
 REVIEW ESSAY:

Of Idealism, Ideology, and Individuals in the History of Socialism

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REVIEW OF JOSHUA MURAVCHIK

Heaven on Earth: The Rise and Fall of Socialism

(San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2002)

The very mention of a book describing the history of socialism is likely to conjure images of a dusty, technical tome, more appropriate for an evening of drudgery than of entertainment. Joshua Muravchik's recent work, *Heaven on Earth: The Rise and Fall of Socialism*, is a refreshing deviation from this stereotype. Far from being overly technical or dry, *Heaven on Earth* succeeds in providing a captivating description of socialism's key thinkers and the drama behind two hundred years of one of history's most influential ideologies. Indeed, the influence of the socialist ideology is nothing short of phenomenal. Whereas 300 years had passed before Christianity was embraced by 10 percent of the world's population, socialist rule exerted itself over 60 percent in a mere 150 years.

From the outset, Muravchik discloses his youthful dalliance in the socialist movement during the 1960s as a leader in the Young People's Socialist League in the United States, having succumbed to the "most popular political idea ever invented." Despite ultimately rejecting socialism and condemning the ideology for the atrocities committed in its name, Muravchik proves capable of maintaining a balanced, credible tone free of fiery anti-socialist polemics. Understanding the evolution and dynamics of the socialist ideology—from invention, development, and

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popularization to revision, exploitation, and, in some cases, abandonment—requires an evaluation of crucial individuals at key points in time. Muravchik, therefore, assembles his work as a collection of portraiture, describing those key individuals and events that represent the origins and evolution of the socialist phenomenon. Through his unvarnished descriptions of socialism's most influential leaders, Muravchik provides important insight into the motivations and means of those who carried the socialist banner.

The author finds that the roots of socialism emerged during the late stages of the French Revolution, whose promises of egalitarianism became linked to the abolition of private ownership. The “conspiracy of equals,” led by Gracchus Babeuf, sought to achieve these ideals through a communal regime banning money and property, thereby serving to “eradicate once and for all the desire of a man to become richer, or wiser, or more powerful than others.” Ultimately condemned to death by the Directory, the flamboyant Babeuf would later be praised by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and lauded at the founding of the Comintern.

Muravchik continues by describing other key personalities commonly associated with the history of the socialist movement. His portrait of Robert Owen, the English utopian who established the New Harmony settlement in Pennsylvania, reveals Owen's inexorable confidence in his own ability to erase an existing social order and replace it with a “full true and social life” complete with new political, economic, and cultural values. Muravchik's depiction of Engels reveals a devoted, modest, yet talented journalist and writer whose faith in Marx propelled the latter thinker to world fame. Marx himself emerges unflatteringly as scornful of the working class, an unproductive and lazy writer, and financially (and generally ungratefully) dependent on Engels. Engels's protégé, Eduard Bernstein, is characterized as a devoted socialist who identified the empirical incongruence of Marx's economic forecasts with reality, thus engendering a particularly harsh doctrinal division within the socialist movement. Muravchik's description of Vladimir Lenin reveals a troubled, yet brilliant, ruthless tactician, whose motives for replacing the proletariat with the vanguard as the engine of socialism were as much a reflection of the shortcomings of Marxist theory as it was a response to Lenin's own insecurities.

In addition to the standard figures associated with socialism in Europe, Muravchik describes other personalities whose ideas reflect critical junctures in the development of the socialist idea. Making the often-overlooked connection between socialism and fascism, Muravchik includes an analysis of Benito Mussolini, whose early socialist activism revealed both the weakness of internationalism and a desire to reconcile nation and class in the socialist ideology. Mussolini's increasingly anti-democratic methods in pursuit of a “new Italian” (a nationalist version of socialism's “new man”) was justified ideologically with the

contention that Italy's poor and weak status as a "proletarian nation" among the European powers meant that the struggle against "rich nations" was as urgent and justified as the struggle of workers against capitalists.

Another watermark in the development of the socialist ideology was Clement Attlee's postwar version of socialism. Though viewing the 1930s Swedish cradle-to-grave system of social benefits as a model, Attlee's attempts to advance socialism in Great Britain, all the more remarkable in the period of the early Cold War, were nonetheless to Attlee only a "few steps toward the kind of society of which...Socialists dream."

Other versions of socialism presented include the Ujamaa advanced by Kambarage Nyerere in Tanzania, whose successful efforts to avert the rise of a middle class ultimately led to shared stagnation, not shared progress. Muravchik's description of Samuel Gompers and George Meany in the United States' labor movement reveals how these leaders' devotion to the American ideals of freedom and prosperity forestalled the emergence of socialism in the United States. "Like Napoleon's failure to conquer Russia," Muravchik writes, "socialism's failure to conquer America proved its undoing."

Muravchik's portrait of Deng Xiaoping reveals the tension between embarking on a course of reform and maintaining power, while Mikhail Gorbachev emerges as a man of apparently good character, but also of unwavering ideological devotion to socialism, believing reform to be the only way to save a rotten system. Finally, the description of Tony Blair and the "Third Way" reveals a commitment to the longstanding ideals of socialism, yet demonstrates how today "the parties of the mainstream Left may pour cream that lightens the coffee of capitalism, but they are not offering any other beverage." Those who call themselves socialists, Muravchik concludes, "have long ago ceased to dream of an elixir that would transport us to an earthly paradise." Economic inefficiencies and the inability to take root in the United States ultimately resulted in socialism's demise.

Muravchik's work succeeds in providing the history of socialism with a human face through an engaging, colorful narrative that identifies people with ideas. While an initial look at the table of contents may lead one to wonder whether a coherent, substantive work on the socialist ideology is feasible, Muravchik skillfully draws together several underlying themes. First, he demonstrates the remarkable degree to which the idea of socialism evolved and shaped itself to its surroundings. Far from being a static doctrine, socialism is shown to possess a particular adeptness to circumstance, capable of being shaped by a variety of political and personal dynamics. While Muravchik demonstrates that so-called socialist movements arose out of the same "acorn" of values—quest for equality, public ownership, and a new morality—this basic ideology was applied to political systems and constituencies in the manner of constant development and adaptation.

Muravchik also properly attributes the popularity and cruelty of the socialist regimes to the promise of the new socialist man's new morality. Babeuf and Owen had sought to create new communities with new ethical and moral values, manifesting a "scientific socialism" of experimentation and confidence in the ability of man's reason to abstractly create and implement new moralities. Marx and Engels replaced "scientific socialism" with "prophetic socialism," claiming that human behavior was determined by abstract, external forces, ultimately leading to a new, better world. Accordingly, socialism developed into a "religion of redemption," promising to lead mankind to a better world in this world—a heaven on earth. As a secular alternative religion, however, socialism contained no inherent internal moral checks on behavior, thereby justifying and facilitating terrible atrocities on unprecedented scales. Socialism's power of attraction despite atrocity, for instance, can be in the faith of many Western intellectuals who continued to support the cause of the Soviet Union in the 1930s and beyond, despite knowledge of the horrific crimes and systemic mass murder being committed by the Soviet regime.

While alluding to the religious impulse of the socialist movement, Muravchik ascribes socialism's decline to economic inefficiencies, corruption of socialist systems, and the failure of socialism to attain an adequate foothold in the United States. He writes that the lesson of socialism is "if you build it, they will leave," pointing to the experience of the Israeli kibbutzim where the democratic socialist system was abolished by popular vote largely because of economic failure. Socialism fell not because it was evil, but because it was inefficient. Muravchik does not attempt to use history to conclusively defeat socialism in moral terms, only to describe its imperatives and economic reasons for its failure.

Muravchik's reluctance to directly address the moral shortcomings of the socialist ideology itself may explain the curious absence of reference to such thinkers as Vaclav Havel and Whittaker Chambers whose writings greatly influenced Western attitudes toward socialism. It also implies acceptance of the standard argument that the socialist utopia may be a desirable state of affairs, but fails because human nature (namely, self-interest and greed) preclude its existence.

This argument, while generally popular, nonetheless, fails to probe a deeper, more difficult question: if a socialist system were able to deliver its promises of "from each according to his abilities to each according to his needs," would that necessarily constitute a desirable state of affairs? The socialist ideal—entailing the successful abolition of private property, profit, and voluntary exchange—necessarily implies centralized planning and, thus, a diminished scope of individual freedom and action. Aside from the corresponding political implications, the absence of competition removes incentives for individuals to raise themselves above challenge, push beyond one's personal limits, or realize the success of individual achievement. Would this life of a comparatively vegetative personal existence under socialism—likened perhaps to the life of a carefree yachtsman—be truly

more fulfilling and meaningful than a life of initiative, risk, and achievement—the life of an adventurous whaler—which man realizes under a system of freedom? Reflecting on the atrocities committed in the name of socialism may serve to deaden one's enthusiasm for the ideology. However, debating and refuting the central tenet that socialism in theory constitutes the best possible life for mankind is essential to eradicating the persisting kernel of hope that the “new socialist man” is the pinnacle for which mankind should aspire and sacrifice.

Heaven on Earth suffers from the additional shortcoming of failing to offer a deeper analysis of alienation and the attractiveness of the socialist ideology. Muravchik claims that the “rise of science” in the nineteenth century explains the devaluation of Christianity and the emergence of ideologies with religious fervor. This is certainly true but not a complete explanation. In the definitive memoir of a former Communist, Whittaker Chambers writes in *Witness* that socialism's elevation of man over God:

challenges man to prove by his acts that he is the masterwork of Creation....It challenges him to prove it by using the force of his rational mind to end the bloody meaninglessness of man's history—by giving it purpose and a plan. It challenges him to prove it by reducing the meaningless chaos of nature, by imposing on it his rational will to order, abundance, security, peace.¹

Muravchik underestimates the attractiveness socialism provided for those seeking to “reduce the meaningless chaos of nature.” Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw that conditions of equality might lead to a sense of personal isolation, opening the door to a “new despotism” whereby citizens almost unconsciously welcome centralized control over their lives to safeguard security and their equality.² The historical sociologist Robert Nisbet concluded that the history of the West is characterized by increasing personal alienation and cultural disintegration which breed totalitarianism. In the liberalizing societies valuing freedom and equality, traditional hierarchies are disintegrated, old loyalties are devalued, and individualism prevails. Nonetheless, man seeks the security, company, and the fellowship of community membership, all of which, Nisbet finds, are often attractively offered through the promises of a centralized state.³ In the words of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor:

So long as man remains free he strives for nothing so incessantly and painfully as to find someone to worship....For these pitiful creatures are concerned not only to find what one or the other can worship, but find something that all will believe in and worship; what is essential that all may be *together* in it. This craving for *community* of worship is the chief misery of every man individually and of all humanity from the beginning of time.⁴

The desire for community of belief should not be overshadowed by the nineteenth century rise of scientism and skepticism; instead, the search for community is very much an underlying impulse that makes ideologies such as socialism attractive in an increasingly fragmented modern world.

Muravchik's discussion also neglects to consider the implications of his analysis for the prospects of ideologies in general. His powerful case claiming socialism as a substitute religion leads the reader to wonder whether new ideologies, which prey on these same human characteristics and insecurities, may again gain force. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt determines that ideologies in general "always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction." Isolation and loneliness are the key factors that give ideologies their power, providing a "stringent logicity as a guide to action." The "self-compulsion of ideological thinking" entails an "emancipation from experience," ruining "all relationships with reality."⁵ The socialist experience—from Babeuf to Gorbachev—is that of a quest for total explanation, faith in stringent logic and reason as guides for action, emancipation from experience, and, therefore, the absence of restraint in pursuit of the central idea.

Indeed, despite Muravchik's declaration of socialism's demise, we see ideologies with these qualities in the world of today. Islamic militarism, as embodied by Osama bin Laden and his followers, constitutes an ideological movement narrowly attributing the Islamic world's problems to the United States. Intransigent pacifists in Europe and America condemn all military conflict—in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere—on the premise that all war is inherently unjustifiable, regardless of the present threats posed by terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. In a world of falling borders, cultural relativism, alienation, and increased insecurity, similar ideologies promising safety, redress, or moral comfort are likely to become increasingly attractive.

Despite the end of the Cold War, mankind has yet to completely come to terms with the history of socialism. Whereas the crimes of Nazism—from which seven million people perished—are rightly kept in the public consciousness, comparatively little atonement has been made for the over 100 million people who died at the hands of socialist regimes since 1917. Joshua Muravchik's *Heaven on Earth* serves an important function in clarifying the roots of these atrocities by highlighting the key thinkers and ideas that shaped the history of the socialist ideology. Indeed, many of the imperatives which drove socialist thinkers—envy and resentment of the wealthy, coercion, political ambition—are not absent from liberal democracies today, within which political parties often exploit class envy while seeking wealth redistribution and defend greater government planning in the name of social equality. Muravchik's volume describes how the humanitarian

roots of socialism can assume a totalizing logic of their own; however, where freedom and democracy retained preeminence over pressures for central planning, destructive ideological trends were resisted and ameliorated. As the world ponders how the high aims and ideals of socialism could have yielded its terrible calamities for humanity, perhaps the greatest lesson from Muravchik's work is that only the staunch perpetuation of freedom and defense of democracy can truly stave off the dangers posed by destructive ideologies. In a world threatened by the rise of new ideological movements promising elixirs to earthly paradise, freedom and democracy may be the only effective antidotes that will ensure that socialism's murderous 20th Century legacy does not become a mere prelude for mankind in the 21st. ■

NOTES

- 1 Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1952), 10.
- 2 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Meyer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1969), 503-507, 668-670, 690-709.
- 3 Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1990).
- 4 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1976), 234-235.
- 5 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1976), 470-479.

A Mystery Uncovered

JOHN C. SWEDA

REVIEW OF ANDREW J. NATHAN AND BRUCE GILLEY

China's New Rulers: The Secret Files

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In May 2002, Chinese Vice-President and heir to the leadership mantle of the world's largest country, Hu Jintao, visited the United States. He toured corporate offices, attended dinners in his honor, and met with senior officials. Very little of Hu was known at that time, and his visit to the United States contributed almost nothing to our existing knowledge of this man. Sticking very closely to prepared statements and regurgitating staid Chinese Communist Party (CCP) jargon in response to reporters' questions, most Americans thought Hu to be quite bland. However, his trip across the Pacific was seen as extremely successful in China. Six months later, Hu, along with eight other CCP leaders, were anointed China's new executive team as members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC)—with Hu "at the core."

So who are these men, and what are their plans for the world's largest country and most important emerging power? Written before the CCP's 16th Congress in November 2002, Andrew J. Nathan's and Bruce Gilley's *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files* attempts to decode the smokescreen emanating from Beijing by identifying who they think will be on the new PBSC, what their priorities are, and how their pasts might influence the present. Much of their evidence is gleaned from highly confidential internal party files and investigative reports that were obtained by a Chinese writer living outside of China from unknown CCP officials within China. These investigative reports, created by the CCP's Organization Department, were meant for the exclusive use of the outgoing Politburo to analyze candidates for top leadership posts. This writer, who wrote under the pseudonym "Zong Hairen," used these files to produce a parallel book in Chinese on the proposed new PBSC, known in China as *Disidai* (The Fourth Generation). Nathan and Gilley probed Zong at length about the internal party files and his

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own manuscript for Disidai. They are able to vouch for the authenticity of the files and of Zong's knowledge of the inner workings of the CCP by citing the forthrightness of the information provided, their own work with the details of the materials, Zong's track record of publishing insider accounts of Beijing's power struggles,¹ and the authors' belief that Zong was in fact in a position to receive the files. It is still unclear why these files were provided to Zong, though the authors—both of whom are accomplished China experts—speculated that it could have been part of a campaign by the new leaders to improve their images to the outside world, show that the incoming PBSC was unified, or simply to provide accurate information about these men.

The end result of the authors' work is a book that is striking in its revelation of new details with regard to the political struggles that have recently taken place in Beijing, is highly concise and succinct, and adds to the repository of knowledge on contemporary Chinese politics. However, it is a book that is also off the mark in some important instances.

In the beginning, the informed reader will be happy to note that the new succession was devoid of much of the drama of years past. In contrast to the shrill battles over ideology, law and order that took place during the Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping years, the promotion of the "Fourth Generation" leadership had been set in motion almost 20 years ago by Deng's "Four Transformations" program, whereby certain young CCP cadres were put on a fast track toward promotion through the Party ranks on the basis of their educational background, technical skills, and loyalty to the party. This was a marked turn, though not a complete one, from the early days of CCP rule where cadres were solely promoted on the basis of their crony connections to CCP officials and their unquestioning acceptance of CCP dictates. However, this is not to say there were no power plays going on. Perhaps the biggest issue, and the one that has attracted the most press coverage, is Jiang Zemin's retirement. It has been widely reported that Jiang wished to retain some kind of leadership post in national political matters—namely as Chairman of the Central Military Commission—thereby impeding Hu's final rise as China's supreme leader. According to the authors, a number of party elders and even Jiang's closest aide, Zeng Qinghong, came out against this idea, maintaining that it would create factionalism within the party, hurt the planned leadership transition, and cause other retired leaders to reassert themselves in national political matters. Nathan and Gilley forecast—in contradiction to many reports put out in the Western media—that, given the lack of support Jiang has for hanging on to such an important position, he would relinquish the chairmanship to Hu in March 2003 as scheduled.² The authors then delve into the profiles of China's prospective leaders of the "Fifth Generation" due to succeed the current leadership in 10 years.

It is in the description of the makeup and structure of the new PBSC that *China's New Rulers* begins to run into some problems. To start with, Nathan and

Gilley identify only seven men that will be members of the PBSC when, in actuality, nine were appointed to the leadership team during the 16th Party Congress—though, to be fair, given that this book was penned several months before the Congress, the information used to make this estimation could have been obsolete. The authors run into the same problem in trying to determine who the members of the PBSC will be. The most glaring miscalculation was in designating Li Ruihuan as the number two ranking member of the PBSC, when in fact, he was left out of the PBSC altogether. In the book's defense, however, the authors did mention that a power struggle had erupted over the issue of Li's promotion with Jiang advocating his forced retirement. The authors had believed that Jiang's efforts to oust Li would not succeed. In the end, they did.

The only other inconsistencies between the book's predictions and what actually happened during the Congress have to do with the rankings of the PBSC members and the elevation of the Beijing, Shanghai, and Shandong Party bosses. That said, one should not take this as a sign that the information provided to Zong and, eventually, Nathan and Gilley was incorrect or meant to throw off these writers. Chinese politics can be volatile at times, despite the newly found stability, and last minute changes could not have been ruled out.

The authors go into intimate detail in recounting the careers and policy viewpoints of the proposed PBSC members. Despite the apparent respect for meritocracy in Beijing, these men still had to rely on the patronage and good graces of highly placed CCP officials. For instance, the rise of Hu Jintao was closely connected to favorable treatment by Gansu party secretary and party elder Song Ping. The reader will also notice the close relationship between the incoming Luo Gan, the top civilian law enforcer, and the outgoing chairman of the National People's Congress Li Peng—the so-called Butcher of Tiananmen. As to be expected, Jiang had a hand in promoting many of the new PBSC officials. Wen Jiabao, Wu Bangguo, and Li Changchun are all seen as allies of Jiang in the incoming PBSC.

But these new leaders also have many characteristics that make them uniquely qualified to rise to the top leadership posts in a country such as China. Hu was the Party Secretary in Guizhou and Tibet provinces. More importantly, he is seen as a unifier among his cadres, which is a potentially vital skill if the PBSC were to become fractious. At the same time, as was made abundantly clear by Nathan and Gilley, Hu has the weakest political base ever in the history of CCP rule over China. Though he is only one of two holdovers from the previous PBSC, Hu spent his time currying favor with Jiang rather than building his own support base. Again, in China this could become a strength for Hu, given that Jiang might very well continue to exert some influence on the political scene, and any sign of disrespect toward the newly christened "party elder" could cost Hu dearly. Hu's new cohorts on the PBSC also show an array of abilities. Wen Jiabao

exhibited survival skills during the Tiananmen conflict in 1989 when he kept his position as director of the Central Office despite being closely aligned with deposed Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. Slated as number three on the PBSC, Wen showed a mastery of vastly different subjects when he was vice premier under Zhu Rongji, and was responsible for agriculture, poverty relief, flood control, reforestation, and the environment. Zeng Qinghong, Jiang's shrewd personal advisor, and the man most responsible for allowing his patron to consolidate power in the late 1990s, is shown to be a well-connected man with the capability to undermine his and his allies' opponents.

The final question examined by Nathan and Gilley has to do with the new leaders' plan for China and their vision for China's prospects in the future. According to book's authors, the incoming PBSC members are broadly in accordance with the idea that China should continue to reform its economy. The difference lies in the pace of the desired reforms. The authors outline who, given their concerns about the effect that mass layoffs can have on social stability, would be cautious in proceeding with the opening of the economy (i.e., Wen Jiabao and Luo Gan) and who would move at a faster clip and open the economy to more foreign competition and entrepreneurship (i.e., Li Changchun and Zeng Qinghong).

The issue of political reform and human rights receives scant attention in this book—and with good reason. Given that this analysis is meant to give the outsider an insider look at the tough process governing China's new leaders, the dearth of attention devoted to the subject is a strong indication that there is no intention to move away from the one party model for quite a while. However, some members (namely Zeng) seem to be open to the idea of an expansion of the democratic process with competitive elections at the county level and the creation of independent political parties.

Despite the book's emphasis on the "Fourth Generation" leadership coming to power, it does devote some space to discussing the details of Jiang's rule. Some of the information provided simply confirms what has been told by other sources, while some of the details shed new light on the infighting that went on during the Jiang era. Coming from Shanghai, Jiang quickly rose from

Shanghai Party secretary to the Party general secretary during the Tiananmen conflict in 1989. Nathan and Gilley go on to describe in detail how Jiang's style of leadership, though bland by Western standards, was seen as egotistical and showy. From his large entourage that he would take with him when visiting parts of China to his promotion of certain CCP officials who were viewed as less than competent, Jiang's approach rubbed some officials the wrong way. The authors delve a bit into tabloid coverage when discussing Jiang's relationships with certain prominent Chinese women. Jiang's ruthlessness and his close Rasputin-like relationship with Zeng is touched upon in a discussion of Jiang's purge of his political rivals.

Towards the end of the book, the authors look at how the new leaders perceive China's relations with the United States and the rest of the world. Though the authors reveal nothing new in pointing out the new leadership's ambivalent views with respect to the United States, they provide insight into why these leaders look at the U.S. the way they do. For instance, while Hu supports multipolarity and believes that the United States seeks to contain China by improving security ties with China's neighbors, he also maintains that economic necessity and a need for stability in the region will bring a convergence of interests between the two powers. Overall, the authors paint a picture of a leadership team that seeks to maintain the status quo while challenging the United States at crucial junctures.

In the end, the ultimate test of this book is in how China develops in the next five years. Full of details as to what to expect of the "Fourth Generation" and of the recent past, this book could become an important piece on contemporary Chinese affairs. While the PBSC is tested by China's crises of the future, and new information comes out on the Jiang years, this book will serve as an important guidepost with which to examine the structuring of those issues. This is recommended reading for both experienced and lay China watchers. ■

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- 1 See, for example, Zong Hairan, *Zhu Rongji zai 1999 (Zhu Rongji in 1999)* (Carle Place, NY: Mirror Books, 2001). In this work, Zong outlines conflicts that were taking place between CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji in 1999 over such issues as China's accession to the World Trade Organization. See also Zong's article in *Xinbao (Hong Kong Economic Journal)*, which criticizes the Party security chief Luo Gan for his alarmist views of the domestic security situation.
- 2 Nathan and Gilley noted that Jiang had even offered to give up the post in November 2002.

The Making of a New Iran

ROHAM ALVANDI

REVIEW OF BEHZAD YAGHMAIAN

Social Change in Iran: An Eyewitness Account of Dissent, Defiance, and New Movements for Rights

(Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002)

Few observers of Iranian affairs would doubt the importance of the political turmoil that has engulfed Iran since the 1997 presidential elections. Yet, few have gone beyond the international media's explanation of a confrontation between reformists and hard-liners to analyze the political earthquake that continues to shake the Islamic Republic to its very roots. One such author is Behzad Yaghmaian, an Iranian expatriate scholar of economics at New Jersey's Ramapo College. His work, entitled *Social Change in Iran*, is the product of four short visits to Iran taken since 1995 and a year-long stay beginning in the spring of 1998.

In his work, Yaghmaian differentiates between an official reform movement from within the state, led by President Khatami, and an unofficial national movement led by students. Whereas the former seeks to "strengthen the state legitimacy through inclusion, tolerance, and pluralism," the student "movement for joy" supports official reforms as a "means towards achieving their final freedom from religious domination and the theocratic state."¹ Yaghmaian's work is a combination of lively personal narrative and quantitative analysis that gives the reader not only an intellectual understanding of Iranian life, but also an intimate awareness of the daily political, social, and economic battles that constitute life in today's Iran.

In fact, *Social Change in Iran* is the first work to provide the English-language audience with a substantial account of Iranian current affairs since the 1997 presidential election. The most important contribution of Yaghmaian's work is its analysis of the student movement in Iran today. Most foreign analysts focus on official student organizations, such as the Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat (Unity Consolidation Office), which have links to President Khatami and the

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official reform movement. However, Yaghmaian argues, during the July 1999 student demonstrations that were condemned by President Khatami, a new student movement emerged, “a movement that betrayed and defied all expectations and created a non-repairable crack in the foundations of the Islamic Republic. This was a movement of the children of the Islamic Republic against the state!”² New student organizations were formed entirely independent of the state. These included the Sazman-e Melli-e Daneshjooyan va Daneshamookhtegan-e Iran (The National Organization of Iranian Students and Alumni), Jebhe Morahede Daneshjooi (Student United Front), and the Daneshjooyan-e roshanfekr-e Iran (Iran’s Intellectual Students).

Yaghmaian argues that these new student organizations have become the vanguard of the “movement for joy.” Their ideology is one of secular democratic nationalism; their political symbol is Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, a popular hero who nationalized Iran’s British-owned oil industry before being ousted in an Anglo-American coup in 1953. It was with pictures of Mossadegh in their hands and the slogans “Salute to Mossadegh” and “Death to despotism” that Iranian students confronted the state in July 1999 following the closure of newspapers critical of the state.³

What Yaghmaian chronicles in *Social Change in Iran* is the growing challenge to political Islam as a source of legitimacy for the Islamic Republic. While Yaghmaian’s work also addresses the free press in Iran and the state of the Iranian economy, his major contribution lies in highlighting the secular aspirations of a growing number of Iranians. While it remains unclear to what extent this “movement for joy” is representative of the majority of Iranians’ aspirations, it undoubtedly signifies a new force in Iranian politics that is worthy of attention. ■

NOTES

1 Behzad Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran: An Eyewitness Account of Dissent, Defiance, and New Movements for Rights* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 227.

2 Ibid., 92.

3 Ibid., 99