diversified and developed discrete approaches to and visions of political change according to elements such as gender, ethnicity and class. As an example, in chapter 5 of my book, I talk about how campaigning for pro-women legal reform was approached differently by activists with professional networks and middle-class jobs such as lawyers and journalists, and by activists with precarious and working-class jobs. For the former, legal reform represented the ultimate goal of a political battle, while the latter were up fighting against structural, deep-rooted, and intertwined forms of oppression although they remained supportive of legal reform. The latter reflected that laws forbidding early marriage and laws enforcing compulsory school education for kids would not solve the issues of low-income families, who might need to wed daughters as soon as possible to survive economically. Different approaches were also present between activists from Tehran and those coming from a less urbanised background or those belonging to ethnic minorities, who were often infantilised and patronised by Tehran-based activists and NGO workers.

Such close analysis of the surplus of activism as a diversified, contested, and complex field of political and human relations allowed me to distinguish between the specific positionalities that activists had developed in post-Khatami Iran, which eventually merged in the Green Movement replicating old divides and limitations both in terms of political goals and aspirations.

Chapter 5 examines the formation of such residual counter-power during the reform era and its implications in the post-Khatami era, when it became fertile ground for the cultivation of autonomous political subjectivities that demanded more than governmental reformism. As the book closes with an analysis of the Green Movement, the last chapter is dedicated to examining the role of the memory of reformism in the life of activists. In spite of all the limitations, it motivated activists to go back to political work, notwithstanding the trauma of the repression of the Green Movement in 2009 and 2010. The memory of a time when dreaming of and working for change was possible – a sort of afterlife of reformism – worked as a push-factor and is a testimony of the continuous negotiations that structure community and state-building, which are open processes that constantly renovate the forms of participation and political imagination.

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