BOOK REVIEWS


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How do the poor manage their lives in urban slums? How do they carve spaces for themselves in the midst of plenty in large cities such as Tehran? Given their lack of economic resources and social opportunities, what are their strategies for survival? This book offers a sociological narrative of the struggles waged by poor and ordinary Iranians against oppressive conditions that deny them jobs, living space, and basic means of survival.

Asef Bayat paints a vivid picture of the politics of survival among the poor during the years 1977–93. Specifically, he examines the squatter movement in Tehran, the illegal takeover of lands and construction of housing in the outskirts of cities and towns by poor migrants, the movement by the unemployed to gain jobs and support from the new Islamic government, and the tactics used by political and ordinary vendors to appropriate business sites and public space in major cities. Although officials and outside observers may regard most of these activities as illegal and extraordinary, Bayat argues that they are simply the daily practices of survival exercised quietly by the poor whenever feasible or advantageous. Bayat characterizes these efforts as “street politics”—that is, “a set of conflicts and the attendant implications between a collective populace and the authorities, shaped and expressed episodically in the physical and social space of the streets” (p. 15). Through such politics, the poor express their discontent, appropriate public space to their advantage, secure jobs and subsistence, and seek autonomy from state regulations and rules. The political turmoil and ideological mobilization of Iran’s revolutionary upheaval in 1978–79 gave practitioners of street politics a boost. Yet this mode of politics did not start with the revolution. Because street politics are due less to political ideology and more to economic policies, they pre-date the revolution and have persisted since 1979. They are the product of the repressive political environments and economic inequalities within which they are found.

Bayat refutes the popular belief that the poor in the developing world are undifferentiated, non-rational, without class consciousness, ideological (religious), and politically passive. He disaggregates the new poor, demonstrating that in their efforts to secure housing and jobs the Iranian poor are often non-ideological, atomized, and governed by necessity and a conscious effort to secure their gains by acting cautiously and invisibly. Although lacking rational and modern organization, strong leadership, and a cohesive ideology, the poor are grounded in a web of passive networks of traditional social relationships such as family, kinship, and neighborhoods.

Bayat’s contributions are principally in . . . fields—regional studies and the sociology of change and social movements. To Middle Eastern studies, especially Iranian studies, he offers solid empirical data on, and insight into, the collective actions and inner workings of various
grass-roots cooperative activities, self-initiatives, local organizations, neighborhood associations, citizenry councils, workers' unions, and jobless syndicates developed by the poor before, during, and after the Iranian Revolution to protect their physical and social lives. This information about the contributions of the poor to social change in this period provides a counterbalance to reductionist, individualistic, and purely political accounts of how Iran's social structures have developed during the past two decades. In fact, Bayat provides to students of Iranian studies the first collection of data in English on the "informal" organizations of the poor, explaining how the early spirit of cooperation and participation in these collective efforts gave way to paternalism and social control later. These groups and their silent, almost inadvertent mobilization may be too informal for Bayat to consider them part of civil society per se. Nevertheless, they make up the informal aspect of any conceptualization of civil society and, as Bayat himself skillfully shows, they act as a counter-hegemonic force against the state during both the pre- and post-revolutionary periods. The poor resist formality because informality maximizes their autonomy from the state, increases their ability to cope with legal restrictions and housing shortages, and enables them to define a social space in which they may craft their lives according to their tastes and designs.

Furthermore, Bayat contributes to the sociology of social change, especially the study of movements among the poor. Building on the works of such theorists of modern social movement as James Scott and F. D. Colburn, and thinkers such as Foucault and Gramsci, Bayat views these quiet, prolonged, and atomized movements as both offensive and defensive mobilizations by the poor to resist the oppressive measures of the state and restrict the privileges of the dominant groups in society. Without engaging Kazemi's earlier work directly (Farhad Kazemi, Poverty and Revolution in Iran: The Migrant Poor, Urban Marginality and Politics (New York: New York University Press, 1980)], Bayat moves the discussion of migrant poor beyond the marginality thesis and rejects the passivist overtone of the Chicago School of urban sociology. In an attempt to reject this theory, he enhances our understanding of the magnitude, diversity, and politics of the urban poor during and after the Iranian Revolution. Further, by comparing Iranian poor movements with those of other countries, he gives us a comparative analysis of these movements and moves their analysis far beyond the often used classical analysis by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail (New York: Vintage, 1977)). He handily dispels the notion that the poor cannot engage in effective offensive action.

Although Bayat does not show much interest in post-modern theories, his discussion of poor movements in Iran lends more credence to these theories which view new social movements as more local rather than global, network-based rather than organization-based, issue-oriented rather than ideologically motivated, disruptive rather than destructive to the state, and interested in autonomy vis-à-vis, rather than power from, the state. The only serious difference in Bayat's study is his emphasis on class and the state as two still important factors in the analysis of social change and the politics of the poor. Yet even here, as he examines the poor's reaction to their plight, he contends that what brings the poor together in their collective, quiet encroachment are the deprived conditions of their existence rather than the abstract consciousness of their position in the larger structure of social relationships in the society. These conditions vary for different groups of the poor—hence, the diversity of their approaches and goals.

Bayat's two decades of studying the working class in Iran and other developing countries have given him keen methodological insights into the difficulty of examining collective action by disadvantaged groups. Having grown up among his subjects and having participated in social movements which embraced the poor, Bayat presents us with a sympathetic study which is anecdotally rich, methodologically solid, and analytically powerful. His work contains a great deal of original information, including some fascinating primary research in the form of interviews and personal observations. This work will be indispensable for anyone interested in the study of social protest, social movements, the poor, and urban migrants in the Middle East.