

**Driving Culture in Iran:  
Law and Society on the Roads of the Islamic Republic**

*Reza Banakar*

*London: I.B. Tauris, 2016. 304 pages.*

*Driving Culture in Iran* creatively explores the relationship between legal culture and citizenry formation in post-revolutionary Iran. Banakar focusses on driving customs and explanations for citizens' disregard of traffic laws, demonstrating that the exceptionally high rates of road accidents and lack of law abidance is due to the complex cultural and political climate. The monograph argues that the state's propaganda machine promotes revolutionary zeal but in a context where people are penalized if they dissent (3).

Consequently, dissension becomes a tool for control, setting into motion multiple forms of internal conflict which are reflected in the way Iranians relate to one another as well as in increasing rates of road traffic accidents (4). The originality of the study rests in its exploration of political life at the juncture of law and culture. Through his analysis of the unintended cultural outcomes of the legal structure in Iran, Banakar contributes to our understanding of citizenship formation in hybrid and religiously charged regimes. In particular, the book illustrates how citizens' distrust of the state can have deadly consequences on Iran's roads. The monograph will be of interest to academics and other professionals working on the Middle East, Islam, and from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives.

The book's central argument is that Iranian society "is a space where contrasting ideologies, religious beliefs, loyalties, forms of political authority and personal and collective aspirations clash on a daily basis in order to uphold a form of social order" (2). The entanglement of these factors results in drivers who show a disregard for the rights of others in pursuit of their own individual interests on the road. While Iranian drivers appear to care about their peer groups, there is a lack of concern shown towards strangers that are outside of their automobiles (155). For instance, male taxi drivers held female drivers culpable for accidents, and professionals like lawyers and doctors perceived the non-Tehrani population as incapable of driving in the city. Insurance agents and lawyers argued that the poor were more religious and closer to the regime hence more likely to bypass laws. Others attributed liability to the impious behavior of the rich and their drug usage. The book argues that this social order is "maintained by perpetuating class and gender conflict," and that it is precisely this larger framework of legal culture that reproduces driving culture in Iran (2).

Banakar clarifies what is at stake in this study in Chapter 1 by highlighting that despite the majority of Iranians viewing driving habits as a cultural problem, very few studies conducted in Iran investigate the cultural aspects of driving (7). In short, the monograph suggests that the crucial argument in aiming to decrease road accidents is the necessity of addressing not only road conditions, cars, and Iranian technology usage but also offering credence to popular distrust of authorities and the state, which subsequently contributes to disregarding the law. Recognizing how law generates gender and class conflict through formal and informal legislation of religion could likewise aid the state in ameliorating poor driving. The book successfully shows that the Islamic Republic fuels citizens' indifference towards the law

by pitting citizens against one another and that this governing tactic engenders careless driving habits.

Banakar discusses the challenges of conducting fieldwork due to the Islamic Republic's general distrust and cynicism towards social sciences, which helps contextualize the issues of access that foreign researchers face in the country. Banakar's collaboration with colleagues based in Iran is noteworthy for several reasons. First, this collaboration supported the author as he applied for an official research permit through a university in Tehran and the other organizations involved in the project, including a taxi agency in Tehran and the Iranian Bar Association. Banakar's decision to obtain research permits for his project is praiseworthy as it publicly legitimizes the social sciences in Iran. Second, by using formal channels to conduct research, and framing the study as a collaborative project with Iranian professionals and academics, his conclusions may influence the broader audience that could benefit from the analysis.

Chapter 3 examines a pilot study conducted in Shiraz where a variety of people were interviewed about the culture of driving. One of the significant findings was that interviewees generally did not speak of justice in religious terms, but predominantly considered justice to be equality before the law. An exaggerated sense of individuality, distrust of authorities, and the notion of *bi-farhangi* or lack of a culture of driving were some of the other dominant findings. In Chapter 4, male taxi drivers draw attention to drivers' refusal to recognize the rights of others once one is behind the steering wheel. Chapter 5 continues this theme of analyzing interviews with different populations, and shows how lawyers highlight the Iranian citizen's inability to trust the state or its authorities. One of the strengths of the monograph is that rights are contextualized from the perspective of different social groups. For instance, while the professional status of lawyers permits them to speak more critically of the state, this was not the case with male taxi drivers. As such, Banakar reminds us that our investigations of subjectivities in Iran are always limited by the extent of freedom that interlocutors believe they have to voice their views. A general desire for relationality and a balance between rights and responsibilities emerges from these interviews.

Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate that class divisions and gender discrimination are reoccurring themes in how Iranians discuss the driving culture in Iran. Banakar stresses that few interviewees actually identified the Supreme Leader as the ultimate source of the law. This is noteworthy in that he remains the highest constitutional authority in the state, yet Iranians iden-

tified parliament as the principal source of law (116). Is this a linguistic limitation of censorship alone? Do the Iranian people believe that despite his constitutional power, he is unable to generate change in a top-down manner? Or is he absent from their political imagination altogether? How the Iranian people (perhaps his followers in particular) relate to the Supreme Leader is an area of research ripe for further investigations.

Moreover, the state's discriminatory legal structures with respect to women, which are justified based on Islamic precepts, has meant that many female taxi drivers are actually well educated but unable to enter fields of work for which they are professionally trained. Most of the female taxi drivers considered here were college educated, with one having studied in the UK and Germany, and fluent in several languages. Another female driver was trained as a photographer, but became a taxi driver due to her economic situation. The female taxi driver, unlike her male counterpart, generally discusses her work as a path taken out of financial desperation. Female taxi drivers also claimed that a lack of respect for others defines the culture of driving in Iran, but they do appear to be more considerate of pedestrians and other drivers than male taxi drivers.

In Chapter 8 Banakar discusses notions of individualism and community in Iran, and argues that Iranian individualism is embedded in family and an awareness of community, and cannot be compared with Western ideas of individualism (153). This is an important claim which upholds the author's general argument throughout the book explaining why respect for the rights of strangers is missing among Iranian drivers. Chapter 9 rightly argues that the field of Iranian studies should focus on how people "experience the law, authority, politics, technology and religion" instead of only exploring elite discourses, fatwas, Sharia guidelines, or macrolevel politics (207). Chapter 10 maintains that the presence of female taxi drivers in the public sphere is creating the cultural change that is necessary for relational citizenry practices.

Finally, Chapter 11 demonstrates that although the Supreme Leader's office both directly and indirectly has a significant role in the construction of laws in Iran, most of the interviewees conceptualized parliament as the basis of the law. The book seems to suggest that while the formation and application of laws in Iran will probably not change quickly, the presence of female taxi drivers in the public sphere may help forge relational practices of rights, at least on the country's roads. Given its significant contributions, the manuscript could have been better organized, more concise, and less essentializing. Readers may wonder how traffic problems are dealt with in

other political contexts that resemble Iran. Additionally, the last two chapters of the monograph are central to the book's conclusions, but they are disconnected from the previous chapters and categorized as "supplementary." Despite such shortcomings, the monograph successfully illustrates the ways in which ineffective political structures, automobiles, roads and popular aspirations for freedom intersect to cause injury but also make life possible after loss. This novel and thoughtful manuscript invites others to examine the cultural ramifications of Iran's legal structures from their disciplinary vantage point.

Shirin Saeidi  
European Centre for the Study of Extremism  
Cambridge, UK