


no more, the labor conditions of teachers is a new kind of politics that continues to be central to understanding education and the state.

Kalisman draws heavily on the extensive secondary literature on education and nationalist politics in these historical periods, as well diverse archives, memoirs, syllabi, textbooks, and oral history interviews. The book also benefits from photographs that bring to life some of the actors and phenomena described by the author, as well as several tables that serve to quantify the scale of what Kalisman describes (e.g. teachers hired, budgets, teacher-student ratios). Clearly written and structured, *Teachers as State-Builders* is accessible to a diverse set of readers, including researchers and students. Anyone interested in the history of modern education will find this book illuminating, as will scholars interested in teachers and teaching as both labor and political work.

doi:10.1017/S0020743823000740

## The Art of Defiance: Dissident Culture and Militant Resistance in 1970s Iran

**Peyman Vahabzadeh (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022). Pp. 439. £85.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781474492225**

Reviewed by Samad Josef Alavi , Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS), University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway ([s.j.alavi@ikos.uio.no](mailto:s.j.alavi@ikos.uio.no))

Peyman Vahabzadeh's *The Art of Defiance: Dissident Culture and Militant Resistance in 1970s Iran* complements much of the work in his monumental 2010 sociological study of the People's Fada'i Guerrilla (PFG) movement, *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fada'i Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979*. In the current book, Vahabzadeh focuses on cultural production, examining how the arts imagined the possibility of the Iranian guerrilla movement before it occurred and mythologized the guerrillas' actions after the armed struggle had begun. *Art of Defiance* argues that revolutionary art at its core shares the same conviction with revolutionary politics that a better world is possible and, as such, revolutionary movements like Iran's in the 1970s cannot be properly understood without considering the convergence of the two. It is not a book about events in 1979, but rather about the dialectical relationship between cultural production and the militant resistance of the PFG, especially at the organization's height between 1971 and 1976. There are many ways to laud the book. One would be to say that anyone who *felt* the significance of Shervin Hajipour's 2022 song "Barayeh" before knowing how to articulate such significance will appreciate Vahabzadeh's central proposition that rebellious artworks capture the feeling, borrowing from Bob Dylan, that we "know something is happening here" well before we know "what it is" and, in doing so, they can actually *make* something happen, as was the case with the militant resistance in 1970s Iran.

*The Art of Defiance* is divided into five chapters, according to artistic forms. Poetry, song, fiction, and film each receives its own chapter (2 through 5, respectively), while Chapter 1 establishes a conceptual framework through which to consider how these arts shaped the PFG movement, the history of which Vahabzadeh examined in *A Guerrilla Odyssey*. The first chapter's theoretical rigor is one of *The Art of Defiance's* notable strengths. Any history of armed struggle in 1970s Iran will cite the attack by a group of guerrillas on a gendarmerie outpost in the village of Siahkhal in 1971 as a foundational event for the movement. What Vahabzadeh argues in the first chapter, however, is that concepts like "myth," "event,"



and “armed propaganda” (which Vahabzadeh theorizes through the writings of George Sorel, Wagner-Pacific, and Bizhan Jazani, respectively) complicate both literary and political history. Whereas earlier studies have treated rebellious art from 1970s Iran as a *reflection* of already existing political movements, Vahabzadeh demonstrates that neither the arts nor the guerrilla movement existed without the other, or that it became a matter of “life imitating art” (the title of Chapter 2) as much as the other way around.

Another of the book’s strengths is that it analyzes a wide range of artworks. Among them, poetry receives the greatest attention, with the chapter on poetry constituting a third of the entire book. This disproportionate attention is justified not only because poetry held a “privileged status” in Iranian society writ large or because the PFG themselves considered it the most effective aesthetic weapon at their disposal but because poetry relates most directly to the concepts of myth and event established in the first chapter (147). Vahabzadeh argues that the attack on Siahkal carried more symbolic value for the guerrilla movement than it did any material advantage. In this sense it had more of a poetic function than a military one. The attack became an “event,” gaining its significance through the way others ascribed it meaning and foreclosed other possible readings to write the event into a set of myths.

To show how profoundly poetry informed the formation of the Siahkal myth, Vahabzadeh pieces together what he calls a “thirty-year poetic history,” spanning the 1940s to the 1970s, through sensitive readings of well-known poems by Nima Yushij, Ahmad Shamlu, and Forugh Farrokhzad as well as by less commonly analyzed poets like Hamid Mossadeq and Karo Derderian. Poets developed a symbolic language in this period that imagined resistance to, rebellion against, and finally violent overthrow of the existing sociopolitical order. Of course, Vahabzadeh is careful not to suggest that poems imagined only one kind of resistance or that they uniformly symbolized resistance at all; but what he does argue is that the militant interpretation became dominant. Therefore, when the first major armed attack against the regime occurred in 1971 the stage had already been set for symbolic violence and militant resistance in the cultural and political spheres to converge.

This process of reading militancy into poetry paved the way for the other arts as well. Publics and censors, according to Vahabzadeh, came to interpret fiction, songs, and movies as referring to armed struggle against the monarchy, even when, as in the case of popular music, the artists explicitly stated that they did not have such references in mind. Here again, Vahabzadeh’s wide range of texts effectively demonstrates how prevalent the armed struggle became and how it eventually overdetermined interpretations of artworks, which in turn perpetuated the mythology surrounding the guerrillas and their actions. Of all the close readings in Chapters 3 through 5, however, the most significant is Vahabzadeh’s discussion of Samad Behrangi’s work, and especially his well-known short story “The Little Black Fish.” Vahabzadeh argues that Behrangi’s story, first published in 1968, lay the blueprint for the PFG as it emerged in the 1970s. The reading, attuned to Behrangi’s personal involvement with the PFG’s founders and informed by readings of Behrangi’s entire corpus, biographical material, and the existing historiography surrounding the PFG, serves as a valuable corrective to some recent scholarship and translations of “The Little Black Fish” that lose sight of the story’s militancy in favor of a vaguely liberal interpretation. The section would be especially appropriate for undergraduate courses that include “The Little Black Fish” on their syllabi.

Related to Vahabzadeh’s breadth of sources, another of the book’s strengths is the way it weaves personal experiences into the study. Vahabzadeh does not shy away from recounting how he was a young PFG supporter himself as a university student in the 1970s, a fitting feature for demonstrating how the arts captured the “feeling” of participating in resistance. These personal recollections also inform the book’s phenomenological approach. For example, as mentioned above, Vahabzadeh discusses the poems of the Armenian-Iranian poet Karo Derderian, whose work has received little scholarly attention. Vahabzadeh argues that Karo’s poems developed a similar symbolic resistance as some of the more widely celebrated poets in the 1970s, but that he didn’t receive the same scholarly attention or critical

praise because he wrote from a working-class perspective, whereas the PFG and their supporters were largely drawn from the ranks of middle-class, university-educated youth. Vahabzadeh explains that he didn't come to know Karo's poetry until his time as a military conscript when he encountered working-class Iranians in the barracks reciting Karo's poems from memory (81). Indeed, these kinds of personal reflections both justify and enrich the phenomenological approach—none of these ideas or arguments, he reminds us, exist outside of lived experience.

Despite its many strengths, there are two areas that the book could have better addressed. The first is the question of Islam. Although it follows the culture and politics of the Marxist-Leninist PFG who, as an organization, may not have explicitly treated Islam as an emancipatory ideology, scholars like Ghamari-Tabrizi have shown that neither "Islam" nor "Marxism" represented mutually exclusive revolutionary ideologies in the decade leading up to the revolution. In a book that demonstrates so thoroughly how artworks *imagine* change before, during, and after, political developments, it struck this reader as strange that Vahabzadeh did not address artists who imagined Islam into their revolutionary vision. The most glaring absence occurs when Vahabzadeh refers to Khosrow Golesorkhi's "post-colonial attack on the regime" in the televised show trial that led to his execution in 1974 (134). In his defense (widely available online) Golesorkhi proclaimed both that he was a Marxist-Leninist and that he had arrived at Marxism through the teachings of Imam 'Ali. Maybe the overall argument of the book would not change by addressing how radical, self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist artists saw no contradiction between religious and secular ideologies, and of course one wants to avoid tautologies that read the emergence of the Islamic Republic backward into history, but it seems strange to ignore the imaginative aspect of Golesorkhi's claim entirely. Further to the point, Behranghi's "Little Black Fish," which Vahabzadeh argues became the "unofficial manifesto" of the PFG, follows the revolutionary trajectory of a black fish and ends with a red fish setting out on the same course (243). It is difficult not to read black and red as symbols of Shi'ism and Marxism, especially considering what seems to be Golesorkhi's invocation of the same narrative in his defense. Again, it may be that Vahabzadeh does not see religious discourse as a significant factor in what would become the PFG's ideology; however, in a book about how art can imagine possibilities—not least through symbols—beyond the currently existing world, one expects at least a mention of how artists may have imagined a continuity between religious cultural identity and Marxist ideology in the years before the Islamic Republic became the phenomenon as we know it today.

Second, the book would have benefited from more careful engagement with existing scholarship. For example, Vahabzadeh relies heavily on a work by "Khosravi 1999" for his discussion of censorship policies (45–48), but no such work is included in the bibliography. Similarly, I would be remiss not to mention that the chapter on poetry overlaps with my own 2013 doctoral dissertation, "The Poetics of Commitment in Modern Iran." Although I was relieved that he drew many of the same conclusions about the complexities of the notion of "commitment" in 1960s and 1970s Iran, it was disappointing to encounter Vahabzadeh's analysis and translations of many of the same sources I had treated in my dissertation without a reference to my work.

These shortcomings aside, *The Art of Resistance* offers a valuable participant-perspective to studies of revolutionary art and history. Individual chapters may serve advanced undergraduate or graduate courses on literature, film, or popular music, not to mention modern Iran. More generally speaking, for scholars writing about 20th-century global revolutions in other national contexts, Vahabzadeh's book provides an excellent case study of how, in 1970s Iran, artistic and political imaginations converged.