

REVOLUTION AND CONSTITUTIONALISM IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND IRAN

Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in The Ottoman Empire and Iran*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 452, ISBN: 9780521187588.

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Abstract: This review reassesses Nader Sohrabi's *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran* as a major comparative intervention that reframes 1906-08 as a trans imperial moment of "modular revolution." Rather than reading the Iranian and Ottoman constitutional movements as belated imitations or insulated national episodes, the book demonstrates how actors selectively translated a circulating repertoire-catalysed by 1905 Russia-through distinct matrices of state capacity, coalition architecture, and logistical infrastructures. I situate Sohrabi within diffusion and contentious-politics theory (Tarrow, Tilly, Sewell) while testing his claims against core Ottomanist and Iranist historiography (Hanioglu, Zurcher, Ahmad; Afary, Abrahamian, Martin, Bayat, Katouzian) and political-sociological accounts of state formation (Findley; Cronin). Two analytic stress tests-mechanisms of circulation (print publics, exile/officer networks) and intra-case heterogeneity (Tabriz vs. Tehran; Salonica vs. Istanbul/eastern provinces)-clarify both the reach and the limits of "modularity," suggesting how to render it a falsifiable analytic rather than a persuasive metaphor. The review argues that Sohrabi explains divergent outcomes without teleology: in the Ottoman case, constitutionalism becomes a technology of recentralization under CUP (Committee of Union and Progress) stewardship; in Iran, constitutional gains prove reversible absent coercive-fiscal consolidation. By provincializing Europe without provincializing the Middle East, *Revolution and Constitutionalism* offers a portable grammar for comparative revolution and imperial politics.

Key Words: Constitutionalism, Modular Revolution, Diffusion, Young Turks, Qajar Iran, State Capacity, Coalition Structure, Ottoman Empire, Iran, 1906-1911.

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NADER SOHRABI, OSMANLI İMPARATORLUĞU VE İRAN'DA DEVİRİM VE ANAYASACILIK

Öz: Bu inceleme, Nader Sohrabi'nin *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran* adlı çalışmasını 1906-08 dönemini "modüler devrim" kavramsallaştırmasıyla yeniden çerçeveleyen karşılaştırmalı bir müdahale olarak tartışır. 1905 Rusya kaynaklı anayasal repertuarın Osmanlı ve İran'da seçici tercüme yoluyla yerel devlet kapasitesi, koalisyon mimarisi ve lojistik altyapılar üzerinden farklılaştığı gösterilir. Metin, Sohrabi'yi diffüzyon ve toplumsal hareket kuramlarıyla (Tarrow, Tilly, Sewell) ilişkilendirirken, Osmanlı/İran literatürü (Hanioglu, Zürcher, Ahmad; Afary, Abrahamian, Martin, Bayat, Katouzian) ve devlet oluşumu araştırmaları (Findley; Cronin) üzerinden karşılaştırmalı bir sınama yürütür. Dolaşımın somut mekanizmaları (basın, sürgün/askerî ağlar) ve vaka-içi çeşitlilik (Tebriz-Tahran; Selanik-İstanbul/doğu vilayetleri) tartışılarak modülerliğin açıklayıcılığı ile sınırları belirginleştirilir. Sonuçta, Osmanlı'da anayasal formun CUP idaresinde yeniden merkezileştirme tekniğine dönüştüğü; İran'da ise mali-zorlayıcı konsolidasyon eksikliğinde tersinir kaldığı savunulur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Anayasal Devrim, Modüler Devrim, Diffüzyon, İttihat ve Terakki, Kaçar İran'ı, Devlet Kapasitesi, Koalisyon Yapısı, 1906-1911.

Nader Sohrabi's *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran* compels us to rethink the 1906-08 conjuncture as neither belated mimicry nor insulated national teleology but as a trans imperial moment in which repertoires of constitutional politics circulated, were strategically translated, and then sedimented unevenly within distinct institutional ecologies¹. The conceptual pivot, "modular revolution" builds on diffusion and contentious-politics literatures yet refuses both the economic determinism associated with some world-systems renderings and the culturalist exceptionalism that still echoes in parts of Ottomanist and Iranist historiography². Sohrabi is at his strongest when he shows how the 1905 Russian shock did not produce imitative fidelity but calibrated borrowing, in which officers, notables,

¹ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, s. 1-32, 427-436.

² Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 3rd ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011; Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003; William H. Sewell Jr., "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures", *Theory and Society*, vol. XXV, no. 6, 1996, s. 841-881.

clerics, and urban publics read the same repertoire through divergent matrices of state capacity, elite cohesion, and logistical infrastructures³. The Ottoman chapters argue that Hamidian institution-building-military academies, communications, bureaucratic expansion-unknowingly fabricated the very organizational skeleton that the Young Turk network would later articulate into a constitutionalist seizure⁴. By contrast, the Qajar monarchy's fiscal brittleness, fragmented coercion, and fissiparous elite alignments rendered Iranian constitutionalism vulnerable at the precise juncture when mobilization had to be converted into durable institutions⁵.

That comparative architecture bears fruit against the existing literature. On Iran, Sohrabi tracks with Janet Afary's reconstruction of *anjoman* politics and urban publics but deliberately recenters organization over class composition at the moment of consolidation⁶. Ervand Abrahamian's classic class analysis remains indispensable for mapping social blocs across the bazaar, artisans, and modern intelligentsia, yet Sohrabi's account implies that class was a necessary but insufficient predictor absent a cohesive administrative-coercive core⁷. Vanessa Martin's work on Shi'i authority clarifies the clerical spectrum; Sohrabi is closest to Martin when parsing how *shura* discourses could authorize unfamiliar legislative forms, even as he treats clerical alignments as strategically elastic rather than doctrinally foreclosed⁸. Mangol Bayat's emphasis on Islamic reform as a carrier of constitutional modernity provides a valuable counterweight, but Sohrabi's evidence suggests that the decisive variable was not intellectual genealogy alone; it was the coalition engineering needed to survive the transition from street to state⁹. Homa Katouzian's "arbitrary state" thesis illuminates the *longue durée* fragilities of Iranian sovereignty; Sohrabi's narrative gives that abstraction operational content in 1906-11 by showing how fiscal

³ Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 33-71.

⁴ Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 33-286; Carter V. Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1980.

⁵ Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 287-426; Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran*, New York University Press, New York 1981.

⁶ Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911*, Columbia University Press, New York 1996; Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 287-334.

⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1982; Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 427-436.

⁸ Vanessa Martin, *Islam and Modernism in Iran, 1906-1940*, I.B. Tauris, London 1989; Vanessa Martin, *Iran's Constitutional Revolution*, Oneworld, Oxford 2003.

⁹ Mangol Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909*, Oxford University Press, New York 1991.

thinness and coercive dispersion sabotaged institutionalization¹⁰. Read alongside Stephanie Cronin's work on Reza Shah's state-building, the Iranian case becomes an experiment in reversibility: constitutional gains, in the absence of infrastructural consolidation, could (and did) unwind¹¹.

On the Ottoman side, Sohrabi joins, and subtly reweights, a crowded field. M. Sukru Hanioglu's *Preparation for a Revolution* remains the definitive account of the Young Turk milieu, tracing the cosmopolitan intellectual circuits and clandestine cellular discipline that made 1908 organizable; Sohrabi leans further into organizational geometry to argue that the constitutional restoration functioned less as a liberal watershed than as a technology of recentralization under CUP stewardship¹². This complements but also complicates Erik-Jan Zürcher's and Feroz Ahmad's emphases on ideology, faction, and crisis management from the 31 March Incident through the Balkan Wars, by foregrounding how a concentrated bureaucratic-military stratum could leverage a broad constitutionalist symbolic capital to restructure sovereignty¹³. Carter Findley's work on the professionalization of the Ottoman bureaucracy provides the prehistory; Sohrabi effectively shows that this infrastructure became the midwife of its own constitutionalist antagonists¹⁴. Set against Selim Deringil's analysis of Hamidian legitimation and Donald Quataert's insights into late Ottoman political economy, Sohrabi's modularity adds a dynamic account of how repertoires travel and are translated into rule¹⁵. In other words, constitutionalism in 1908 did not merely legitimate a preexisting project; it enabled it administratively.

Two stress tests sharpen both the reach and the limits of the modularity claim. First, mechanisms of circulation: Sohrabi is convincing that repertoires moved, but the micro-relays sometimes remain at the level of heuristic plausi-

¹⁰ Homa Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis*, I.B. Tauris, London 2000.

¹¹ Stephanie Cronin (ed.), *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Reza Shah, 1921-1941*, Routledge, London 2003.

¹² M. Sukru Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902-1908*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001; Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 72-188.

¹³ Erik-Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd ed. I.B. Tauris, London 2004; Feroz Ahmad, *The Young Turks: The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics, 1908-1914*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1969; Aykut Kansu, *1908 Devrimi*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul 2001.

¹⁴ Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1980; Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 135-188.

¹⁵ Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, I.B. Tauris, London 1998; Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922*, 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005.

bility. Mapping the concrete vectors, print publics (in multiple scripts), exile corridors, officer postings, Masonic/student lodges, would move the argument from elegant synthesis to an even more falsifiable model¹⁶. Here Amos Ayalon's analysis of Middle Eastern press ecologies, Palmira Brummett's work on revolutionary imagery, and Hanioglu's reconstructions of clandestine networks provide ready building blocks¹⁷. Second, intra-case heterogeneity: the book's macro-pairing is judicious, but both cases hide telling provincial variance—Tabriz's brokerage versus Tehran's courtly centrism; Salonica's military-bureaucratic crucible versus Istanbul's fragmented public sphere and the eastern provinces' distinct social terrains. Recent regional studies suggest that outcomes turn on meso-level brokers who connected repertoires to local alignments; integrating those would further refine the diffusion-translation linkage¹⁸. Finally, there is a theoretical dividend. By re-reading 1906 and 1908 through modularity, Sohrabi both affirms and corrects Theda Skocpol's structuralist model: international conjunctures matter, but they do so through repertoires that actors must skillfully fit to changing state capacities¹⁹. Jack Goldstone's emphasis on demographic and fiscal bases of state crisis also resonates, yet Sohrabi shows how, absent organizational leverage, structural pressures alone do not yield constitutional consolidation²⁰.

None of these suggestions detract from the book's achievement. *Revolution and Constitutionalism* is that rare comparative study that persuades specialists on both sides of the Ottoman-Qajar line while offering a portable analytic to comparativists of revolution. The upshot is not that constitutiona-

¹⁶ Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 72-134; Kurt Weyland, "The Diffusion of Revolution: '1848' in Europe and Latin America", *International Organization*, vol. LXIII, no. 3, 2009, s. 391-423; Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. Free Press, New York 2003.

¹⁷ Amos Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*, Oxford University Press, New York 1995; Palmira Brummett, *Image and Imperialism in the Ottoman Revolutionary Press*, SUNY Press, Albany 2000; Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902-1908*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

¹⁸ Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911*, Columbia University Press, New York 1996; Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd ed. I.B. Tauris, London 2004; Ahmad, *The Young Turks: The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics, 1908-1914*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1969; Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1997.

¹⁹ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1979; Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 1-32, 427-436.

²⁰ Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*, 2nd ed. Routledge, London 2015; Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 189-286, 427-436.

lism “arrived” intact, nor that it dissolved into locally idiosyncratic meaning, but that a shared script, the repertoire of constitutionalism, yielded divergent sovereignties when refracted through different coalition architectures and infrastructural capacities²¹. By provincializing Europe without provincializing the Middle East, Sohrabi gives us a grammar of modern politics that other imperial ecologies can use: where institutions were thick and coercion centralized, constitutionalism became a technique of rule; where both were thin, it remained a fragile idiom vulnerable to rollback.

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²¹ Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, s. 427-436.

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