


deeply conflictual? And how does one prevent the nascent institutions of culture from being swallowed up by the divisive partisan politics that characterized Egypt's "liberal experiment"? Ahmed's book convincingly revisits the period of parliamentary Nahda by showing that, despite the partisan game that often disrupted political will, the interwar period was also the time when most of Egypt's cultural institutions came into being. Hussein played the role of front man in the institution-building effort as he devised bureaucratic structures that would shield the educational system from state interference and frequent political turnover. Hussein, consequently, emerges as the one who provided the cultural movement of the Nahda with an institutional face.

Original and well-researched, *The Last Nahdawi* not only provides a valuable contribution to the field of Arab intellectual history but also demonstrates the scientific value of adopting an institutional approach to the study of intellectual worlds. It represents the first attempt to write an institutional history of culture in Egypt during its formative interwar period. Perhaps the only limitation of the study is that it does not delve deeply enough into the polarizing effects that this newly emerging institutional infrastructure, which came to represent Egyptian modernity, had on the larger intellectual field. The new institutions of culture patronized by Hussein emerged at the price of other institutional solutions within the Nahda movement that were eventually marginalized. Bringing into the story the grievances of older educational institutions, such as al-Azhar and Dar al-'Ulum, would have shown that Hussein was, himself, the product of the newly created institutions whose interests he defended. In telling the story of Taha Hussein, it is challenging to maintain the balance between Hussein the intellectual, Hussein the politician, and Hussein the statesman. However, *The Last Nahdawi's* strength lies precisely in revealing the multiplicity of Hussein's roles and the challenges faced by him when navigating them.

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Hidden Liberalism: Burdened Visions of Progress in Modern Iran

Hussein Banai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Pp. 230. \$99.99 cloth, \$44.99 paper. ISBN: 9781108817509

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Hussein Banai's *Hidden Liberalism* is an engaging and important study of the ways in which Western liberalism, born of the Enlightenment, has shaped and influenced Iranian politics since the nineteenth century. As the title indicates, the paradox of this engagement lies in the fact that "Liberalism is at once everywhere and nowhere to be found; it has formed the basis of many social and political struggles, yet it remains *hidden as a public standpoint*" (p. 3). For the author, the roots of this paradox lie in liberalism's association with Western imperialism and the reality that explicit reference and association with liberal ideas also brings a political cost few are willing to bear. Consequently, "liberalism has remained an embattled, taciturn, even shadowy thought-practice that is more readily detectable in the religious and nationalist double speak of vulnerable intellectuals than in any formalised intellectual program or political agenda" (p. 2).

Banai's book begins with an assessment of liberalism as understood in the West before turning to its absorption into the Iranian milieu, where, the author argues, Western liberal

concepts were imperfectly adapted by thinkers constrained by political association. Be that as it may, “liberalism,” even imperfectly understood, had a profound impact on Iranian political ideas and wider state development—seen most clearly in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906—and the author rightly suggests that Mohammad Mossadegh, who is often conceived as a “nationalist” prime minister, might better be understood as a man of liberal inclinations. In many ways, the first half of the twentieth century marked the high tide of visibly liberal ideas in Iranian political discourse. With the overthrow of Mossadegh and the implementation of authoritarian liberalism through Mohammad Reza Shah’s “White Revolution,” it is perhaps not surprising to find these ideas coming under attack, retreating to the margins, and becoming “hidden.”

This authoritarian liberalism culminated in the triumph of an Islamic revolution that sought to both define itself against the West while, at the same time, adopting many political precepts of Western political development. Even if Khomeini was pushed to accept the principle of an Islamic republic, he still accepted, against his better judgment it would seem, the idea of a “republic” drawn from the French model, just as 1906 was modelled on that of Britain. What is perhaps most interesting about the post-revolutionary period is the way in which many writers were forced, in many ways despite themselves, to confront and absorb liberal ideas. In his analysis of political thought under the Islamic Republic, especially during the rise of the Reform Movement from the 1990s, Banai takes issue with and offers a different reading of Abdolkarim Soroush’s attempts to reconcile Islam with democracy, instead drawing a distinction between liberalism and democracy. Soroush appears here as an influential “public intellectual,” (p. 131) an activist as much as a thinker, and in some ways Banai’s critique seems a bit harsh. Arguably, the interesting aspect of Soroush’s engagement with these ideas was his contention with liberal thought at all, and it is quite clear that liberal ideas did begin to inform his own views over time.

Banai states at the outset that he is approaching this study as a student of political thought, not as an intellectual historian or historian of Iran. As refreshingly honest and self-effacing as this acknowledgement may be, it also raises questions regarding the author’s approach, not least of which is his understanding of liberalism, which comes across as abstract, complex, and contested. While this approach might serve the interests of political theorists, it is less satisfactory for historians. Indeed, as far as Iran is concerned, Banai contends: “it is impossible to attempt a taxonomy of liberal concepts and definitions in the case of Iran, and certainly foolhardy to identify a *sui generis* Iranian liberalism” (p. 16). Although Banai proceeds to outline what he considers to be some liberal “traits,” one is left wanting more in terms of liberalism as an ideology rooted in British whiggism.

The power of whiggism as an ideology of progress that shaped British politics for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was enthusiastically absorbed by a series of Iranian travellers and thinkers, culminating in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, needs more thorough treatment than it receives here. Certainly, the Constitutional Revolution as the most explicit political expression of liberal or, better still, “whig” ideas would have benefitted from a more comprehensive treatment. A better exposition and exploration of these ideas would also have allowed for an effective comparison of the phenomena of “hidden liberalism,” as Iran is clearly not the only country where liberalism as an explicit and distinct political force has been in retreat.

The Iranian experience, while distinct, is not unusual. Banai, however, in his attempt to identify this distinction in terms of anti-imperial impulses within Iranian society, loses some of the nuance in the encounter. This shortcoming is visible in his treatment of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who he presents as a progenitor of political Islam, whose “contributions in reasserting the oversight role of the clergy in this period cannot be overstated” (p. 67). Afghani’s views are difficult to pin down at the best of times, but his role as a proto-Islamist is hard to reconcile with his response to Ernest Renan, and indeed his “anti-imperial” posture is not as clear as Banai argues.

Afghani was, of course, a ‘political’ thinker and often tailored his views to his audience and context. His Arab disciples see him almost exclusively as a Muslim thinker, ignoring the incongruities of his career, such as his membership with the Freemasons. His Iranian followers, meanwhile, see Afghani as a “philosopher,” a descriptor that positions him firmly on the Enlightenment side of the debate against the orthodox dogma of religion. Similarly, Banai’s heavily truncated reference to Afghani’s diatribe against the Qajar monarchy—“The Reign of Terror in Persia”—as an example of his unequivocal anti-imperialism omits the more interesting section of the text, which interrogates why Britain did not intervene in support of Iranian rights. Collectively, these examples point towards a much more nuanced engagement with “liberal” ideas than many writers recognize. Banai, to be certain, has made a useful contribution to a neglected field, but much more work remains to be done.

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Teachers as State-Builders: Education and the Making of the Modern Middle East

Hilary Falb Kalisman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022). Pp. 288. \$90.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780691234250

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In *Teachers as State-Builders*, Hilary Falb Kalisman considers teachers as a social group with shifting status and changing relationships to the powers that be. With a focus on Palestine, Iraq, and Jordan, she examines the role of teachers during a time of tremendous political change, from the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the Mandate period to independence, or, in the case of Palestinians, dispossession or relegation to the status of second-class citizens with the creation of the State of Israel.

One of Kalisman’s major aims is to complicate the assumed links between nationalism and the spread of public education. She pursues this task by extending her analysis both into the past, examining Ottoman educational policies aimed at spreading public education, and into the future, exploring state-building and contemporary teacher labor organizing. Much of the literature on the politics of education in the post-World War I period has focused on the central role of teachers in the emergence of anti-colonial and nationalists movements. Taking the reader through multiple phases of educational expansion, Kalisman shows how the status and role of teachers changed with shifting political realities, yielding, at times, unexpected implications for their role in shaping political landscapes.

Chapter 1 examines the “imperial legacies” of educational policies, namely, the production of a relatively elite network of teachers Kalisman calls “roving teacher-politicians,” capturing both their physical as well as professional mobilities (p. 2). She argues that the high demand for teachers, as well as the varied and, at times, piecemeal fashion in which a public education program unfolded after the passage of the Ottoman Regulation of Public Education of 1869, afforded these early educators great flexibility and negotiating power vis-à-vis the Ottoman authorities. It was this foundation that led to the expansion of transnational networks of teachers that we encounter in the following chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the interwar period and the educational policies of the British Mandate. In these chapters, Kalisman addresses several key themes, including the making of an elite cadre of teachers and the dispositions that came with their status, the growing demand for education and the gendered