

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editors:

It is with dismay that I read "Current Political Activities in an Iranian Village" (*Iranian Studies* XVI, Winter-Spring 1983, pp. 3-29), by an anonymous author.

The two main criteria for publishing ought to be, first, the relevance and importance of the subject matter, and, second, high standards of scholarship, or simply objectivity. The work certainly satisfies the first criterion. As is well known, I warmly welcome the publishing by scholarly journals of work devoted to current issues and problems of political economy, no matter how unpleasant they may seem to the ruling elite of the country in question. If social science is not permitted to cast its critical eye on the society it studies, but only to compliment it, then it is not science but propaganda. On this count I congratulate the editors for publishing the work.

However, the above-mentioned work fails, in my opinion, to satisfy the second criterion of objectivity. In order to criticize the nature and extent of thought control and the modes and degrees of repression in Iran today, the anonymous author has, unnecessarily and without cause, in terms of his own main point, either ignored or praised the previous situation. This lack of objectivity becomes particularly glaring when the author reviews and then dismisses previous studies of the state of the Iranian agricultural sector during the shah's era. This is a self-induced split vision.

The author states that the single village under study was "situated [in] a region which, under the shah, was considered one of the most backward in Iran" (p. 4 paragraph 2). The author then describes "a notable economic upsurge"

(p. 4) during the shah's reign, to the point where villagers could "greatly improve their living conditions" (p. 5). Also, "Most of the families had built, or were in the process of building, spacious, modern houses furnished with plumbing, electricity, and bathroom facilities. Many houses had a refrigerator, a sewing machine, and a television set; some also had a washing machine. Eighteen families owned private cars" (p. 5). These statements, taken together, force the conclusion that indeed one of the poorest villages in Iran under the shah had come to rival the standard of living in American suburbia.

Further, "Likewise, some scholars argued that the shah's land reform was a failure¹ and that 'about 40% of the rural households...experienced impoverishment and deterioration of their standards of living.'² Whatever the ultimate validity of these articles may be, for this particular village...they are demonstrably wrong, or else not pertinent" (p. 4).

An anonymous author, hiding behind an unspecified methodology, ought not be permitted to so cavalierly refute scholarship based on detailed statistical studies of the whole country, obtained from evidence from the shah's own central bank and other agencies, published over the years. And let us not forget that the previous regime was accustomed to magnify its accomplishments and hide its failures, to say the least.

Since the study has obvious political implications, the author ought not be permitted to avoid through anonymity the many pertinent questions: Why and how was the village singled out for the case study? Was it a showcase, a Potemkin village of the shah? I am reminded of the college recruiting officer who, having admitted a large number of unqualified students, was criticized by the faculty. So he "searched for" and found a single outstanding student he had recruited, claiming this as proof that the faculty was wrong in saying he could not recruit good students.

It is unfortunate that the author found it necessary to color a potentially interesting study with biases which serve no positive purpose, and with dismissing the work of other scholars without examining their methodology, sources of data, logic or conclusions as such, while not permitting

the examination of his own methodology or sources. The cavalier attitude expressed in these instances may, perhaps undeservedly, call into question the author's entire work.

Without using the term itself, the author reaches the conclusion that the current upheaval in Iran is no longer a revolution but rather a "counterrevolution." I certainly am sympathetic to this view, having longed for an Iran where freedom of expression and human rights were respected by the ruler.

Manoucher Parvin

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The Author Replies:

As these lines show, my anonymity does not serve to hide from criticism. The ethics of field research demand the protection of sources, especially in a precarious case as the present one. Since my name may give possible clues to the identity of the people described, I had to omit it. Also, the information presented in my article is not of the kind one can obtain, as Professor Parvin rather naively appears to think, by "singling out" a village and then walking in to survey one's sample group. Rather, it requires relationships of absolute trust, a trust I am not willing to betray, no matter how vexatious my anonymity may be to some readers and how tempting the occasion would be to earn laurels with the publication of what I believe to be indeed unique material.

The exception I take to Professor Parvin's statement that in the shah's era about 40 percent of the rural households experienced impoverishment was not made in an off-hand fashion (if this is what he means by "cavalierly"), but on solid grounds. I have thoroughly documented the economic evolution of this village in repeated field sessions over a period of nearly twenty years, using standard techniques of census-taking, mapping, photographic recording, interviewing, and direct observation. On the basis