

Field Research, Research Design and the Tehran Bazaar

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While it would be incorrect to say that scholarly interest in Iran has waned since the Islamic Revolution, due to real and perceived logistical difficulties in conducting long-term field research, studies have been limited in terms of topics and approaches.

Much of the early scholarship addressed macro-level research questions regarding the causes of the Revolution, elite politics and the ideological bases for post-revolutionary developments; the principle sources for these analyses were newspapers, official proclamations, memories and national statistics. With the gradual opening of Iranian society in the second decade after the Revolution, several research centers and networks have been established. Scholarly interest in Iran has also gradually shifted from examining the causes of the Revolution to investigating its consequences, and scholars are increasingly conducting research based on archival analysis, in-depth interviewing, participant observation and survey analysis.¹

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With the gradual opening of Iranian society in the second decade after the Islamic Revolution, a number of research centers and networks have been established. Scholarly interest in Iran has also been shifting from examining the causes of the Revolution to investigating its consequences. Scholars are increasingly conducting research based on archival analysis, in-depth interviewing, participant observation and survey analysis to investigate social transformations that have taken place in Iran.

The emerging narratives highlight the disparities between state rhetoric, official policies and actual social reality. These studies have begun to map a new configuration of social and political forces that weave together continuities and ruptures with the Pahlavi era. It is an important moment for the academic community to self-consciously ponder how and why extensive and fine-tuned field research can contribute to our understanding of both contemporary Iran and social dynamics more broadly.

Field research should play a particularly privileged role in our study of contemporary Iran. Conducting empirically grounded research will help us formulate pertinent research questions, investigate assumptions about Iranian society and lead to the re-conceptualization of analytical constructs. Finally, field research can allow us to assess and analyze the extent to which the Islamic Revolution was a *social* revolution; that is, how changes in the state altered patterns of social relations. I present these arguments by making reference to research I carried out on the Tehran Bazaar.

Empirically based field research is not always an integral part of research design. For instance, most political scientists derive research questions from theory in the pursuit of theory testing. Hence, there is a tendency to view field research as simply a mode of data collection to measure concepts and variables, test hypotheses and lend credence to theoretical perspectives. However, given that in Iranian and Middle Eastern studies more broadly we continue to have little information on how societies and polities are organized and develop, there exists a need to systematically generate an empirical base of knowledge which can enhance concept formation. If our goal is to better understand Iran, then field research should be as much an epistemological tool as a methodological one.

Field research as research formulation

I came to appreciate the salience of field research while conducting comparative research on the social structure of the Tehran Bazaar and the central bazaars (*aswaq*) in Cairo in the post-World War II era. I believed that contrasting these cases would illuminate the reasons why the Tehran Bazaar has enjoyed a central role in Iran's economy and a number of social movements, while its counterpart in Cairo has had a far less prominent role.

While conducting preliminary research in Tehran it became quickly apparent that since the Revolution the Bazaar's basic institutions, internal relations and position in the political economy had radically changed. For instance, promissory notes, which through the 1970s were a critical instrument of exchange and a means of tying together various levels of the value chain, had become almost completely obsolete and were replaced by cash and checks. Also, the literature from the pre-revolutionary era claimed that *bazaaris* actively attended religious events in the Bazaar and religious meetings (or *hayats*) that were based on guild membership.² However, two decades after the Revolution, many *bazaaris* explained that if they did attend communal religious events, they were ones in their neighborhoods outside central Tehran and not necessarily connected to the Bazaar. Finally, and most fundamentally in many senses, the interlocking and long-term networks of



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importers, wholesalers, brokers and retailers that prevailed through much of the twentieth century are currently almost non-existent; they have been replaced by fragmented clientalistic ties to the regime and more precarious smuggling networks. In short, our understanding of the Tehran Bazaar must be sensitive to historical variations, or more specifically, changes that have occurred since the Islamic Revolution. Thus, I reformulated my research question to ask how and why the structure of the Bazaar and state-bazaar relations changed over the last four decades.

As my research evolved it became apparent that changes in the Bazaar were not simply related to incremental changes in the socio-economic fabric (e.g. urbanization, industrialization, or improved transportation), but were created and mediated by the interaction between state policies and the *bazaaris'* negotiation of these policies. Thus, we arrive at an empirical puzzle: why did the organizational structure of the Tehran Bazaar persist under the anti-traditional Pahlavi regime and radically alter under the Islamic Republic that sought to preserve it? It was only through conducting initial field research that I was able to develop this central research question. Had I not visited Iran it is unlikely that I would have understood that the Bazaar's organization and position in the political economy had undergone transformations. The secondary literature made little or no reference to the transformation of bazaars, and prominent figures in the Islamic Republic had identified the *bazaaris* as a revolutionary group and ally, with the Bazaar represented as an 'authentic' and 'Islamic' institution that was to be preserved. Yet my exploratory field research generated and framed the research questions by identifying outcomes and processes that contradicted these expectations and claims.

Even the most rudimentary field research can uncover new questions and challenge accepted notions. For example, most Iran experts describe the *Resalat* daily newspaper and *Shoma* weekly as the voice of the ultra conservative factions (such as the Islamic Coalition Association and Society of the Islamic Associations of Tehran's Guilds and Bazaar) that allegedly represent and receive support from the *bazaaris*.³ Yet there is little evidence of actual *bazaari* readership of these papers. If one walks through the Bazaar and pays attention to the newspapers present in their stores, it becomes evident that they almost unanimously read *Hamshahri* and *Iran*, the two most mainstream and commonly read newspapers in Tehran. Moreover, when interviewed, *bazaaris* rarely, if ever, made reference to *Resalat*. To lend some credibility to these observations I asked the newspaper peddlers in the Bazaar what newspapers sold the most copies. Without exception peddlers responded that *Hamshahri* and *Iran* were the best sellers and some even said that they stopped carrying other broadsheets. Next, I investigated the newspaper kiosks surrounding the Bazaar that have a wide selection of papers ranging from the continually changing collection of reformist papers to arch conservative papers, such as *Jam-e Jam*, *Resalat*, and the afternoon *Kayhan*. I noticed that at the end of the day their heaping stacks of *Hamshahri* and *Iran* were generally sold out, and the reformist selections were well on their way to being sold out. Meanwhile, a large number of issues of *Resalat* and other conservative papers, in small supply to begin with, remained unsold.

The point here is that there is plenty of 'data' available if one is willing to use some creative, even if imprecise measurement and data collection techniques. Researchers will almost inevitably have to adjust their conceptions and develop new questions once they start gathering even the most cursory data. In terms of the Bazaar, the evidence of newspaper readership, along with other observations, indicated significant disparities between state-recognized associations that are said to represent 'the bazaar' or 'the *bazaaris*' and the practices and sentiments of traders within the historic marketplace.

Field research and concept formation

Close range field research (e.g. archival analysis, in-depth interviewing and participant observation) tends to highlight complexities of social life by illustrating inconsistencies in human behavior, the prevalence of subjective categories, discrepancies between institutional designs and actual outcomes, or the simultaneous nature of change and continuity. In the context of the Tehran Bazaar, the above discussions suggest that our concept of the Bazaar must account for temporal shifts and scrutinize the view of the Bazaar as a single corporate entity.

To account for these issues exposed during research, I have built on scholarship in new economic sociology that views networks as the basic

building block of organizations.⁴ I propose that bazaars should be studied as bounded spaces containing a series of socially embedded networks that are the mechanism for the exchange of specific commodities, credit and information about market conditions and potential transaction partners. Economic relations that are in various degrees embedded in religious, familial and ethnic relations capture a dynamic process that continually produces and structures the culture of exchange relations. Consequently, what is termed as the bazaar's 'traditionalism', 'informality', and 'mentality' is not a product of internalized, essential, and unvarying structures, or a functional response to meet economic necessity, but a logic that emerges out of patterns of relations enforcing and molding actions. Moreover, these networks themselves are subject to transformation as the political economy changes.

The process of conducting initial field research forced me to critically evaluate the literature and re-conceptualize long held notions of the Bazaar. I then turned to secondary sources to address unasked questions and refine existing categories used to analyze Iranian society. Thus, field research was the critical first step in interrogating existing modes of thought.

The Islamic revolution as a 'natural experiment'

Once we begin to study Iran from a more empirically grounded perspective, we can systematically explore the Islamic Revolution and ask whether it constitutes a social revolution. If the Revolution is treated as an exogenous shock, the Iranian case lends itself to interesting studies of change and continuity in order to explicitly investigate the consequences of the Revolution. The change in regimes acts as a sort of 'natural experiment' through which we can access the impact of changes in state institutions on society. By carefully and systematically comparing Iranian society before and after the Revolution we can assess the relevance of continuities such as Iran's position in the world economy, or the continued lack of liberal individual rights and absence of institutionalized parties. For example, while the main components of 'modernization', such as urbanization, industrialization, and expansion of education, all existed since the 1940s, it was only after the Islamic Revolution that a radical transformation of the Bazaar's networks can be detected. Also, comparisons across the revolutionary epoch can be bolstered by comparisons across cases within Iranian society. A whole host of creative comparative projects can be devised to study variations across cities, regions, ethnicities or economic sectors. Through evaluating the change in regime we can consider the relevance of socio-economic, ideological and political factors in precipitating transformations. It is incumbent upon researchers to spend time in Iran to identify dissimilarities and appropriate comparisons, and field research must play a fundamental role in project design as much as in deriving findings.

In order to encourage research projects that tackle new issues, develop more powerful concepts and uncover new sources, the academic community must encourage early and regular visits to Iran. Unfortunately at this time there is little institutional and financial support for exploratory research. I would encourage research institutions to direct their limited funds to sponsor students in their first few years of study to make even brief visits to Iran to meet researchers, interview people, peruse archives and review dissertations and journals published in Iran in order to simultaneously diversify their research sources and lines of enquiry. Exploratory and preparatory research is a crucial, although often slighted, component of the preliminary stage of social inquiry, a stage that is particularly lacking in much North American and European scholarship on Iran. It is time to consciously support and privilege research projects that are constructed through, as well as by, field research; they will go a long way in enriching our understanding of Iran and social processes more generally.

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Notes

1. Two noteworthy examples are Fariba Adelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran* (trans. Jonathan Derrick), (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) and Asef Bayat, *Street Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
2. Gustav Thaiss, 'The Bazaar as a Case Study of Religion and Social Change', in *Iran Faces from the Seventies*, ed. Yar-Shater (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971).
3. *Inter alia* Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002) and Hojjat Mortaji, *Jenah-haye Siyasi dar Iran-e Emrooz* (Tehran: Naqsh va Negar, 1378).
4. Walter W. Powell and Laurel Smith-Doerr, 'Networks and Economic Life', in *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, eds. Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).