History is not written by the victors: The case of the Iranian Revolution of 1979

By Nicholas Allen for HIS201: The Uses and Abuses of History

The maxim, ‘history is written by the victors’ claims that the dominant political structures of society exclusively construct the knowledge of past events. This phrase has less relevance within contemporary society because these dominant structures do not exclusively formulate historical interpretations that influence society’s understanding of the past. Nietzsche provides a useful concept of multiple historical interpretations that contest each other and revise the meaning of historical events.¹ This is demonstrated in the case of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, through the historical interpretations of the Jewish-Iranian minority; the Baha’i community; the feminist perspective; the political left and the ‘primary source’ accounts. The Jewish-Iranian minority offers a history that challenges the dominant Islamist discourse, while the Baha’i community provides a historical narrative of their own persecution that contests the dominant Islamist interpretation. Feminist perspectives of the Iranian Revolution subvert the dominant discourse by highlighting the patriarchal systems of power while the role of the political left provides a history that has been repressed and reinvented. The primary sources of the Revolution offer individual historical interpretations that challenge the dominant discourse and moreover, competing historical interpretations influence current political practices between Iran and the West.

The philosopher, Walter Benjamin, explicates an early variation of the phrase, ‘history is written by the victors,’ in his critique of historicism, “… With whom does the historical writer of historicism actually empathize … The answer is irrefutably with the victor.”² This means that the writing of history is used to benefit current rulers.³ Benjamin provides a reflection on the silencing of histories of exploitation conducted by the dominant political structures of society.⁴ An earlier variation on this concept is asserted by Hegel: "In the history of the world only those peoples can come under our notice which form a state.”⁵ This means that only the people who have achieved organisation in society are recorded into history.⁶ An important aspect for understanding the relevance of the phrase, ‘history is written by the victor,’ is the role that history performs within today’s society.

³ Ibid.
⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of History (New York: Bell and Daldy, 1861), 40.
The philosopher Nietzsche explicates the concept of the subjective nature of historical interpretations, which is particularly useful in exploring the role of history within contemporary society. Nietzsche argues that objective knowledge is an illusion because it is influenced by human desires, morals and culturally specific values. This concept applies to history because it rejects the idea of an objective universal interpretation of the past. Nietzsche highlights the impossibility of historical objectivity by stating, “There exists no ‘objective history,’ for the appropriation of history is done under the guidance of stimuli and the drives.” This shows that history is interpreted through a subjective framework that prevents a complete detachment from the historical subject. This allows multiple historical interpretations to contest and revise the meanings of widely believed certainties about the past. An important role of history within society is that of a cultural resource which offers alternative viewpoints that challenge the dominant assumptions of a collective. This shows that the phrase, ‘history is written by the victor’ does not take into account the complexity of history within contemporary society because of multiple interpretations that contest dominant historical accounts. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is a particular event that demonstrates histories constructed from a perspective other than that of the victor.

The Iranian Revolution started in 1977 as a popular uprising against the Western-backed Pahlavi monarchy. In 1979, this resulted in Ayatollah Khomeini seizing power and establishing Iran as an Islamic Republic. As the victors, the Islamists constructed a historiographical approach that aligned history in compliance with their political ideology. However, the minority group of Jewish-Iranians offers a history that challenges the hegemonic

16 Ibid.
Shi’ite discourse. This challenges the dominant discourse because it offers a history of Jewish-Iranian national identity that the Islamic Republic suppressed by portraying them as a minority group existing within a Muslim country without established cultural links to the land. Art historian, Carmeli, highlights these cultural links with: “The Jews of Iran who lived in that country for over 2,700 years created a rich and versatile culture in many areas such as literature, philosophy [and] science.” This identifies that the Jewish population within Iran shares a long-standing history that solidifies a unique Jewish-Iranian national identity. This opposes the dominant Islamist historical interpretation because it constructs the history of Iran as being culturally diverse rather than hegemonic. Therefore, this marginalised group has constructed their own historical narrative. Another important marginalised group is the Iranian-Baha’i.

Formed in the 1860s, the Iranian-Baha’i are a minority religious group who were persecuted by Islamists during the Iranian Revolution. The Baha’i offer a historical interpretation of their own persecution that undermines the concept, ‘history is written by the victor.’ The dominant Islamist interpretation presents the persecution of the Baha’i as a justified effort to eradicate a threat to Iranian hegemony. This interpretation is demonstrated in a letter written by Ayatollah Khomeini: “A major concern that will lead to a very dangerous situation … is the influence of the wayward and misguided Baha’i sect … whose influence is growing by the day.” Therefore, the dominant Islamist interpretation imposes a value judgement on the Baha’i that positions the group as a dangerous internal ‘other.’ The Baha’i challenge this dominant Islamist interpretation by offering a narrative that presents the persecution as an injustice. This narrative highlights the Baha’i community’s avoidance of anti-Iranian politics

27 Yazdani, “The Islamic Revolution’s Internal Other: The Case of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Baha’is of Iran,” 594.
and therefore rejects the Islamist portrayal of them as enemies of Iran. By rejecting this portrayal, the Baha’i present the persecution as a series of unprovoked attacks against an innocent group. These attacks included the destruction of property, desecration of sacred monuments and executions. As a result of highlighting their persecution during the Iranian Revolution, the Baha’i narrative has gained widespread attention and the international community has been introduced to the experience of the Baha’i people through a sympathetic context that has also led to condemnation of the Iranian regime. Therefore, the Iranian-Baha’i present a historical interpretation of their own persecution that challenges the dominant Islamist interpretation. Feminist history is another important interpretation that undermines the concept, ‘history is written by the victor.’

Feminist history constructs a historical interpretation of the Iranian Revolution, which subverts the concept that ‘history is written by the victor.’ The dominant Islamist interpretation presents the Revolution as a victory of traditional Islamic beliefs over Western modernisation, whereas feminist history provides a gendered perspective that was excluded from the dominant narrative. Through the proliferation of feminist histories, the Revolution led to an increase of women challenging their patriarchal exclusion from the Islamist historical narrative. Iranian gender-studies expert, Sedhi, offers an alternative interpretation of the Iranian Revolution with: “Curtailing decades of opportunities that had accompanied unveiling and gender policies for some women, the new clerical authorities sought to reshape the society according to their precepts.” This interpretation includes the effects of the Iranian Revolution on women, which challenges the exclusionary nature of the dominant interpretation by highlighting methods the regime utilised in order to create patriarchal norms. Therefore, the feminist interpretation of the Iranian Revolution subverts the dominant Islamist historical interpretation by highlighting the patriarchal systems of power that led to the continual oppression of women. Another aspect

30 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
that is relevant in contesting the dominant Islamist discourse is the historical interpretation of the political left.

The role of the political left in the Iranian Revolution provides a complex history that has been repressed and reinvented.39 Iran has a long history of left-wing activism, originating in 1907 with the Persian Constitutional Revolution.40 During the Iranian Revolution, many left-wing organisations participated, including the Tudeh party, the People’s Fedayeen and the People’s Mujahedin of Iran.41 The presence of these groups show that left-wing narratives existed throughout the Revolution.42 After seizing power, Ayatollah Khomeini’s revisionist history excluded these narratives in order to shape an interpretation of the revolution as a purely Islamic uprising.43 This exclusion was demonstrated in a speech where Khomeini said, “You who suppose that something other than Islam overthrew the Shah’s regime, you who believe non-Islamic elements played a role – study the matter carefully.”44 The Iranian-left challenged this dominant Islamist interpretation by portraying the Revolution as the creation of left-wing groups, an idea that was later stolen by the clergy.45 This shows that the Iranian-left reinvented a historical interpretation of the Revolution after being repressed by the dominant Islamist discourse.46 Another interpretation suggests that the work of the left-leaning sociologist, Ali Shari’ati, was an important motivating factor behind the Revolution.47 This interpretation highlights the large following of Shari’ati’s concept of Islamic socialism, which combined the economic principals of socialism with the spiritual values of Islam,48 but suggested the Revolution was motivated by an ideological convergence of socialism and Islam.49 This challenges the dominant Islamist interpretation by reinventing the history of the Revolution as an inter-relationship between the left and Islam.50 Therefore, the history of left-wing involvement in the Iranian Revolution is complex as it has been repressed by the victor and

43 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
reinvented by the loser. An exploration of primary sources on the Iranian Revolution provides insight into the diversity of perspectives held by Iranians.

Primary sources on the Iranian Revolution, such as memoirs and interviews, show that ‘history is not written by the victor’ as these sources offer subjective historical interpretations. The Islamist interpretation of the Revolution is demonstrated in a pronouncement by the revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Taleghani: “… Our Muslim nation has been proclaiming its judgment on this tyrannical puppet regime, steeped in corruption, by the most lawful and acceptable means.” In this declaration, Taleghani portrays the Islamist revolutionaries as innocent victims of an oppressive regime. A contrasting interpretation of the Revolution is offered in a memoir by Dehqani-Tafti as he details the violence committed by revolutionaries. A bishop of the Episcopal Church in Iran, Dehqani-Tafti, recalls facing constant persecution from the revolutionaries, which culminated in the death of his son. This memoir offers an alternative interpretation of the Revolution as it portrays the participants as a source of oppression rather than a product of the oppressive regime. Another distinct interpretation is shown in an interview with Kasra Naji as she recalls being a student participant in the Revolution. When asked about the Revolution, Naji stated, “We wanted democracy, and the Revolution was promising that.” However, Naji felt that Ayatollah Khomeini exploited this desire for democracy as she stated, “… All he would talk about was democracy and freedom,” and continued, “He would not talk about a religious revolution [sic].” This creates a historical interpretation that positions Ayatollah Khomeini as a manipulative figure who exploited the revolutionaries. Therefore, the primary sources on the Iranian Revolution offer diverse perspectives that construct different historical interpretations. This shows that memories of the Revolution have been written by individuals as opposed to a singular historical account constructed by the victor. Another important aspect is the impact of the Iranian Revolution on current political practice.

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53 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
The Islamist victory in the Iranian Revolution has fundamentally shaped current political practices between Iran and the West. For the Islamists, the Revolution symbolised a defiance against Western political influence. This resulted in the dominant Islamist discourse defining Iran in contrast to the West. This means that Iran's concept of ‘self’ is contingent on the discursive representation of the West as ‘the other.’ This discursive dependency is aligned with concepts of domination and resistance. According to Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, the West constitutes the axis of domination, while Iran is part of the resistance. Political scientist, Avineri, highlights the Islamist perspective with, “Here was a beleaguered, God-fearing Islamic republic fighting against the Western, godless juggernaut.” Therefore, the dominant Islamist discourse positions Iran as a victim to an ever-present Western oppressor. However, the Western interpretation of the Iranian Revolution challenges the dominant Islamist discourse through the positioning of Iran as a threat to Western interests. An article from Time magazine highlights this Western interpretation by arguing that the Revolution “threatens to upset the world balance of power more than any political event since Hitler’s conquest of Europe.” Western political practice reflects this interpretation through the implementation of policies that target Iran’s economic and military power. This is shown in the United States’ policy of containment, which imposes sanctions designed to hinder Iran’s development of ballistic missiles. It also shows that the Western interpretation of the Iranian Revolution presents Iran as a threat that needs to be contained. Conversely, the dominant Islamist discourse presents the West as the hostile force. Therefore, current political practices between Iran and the West have been influenced by contrasting historical interpretations of the

64 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
74 Warnaar, Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions, 146.
Iranian Revolution. This shows that ‘history is not written by the victors’ as per the Western historical interpretation that challenges the dominant Islamist discourse.

The saying, ‘history is written by the victors’ has been explored and it is suggested that this phrase is largely irrelevant to contemporary society because it does not reflect the complexity of multiple histories that continue to provide historical interpretations that contest the dominant narrative. Nietzsche’s concept of history has been examined, as it reasons the subjective nature of history that allows for multiple interpretations to challenge claims of universal truths. The multiple interpretations that challenge the dominant Islamist history of the Iranian Revolution have been discussed, along with the Jewish-Iranian historical interpretation that suggests ‘history is not written by the victors’ because that only offers a history created by a marginalised group. The Baha’i community offers an alternative interpretation of their own persecution during the Revolution and the feminist histories of the Iranian Revolution are constructed from the position of the oppressed, who attempt to identify systems of dominance created by the Islamist revolutionaries. The history of the left in the Iranian Revolution shows the repression and reinvention of historical interpretations, while the primary sources of the Revolution undermine the concept, ‘history is written by the victors’ as they provide individual historical interpretations. Moreover, it is asserted that current political relations between Iran and the West are influenced by contrasting interpretations of the Iranian Revolution and that ‘history is not written by the victors’ as it has been illuminated that multiple histories are constructed from groups that are not in positions of power.
List of References


