

## ***Follies of Development Theory***

**The Elementary Structures of Political Life: Rural Development in Pahlavi Iran**, by Grace E. Goodell, *Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1986. vii + 362 pp. \$45.00.*

IN 1972 Grace Goodell, an anthropologist who now directs the Program on Social Change and Development at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, went to Iran to study economic development in the country's "traditional" and "modern" sectors. For over two years she lived in the southwestern Iranian province of Khuzestan, first in an immemorial peasant village and later in a sort of company town where the Iranian government had resettled peasants uprooted from the countryside. In communities she calls Rahmat Abad and Bizhan, Goodell saw starkly illustrated the pernicious practical consequences of much of

Western modernization and development theory, and how vital societal holism is to that moral integrity without which sustainable economic development is impossible. Woven with the subtlety and detail of a Persian tapestry, this account of her Iranian experiences ought by now to have stimulated major rethinking of the determinants of economic growth and capital formation in both the West and the Third World. That it has not suggests how deeply ingrained is the ideology of development which Goodell criticizes.

In Iran, much might have been different had the Shah's land reforms of the early and middle 1960s been left in place. Between 1962 and 1965, the holdings of Iran's rural (and often absentee) landlords were broken up and reallocated to the Iranian peasantry. The new peasant smallholders, whom Iranian and foreign technocrats never ceased to regard with contempt, proceeded to raise substantially their productivity on land which they now owned privately but worked collectively. Goodell notes that the reforms released "tremendous energy" in the countryside, and that by 1966 Iran's peasants had raised their annual per capita income to \$430 from \$130 in 1960. During this period the peasantry more than doubled its agricultural yield through the use of fertilizers and pesticides, and significantly increased livestock production. The achievements of the newly empowered peasants suggest what they might have accomplished economically if the land had been left in their hands. Alas, such was not to be.

With funding from the World Bank and technical advice from David Lilienthal, American architect of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Shah in 1966 announced a massive development and irrigation project along a 100-mile stretch of Khuzestan's Dez River. All was to be done according to a centralized plan promulgated from Teheran and designed as

a model for modernization throughout the country. Thus, the land which the peasants had so recently acquired and were utilizing effectively was "repurchased" by the state and leased to foreign agribusinesses. These agribusinesses then hired peasants on a day-wage basis, subject to seasonal demands. Iranian technocrats and foreign advisors projected the physical destruction of 100 traditional villages in Khuzestan, and collection of the deracinated peasantry in *shahraks*, new, antiseptic "labor centers" which were to "service" the agribusinesses. In effect, the Shah repealed his own land reforms. In their place, large-scale farming dictated by Iran's remote urban bureaucracy and implemented with foreign capital was imposed as the model for the nation's social modernization and economic development. Results were catastrophic, both for the viability of rural Khuzestan and, less obviously, for the legitimacy of the Shah's regime itself.

Rahmat Abad and Bizhan represent the dialectical opposites on which Goodell constructs her argument. In the former, an illiterate and mud-housed population operated on the basis of clear and predictable behavior and relationships. In the latter, with its wide avenues and identical cinder-block houses, all was uncertainty, confusion and mistrust. Rahmat Abad, not Bizhan, enjoyed the "calculability of impersonal, purposeful actions" essential to capitalistic economic development. Nevertheless, the Iranian state strove to destroy that predictability with which an unwritten legal system, demanding individual and corporate responsibility, had endowed Rahmat Abad, and replace it with an arbitrary obscurantism. In Bizhan, Teheran's modernizers wielded supreme power, unhindered either by prescriptive tradition or personal initiative. By 1976, Bizhan and the other *shahraks* had proven spectacular failures and all of the

agribusinesses were bankrupt. An embarrassed regime requested that the peasants dragooned into "development" return and farm the land which the Shah had given them during the 1960s and then taken away. Any rebirth of entrepreneurship or productivity was aborted, however, by the Iranian Revolution which erupted in 1978-1979.

In Rahmat Abad, Goodell discovered an active public arena in which village objectives were debated and corporate goals established. Nothing of the sort ever developed in Bizhan. To achieve public purposes, Rahmat Abad's villagers insisted that each individual act as a self-reliant and responsible moral agent. In Bizhan, the state replaced moral responsibility with dependence, permitting action only at its command and survival only through its largesse. There, Rahmat Abad's pervasive individualism was replaced by a collective parasitism and homogenization. In Rahmat Abad, moral order nourished corporate responsibility, and the predictability of customary law reinforced societal holism. In Bizhan, Teheran attempted through its own "essential lawlessness" to force rapid development, and strove to despoil Bizhan of any sense of transcendence, community, or a shared past. Once the old order which the Rahmat Abads represented had been expunged and its living people converted into interchangeable labor units mass-produced nationwide, the Shah, the World Bank, and David Lilienthal all believed that Iran would qualify for membership in the club of Western, modernized states. The reader of this book can only shake his head at how little they understood.

Goodell is especially effective in criticizing the pervasive Western notion that traditional society necessarily equates with underdevelopment, backwardness and general social reaction. Between 1962 and 1965, Rahmat Abad proved itself not only ready to adopt mechanization but

also eager to buy and manage the latest in farm equipment. Such initiatives imposed "radically new responsibilities" on its inhabitants, Goodell notes, and illustrate the compatibility of the village's corporate cohesion with social and economic innovation. In Goodell's opinion, this rapid adoption of machinery illustrates how much more important societal integrity and organization are to "spontaneous" modernization than are either education or governmental assistance. Indeed, Rahmat Abad demonstrated that it was neither technologically, economically, nor even religiously backward, as Goodell states, and constitutes an excellent example of the importance of Edmund Burke's "little platoon" to social progress.

Among the great strengths of this study are the specific examples Goodell adduces of the excesses of the Iranian *dulat*, or national government. For instance, she relates the way in which a government doctor exploited a village tragedy to trick Rahmat Abad's peasants into permitting him to extract great quantities of their blood. The doctor did not bother to explain to the peasants that their bodies would generate new blood shortly, and proceeded to sell his stolen blood at a substantial profit. Technocrats despatched by *dulat* insisted on providing Rahmat Abad with an enlarged canal that succeeded only in contaminating its drinking water and causing several deaths from drowning. Perhaps most spectacularly, *dulat* invaded Rahmat Abad with a malaria spray team which, without any consent from or even consultation with the villagers, "plunged into every room of the community." Goodell writes:

... fast, marching, efficient, their pungent white film on everything, indiscriminately. Pity a woman at home with small babies, pregnant, sick, or weak—worse yet, if no one was home at all....Leave a cup in the niche, a photograph of the prophet on the

wall—God forbid, a baby in the cradle!—swish, swish, finished. Next room....When I asked the spray team how they would like someone to act that way in their homes, they were surprised by the suggestion of any comparison: “The place belongs to *dulat* and it is infested,” they pronounced, “only the poison will kill the disease.” One could not help but wonder which vermin *dulat* hoped to exterminate.

For good reason, government was considered the great ravager by peasants in Rahmat Abad and elsewhere. For such excesses both the Shah, for whom peasant villages were sometimes razed simply to spare him the sight of them, and the alien, intrusive world which he represented were held responsible and would soon pay dearly.

This outstanding book owes much to Tocqueville, Durkheim, Kirk, and Nisbet, and debunks theorists of modernization from Weber to Myrdal. It should be required reading for every official of the World Bank, and in the suitcase of every Western technocrat sent to the Third World. Read in conjunction with James Bill’s *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (1988), it makes the Iranian Revolution comprehensible. The vessel drained of meaning by *dulat*’s suffocating paternalism and its insistence on uniformity and standardization has tragically now been refilled by the Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors.

— *Reviewed by Antony T. Sullivan*