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Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

I am overjoyed to introduce the second issue of the *Notre Dame Historical Review*. Coming on the heels of a very successful inaugural issue, this publication is the fruit of a hardworking Editorial Board. Without the students who volunteer to make this publication a reality, the journal simply would not exist.

The continuity of staff who worked on the inaugural issue was tremendously helpful in creating another glowing issue. We were also pleased to have some new faces on the Board as well. And, of course, the Notre Dame History Department has been similarly instrumental in bringing the *Review* to print, both online and on paper. Undergraduate Studies Coordinator Megan Brewer especially deserves thanks for her role in this process.

Inspired by this issue's first article, the cover this semester employs a photograph of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution. Although the image visually contains "1914," the exhibition took place in the 1930s. Like the articles in this issue, the figures in the photograph reflect on the past and its ramifications. The photograph itself, also, is an exercise in perspective: a framing of events. The authors included in this issue have chosen what events are important to invoke for the stories and arguments they outline.

The authors included in this issue explored very distinct topics. Some broad themes such as religion and culture connect the pieces loosely, but, while all being historical, each article is able to explore disparate subjects pertaining to the past. Please enjoy reading the nuanced arguments and engaging analyses contained within these pages.

Vincent Micheli

Editor-in-Chief

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Daniel Zhang, University of Chicago



About the Authors

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Emily Sweeney is a senior at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, majoring in History, with a minor in Classical Archaeology and a certificate in Medieval Studies. She will graduate in Spring 2026, and hopes to attend graduate school, with the long-term goal of a professional career in the museum field. Her academic interests include Classical Antiquity to the early medieval period, Gender & Sexuality Studies, and Public History.

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The Fascist Performance: Italian Theatre and the Fascist Struggle for Unification

Mackenzie Morgan
University of Michigan

Abstract:

Building upon previous scholarship, this study investigates the role of theatre in Fascist Italy, ultimately framing it as a metaphor for the regime's collapse. Through an examination of Fascist theatre, the study demonstrates how the regime appropriated both traditional and avant-garde theatrical forms in an effort to unite Italy under its control, transforming theatre into a political tool rather than a space for artistic entertainment. Drawing on Italy's theatrical heritage, the study contextualizes themes that emerged in Fascist theatrical production, then examines the regime's institutionalization and manipulation of theatre through the employment of performances, playwrights, and state intervention. Further, the study explores the activities of avant-garde artists during the regime's prominence and introduces the concept of a "Fascist avant-garde." It concludes by showing how the contradictions and failures inherent in these theatrical expressions reflect the broader collapse of the Fascist regime in Italy.

Theatre in Fascist Italy was not just an art, but a tool for Fascist ideals. The stage was transformed into a space focused on strength, unity, and renewal. Yet, Fascist theatre did not arise out of nowhere. It was influenced by the rich tradition of Italian performance that preceded it. From the theatrical shifts of the late 19th century to the experimentation of the Fascist regime, the evolution of Italian theatre mirrored the broader transformations in Italian society. The following examination of Fascist theatre will demonstrate how the regime appropriated traditional and avant-garde theatrical forms to unite Italy under its rule, changing theatre's function from artistic experimentation and entertainment to control. Through historical context, an exploration of theatre's governmental institutionalization, and an examination of avant-garde involvement, this study will demonstrate that while the Fascist use of theatre reinforced key ideological aims, it also reveals the very constraints that kept Fascism from fully dominating Italy's cultural landscape.

It is important to understand that the Fascists saw culture and politics as intertwined. After their early avant-garde exploration, a step towards using art as a mass cultural spectacle occurred.¹ Because of this, Fascists understood theatre and art as a means to unify Italy. The regime used theatre as a force for its message, taking theatrical spectacle and using it for both cultural impact and orchestrated political display. Stanley Longman, professor emeritus and former head of Theatre and Film studies at the University of Georgia, highlights the Fascist approach to public events as the most prominent example of “para-theatre,” otherwise described as staged events that are calculated for a certain effect.² In this, Fascism framed itself in a careful construction—just like Fascist theatre—with the Italian people as the audience.

SETTING THE STAGE: THEATRE BEFORE FASCISM

Italy has a historically rich theatrical tradition, evolving significantly in style and form throughout the nineteenth century. These changes reflected broader cultural transformations in the country. This section will explore two key theatrical forms in the nineteenth century: Romantic theatre and *verismo*. It will examine their roles during the pre-Fascist era and their connection to Italian unification. Additionally, it will explore how these forms influenced audience dynamics and national identity. By analyzing

¹ Walter L. Adamson, “Modernism and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903–1922,” *The American Historical Review* 92, no. 2 (1990): 378.

² Stanley V. Longman, “Mussolini and the Theatre,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60, no. 2 (1974): 212.

theatre before the Fascist regime, the stage is set for understanding how the regime used theatre as a tool for political and cultural control.

Italian Theatre underwent a Romantic period in the nineteenth century. Playwrights drew inspiration from figures like Dante and Shakespeare, seeking to evoke a romantic feel through emotions. Romantic theatre emphasized aesthetic beauty while engaging with human experience and emotional intensity. Although it engaged with universal human themes, Romantic theatre often disconnected itself from daily life. This is because Romantic theatre featured historical events and figures that were not realistic and were rather romanticized. This form of theatre employed grand gestures and glorified heroes. It often carried nationalistic undertones—themes that would resonate in Fascist theatre.

Another popular genre of the nineteenth century was *verismo*, or realism. The transition emerged as a reaction to the disconnection between theatre and everyday life in Romantic works. Giovanni Emmanuel had sought to make theatre more relatable, largely in part to influences from Henrik Ibsen, the father of theatrical realism. Thus, Emmanuel interpreted realistic theatre to focus on ordinary people and everyday Italian experiences. He aimed to adapt plays to the skills of the actors, as opposed to the Romantic view of adapting the actor to the play.³ Realistic theatre was introduced after Italy's unification and was well regarded in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. The shift from Romantic theatre to *verismo* reflects Italy's changes following unification in 1861. *Verismo* focused on ordinary people rather than idealized beauty, presenting a grounded view of Italian identity. It dealt with the challenges of unification and Italy's complex identity rather than idealized heroes.

Verismo grounded its stories in the realities of everyday life as opposed to Romantic theatre's glorification of everyday life. Both genres, though distinct, sought to explore national identity in their own way. Where *Verismo* highlighted the experiences of ordinary people, emphasizing the complexities of the unified Italian identity, Romantic theatre glorified the Italian past, highlighting the heroes of Italy. Both forms played a role in Fascist theatre, as the regime sought to unify and glorify simultaneously.

The transition from Romantic theatre to *verismo* signaled an invitation for non-bourgeois spectators. Although enjoyed by all, Romantic theatre was more of an upper-class enjoyment. By normalizing the everyday person within the art form, *verismo* filled a void left by Romantic theatre.

³ Gianina Druță, *Ibsen at the Theatrical Crossroads of Europe: A Performance History of Henrik Ibsen's Plays on the Romanian Stages, 1894-1947* (Columbia University Press, 2024), 62–65.

This shift allowed true realities to take center stage while Romantic theatre glorified everyday life and concentrated on the "greats" of history. The introduction of *verismo* could be understood as a shift towards a "true" national theatre, which invites all to be involved—a theatre with common themes and a unified collective. Just as Emmanuel advocated for a change within theatre, Italians desired a change in Italy. Therefore, the change reflected the desire for a more unified identity, a desire that the Fascists would later adopt as their own. This is not to say that Romantic theatre disappeared as *verismo* rose, as it still had its place. Instead, the two shared a role in Fascist Italy, modeling the regime's approach to theatre.

Paolo Puppa, a professor of history and theatre at the University of Venice, introduces how theatre took on a dual role under a unified Italy. This concept helps make sense of the relationship between *verismo* and Romantic theatre. Puppa explains that theatre, on the one hand, was socially instructive, and on the other hand, had a "sublime and ethereal" undertone.⁴ The fusion of social instruction and aesthetic beauty allowed theatre to reflect Italy's evolving identity while providing a space for emotional escape. This offered audiences a rich and complex theatrical experience that resonated on both a personal and collective level. This dual role would later play a critical part in the Fascist regime's control over theatre; in this era, the playwright was understood as a "preacher" of cultural customs and expectations.⁵

Despite notions of nationalization and themes of unification, Italian theatre remained fragmented. Theatre was typically associated with the upper class and elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Günter Berghaus, a prominent theatre historian, notes that theatre remained largely a bourgeois activity, showing that true unity was not reached.⁶ Furthermore, Puppa argues that theatre was restricted to those in a "higher status than the stalls," a bourgeois activity.⁷ Although there were exceptions, theatre in Italy was not yet nationalized. It remained largely a space for the upper classes, a structure that would not see change until the rise of Fascism.

⁴ Paolo Puppa, "The Theatre of a United Italy," in *A History of Italian Theatre*, ed. Joseph Farrell and Paolo Puppa (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 223.

⁵ Puppa, "The Theatre of a United Italy," 226.

⁶ Günter Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909–1944* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.

⁷ Puppa, "The Theatre of a United Italy," 223.

THE MAIN ACT: THE FASCIST INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THEATRE

Under Fascism, theatre became more than just an art form; it was a political tool used to promote national unity. The Fascist regime utilized theatre to emphasize unity, strength, and national pride. The regime aimed to control culture to strengthen its grip on Italy, understanding that theatre could influence the masses. This section explores how the Fascist regime used theatre to advance Fascist ideology, how the regime nationalized theatrical institutions, and how Fascism reached the masses through theatre. To do so, I will examine state-sponsored performances, the role of playwrights, and the promotion of Fascist ideals.

Fascist Italy's vision aimed for a unified, classless society, where social divisions were subordinated to the nation's strength. This vision of unity was central to Fascism's political appeal, as it promised to overcome Italy's chaotic post-war fragmentation and provide a sense of national purpose. To achieve this, the Fascists needed various means of spreading their ideals, thus employing theatre as a tool to convey their message. The regime used theatre to glorify the role of the state and the collective, emphasizing the importance of unity and compliance to benefit the nation.

Under the Fascist regime, theatre became organizationally unified. In the 1920s, the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND) was created to fund, coordinate, and control leisure activities such as cinema, sports, and theatre.⁸ This marked the beginning of nationalized theatre, with the state taking control of the pastime. Yet, like many other leisure activities, Italy's theatre was not initially aligned with Fascist goals. To enforce conformity to Fascism, the government introduced membership tests to admit new members to preexisting theatre groups. As Peter J. Williamson explains, these tests ensured that only loyal citizens were allowed to participate in theatre. These tests made sure Fascist ideals permeated all aspects of Italian culture, not only in membership but also in ideals.⁹ With membership tests being conducted regularly, an Italian interested in theatre had to align with Fascist ideals to engage in art. If the citizen did not align, they were not able to join a theatre group.

State support was critical in centralizing and unifying theatre. Many playwrights were directly funded by the regime, ensuring that Fascist ideals were embedded in their works. One prominent playwright supported by the regime was Gabriele D'Annunzio, Mussolini's political inspiration. His

⁸ Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organisation of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 39–44.

⁹ Peter J. Williamson, *Mussolini and Reshaping the State: Social Intervention* (Oxford Academic, 2023), chap. 7.

plays blended Romantic theatre and *verismo*, emphasizing historical heroism and connecting to everyday life. This style of Fascist theatre reinforced the themes of unity and strength central to the regime. The state also generously funded several other well-known playwrights of the era, understanding theatre as a tool for shaping the attitudes of the public.

The content of state-sponsored plays reflects the Fascists' desire to control Italian culture through theatre. Many plays celebrated heroism, often through the concept of the "Superman," a term derived from philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of *Übermensch* (Superman). The "Superman" symbolized a powerful leader who embodied strength, sacrifice, and national renewal—themes central to Fascist ideology.¹⁰ Patricia Gaborik, author of *Mussolini's Theatre*, highlights the importance of the "Superman" in Fascist plays, emphasizing the regime's goal of creating a collective national identity around a central, revitalizing figure.¹¹ These themes had appeared in theatre before, influenced by Romantic ideals, but under Fascism, they were transformed to promote the regime's message. They incorporated collective identity into their performances, similar to the themes seen in *verismo*. Director and writer Mario Verdone notes that Fascists, in targeting the general public through "mass theatre," aimed to re-educate the population. The Fascists tended to focus on the youth with these performances, incurring ideological indoctrination early on.¹² These notions of heroism, national unity, and strength under the "Superman" were meant to unify Italy under the Fascist ideal.

The glorification of heroic figures, through Fascism's ideals of strength, sacrifice, and national unity, became deeply embedded in popular culture through theatre. The play *Cesare* is an example of this intent. Written by playwright Giovacchino Forzano, *Cesare* offers a Fascist interpretation of the life of Julius Caesar, the Roman dictator. The play draws parallels between Fascist Italy and the Roman Empire, both unified under one powerful leader.¹³ The portrayal of Caesar as Rome's "Superman" reinforced ideas of national unity and renewal, tying back to the role of Mussolini in Fascist Italy. Italy, in this sense, was united under

¹⁰ Marja Härmänmaa, "Anatomy of the "Superman": Gabriele D'Annunzio's Response to Nietzsche," *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 24, no. 1 (2019).

¹¹ Patricia Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 68–71.

¹² Mario Verdone, "Mussolini's Theatre of the Masses," in *Fascism and theatre: comparative studies on the aesthetics and politics of performance in Europe, 1925-1945* ed. Günter Berghaus (Berghahn Books, 1996), 134.

¹³ Patricia Gaborik, "Mussolini's Cesare: Propaganda, Pedagogy and the Dramatization of History," *Fascism* 12, no. 2 (2023):180.

one central hero, just as Rome was. Furthermore, both Fascist Italy and Caesar's Rome aimed for a unified identity. Themes of war, heroism, and collective identity were central to Fascism, and *Cesare* reinforced the regime's message through this depiction.

As the Fascist regime progressed, theatre became more accessible to all Italians, not just the bourgeoisie. This was necessary to enforce their message of unification. The regime went beyond funding to make theatre a universal activity, mending the fractured Italy through theatrical involvement. Theatre buildings were enlarged, allowing more Italians to enjoy theatre. Around 15,000–20,000 citizens could fit in a theatre simultaneously, increasing the accessibility for urban Italians.¹⁴ Theatres were previously smaller, making them less accessible to the general public. These theatrical buildings received state-sponsored subsidies, making Italian theatre more widespread and unifying.¹⁵ Furthermore, theatrical funding furthered the notion that Fascists aimed to unify Italy's culture. Making theatre more accessible signaled the regime's goal to control culture, as more viewers meant more impressionable minds.

In the case of rural Italy, performances were scarce. To fix this, Thespian Wagons were introduced. Gaborik states that this initiative delivered state-sponsored shows to about 175,000 spectators each summer, a real novelty for rural Italians.¹⁶ These performances were not just entertainment—they were meant to reach each corner of Italy and further the Fascist grip on the nation, unifying all of Italy under one ideal. These rural performances further demonstrate how the regime sought to control culture under the guise of accessible theatre, furthering their goal of unifying Italy.

The regime also sought to establish state-run institutions to encourage experimentation and promote theatre.¹⁷ Silvio d'Amico, a prominent playwright and critic, believed that theatre estranged the "true audience" and needed to be revitalized to serve the regime's ideological goals. D'Amico was made the head of a theatrical academy introduced by the Fascist regime as an experimental concept. This institute was meant to train those interested in theatre to lead the next generation. As it was sponsored by the Fascists, its instruction aligned with Fascist values. D'Amico's institute only lasted one season despite alignment with the

¹⁴ Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre*, 195.

¹⁵ Alexander Golovlev, "Theatre Policies of Soviet Stalinism and Italian Fascism Compared, 1920–1940s," *New Theatre Quarterly* 159, no. 4 (2019): 315.

¹⁶ Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre*, 205.

¹⁷ Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre*, 236.

Fascist mission. This failure, similar to the fate of other experimental theatrical institutions, illustrates the regime's inability to fully control all areas of theatre, broadly reflecting the regime's limited grip on Italian culture.¹⁸

The transformation of Italian theatre into the Fascist era shows how it became a tool for shaping national identity and collective consciousness. Fascist plays, with their focus on heroism and unity, shifted from being elite entertainment to a mass spectacle. The regime used theatre not only as a performance but as a means of instructing the public in loyalty to the state, with playwrights and new initiatives becoming agents of Fascism's ideological project. This shift reflects the transformation from a fragmented post-unification society to a highly centralized Fascist state. Initiatives like larger theatres, state funding, and Thespian Wagons allowed the regime to spread its message of unity. Furthermore, their use of theatre emphasized the power of the state. Yet, the lack of a successful institutional framework meant that theatre could not fully become the state-driven force the Fascists had envisioned. Nevertheless, the regime was still able to use its performances to spread ideology.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN: AVANT-GARDES AND FASCIST EXPERIMENTATION

Early twentieth-century theatre was shaped by avant-garde movements that broke from tradition in their quest for artistic innovation. This era of innovation and avant-garde experimentation became the foundation for new theatre.¹⁹ In this context, the avant-gardes were individuals who sought after artistic expression and innovation, looking towards the future. Both the avant-garde and the Fascists sought to break away from the past—but for two differing reasons. The Fascists desired control, while the avant-garde pursued artistic expression. The lack of alignment between the two created growing tension. As Fascism rose to power, avant-garde movements had to navigate the tension between conformity and innovation. This section examines the connection between avant-gardes and Fascists, the role of amateur theater, and how the Fascists occupied the space that the avant-garde had left. Such an examination reveals how the regime had embraced and restricted the avant-garde spirit to promote Italian unification.

¹⁸ Mabel Berezin, "Cultural Form and Political Meaning: State-subsidized Theater, Ideology, and the Language of Style in Fascist Italy," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1259.

¹⁹ Giovanna Di Martino, Eleftheria Ioannidou, and Sara Troiani, "Special Issue: A Hellenic Modernism: Greek Theatre and Italian Fascism Introduction," *Classical Receptions Journal* 16, no. 1: (2024), 4.

Futurism, fathered by Filippo Marinetti, focused on “art in action.” Berghaus describes art in action as battling the suffocating Italian past with a lens toward the future.²⁰ The movement aimed for a new, dynamic future that strayed from Italy’s pre-existing norms. Instead of being solely political, Futurism was an artistic and political movement. Berghaus elaborates on this concept, sharing that Futurists aimed for “political action theatre.”²¹ Futurists experimented with theatrical expression to inspire the masses, as it was one of their favorite forms of expression. Yet, this experimentation would find itself threatened by Fascism’s rise.

Futurism initially aligned with Fascism in 1919, united by a desire to revitalize Italy through youth, violence, and innovation. However, after the failure of the Fascists in the 1920 general elections, Futurists began to distance themselves from the regime.²² Many Futurists became increasingly anti-Fascist before the March on Rome in 1922. Because of this, the Fascists excluded the Futurists from state-sponsored art exhibits. Furthermore, some Futurists were prosecuted by the government for their anti-Fascist ideals.²³ Scholar Walter L. Adamson explains that Mussolini viewed Futurists as incompatible with Fascist cultural politics, furthering the growing distance between the two.²⁴ The Futurists faced a new dilemma: to survive, they had to reassess their relationship with Fascism and seek a way to continue pursuing art. If they could not find a way to align with the regime, the only other options were leaving Italy or discontinuing art.

Berghaus notes that, due to the lack of a “true totalitarian state,” Futurists did not have to leave the country unless they truly desired to, as personal ambition shaped the Futurist movement’s evolution under Fascism. Instead of leaving the country, many Futurists shifted towards pro-Fascism during the regime’s prominence, as career aspirations took precedence over aligning with Futurism.²⁵ Over time, Futurists were reintegrated into art, with some of their works featured at state-sponsored exhibitions and their theatrical performances being allowed. Other avant-gardes faced a similar dilemma: they either adapted to Fascism, stopped pursuing an artistic career, or left Italy altogether.

Another avant-garde group that followed this trajectory was the Modernists. According to Adamson, Modernists desired an industrialized,

²⁰ Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre*, 5.

²¹ Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre*, 59.

²² Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre*, 329–33.

²³ Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre*, 336.

²⁴ Adamson, “Modernism and Fascism,” 380.

²⁵ Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre*, 338–39.

reborn culture that merged politics with the people, focusing on creativity, the social role of art, and the influence of intellectuals.²⁶ Modernists, like the Futurists, initially saw some compatibility between their artistic ideals and the regime. For example, the heroic “Superman” was well received by Modernists, calling for a unifying hero.²⁷ Despite some shared ideology, Modernists faced a similar choice as the Futurists: cooperate with the Fascists or leave Italy. Many chose to cooperate with the Fascists, adapting and aiming to continue pursuing their artistic interests.²⁸ One prominent playwright who followed suit was Luigi Pirandello. Pirandello was initially aligned with modernist thought but adapted to the regime to continue his love of theatre. While Pirandello's plays frequently dealt with themes of individuality, his later work reflected the regime's emphasis on unity and collective identity. Because of this shift, he later became a state-sponsored playwright. Playwrights like Pirandello had to navigate the state's ideological demands while attempting to preserve their independence.

The Italian Fascist regime co-opted avant-garde movements, transforming theatrical experimentation into a tool for political messaging. According to Adamson, the regime's experimentation took inspiration from avant-garde movements like the Futurists and Modernists.²⁹ In this, the “Fascist avant-garde” emerged, in which the Fascists explored theatre's ability to be used as a tool for ideology. The “Fascist avant-garde” movement was more focused on promoting political messages based on national identity than artistic freedom, in contrast to other avant-garde movements. Because of this, state-sponsored experimentation incorporated the elements of avant-garde art, designed to celebrate Italy's strength and unity. The experimentation of the Fascists led to new, innovative theatrical concepts.³⁰ In this context, no space was allotted for the original avant-garde to lead theatrical innovation. Fascists filled the avant-garde niche, using theatrical experimentation to unify Italian theatre under one vision.

One notable creation of the “Fascist avant-garde” was the Thespian Wagon, also known as the Thespian Car. Giovacchino Forzano, the writer of *Cesare*, was the main driver for this project.³¹ In this project, traveling theatre trucks sponsored by the OND were equipped with the latest technology, carrying theatrical performances to all parts of the country.

²⁶ Adamson, “Modernism and Fascism,” 365–67.

²⁷ Adamson, “Modernism and Fascism,” 385.

²⁸ Adamson, “Modernism and Fascism,” 386–90.

²⁹ Adamson, “Modernism and Fascism,” 384–88.

³⁰ Golovlev, “Theatre Policies of Soviet Stalinism and Italian Fascism Compared,” 319.

³¹ Berezin, “Cultural Form and Political Meaning,” 1271.

Everything necessary for a production—costumes, props, stage, and seating—was contained within the trucks, and crews would arrive a day before the performance to transform the local piazza into their temporary stage. Sociologist Mabel Berezin notes that these productions “packed the central town piazzas with throngs of people,” since these trucks were a must-see experience for Italians that turned theatre into an experience rather than just a show.³² The performances were intended to both entertain and instruct Italians in loyalty to the state, promoting unity and strength through theatrical spectacle. Thespian Wagons exemplified the regime’s ability to blend avant-garde techniques—movement, multimedia elements, and mass participation—all with its objectives of unification and influence. The grandeur and technological sophistication of the trucks showcased the regime’s innovative capacity, blending their theatrical performance with technological experimentation to promote Fascist ideology.

The regime’s attempt to position itself as an avant-garde was more about control than innovation. Berezin explains that while the regime did employ innovative theatre, it did not create these innovations without inspiration, as they were “appropriations of preexisting theatrical innovations.”³³ Thespian Wagons were not born from a passionate interest in artistic expression but rather from the desire to create a unified Italy. The Fascist investment in theatre was not a passion project, but a calculated political strategy designed to mobilize the public and reinforce control. The fact that Fascists did not gain profit from theatre, nor did they expect theatre to be profitable, further enforces this notion.³⁴ This is because the regime was centered on mobilizing public support and involvement, promoting national unity, and fostering a collective identity. The weaponization of theatre as propaganda was a calculated political strategy in which art was used not to generate revenue, but rather to reinforce the regime’s control and shape public perception. It was an investment in the future rather than one for monetary gain.

Alongside the “Fascist avant-garde,” amateur theatre played an important role in the Fascist cultural landscape. Scholar Pietro Cavallo explains that amateur theatre was widely popular. The average Italian was engaged: teachers, journalists, housewives, and the unemployed wrote and performed theatre.³⁵ Although generally simplistic, thousands of these plays

³² Berezin, “Cultural Form and Political Meaning,” 1260–61.

³³ Berezin, “Cultural Form and Political Meaning,” 1263–64.

³⁴ Berezin, “Cultural Form and Political Meaning,” 1265.

³⁵ Cavallo, “Theatre Politics of the Mussolini Regime and Their Influence on Fascist Drama,” 115.

were subjected to the Regime's Censorship Office. Fascist authorities required plays to be submitted to the censors, as those in charge recognized the need to control theatre's influence on public opinion. Censorship was extensive, prohibiting any work that challenged family values or the law, provoked class conflict, or included anything offensive to the government.³⁶ This broad censorship system gave the regime significant control over what could be expressed in theatre, preventing varying ideologies from being shared. The role of amateur theatre is notable, as it was both a means for reinforcing Fascist control and extending the regime's control. It promoted national unity while censorship ensured no alternative voice could emerge. Ordinary Italians were able to participate in the cultural life of the state, while censorship reinforced the regime's control of artistic expression.

Although censorship posed a significant challenge to amateur theatre, Berezin notes that only 630 of 17,330 plays between 1931 and 1943 were banned, with around 1,000 revised. Moreover, Berezin argues that not all theatre produced strictly adhered to Fascist ideology; 72 percent of plays were dramas focused on love stories without explicit goals.³⁷ In fact, many playwrights explored universal themes of human emotion and conflict. This suggests that while the regime exercised considerable influence, the persistence of universal themes demonstrates the limitations of Fascist power in completely shaping the Italian cultural landscape. The regime could not suppress artistic expression fully or control the cultural landscape to the extent it intended.

The relationship between avant-garde movements, amateur theatre, and the Fascist state reveals the interplay between creativity and control. While the regime sought to manipulate theatre as a tool for unity and ideology, the influence of avant-garde experimentation persisted amidst attempts to constrain it. The regime's appropriation of the avant-garde signaled its attempt to take over culture. During this time, Futurists, Modernists, and everyday performers were forced to balance adaptation and artistic integrity. Censorship efforts, though extensive, did not fully suppress artistic expression. Even with the tightly controlled environment of amateur theatre, the focus on universal themes demonstrated the limitations of Fascist power in shaping Italian culture.

CLOSING THE CURTAINS: THE THEATRICAL METAPHOR OF FASCISM
The Fascist regime's use of theatre failed to unify Italy as intended. Although it co-opted avant-garde and traditional forms, its attempts to wield

³⁶ Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre*, 153–56.

³⁷ Mabel Berezin, "The Organization of Political Ideology: Culture, State, and Theatre in Fascist Italy," *American Sociological Review* 56, no. 5 (1991): 640.

theatre as a tool for unification were undermined by the contradictions of trying to control a fragmented society. Many of the regime's efforts and experiments did not achieve what they sought to, marking a tension between ideological goals and the creative autonomy of artists. The prevalence of avant-gardes and amateur theatre illustrated this, as the regime could not fully extinguish non-Fascist theatre. Rather than unifying Italy through freedom of expression, the Fascists opted to control theatre under a tight guise.

Leading up to the Fascist regime, theatre became a realm in which artistic expression and political power intertwined. Romantic theatre and *verismo* proved themselves to influence Fascist theatre. Focusing on grand narratives and heroic figures, Romantic theatre aimed to inspire and elevate the national spirit, laying the groundwork for the "Superman" in Fascist theatre. Similarly, *verismo* introduced a more grounded and relatable form of drama. It provided an avenue for Italy's post-unification to be explored. The shift towards inclusivity was not just an aesthetic but also a political one, reflecting the desire to integrate various social classes into a cohesive national identity. Despite these notions, Fascism was unable to use theatre as a tool for unification.

Italian theatre reflected the desire for unification, as seen in the themes of performances. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, author of the *Fascist Spectacle*, explains that Mussolini considered his political actions concerning a "final masterpiece."³⁸ In this, Mussolini aimed to reshape Italy to his final vision, his unified masterpiece. The correlation between Mussolini and the "Superman," as explored with *Cesare*, exemplifies this concept. Theatre was an extension of Mussolini's vision, and Mussolini, as the "Superman," transformed Italy into his own stage. Mussolini was positioned as the embodiment of Italy's hero, whose actions and presence on his various stages solidified his role in the national drama of Fascism. He was meant to unify the Italian people under one ideal, just as the regime's theatre aimed to do. Despite all of this, Mussolini was not the hero that Italy needed. Increasing disillusionment prevented Mussolini from being the "Superhero" his regime pushed, leading to the failure of the regime, Fascist unification, and Fascist theatre.

Italian theatre also reflected the performance of unification, as the spectacle of the performance was prevalent in both theatre and politics. Mussolini, like Thespian Wagons, made visits to rural areas. Mussolini was able to visit three-fourths of Italy during his first year in power, and this was

³⁸ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (University of California Press, 1997), 16.

something that rural Italians were not used to. Falasca-Zamponi states that the only governmental contact that most Italians made was with local police or tax agents.³⁹ Because of this, the monumental visits by Mussolini only further bolstered unification. Mussolini's experimentation with his image reflects the experimentation of the Fascist regime: to maintain power, there needed to be a performance. Whether it be a performance on the stage or a political performance, Mussolini's regime aimed to shape public consciousness and reinforce national unity. Yet, with unification being a political performance rather than a true effort, it was inevitable that these efforts would fall apart.

In using theatre to explore Fascism's goal of unification, we can understand why Fascist unification did not stand. The inherent clash between artistic freedom and political control reflects the clash between the people and the regime. Persistent social divides are not easily fixed by an artistic spectacle, just as a whole country cannot follow its leader purely from his spectacle. The use of theatre—though grand and impressive in its scale—did not genuinely address the complex and varied needs of the Italian population. The regime's reliance on top-down forms of unity was akin to treating symptoms without addressing the underlying societal fractures.

Because of this, we can understand the limitations of Fascist ideology in unifying Italy. Despite efforts to nationalize—even in theatre—Italy could not be united as one under the regime. The Fascist regime could not harness culture through theatre, reflecting their broader failure to control the united populace. The dichotomy between Romantic theatre and *verismo* introduces the divide between the bourgeoisie and the everyday citizen, something the Fascists could not fully eliminate. The "Fascist avant-garde" was not enough to change cultural norms within Italy. Moreover, the relationship between avant-garde movements highlights the limitation of the regime's control. The need for control caused a rupture between the people and the regime, with artistic innovation clashing with the desire for a centralized Italy. The superficial experimentation stifled the creativity of theatre, demonstrating the regime's inability to employ artistic movements for true unification under a common ideal. This study shows that the strategic use of the arts to control culture could not outweigh the regime's other efforts, ultimately leading to its demise.

³⁹ Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 85.

Alexander (2005): The Impossibility of Representing Alexander the Great in Modern Film

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Abstract:

This undergraduate research paper focuses on the 2005 blockbuster film *Alexander* directed by Oliver Stone, and the ancient literary sources on Alexander the Great, serving as a case study in understanding the issues of portraying historical figures in film, and if it can be achieved successfully at all. While the creators of *Alexander* aimed for the film to be the most comprehensive film featuring the famous Macedonian king's life and military campaigns, it was a box office bomb, being plagued with drawn out battle scenes, mediocre characterization, and questionable historical accuracy. Using a comparative method of ancient sources with the modern film, this paper analyzes differences in key scenes and characterizations of Alexander, and the close relations he had with his mother and companion Hephaestion. Then, it discusses the possible alternatives to creating a film focusing on the famous Macedonian king, concluding with the argument that it may be impossible to accurately and holistically portray Alexander the Great in a film setting.

INTRODUCTION

The histories and legends of the fourth century BCE king— better known today as Alexander the Great, have been popular for centuries, ranging from ancient Roman sources to medieval manuscript illuminations, and even reaching the realm of cinema in the modern day. In the twenty-first century, film adaptations of ancient Greek and Roman culture have become extremely prevalent, and Oliver Stone's *Alexander* from 2004 is one of those examples. Unfortunately, *Alexander* falls flat in its retelling of the life of the Macedonian king, coming across as a long, drawn out film, with flat characters underneath the guise of historical accuracy. Film director Oliver Stone and historical advisor Robin Lane Fox conducted a vast amount of research and recreation for the film, yet it did not shape up to be the cinematic masterpiece they had imagined. This failure can be attributed to a multitude of factors, all of which point to the conclusion that it may be impossible to accurately portray Alexander the Great in a film setting. Through a comparison of key scenes and characterizations in *Alexander* to the ancient and modern scholarly sources, this research paper will discuss why it is challenging to create a film about Alexander the Great's life, and how I would personally go about the creation of a film on Alexander the Great.

SOURCE COMPARISON OF KEY SCENES

Prior to beginning a source comparison of key scenes in *Alexander*, the issues surrounding the primary source evidence that historians have on Alexander the Great must be acknowledged. There are five main accounts on the history of Alexander, of which three will be followed in this research paper. One thing that is important to note in this subject is that there are no remaining literary sources that were written during Alexander of Macedon's life, or close after his death. The accounts that do exist were written hundreds of years after Alexander lived and were biased in his favor. So, while they are the "primary sources" for Alexander the Great's history, they are truly second and third hand accounts that are nowhere close to the standards of 'scholarly' resources historians have today. While these accounts aren't ideal, they are the oldest literary sources that remain and are therefore invaluable when researching Alexander of Macedon.

The first historical account referenced in this paper is the *Anabasis and the Indica*, written in the second century CE by Greek historian Flavius Arrian who lived in the Roman Empire. Arrian's main sources are the two eyewitness accounts of Ptolemy and Aristobulus, two of Alexander's comrades who accompanied him on his campaigns. Both historians wrote extensively about Alexander's life and military campaigns, but their accounts did not survive to the modern day; this information is only found

in later references.¹ Arrian's account focuses largely on Alexander's military campaigns, presenting readers with in-depth depictions of the Macedonian King's victorious battles. His account is largely biased towards Alexander, simultaneously highlighting his victories and downplaying his losses.

The second account is Plutarch's "Life of Alexander", which was a part of his larger collection titled *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch was a Greek writer from the turn of the first century CE, and his biography was originally created to compare Alexander the Great's life to the life of Roman Emperor Julius Caesar.² Plutarch explicitly states that his account is a biography, referencing Cleitarchus and Ptolemy, and is intended to depict the personality and feelings of Alexander the Great, rather than recounting his military campaigns.³ Because of this goal, readers must take into account the inherent bias, and Plutarch's overall narrative motive. This account is worth referencing to understanding Alexander of Macedon's upbringing and character, especially as it is the main source of Alexander's youth.

The third historical account mainly referenced is Curtius Rufus's *Histories of Alexander the Great*. Curtius's writings are a Roman's take on Alexander, with works written in the first century CE. His main source is Cleitarchus, and Curtius's account is the least biased of the three.⁴ His account is the most detailed, which signals that the work is either heavily embellished, or further detailed and researched in comparison, but which of the two options is correct, is unknown. A key part in understanding the history of Alexander is understanding the multitude of sources and the issues they each and collectively have. With this distinction made, the analysis and comparison of key scenes in the film can now proceed.

Alexander features six key scenes, all of which are recorded in the historical sources. For brevity, each key scene will be compared to the ancient source it follows the closest, as the film pulls from all three sources, not just one. Film director Oliver Stone decided that the five key scenes that tell Alexander's story are his ascension to the throne, the Battle of Gaugamela, the Murder of Darius, the Philotas's conspiracy, and the death of Hephaestion. Through discussing these scenes in chronological order,

¹ Arrian, Martin Hammond, and John Atkinson. *Alexander the Great: The Anabasis and the Indica*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 1.0.2 (Hammond, 3).

² Plutarch, Ian Scott-Kilvert, and G T Griffith. *The Age of Alexander: Nine Greek Lives*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973. P. 253.

³ Plutarch, 7.1 (Kilvert, 252)

⁴ Curtius Rufus, Quintus, John Yardley, and Waldemar Heckel. *The History of Alexander / Quintus Curtius Rufus*; Translated by John Yardley; with an Introduction and Notes by Waldemar Heckel. [Rev. ed.]. London; Penguin Books, 2004. P. 6

how each key event is told, what discrepancies exist, and why they were made in the film adaptation can be understood.

Alexander's ascension to the throne in the film takes from Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, because it is the only ancient account that focuses in depth on Alexander of Macedon's youth. In *Alexander*, Phillip II's death is treated with far more weight than the ancient sources. In the movie, it is a vital moment in Alexander's life, as it strains his relationship with his mother and becomes a proponent for his campaigns. We see this during Alexander's speech at Gaugamela, where he blames Darius for his father's murder with the line, "Who is this great king who pays assassins in gold coins, to murder my father, our king, in a most despicable, and cowardly manner?"⁵ There is also an emotional weight when Phillip's crown is taken off his dead body and put onto Alexander.⁶ Viewers can feel the weight of Macedon on Alexander's head as the crown and kingship are suddenly placed upon him.

In comparison, Plutarch's account treats this event as the steppingstone into the kingship Alexander would inevitably inherit. In the greater historical narrative, Phillip's death had no effect on Alexander's Persian campaigns; it was a goal Alexander was going to pursue no matter if or when his father died. But because the film wanted to keep viewers' attention, it makes sense to raise these stakes, and have viewers believe that Alexander's kingship could be in jeopardy.

A second aspect of Alexander's ascension is the conspiracy behind Philip II's death. Plutarch's narrative explains the murder by stating that: "A Macedonian named Pausanias assassinated the king: he did this because he had been humiliated by Attalus and Cleopatra and could get no redress from Phillip."⁷ Prior to his death, Philip had married a Macedonian noblewoman named Cleopatra, whose uncle (Attalus) was one of his generals. Ancient Roman Scholar Justin Trogus claims that Attalus had sexually assaulted Pausanias, and Phillip's unwillingness to punish him due to the recent marriage was the reasoning behind Pausanias's actions. Another conspiracy suggested by Plutarch is that Alexander's mother, Olympias, was involved in the murder.⁸ *Alexander* takes this conspiracy and runs with it, pinning the entire plot on Olympias.

When King Phillip II is assassinated, Olympias is shown to sit calmly as the rest of the crowd devolves into chaos when her husband is

⁵ *Alexander*. Film. North America, United Kingdom: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005. 00:48:44.

⁶ *Alexander*, 2:05:40

⁷ Plutarch, 7.1 (Kilvert, 262-263)

⁸ Plutarch, 7.9 (Kilvert, 263)

murdered.⁹ When Alexander confronts his mother about her affiliation with the conspirators, she does not admit anything: instead, she claims that Phillip's death and Alexander's ascension was meant to be.¹⁰ Between her physical actions and conversation after the fact, viewers are clearly supposed to believe that Olympias was behind the plot, highlighting a discrepancy between the historical sources and the film.

These discrepancies were likely made for a few reasons. The first—choosing to omit male sexual violence fits with the modern culture around assault that often blames male victims or discredits their assault entirely. While unfortunate, viewers may not have reacted well to this inclusion, which is most likely why it was left out. Secondly, this version better aligns with the cunning and evil character of Olympias the filmmakers are trying to depict. Third, it adds more drama and emotional investment in the campaigns, while also giving Alexander motivation and character growth. As a film, there are cultural boundaries that need to be met, a profit to be made, and a goal to entertain viewers. The story of a mother who is willing to murder her husband for her son is more captivating to a film audience than the possibly confusing mystery the ancient sources have.

The second and longest key scene is the Battle of Gaugamela. Oliver Stone's version of Gaugamela is a combination of the earlier historical Battle of the Granicus, and the actual Battle of Gaugamela. *Alexander* is an epic style film where viewers anticipate a large battle scene, and Stone's Gaugamela is that moment. Because many of Alexander's campaign battles are in similar settings with similar outcomes, combining two battles together shortens the run time while also keeping viewers engaged. There are two parts to this battle that are important to compare to ancient sources. The part taken from the Battle of the Granicus is the stylization of Alexander with an iconic dual-plumed golden helmet, as well as a morale boosting speech Alexander gives to his army prior to the battle.

The description of a double plumed helmet is only mentioned in Plutarch's account, stating that "Many of them charged against Alexander himself, for he was easily recognizable by his shield and by the tall white plume which was fixed upon either side of his helmet."¹¹ Dressing this way historically allowed those on the battlefield to locate their king, and this imagery serves as a marketing strategy for the film as it leaves a lasting impression on viewers.

Alexander's speech is mostly pulled from Curtius's account. In the film, Alexander gives this long speech to his soldiers, telling them to be

⁹ *Alexander*, 2:03:34

¹⁰ *Alexander*, 2:04:15

¹¹ Plutarch, 7.16 (Kilvert, 268-269)

proud of how they got here, that they are honoring their country and ancestors, and reminding them why they are fighting the Persians.¹² This speech shows viewers that Alexander is with his men and sees them as equals. He wants to show he is a leader, not a controller like the Persian king. Alexander rides into battle in both the film and historical accounts, showing he is emotionally as well as physically a part of his army. This leads to the high point when Alexander is victorious. The Persian empire has essentially fallen, completing the overarching goal Alexander the Great has aspired to his entire life.

The murder of Persian King Darius III is the turning point of both the film and the ancient sources. It is a strange moment, due to the anticlimactic end for Darius, Persia, and Alexander. The film is a mix of ancient sources, with Darius being found on the side of the road in a puddle. Alexander, in a moment of remorse and respect for the other king who had been brutally betrayed, lays his own cloak on top of the body.¹³ Curtius is sourced for the state of which Darius was found, but Plutarch for the draping of his cloak moment.¹⁴

This scene serves as a “what now?” moment for Alexander. He had spent his entire life wanting to destroy Persia, to defeat Darius himself, but this was taken away from him. Because of this, he decides to continue onward and avenge Darius by killing his betrayers, because as long as they lived, they stood as a threat to Macedonian rule. This moment can also be interpreted as Alexander felt the need to continue to secure Persia and continue to expand his empire as he had been extremely successful in his campaigns thus far. Either way, Alexander continues his conquests, but after this point he begins to lose the faith of his companions and soldiers, as his motivations become unclear as the years away from Macedon drag on.

Hephaestion's death kills two people: Hephaestion himself, and Alexander, the king of Macedon. Hephaestion died physically from an illness, but this tragedy killed Alexander emotionally. In both the film and ancient sources, Hephaestion is extremely important to Alexander, and when he passes away from an illness during the campaign into Asia, the film portrays Alexander blaming himself for the death of his companion. He is pictured as extremely distraught in this scene, screaming and yelling, as he orders the physician to be killed.¹⁵ In all the ancient sources he acts similarly, and in Plutarch's account he becomes obsessed with his fears of

¹² *Alexander*, 0:47:53

¹³ *Alexander*, 1:19:46

¹⁴ Curtius, 5.13.24 (Yardley, 117); Plutarch, 7.43 (Kilvert, 301)

¹⁵ *Alexander*, 2:36:12

the supernatural and extremely suspicious of anyone around him.¹⁶ What is important about this scene is that his grief leads to him being careless for the rest of his life, leading him to fall ill and pass only months later.

One of the largest challenges in creating a film about Alexander the Great comes to light when doing source comparison. The issue is that when filmmakers are writing their script, they must choose a source to follow or create a new interpretation and amalgamation of what remains. However, such a large part of studying Alexander is comparing the multitude of sources and seeing what each author was attempting to tell in their version. For example, someone who has only read Plutarch's account cannot say they know the full history of Alexander, because there are so many things highlighted or disregarded in that narrative. This same idea can be applied to the film *Alexander*, and with this information, it can be concluded that it will inherently be harder to portray Alexander the Great in a film as he is not one character, but three or more, only understood when historical sources are considered in tandem to each other. A filmmaker cannot properly portray his life and campaigns through picking and choosing what to include in a narrative, because that is not how historians understand him as a historical figure.

PORTRAYAL OF ALEXANDER'S CHARACTER

The largest difference and downfall of *Alexander* is Oliver Stone's portrayal of the main character himself. In this film, especially in the first half, Alexander is generally described and shown in a positive light, as a man who was a brave and knowledgeable general, who believed in his motivations while supporting his companions and Macedonian soldiers. In the second half, he is portrayed as troubled and pulling away from Macedonian life, leaning into Persian culture. While this is upsetting to the Macedonians, it is still never portrayed as a negative thing in the film. Any moment where Alexander is seen irrational, his emotions are justified, and there is an explanation for his actions. This way, he comes across as a good man at heart, who like any other person feels emotions and makes mistakes.

This portrayal is a huge divergence from ancient sources. Historically, Alexander the Great is generally depicted as a hot-headed, passionate, egotistical, and lucky man. Those who read the ancient sources do not view Alexander as a hero, or necessarily a villain, but someone in between: a conqueror who murdered innocent people but also gave large gifts of dowries to others. Many of these traits are not seen in the movie at all. In this section, I will focus on a few scenes in both film and ancient sources to see how they portray Alexander, as well as looking into the

¹⁶ Plutarch, 7.74-75 (Kilvert, 331)

character Hephaestion, to show how Oliver Stone's positive depiction of Alexander greatly hinders the film and prevents viewers from understanding who Alexander of Macedon truly was.

The foundation for Alexander's personality in both the film and the ancient texts is the story of Bucephalus. Both begin by depicting Alexander as a smart boy, who believes and perseveres in what he decides to take on. The story goes that a horse was brought in front of King Phillip II, but it could not be tamed or mounted. Alexander sees the promise in the horse and tells his father that he can ride it. Phillip does not believe him but lets him make the attempt. Alexander goes to the horse and sees that it is afraid of its own shadow. He then decides to point the horse to face the sun, and it calms down, eventually allowing Alexander to ride it. Phillip cheers for the success of his son, and Alexander and the horse, who is named Bucephalus, ride together throughout Alexander's campaigns.¹⁷

In both the film and the sources, it gives us a look into multiple personality traits, of which being intelligence and self-confidence. These traits will only continue to foster in Alexander, appearing again when he plans the Battle at Gaugamela. In both the film and ancient texts, Alexander's companions advise him to stage a night attack, as the Persian army was so much larger than the Macedonians. In the film, Alexander responds to this proposition by stating "I didn't cross Asia to steal this victory."¹⁸ He says similarly in Arrian's account, stating that "A stolen victory was demeaning: Alexander's victories must be won in open fight without trickery."¹⁹ His words come across as egotistical rather than just confident at this point, as Alexander wants the spectacle of defeating the Persians in broad daylight. But while this confidence is the height it reaches in the movie, it devolves as "His self-restraint and continence, supreme qualities at the height of good fortune, degenerated into arrogance and dissipation," according to Curtius.²⁰

Curtius recounts the height of Alexander's arrogance.²¹ Proskynesis was a Persian custom Alexander wanted to continue, but it was extremely demeaning to Macedonian soldiers who had fought hard alongside the man they once viewed as an equal leader. But because *Alexander* wants to keep up the image that Alexander views himself as a fellow soldier who leads rather than controls, this whole side of Alexander is left out of the film, impeding on a large aspect of his character, and also

¹⁷ Plutarch 7.1.6 (Yardley, 257)

¹⁸ *Alexander*, 00:40:24

¹⁹ Arrian, 3.10.1-3 (Hammond, 77)

²⁰ Curtius, 6.6.1 (Yardley, 128)

²¹ Curtius, 6.6.3 (Yardley, 128)

part of the reasoning behind Alexander losing the support of his men. In the ancient sources, Alexander becomes so caught up in his ego and wish to be a god that he loses sight of the goals he once had, separating himself from his Macedonian army. But this is not properly represented in the film, even though it should be.

Arguably, the largest issue in his film representation is the omission of the destruction of Thebes, amongst other cruel sieges and actions. In the film, the destruction of Thebes is completely removed, only mentioned in a single sentence by Ptolemy. However, in ancient sources, this event is seen as a terrible mark on Alexander's reign, and one of the gravest mistakes he would make during his lifetime. The Greek city of Thebes had revolted against Alexander, and when his army arrived at the city, he decided to make an example of them. According to Arrian, "They decided to garrison the Cadmea and raze the rest of the city to the ground, sharing out the land (other than consecrated areas) among themselves: the children and women, and any surviving Theban men, were to be sold into slavery."²² Plutarch adds that around twenty thousand Thebans were enslaved, and over six thousand killed.²³ The decision to completely decimate a once bustling city, was extremely looked down upon by ancient and modern scholars, and even Alexander himself; "In later years Alexander often felt distressed, we are told, at the harsh fate of the Thebans, and the recollection of it made him milder in his treatment of many other people."²⁴

The acts committed here, killing and enslaving thousands, cannot and should not be looked past when studying Alexander. It shows the irrational anger and the lack of empathy he had. Stone's decision to basically omit this part of history to viewers in order to keep his depiction of a flawed hero, is a huge disrespect to the Thebans whose homes and livelihoods were destroyed by the Macedonians, as well as creating an extremely improper representation of Alexander himself. One who knows about the destruction of Thebes cannot view Alexander of Macedon as a hero, so he should therefore not be treated as one. And if a film director is not willing to represent Alexander in this way, of who he truly was, they should not be creating a film about his life at all.

Another way to understand Alexander's character is to look at the people who he had close relationships with. In both the film and ancient sources, Hephaestion is Alexander's closest companion, throughout his entire life. The question of whether Alexander and Hephaestion were romantically involved or not remains unanswered in the ancient sources and

²² Arrian, 1.9.9 (Hammond, 14)

²³ Plutarch, 7.11 (Kilvert, 264)

²⁴ Plutarch, 7.13 (Kilvert, 264)

in the film, with heavy insinuation but never explicitly stated. The film decides to portray Alexander and Hephaestion as romantically involved but still strays away from any sexual contact between the two. A large factor in their relationship in the film is that Hephaestion views Alexander for who he is as a person, rather than a king. This is shown multiple times in the film, first being in a conversation between Alexander and his mother, where he tells her that “Hephaestion loves me as I am, not who.”²⁵

It is also shown in the fact that Hephaestion is consistently the only character to have deep personal conversations with Alexander, rather than just someone who is taking orders from the king. One of these conversations occurs prior to the Battle of Gaugamela, where Alexander asks Hephaestion: “Am I weak or divine?”²⁶ At this moment, Alexander is unsure of who he is, and where he stands at this place in the world. He is admitting he is afraid of the outcome of the battle they are about to fight. No other character in the film sees this point of weakness, as there is a mutual bond of trust and love between the two characters. As the leader of a massive army and kingdom, Alexander cannot express his fears to his subjects, without the possibility of his army losing hope in themselves in their leader. Alexander, as a person, needs to be weak at points, but he can never let the public view him as so. This is where Hephaestion is crucial to him as a character and person. Lovers or not, Hephaestion is the only one Alexander can be himself with, and this personalization allows viewers to truly better understand what Alexander is thinking and feeling, as well as the vast amount of pressure he faces as a ruler.

The ancient sources put more distance between Alexander and Hephaestion in comparison to the film, but Hephaestion was still Alexander’s closest companion in life, often leaning onto him for support in similar ways as the film. Curtius provides this information, stating that “Hephaestion was by far the dearest of the king's friends; he had been brought up with Alexander and shared all his secrets.”²⁷ Plutarch adds to this, writing that Hephaestion was the one allowed to see letters written between Alexander and his mother.²⁸ While these two sources do not give the exact examples as the film does, it can still be seen that Hephaestion was extremely important to Alexander, and someone who the King of Macedon greatly trusted and relied on. While not explicitly mentioned, if Alexander was going to expose his weaknesses and fear of ruling to someone, it would be Hephaestion as he does in the film.

²⁵ *Alexander*, 0:29:33

²⁶ *Alexander*, 1:18:08

²⁷ Curtius, 3.12.16 (Yardley, 46)

²⁸ Plutarch, 7.39 (Kilvert, 296-7)

Alexander and Hephaestion are still far more distant in the ancient sources than in the film, and it is important to briefly address the question of their relationship, and if it is appropriate to depict Alexander as homosexual or not. The ancient sources do not make Hephaestion a titular character, but rather he is mentioned in passing, and his importance is largely by Alexander's reaction to his death. Through what exists it can be inferred that Hephaestion may have been more important than the ancient sources let on, but why he was minimized remains unknown.²⁹ Modern scholar Athena Ricardson presents a possible answer to this in "Alexander the Great and Hephaestion: Censorship and Bisexual Erasure in Post-Macedonian Society". Her hypothesis is that ancient scholars had downplayed the sexual partnership between Alexander and Hephaestion for two reasons: because homosexuality was not viewed as acceptable in the Roman society their works were written in, and to prevent any implication of femininity or submission that could be applied to the King of Macedon. These two explanations provide a deeper understanding of why Alexander and Hephaestion's relationship in ancient sources exists as it does, and how they can be applied to the modern film.³⁰ While homosexuality existed in 2005 when *Alexander* was released, it was not depicted in the media positively, or at all comparatively to today. In 2005, being gay meant being feminine, and a film hero could not be that, hence why Alexander and Hephaestion never do anything that is explicitly romantic or sexual towards each other. Similarly, this same idea can be applied to ancient Greece; according to Richardson: "Hephaestion was taller and more handsome than Alexander, so it might have appeared that he held the power in their relationship."³¹ Ancient scholars may have downplayed Hephaestion as a character because they did not want him to take away from Alexander's "Greatness." Homophobia in ancient Greece and Rome can be compared to the modern day, affecting the true characterization of both Hephaestion and Alexander. Whether the exclusion or inclusion of an explicitly homosexual relationship between Alexander and his companion Hephaestion has been seen as accurate or not remains unknown, it is important to highlight the issues that exist with the ancient texts, and how that can affect the modern media portrayals.

Whether their relationship is romantic or platonic, the inclusion of Hephaestion as a character in the film adds depth to Alexander greatly as a character. It is hard to see who a person is, without viewing their interactions

²⁹ Richardson, Athena. "Alexander the Great and Hephaestion: Censorship and Bisexual Erasure in Post-Macedonian Society." *Athens Journal of History*, January 1, 2018. P. 1

³⁰ Richardson, 1

³¹ Richardson, 1

with others, especially those they love and respect. With a main character who is a king and of a higher power than those around him, these personal connections are vital to bringing Alexander back into a plane of existence that viewers can relate to. No viewer of this film is in the position of leadership of what Alexander is in as the King of a massive empire, meaning that he has to be relatable in other ways, such as his familial actions, in order to be liked and understood by viewers.

HOW FILMMAKERS COULD MAKE A FILM ON ALEXANDER THE GREAT *Alexander* was released in 2005 and directed by Oliver Stone with Robin Lane Fox as the historical advisor. Fox was the author of a fairly successful biography titled *Alexander the Great* first published in 1973 and serves as the main inspiration for the film. Fox also wrote a companion guide to the film titled *The Making of Alexander*, which details the creation and execution of the film. According to this guidebook, *Alexander* was a passion project for Stone, as his interest in Alexander the Great began in his youth, creating multiple different film drafts throughout his lifetime.³² Stone and Fox wanted to make the greatest and most accurate film on Alexander's life to ever be created, yet it did not end that way.

Eugene N. Borza, professor at Pennsylvania State University, goes in depth about further historical inaccuracies with set and costume design, as well as the script in his article "Movie Commentary: *Alexander*." He comes to a similar conclusion to this paper, stating: "One wonders if, in the hands of a competent editor, this three-hour-long ordeal could be recast into a comprehensible two-hour film, retaining the successful attempt to portray the appearance of the age, and removing the errors. In the end, Alexander of Macedon has yet to meet his modern film maker."³³ This shows that while *Alexander* may not have been successful, maybe portraying this famous historical figure is possible. This third section will discuss the redeeming qualities that could be kept in a modern film, as well as discussing different methodologies filmmakers could use in going about creating a more successful film on Alexander the Great.

One way to make a more successful film on Alexander the Great's life could be through focusing on one ancient historian's account. For example, one could create a film purely on Plutarch's account, where Alexander's motivations and character would be clearer for viewers to understand because they are seeing only Plutarch's interpretation of these events. Plutarch also states in his introduction that his narrative is supposed to be a summary of his campaigns rather than a history, so it could be easier

³² Robin Lane Fox. *The Making of Alexander the Great*. Oxford: R & L, 2004. P. 7

³³ Borza, Eugene N. "Movie Commentary: *Alexander*." *The Archaeological Institute of America: Online Publication*, December 2004, 1–5. P. 5

for filmmakers to decide what they want to go more in depth on, and what episodes are less important in this representation.³⁴

Another way to create a successful Alexander film is rather than trying to tackle his entire life and campaigns, instead focusing on a smaller, key event. In modern days, it is very common to see films where the whole narrative is focused on a singular battle, especially of the Second World War. This has shown itself to be successful in films such as the Academy Award winning film *Saving Private Ryan* from 1998, where the film follows the Allies storming the beaches of Normandy and what occurs after. Rather than focusing on the entirety of a war, the movie has a sharp focal point that allows viewers to become immersed in the characters and the historical moment they are living through. The viewer follows Tom Hank's character as he and his men face the brutalities of war in attempt to save one man. Filmmakers could be similarly successful in replicating this formula with a film that focused on the Battle of Gaugamela, for example. The film could captivate viewers with an opening of a large-scale battle scene with Alexander at the front and center. Then, it could continue by following Alexander as he chases after Darius III of Persia, allowing viewers to understand the motivations of the Macedonian King and follow this journey, physically and emotionally, as the king completes the quest of conquering the Persian Empire that his father began. The film could tell a story of perseverance, confidence, and self-determination with Alexander as the focal point. A film such as this could be successful through more relatable morality but remain fresh through the visual aspects of a lesser-known historical moment.

A third solution could be to change the characterization of Alexander the Great. As mentioned in the previous section, one of the biggest issues is how he is commonly portrayed as a heroic, inspirational figure, when in reality he was not. He was far more of a complicated character with just as many vices as virtues. If a film were to display Alexander as more of an anti-hero or even a villain, it could be an extremely fresh and successful new portrayal of his character, one of which does better justice to his historical figure. Alexander does not need to be a 'good guy' for it to be a good film about him.

An example of this could be either the episode of the destruction of Thebes, or perhaps Philotas's conspiracy to murder Alexander. Both ancient and modern historians remain uncertain about this episode, and the questions of whether Philotas was truly involved, or why Alexander decided to execute him, remain for debate. A film adaptation of this moment could

³⁴ Plutarch, 7.1 (Kilvert, 252)

be extremely interesting for a question it begs— did Alexander and his companions possibly frame Philotas for the conspiracy? Modern scholar Peter Green in his biography *Alexander of Macedon* explains the reasoning behind Alexander wanting to get rid of Philotas, claiming that Alexander framed his companion because he was a threat to Alexander's power.³⁶ Whether or not Philotas was guilty is up to interpretation, leaving filmmakers able to portray Alexander as a cunning villain, hungry for power through this interpretation.

CONCLUSION

The three previous sections highlight the two largest issues in making a film about Alexander the Great, being the inconsistencies in source material and how to properly represent the character of Alexander the Great, while offering some solutions to these problems. Something that all three sections point to is the larger idea that Alexander the Great is understood by historians through the culmination of culture, narratives, and characterization he has. As all the ancient sources are writing about a man who had been dead for over three hundred years at that point, there is already a separation between his story and the actual ruler he was. Part of the enjoyment in learning about Alexander, as well as the issues, is the fact that he can be interpreted as more of a mythic figure than an actual historical figure. Between his obsession with the divine, and his extreme luck and success in his campaigns, readers and scholars have trouble viewing him as the human that he was, something that Alexander himself also struggled with. The cultural understanding and image of Alexander the Great is something that has been created by centuries of retellings, artwork, and mythology. This then begs the fundamental question and issue in filmmaking; can you create a historically accurate movie about a man who doesn't really exist? This is the issue that *Alexander* has with every critique. The inconsistencies in source usage, as well as poor characterization, are because *Alexander* could not overcome the issue: how do you properly represent a man who only truly exists in the greater essence of himself?

Throughout the research and creation of this paper, this is the question that was repeatedly returned. Alexander the Great does not exist in one single way. The image of who he was is unclear and will likely remain that way for the rest of history. In modern perception, Alexander the Great is not just the king of Macedon, but rather the amalgamation of multiple histories, opinions, and legacies, all rolled together into a larger than life and impossible to fully realize character. He cannot be understood by reading a singular source, nor by pulling apart the campaigns that spanned his life. If it can be agreed that Plutarch, Arrian, and Curtius solely cannot create a complete and accurate history of Alexander, then how could a

filmmaker do it? Even a research paper such as this fails to fully represent Alexander the Great historically due to literary constraints. It is impossible to fully delve into the historical materials and compare them to the modern film, because that would create a monotonous piece where readers lose engagement due to the word count. The same issue that had to be addressed in this paper is what caused *Alexander* to fail on screen. Attempting to tell the entire history of Alexander the Great's life exceeds the capacity of a film setting. When creating a film of his life, there has to be one or more sacrifices; losing the nuanced understanding with multiple sources, misrepresenting the character, or narrowing down the focal point in his life. All the above cannot be met in a film setting, and *Alexander* is the perfect case study of this phenomenon, concluding that making a film adaptation of Alexander the Great or his campaigns may truly be impossible.

From Avarice to Influence: Philanthropy in Puritan America

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Abstract:

This paper explores the evolution of philanthropy from the early days of Christianity to today, with a particular focus on Puritan America. Since the beginning of the Church, care of the poor has always been a tenet but the practice of that care has shifted over time. From Saint Francis of Assisi's voluntary poverty to the rise of capitalism in the American colonies, religious moral giving has taken a number of forms. Over time, capitalism, the Protestant work-ethic, and mass accumulations of wealth have shifted self-interest and avarice to the forefront of philanthropic actions by Christians. Tracing the actions of philanthropists such as Thomas Coram and George Whitefield, this essay argues that philanthropy provided justification for the wealth amassed in the colonies, allowing evangelical religious leaders to reconcile their wealth with Christian teachings.

From the beginning of the 13th century, philanthropy has been a key focus of the Catholic Church's concerns. The ideological 'Mendicant Solution' of the 13th century is perhaps one of the clearest examples of how the Church made sense of the accumulation of wealth within a Christian society. While this "solution" did not change structural inequalities, it did solve the question of: *How can one successfully live as a good Christian during the period following the commercial revolution?* During this period, Church leaders, and society writ-large, condemned avarice as directly contrary to Christian values. In the Church's eyes, extreme wealth and avarice were seen as incompatible with Church teachings. As the 17th and 18th centuries emerge, however, the notion that extreme levels of wealth are contrary to Christianity ceased to be as prominent in Puritan America. I argue that in 17th and 18th century Puritan America, a new form of philanthropy surfaced. Puritan American philanthropy shifted from a religious act aimed at addressing the sin of avarice to a means of consolidating power between competing religious views. Additionally, philanthropy supported the economic growth of Puritan America's colonies through civic institutions. It was a subtle shift, as religious ideology undoubtedly still partially motivated philanthropy, but the shift was nonetheless crucial in laying the groundwork of current structures of philanthropy in the United States.

To understand American philanthropy in the colonies, it is necessary to understand the direct influence from medieval Europe onward. Beginning in the 13th century, as the commercial revolution raged, merchants, priests, and laypeople successfully reconciled the tensions between wealth and the vice of avarice through institutionalizing almsgiving. Although voluntary poverty remained the Christian ideal, those unable to renounce wealth were encouraged to detach themselves from its temptations and to redeem it through almsgiving.¹ Scholar Kevin C. Robbins contextualizes the formation of the Mendicant Solution stating, "These views gained greater force within an unfolding Christian moral economy directly connecting sin and charity as inversely proportional forces locked in perpetual cosmic battle."² While wealth was not outwardly condemned by the Church, it had to be treated in a sensitive manner that fit within the Christian worldview of the period, and that led it to be funneled towards philanthropy.

1. Adam J. Davis, "Medieval Understandings of Charity: From Penance to Commerce," in *The Medieval Economy of Salvation: Charity, Commerce, and the Rise of the Hospital*. (Cornell University Press, 2019), 34.

2. Kevin Robbins, "The Nonprofit Sector in Historical Perspective: Traditions of Philanthropy in the West," in *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, ed. Walter Powell and Richard Steinberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 22.

Despite the new accumulation of wealth that followed the Commercial Revolution, and the rise of urban mercantile activity, most of fifteenth and sixteenth century medieval Europe still existed in a non-market economy. Religious, ethical, and metaphysical concerns constrained market practices. An often-overlooked figure of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Bucer, was a German theologian who sought to reconcile competing strands of Protestant thought and align religious reform with civic responsibility. In 1551, Martin Bucer's societal commentary showed the pervasive influence of religious ideology in shaping political and economic beliefs. Bucer describes that "the care for the poor and needy" is "proper to the Kingdom of Christ."³ He articulates the religious and ethical constraints on market practices, stating:

[T]his island... should be able to produce far richer farm products than it now does [and could if] all land were cultivated which used to be and should be cultivated on its own merits and for the good of the commonwealth, at the expense (at least partial if not entire) of the profit in wool. Insofar as this profit provides only harmful pomp and luxury, it should be turned over to the purpose of giving sustenance to human beings who are the sons of God.⁴

Bucer's statements highlight the prioritization of philanthropy for solely the communal good, a key tenet of the Christian moral economy. Particularly in his discussion of wool providing for "pomp and luxury," his moral convictions against wealth for the sake of improvement of one's material possessions shine through.

With such a deep history and tradition of philanthropy for purely religious motivations, how did philanthropy make its way across the sea to Puritan America with such diversification of motives behind it? One answer lies in the long-term changes ushered in by the Protestant Reformation.

While Martin Luther taught that salvation lay in scripture and faith, not in economics or politics, the openness of this conviction invited diverse interpretations that ultimately splintered Protestantism in the centuries to come. By the time Puritan America was formed, "the Reformation [had already] divided European communities into antagonistic camps of Protestants and Catholics, each having to develop and fund their own

3. Martin Bucer, *De Regno Christi (1551)*, in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 256.

4. Bucer, 338.

charitable organizations.”⁵ As Mark Valeri furthers, “Boston’s merchants shared no monolithic ethos or religious identity.”⁶ This competition over moral legitimacy shaped how different denominations defined charity and religious duty. In this context, Philanthropy thus evolved from a religious duty into a social instrument for organizing power and maintaining order within an increasingly diverse and competitive Christian landscape.

Following the Reformation, philanthropists spoke “far less about saving their own souls or boasting to angels through donations and far more about making worthy investments training needy people for productive self-sufficiency.”⁷ Both shifts, including the rivalry of religious sects, and the addition of the justification of philanthropy as a social investment rather than just compassion and God’s will, are evident in the unfolding of Puritan America.

At the center of these transatlantic conversations and religious competitions emerged Cotton Mather, a key figure in shaping transatlantic philanthropy. Mather’s influential teachings on philanthropy stemmed directly from what he observed in European practices, both from fellow Protestants, as well as Catholics. As Amanda B. Moniz, the Curator of Philanthropy at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History writes, “The Boston minister Cotton Mather pointed to fellow Protestants—Dutch and Danish missionaries in the East Indies—as worthy of imitation by New Englanders.”⁸ He sought to emulate European Protestants to remain in the playing field of a game now full of competing denominations. His comparisons of Protestant New England to the Protestant Europeans came from a place of admiration. However, his comparisons of Catholic Europe came from a place of competition. Protestants in the British world and Puritan American were anxious over whether their “charitable endeavors” were up to the same level that Catholics’ were.⁹ While many of these charitable actions still came from a sincere place and were used as a means for good, charity had also become a way for denominations to promote their self-image to the public.

Philanthropic efforts in America further underscore the hidden motivations behind charity during this period. Thomas Coram, a British-born sea captain that spent many years in the American colonies, is a clear

5. Robbins, 25.

6. Mark Valeri, *Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 83.

7. Robbins, 25.

8. Amanda B. Moniz, *From Empire to Humanity: The American Revolution and the Origins of Humanitarianism*, 1st ed. (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 17.

9. Moniz, 16.

example of this phenomenon. Although Coram's most well-renowned charitable work was London's Foundling Hospital, he eventually married a Boston-born puritan American and participated significantly in North American charitable works. In the 1730s, Coram and other philanthropic actors began projects such as efforts to Christianize enslaved African American peoples and Indigenous populations. The goal for Coram, and similar activists "on both sides of the Atlantic...sought to bolster Britain through their benevolence."¹⁰ One such philanthropic effort was carried out by John Sergeant in 1743. He sought to create a boarding school for Indigenous women, labeling it outwardly as a charitable organization. He gained support from British philanthropists, including Coram himself who stated that he "was so charm'd with Mr. Sergeant's undertaking" and a "very political Contrivance." He even specifically stated that the end goal of such projects was to "unit[e] the Indians in North-America, more closely to the British Interest."¹¹ The alignment of charity with political goals underscores how philanthropy often served a dual purpose during this time: one that served both altruistic and imperial purposes.

Furthermore, George Whitefield, a Puritan Evangelist, was a key figure in philanthropic efforts in the mid-18th century that demonstrated this new form of philanthropy. He came to America in 1740 to set up both an orphanage and a "Negroe school" in Pennsylvania, where reading and Christianity likely would have parts of the curriculum."¹² While this project eventually failed, Whitefield founded a school in Charleston. The goal remained the same—to teach African enslaved persons, mainly with the purpose of conversion to Christianity.¹³ While these projects were beneficial in providing education and healthcare to children and low-income populations, they are examples of a strange duality that was emerging in philanthropy: they "all sought to build British strength in an era when Britain and France were locked in a struggle for control of the North American continent."¹⁴ The men that were driving these ventures were not just lay members of society. As Valeri describes, these were religious leaders in Puritan America that lay people turned to looking for spiritual guidance who provide critical insights into the new ways in which philanthropy was motivated.

The new form of philanthropy that surfaced in Puritan America succeeded because of the justification of philanthropy as a social investment

10. Moniz, 22.

11. Moniz, 23. Italics removed from "Indians in North-America" and "British Interest."

12. Moniz, 23.

13. Moniz, 23.

14. Moniz, 22.

in market terms. This new form of philanthropy emerged through the early Puritan American's focus on creating a capitalist society with the infrastructure to support that type of society. As Robbins describes philanthropic efforts were focused on "training needy people for productive self-sufficiency."¹⁵ The recipients of philanthropy and charity were no longer just poor, suffering individuals or the Church itself. Government was often "more likely than any private body to be its recipient."¹⁶ This transition from grassroots giving to institutional giving marked a significant shift in the way religious communities conceptualized philanthropy. In 1653, Robert Keayne, a Boston merchant, donated £300 for the construction of a conduit and a Town House comprising a marketplace.¹⁷ John Hull, an English-born, prominent merchant of Puritan America kept records on the funds for a similar project. In 1669, the founding families of the Old South Church funded a meetinghouse in Massachusetts which the final cost totaled to almost £2,000.¹⁸ This evolution marked the transformation of philanthropy from a moral duty of individual charity into a civic enterprise that reinforced the economic and social beginnings of an emerging capitalist society.

Furthermore, wealthy individuals funneled towards the erection of high-status educational developments. For example, the in 1638, Hall highlights the founding of Harvard University, quoting: the "bequests of clergyman John Harvard" to the colony "towards erecting a Colledge."¹⁹ These developments in the uses of philanthropy suggest that there was a more secular and investment-driven way of approaching charitable acts. The donation of academic spaces, markets, and other civic institutions demonstrates a shift in philanthropic ideals—from a focus on alleviating poverty and caring for the least of God's creation to a model of philanthropy oriented toward long-term economic and social investment in Puritan America.

This is not to say that religious motivations and justifications for charitable actions were absent. According to Valeri, Mather would consistently correct "his enthusiasm for economic success reminding merchants that he had not meant to recommend diligence for the sake of

15. Robbins, 25.

16. Peter Dobkin Hall, "A Historical Overview of Philanthropy, Voluntary Associations, and Nonprofit Organizations in the United States, 1600–2000," in *The Nonprofit Sector*, 32 ed. Walter Powell and Richard Steinberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 34.

17. Valeri, 11.

18. Valeri, 86.

19. Hall, 34.

mere riches, as though avarice had become a virtue; they ought to devote their hard-won profits to '*Pious Uses*,' [or] the common good."²⁰ Pastors frequently urged merchants to engage in charitable actions as the stratification of wealth grew.²¹ Despite the withstanding presence of religious ideals in economic life, they were utilized in a different way than the majority of medieval Europe. Merchants and laypeople no longer saw these moral claims to lead them to direct help to the poorest in a society, they saw charity as a means of elevating their own social status further, and the capital of civic institutions of Puritan America.

Valeri's argument directly supports the shift of philanthropy from a means of good-will to a selfish activity. He states, even though figures such as Sewall, Colman, and Foxcraft promoted philanthropy, "they transformed what had been labeled 'almsgiving' into 'beneficence': a sign of gentility, high social status, and cosmopolitan manners."²² Valeri furthers that the institutionalization of poor relief helped to "strengthen Boston's economy." Almshouses were transformed to workhouses, and those in poverty to workers expected to reduce their "idleness."²³ Religious influences appear to have been far more performative than reflective of what was actually happening in terms of charitable practices of the time. The clergy "echoed the jeremiads of the 1670s and 1680s," but Valeri finds that "the echo was faint" and overpowered by their "appreciation for the importance of the market to the transatlantic British interest."²⁴ The shift in philanthropic practice demonstrates the growing disconnect between religious ideals that are espoused and the self-interest of the philanthropic organizations and actions of the time.

One could argue that giving to institutions was not a new phenomenon of 17th and 18th century Puritan America. For example, as early as the mid-15th century, the Church donated money for the purpose of extravagant buildings and institutions like St. Peter's Basilica in Rome under the papacy of Pope Nicolas V. While this does reflect continuity in the giving towards grand institutions and the consolidation of wealth in this form, Puritan America's secular institutions demonstrate a shift in focus. The construction of large basilicas was primarily aimed at consolidating social, institutional, and ecclesiastical power. The construction of colleges, marketplaces, and other civic institutions demonstrates the clear focus of

20. Valeri, 161.

21. Valeri, 164.

22. Valeri, 218.

23. Valeri, 166-167.

24. Valeri, 167.

Puritan America on prioritizing investments that are aligned with economic growth. All of these spaces share a common goal: to spread the capitalist ethos of the emerging country: marketplaces by providing a space of trade, and colleges aimed at education to sustain the economic growth of the colonies.

Although subtle, the shift from primarily religiously-motivated philanthropy to Puritan America's capitalist ethos of competition, spanning both in economic and religious life, it marks a pivotal moment in the history of philanthropy. Philanthropy provided justification for the wealth amassed in the colonies and "rounded out the circle of private sentiment, commercial success, and social good."²⁵ And while social good certainly did come of it, charitable practices with the intent of promoting economic growth and a capitalist economy were not always pleasant for American citizens. At times, these practices perpetuated existing inequalities. As the poor sought to keep up with the spending habits of their upper-class counterparts in the early 18th century, they often dug themselves a deeper hole, Valeri finds. As Valeri argues, "Impoverished by their spending habits, many residents turned to alcohol or fraud and further damaged Boston's commerce by absorbing more capital in the form of poor relief."²⁶ Instead of attempting to remove the root causes of poverty, figures such as Mather framed poverty around the vices such as "idleness" for "peddlers, unemployed laborers, and small-time shopkeepers" that led to the social stratification, with no mention of "the sale of credit, fluctuations in monetary value, or inflation."²⁷ Thus, charitable actions exacerbated inequalities created by capitalist economic structures in Puritan America, contrasting Christian ideology against avarice.

Mather's teachings were referenced years after his death by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin described that "'if I have been, as you seem to think, a useful citizen, the public owes the advantage of it to [Cotton Mather's *Bonifacius, or Essays to Do Good*].'"²⁸ The long-standing influence of his work highlights the key role Mather and his ideology played in laying the foundation of philanthropy in America. There are parallels to the seeds sown in American philanthropy in Mather's America to today's America. Both systems serve as a way to reconcile the moral tensions of wealth, transforming charity from a means of rationalizing commercial success into

25. Valeri, 243.

26. Valeri, 165.

27. Valeri, 167.

28. Benjamin Franklin, *Letter from Benjamin Franklin to Samuel Mather, 12 May 1784*. Letter. From Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/database/533> (accessed December 3, 2024).

a modern tool of social influence and power, and at times, perpetuating inequalities.

Today, the motivations for philanthropy are diverse. Self-interest, care for the poor, religious reasons, value-based motivations, instrumental motivations, peer pressure, and other selfish motives are all reasons that historians, psychologists, and sociologists alike have found ways to motivate today's charitable actions. The sheer wealth of philanthropies has grown to an unprecedented amount. In 2010, the 75,000+ United States philanthropic organizations had assets of \$565 billion.²⁹ And despite this absurdly large amount of money that goes to charity, unfortunately, it is not apparent if philanthropy is all that effective. As Anheier and Leat find, "small philanthropy, or ordinary charitable giving, can be problematic as well. Charity, it turns out, does surprisingly little to provide for those in need and sometimes worsens inequality."³⁰ The aspect of philanthropy led by power is still present today as well. Philanthropy can serve a number of purposes, including avoiding the strain on one's conscience of being "overly rich," "avoiding state intervention in problems in which the donor has an interest," and particularly "doing all of this with control."³¹ These notions and current research reflect a persistent tension in American philanthropy between altruism and self-interest.

From Mather to Melinda Gates, the same question exists—are foundations effective in caring for the least of society, or do they merely perpetuate inequalities? How did we get to the point of the very few holding the majority of wealth that they choose how to distribute? Philanthropy can undoubtedly serve those in need, and many charitable organizations and practices do good for those in need. But it is hard to ignore the foundations of philanthropy in the United States that rest on a search for power and hierarchy. The challenge for the contemporary era now lies in rediscovering the origins of true charitable practices in communal, early Christian communities, for example. While this socio-economic reality is drastically different from our own, it may be valuable to analyze other models of charitable giving such as those practiced by the early Christians to see their relative costs and benefits.

29. Helmut Anheier and Diana Leat, "Philanthropic Foundations: What Rationales? Giving: Caring for the Needs of Strangers," *Social Research* 80, no. 2 (2013), 449.

30. Rob Reich, *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), overview.

31. Anheier and Leat, "Philanthropic Foundations," 457.

Secular vs Islamist Education: The Contradictory Nature of Women's Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract:

Women's education in Iran has undergone great changes in the last century. The Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979) and the Islamic Republic (1979-present) the two most recent authoritarian regimes, that offer stark contrast in educational policy. The Pahlavi Dynasty focused a significant amount of policy on bringing women into schools. However, forced secularized and Westernized reforms, such as the mandatory de-veiling of women, resulted in a backlash where Iranian society could not accept these new reforms. The Islamic Republic had the intention of enforcing heteronormative gender binary roles, by forcing all women to be veiled, segregating girls' and boys' schooling, and pushing propagandized education. However, because the Islamized education policy was more acceptable to conservative Muslim families, more girls and women were able to receive an education. In both regimes, middle- and upper-class urban women were the most likely to reap the benefits, though the Islamic Republic has opened doors to less privileged women. Although the Islamic Republic is extremely authoritarian and patriarchal, its educational policies encourage women's education and participation in the political sphere, thus creating the very conditions which currently allow Iranian women to protest against the Islamic Republic itself.

دوباره می سازمت وطن	"My country, I will build you again,
اگر چه با خشت جان خویش	"if need be, with bricks made from my life.
ستون به سقف تو می زنم،	"I will build columns to support your roof,
اگر چه با استخوان خویش	"if need be, with my bones.
دوباره می بویم از تو گل،	"I will inhale again the perfume of flowers
به میل نسل جوان تو	"favored by your youth.
دوباره می شویم از تو خون،	"I will wash again the blood off your body
به سیل اشک روان خویش	"with torrents of my tears."
– سیمین بهبهانی، "دوباره می سازمت وطن" ¹	~ Simin Behbehani, "My Country, I Will Build You Again" ²

On September 16, 2022, Jina Amini (more commonly known as Mahsa Amini), a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, was pronounced dead at a hospital in Tehran, Iran. The circumstances of her death were extremely suspicious, because she had been in police custody since 13 September, arrested for improperly wearing the veil. According to eyewitnesses, Amini was tortured and beaten by the police, and after becoming unresponsive, was taken to the hospital. By the time she died three days later, the country was in an uproar – it was the spark which lit the *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* ("Woman, Life, Freedom") movement. However, this event clearly did not happen in a vacuum; when the Islamic regime was founded in 1979, many women's rights were no longer recognized by law: the right to divorce, the right to child custody, the right to run for certain political offices, and of course, the right to choose what they wore. This naturally led to high levels of resentment, which meant tensions were only increasing.

What makes a revolution successful? One factor that determines a successful revolution is how well-educated the revolutionaries are. When women's liberation movements happen in other parts of the world, in such an eruptive fashion, Westerners sometimes take that as an example of how women in other countries are supremely uneducated and suppressed. In many patriarchal "third-world" authoritarian regimes, women are kept subservient by being systematically denied access to education. In Iran, however, women are not only *extremely* well-educated, but the regime's policy actively *encourages* women to be educated. Although seemingly counterintuitive that a patriarchal authoritarian regime would encourage

¹ Behbehani, Simin, "My Country, I Will Build You Again", 1999, <https://www.iranboom.ir/shekar-shekan/chame/284-dobare-misazamat-vatan.html>

² Behbehani, Simin, "My Country, I Will Build You Again", 1999, (English translation) <https://poetryinvoice.ca/read/poems/my-country-i-will-build-you-again>

women's education, there are many ways which the Islamic Republic does this to fit their agenda.

One crucial difference between education in the U.S. and Iran, of course, is the role of religion in education. In the U.S. and much of the West, state-sponsored education must be secular, due to a long-standing belief, from the Age of Reason, that secular education is essential to empowering women. In Iran, however, state-sponsored education must be *Islamic*, religious and dogmatic in nature, a politicized interpretation of the scriptures as according to the Shi'a clerics who control all aspects of Iranian politics. All public schools have an Islamized curriculum, requiring students to learn the Iranian government's interpretation of Islamic beliefs and values.

This Islamized education system has certain implications for women in Iran. It is preparing them for a specific role: their roles in Islam – or rather, what the Iranian government interprets as women's roles in Islam. The religious gender binary is emphasized at all stages of education, starting from the moment children enter the school gates for the first time. Even so, this does not necessarily mean the Iranian education system prepares girls only to become wives and mothers. *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran*, a compilation of articles edited by Goli Rezai-Rashti, emphasizes this point. In the chapter “Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Understanding the Paradox of Tradition and Modernity” by Golnar Mehran and Fariba Adli, the policies surrounding women's education in Iran are further explained. Mehran and Adli explain that the policies reflect “the dual role assigned to the New Muslim Woman who is asked to be traditional and modern at the same time. What seems contradictory is indeed illustrative of a policy to create the ideal female citizen who is socialized, politicized, and Islamized, and can serve the traditional needs of a religious society as well as the modern demands of the country.”³ One explanation for the eruption of the current-day women's liberation protests, and an indication of their future success, is how well-educated Iranian women are. They have received a well-rounded education apart from and including religious studies, and because of this, they are in a better position to advocate for their needs.

To explore this topic, it is necessary to examine the policy surrounding women's education in Iran at the start of the Islamic regime. This article will consist of three major sections. The first will be a summary of female education in the Pahlavi era (1925-1979) and an explanation of educational reforms in the early part of the Islamic regime (1979-1999). The

³ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al. *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 16.

second will involve the analysis of women's educational experiences, including women I personally have met and interviewed, and women who have published memoirs about their experiences in the Islamic regime. The third and final section will be an analysis of women's education in early Islamic Iran; how dogmatic religious education has affected women in comparison to secular education. The dominant narrative in Western democracies is that state-mandated religious dogmatic education is backwards and always oppressive of women. Although the morality of imposing religious beliefs on a diverse population is questionable, it will become clear that, in fact, this one-size-fits-all model cannot be applied to a non-Western country like Iran. Secular education in Iran cannot be equated to secular education in the West; while the Western narrative sees dogmatic religious education as detrimental to women's empowerment, Iran's educational model shows a more nuanced picture where dogmatic religious education has both harmed *and* benefited women.

I. IRANIAN WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN THE MODERN ERA

The two most recent Iranian regimes are the Pahlavi Dynasty and the Islamic Republic. The first was an authoritarian monarchy, and the second is an authoritarian theocratic republic. In the Pahlavi Dynasty, the regime established a formal policy towards female education, heavily emphasizing secularism as the path to women's liberation. In the Islamic Republic, education for both sexes was overhauled in a decisively Islamic curriculum. Although the Pahlavi Dynasty tried to make education more accessible for girls and women through the use of Western, secular ideas, it was really the Islamic Republic which, in a contradictory way, got girls and women into schools.

Female education in the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979)

The Pahlavi rule was founded in 1925, by Reza Shah Pahlavi. The Shah assumed a military dictatorship, modeled on the regime of Atatürk, with whom he had close correspondence, in Turkey.⁴ Under his rule, secularization became the dominant policy. His government formed more public schools, including schools for girls – with more of a Westernized curriculum and less of an Islamic one. His policies were decidedly anti-Muslim; not only did he disapprove of Muslim women's veils, but he actively banned them. According to Ashraf Zahedi, a scholar who studies women's roles in Iran and Afghanistan, Reza Shah “employed physical force to accomplish the unveiling of women. Unlike in Turkey, where

⁴ Axworthy, Michael, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), pg 36.

women were encouraged to unveil, Reza Shah's soldiers "were ordered to remove women's veils. [...] To ensure that no veiled woman gained access to public places, the Shah ordered the owners of businesses... to prevent [veiled women] from entering and receiving services."⁵ The rationale behind this policy was that veiling oppressed women, and if all veils were removed, women would start to gain more access to the public sphere. But rather than bringing women into the forefront of society, it had the opposite effect. Without the veil, many fathers and husbands did not allow their daughters and wives to even leave the house, as it was considered improper for a woman to go out in public without a head-covering. The forced removal of women's veils therefore, meant fewer women were going to school.⁶

Despite this all, government policy on female education continued to expand. The number of state-sponsored girls' primary and lower-secondary schools grew higher. In 1939, the government opened upper-secondary schools for girls, with a comparable curriculum to that of boys' upper-secondary schools. In some cases, the first four grades of primary schools were co-ed, but all forms of secondary education were sex-segregated. Although female teachers were mostly restricted to girls' schools and male teachers mostly restricted to boys' schools, female teachers were sometimes hired for boys' primary schools; the belief was that women may be more effective in teaching young children.⁷

Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, succeeded him in 1941, and continued his father's legacy of secularism and policies meant to improve women's lives. In 1963, he proposed a plan called the White Revolution, which was meant to modernize, secularize, and Westernize Iran. One of the proposed reforms was to grant women's suffrage, which had not been afforded to them even during the time of Reza Shah. Another reform was the creation of the Literacy Corps, an organization that sent secondary-school graduates to the rural areas of the country, teaching the people there how to read and write.⁸

⁵ Zahedi, Ashraf, "Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Islamic Regimes", pg 82, 2007, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/mew.2007.3.3.75>

⁶ Esfahani, Marzieh Kouhi, "Iranian Women: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back", pg 38, 2014, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/886984>

⁷ "Women's Education in the Pahlavi Period and After," 2011, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/education-xxvi-womens-education-in-the-pahlavi-period-and-after>

⁸ Pahlavi, Farah, *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2004), pg 121-122.

Mohammad Reza Shah put his wife, Farah Shahbanu Pahlavi, in charge of women's affairs. On 26 October 1967, he had a coronation not just for himself, but also for his wife. Both the Shah and his wife had been educated in France; they therefore subscribed to the more elitist view that gestures like these were what created gender equality. In her memoir *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah*, Farah writes that "when he put that crown on my head, I felt that he had just honored all the women of Iran."⁹ In reality, though, such an event had little effect on the impoverished masses of Iran. The Shah also had his wife go on tour around the country to see the lives of rural women. On Farah's travels, she discovered the Literacy Corps was not effective enough, because fathers refused to send their daughters to study under male tutors. Therefore, she set up the Women's Literacy Corps, a program run by female tutors, teaching women and girls how to read and write.¹⁰

The Shi'a clerics, who were the political and religious leaders in Iranian society, vehemently opposed all these reforms. If citizens, especially women, were educated in secular ways, the clerics' iron-clad grip on society would disappear. And since clerics were so powerful in the rural areas, they were able to inhibit the efficacy of these reforms. Even Farah admits in her memoir: "What did [these new reforms] mean far from cities, in a rural society that was still for the most part illiterate? [...] The mullah remained the only moral authority in most villages. [...] The girls wanted to go to school, the women wanted the reforms, but the men were dragging their feet."¹¹ It was a difficult political situation, because while the Shah and his wife wanted to increase women's political participation, it was near impossible to enact change when the religious authorities were opposed.

Interestingly, some *women* also opposed the Shah's policies; they felt the country was becoming too secular, thereby undermining their Muslim identity. Women also took part in demonstrations against the Shah, and many of them also advocated for an Islamic Revolution, believing a new government would better recognize their rights. Though the new Shah tried to appear more moderate than his father, by softening some of these policies such as mandatory de-veiling in the whole public sphere, he was

⁹ Pahlavi, Farah, *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2004), pg 157.

¹⁰ Pahlavi, Farah, *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2004), pg 178.

¹¹ Pahlavi, Farah, *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2004), pg 176.

still an authoritarian ruler. Women who wore the veil were still limited, by law, from educational opportunities.¹²

Eventually, the Shah was ousted from power. He had appeared as too Westernized and secularized, especially as many of his policies were specifically meant to break the iron-clad grip the clerics had on society. This angered not just the clerics but also many Muslim citizens of the country. Though his intentions were to make a society more inclusive of women, in reality it did the exact opposite.¹³

Female education in the early Islamic Republic (1979-1999)

In 1979, after the Shah was deposed, Ayatollah Khomeini swept in as the Supreme Leader of Iran. Thus began the Cultural Revolution (1980-1982), the movement that would entwine Iran as a nation with the revolutionaries' interpretation of Islamic law. Khomeini and other leaders saw Islam not just as a religion, but also as a political system, much like capitalism, communism, and fascism. Therefore, Islam was to be a part of every facet of life.¹⁴

The Iranian Constitution of 1979 outlines the role Iranian women are expected to serve in society:

“In the constitution, women will play a role in establishing the foundations of Islamic society. [...] It is natural that women, due to the greater oppression they endured under the previous tyrannical regime, will have more of their rights restored [under the Islamic regime]. [...] In this view of the family unit, women are no longer objects or tools for promoting consumerism and exploitation. Instead, they will regain their noble and crucial role as mothers, nurturing ideologically-driven individuals and becoming active partners alongside men in the arenas of life.”¹⁵

The excerpt clearly establishes that women are expected to, first and foremost, be mothers and wives. However, the constitution *also* states: “They actively participated in the societal and revolutionary efforts

¹² Keddie, Nikki R, “Women in Iran Since 1979”, pg 409, 2000, *Johns Hopkins University Press*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40971478>

¹³ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al., *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 109

¹⁴ Borjian, Maryam, *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalism* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2013), pg 65-66.

¹⁵ *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (1979), translated by Feri Paydar.

alongside men and will, as a result, bear more significant responsibilities and be recognized with higher values and dignity in an Islamic worldview.”¹⁶ This is quite a vague statement; theoretically, it can be interpreted in any way by any government. How did this shape policy on female education in Iran? To understand, it is necessary to see what changes were made to the education system.

To start, Ayatollah Khomeini despised Western influence on Iran, which had become so prevalent during the Pahlavi regime. He frequently described Iran and its education system as *Gharbzadegi* (“Westoxicated”), a term coined by Persian poet Jalal Al-e-Ahmed in 1962. In his view, all Western influences on society – de-veiling, miniskirts, co-educational schooling, women’s right to divorce – were products of Western imperialism. For the good of the Iranian society, the country was supposed to be “purified” with a return to Islamic values. He had the following to say about faculty in Iranian schools and universities: “Many teachers and professors... at our schools and universities are Westoxicated. Their task is to brainwash our youth with the incorrect education, rooted in the colonial education of the West... Thus, our universities should change fundamentally. They should be rebuilt from the ashes... and new teachers with the correct training and education should be in-charge of teaching our youth.”¹⁷

Therefore, the first thing the revolutionaries enacted was to shut down the universities, which were hotbeds for Marxism, liberalism, secularism, and other values contradictory to the revolutionaries’ idea of an Islamic nation. The universities were shut down in April 1980 and would not open again for another two years. Thousands of university professors were removed from their positions because they aligned with views that were not consistent with the Islamic Republic. University curricula were also changed; for example, courses in Islamic law, theology, and ethics became mandatory, while courses such as biology became optional.¹⁸ In primary and secondary education, teachers and school staff had to submit to a review, where bureaucrats would determine whether they met Islamic standards as educators, and were dismissed if they did not meet the standards. New textbooks were made, propagating Islamic values and

¹⁶ *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (1979), translated by Shahideh Kiehbadroudzinezhad.

¹⁷ Ayatollah Khomeini, translated and quoted by Borjjan, Maryam, *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalism* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2013), pg 67.

¹⁸ Borjjan, Maryam, *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalism* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2013), pg 66-69.

decrying secularism. Islamic dress codes were imposed on students and teachers at all levels of education.”¹⁹ In addition, Farrokhrū Parsa (the Minister of Education under the Pahlavi regime, a woman), was executed by the Islamic government in 1980, thus symbolizing the violent start of a new politicized education system.²⁰

When it came to educating women, Khomeini believed women could be permitted to study, as long as gender segregation was not dismantled.²¹ Women were allowed to go to universities, but initially, they were barred from pursuing more “masculine” majors such as agriculture, veterinary medicine, mining, and petroleum engineering.²² Conversely, more “feminine” disciplines, such as gynecology, nursing, dental hygiene, and midwifery, could only be practiced by women.²³ This was done with the intention of keeping men and women confined within separate roles. By the 1990s, however, the educational system was considered “Islamized” enough, meaning: all the non-Islamist faculty and students had been purged, there were enough Islamic studies classes, and all students had to be interviewed by mullahs before entering the university system. Therefore, women’s lobbyist groups were able to push for fewer restrictions on what women could study.²⁴

Perhaps most notably, it also became mandatory to segregate students and teachers by sex. This had already been common before the Islamic Revolution; but now, it was *required* for girls’ and boys’ schools to be separate. Girls’ schools could only have female teachers, and boys’ schools (except for boys’ primary-schools) could only have male teachers. The only exceptions were universities, which had the choice of being single-sex or co-educational, and remote rural schools, which didn’t have enough numbers to split into separate schools for girls and boys.²⁵

¹⁹ Borjian, Maryam, *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalism* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2013), pg 70-71.

²⁰ Borjian, Maryam, *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalism* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2013), pg 67.

²¹ Shavarini, Mitra K, “Wearing the Veil to College: The Paradox of Higher Education in the Lives of Iranian Women”, pg 192, 2006, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3879970>

²² Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 86.

²³ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 86.

²⁴ Shavarini, Mitra K, “Wearing the Veil to College: The Paradox of Higher Education in the Lives of Iranian Women”, pg 192, 2006, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3879970>

²⁵ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 22.

In the Pahlavi era, state scholarships had frequently been given to college students of both genders to study abroad. However, the Islamic Republic has now passed a policy making single women ineligible for state scholarships. Female college students can study abroad only if they are married and their husbands go with them. This is a sure way of keeping women subservient to the males in their families and denying women educational opportunities even when fully qualified.²⁶

And then there was the requirement of veiling. All females age six and above, across the entire country, were required to wear the veil - including those who were not Muslims. Female teachers were required to wear the *chador*, a specific type of veil, which is black and covers the whole body.²⁷ This was a complete opposite policy from the Shah, who had *banned* women from wearing the veil; now, women were *forced* to wear it. This too had many problematic implications, restricting women's freedom and self-expression just as the Shah had done before. Because neither regime had accepted it as a personal choice, women had to adhere their appearance to a political ideology, rather than having the freedom to express themselves as they were.

One notable change in the curriculum at schools was the new school textbooks. Textbooks were an essential form of pushing ideologies and propaganda onto young children, molding them into the revolutionaries' Islamic views. In textbook illustrations, men were generally portrayed as the breadwinners and providers of the family, while women were portrayed as the makers of the house. However, there *were* also depictions of women working outside of the house, but only in the context of assisting their husbands, not out of desire for their own careers. The majority of the textbooks were the same for both the girls' and boys' schools. However, the textbooks describing careers and occupations were different in girls' schools versus boys' schools; girls' textbooks portrayed more "feminine" occupations, such as sewing and cooking, while boys' textbooks portrayed more "masculine" occupations, such as engineering and sciences.²⁸

Despite this, Iranian girls and women post-Revolution have a much higher school attendance than their pre-Revolution counterparts, and, in fact, are *very* well-educated. Why is this? One important factor is that the Islamization of the educational system – compulsory veiling, rigorous

²⁶ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 22.

²⁷ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 23.

²⁸ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 24.

Qur'anic education, sex-segregated schools – has made girls' education acceptable to conservative Muslim families. Knowing that the “correct” message is being sent by the government, and “corrupting” influences are being crushed, fathers are more comfortable sending their daughters to school. This, in-turn, has created a society where women have attained high levels of education, and are also able to pursue careers of their own.²⁹

Statistics on education and literacy, Pahlavi and Islamic regimes

The following chart shows how percentages have changed in Iranian girls' and women's education, the percentage of female students in a student body, and female literacy rates overall.³⁰ After the Islamic Revolution, every single one of these statistics has improved for women when it comes to school attendance and literacy rates.

²⁹ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 29.

³⁰ Data appears incomplete because, for the second set of statistics, it was not possible to find data in all categories from 2000; the closest I could find in the final column was from 1996.

Year	Primary schools (percentage of females in the student body)	Secondary schools (percentage of females in the student body)	Universities (percentage of females in the student body)	Female literacy rates (age 6 and above)
1976	40% ³¹	40% ³²	28% ³³	35% ³⁴
1996				74.2% ³⁵
2000	48% ³⁶	49% ³⁷	61% ³⁸	

II. WOMEN'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE IRANIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

In order to get a more holistic picture of women's education in the Islamic Republic of Iran, I read about the personal experiences of women in Iran and their own opinions of the education they received, and how society was transformed as a result. It is important that this article is about more than just statistics; to truly understand the dichotomy of secular vs religious education, it is important to get to the heart of the matter, to talk to the women affected. Therefore, I have included the views and experiences of women who lived in Iran, both from interviews and published works.

³¹ Mehran, Golnar, "The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran", pg 280, 2003, *The University of Chicago Press*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/378248>

³² Mehran, Golnar, "The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran", pg 280, 2003, *The University of Chicago Press*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/378248>

³³ "Women's Education in the Pahlavi Period and After", 2011, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/education-xxvi-womens-education-in-the-pahlavi-period-and-after>

³⁴ "Women's Education in the Pahlavi Period and After", 2011, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/education-xxvi-womens-education-in-the-pahlavi-period-and-after>

³⁵ Elmi, Zahra Mila, "Educational Attainment in Iran", 2009, *Middle East Institute*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/educational-attainment-iran>

³⁶ Mehran, Golnar, "The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran", pg 280, 2003, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/378248>

³⁷ Mehran, Golnar, "The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran", pg 280, 2003, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/378248>

³⁸ Mehran, Golnar, "The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran", pg 280. 2003. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/378248>

Marjane Satrapi, the author of *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, a graphic novel memoir about her childhood and early adulthood, split between Iran and Austria, was born in Rasht, Iran, in 1969. She grew up in Tehran with her mother, father, and maternal grandmother. She first attended a co-ed bilingual school where Persian and French were taught, and when the Revolution occurred, she was sent to an Islamic girls' school. In 1984, after her family's Marxist values caught the ire of the Iranian authorities, she was sent to live in Austria to study. She came back at age nineteen for university, and eventually, went to France and left Iran for good. She is a graphic novelist, and currently, a supporter of the *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* movement from afar.³⁹

In *Persepolis*, Satrapi describes her experience applying to university. In addition to an entrance exam, all students were required to be interviewed by a cleric before they could be accepted into the university. The purpose of the interview was to ensure the student was a devout Muslim and would contribute to the society's Islamic ideals. When Satrapi went for her test, the cleric asked her if she had worn the veil while living in Austria. Satrapi had responded by saying, "If women's hair posed so many problems, God would've surely made us bald."⁴⁰ Of course, having answered back to the cleric, she believed she would no longer be accepted into the university. But, miraculously, she managed to get admission – she later found out it was because this particular cleric had appreciated her honesty. Thus, Satrapi explains how this system doesn't always necessarily

³⁹ Luebering, J.E., "Marjane Satrapi", *Britannica*,
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marjane-Satrapi>

⁴⁰ Satrapi, Marjane, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (Paris, France: L'Association, 2002), pg 284.



work the way the Islamic government wants it to, as not all authority figures (even in autocratic regimes) share the same viewpoint.

In an interview with Emma Watson, Satrapi explains what she believes to have been the impetus for improved women's education in Iran. She explains her view on how the Pahlavi era restrictions did women a disservice: "According to the [Pahlavi era] law, we had much more freedom because women could, for example, ask for a divorce. But when a woman is uneducated and is not actually economically independent, you can have all the rights to divorce that you want and it doesn't make a huge difference. At the end of

the day... if you have three kids, no education, no job – what do you do? You don't divorce; you have to stay with the same a***** all your life!"⁴¹ Then she goes on to describe the Islamic Revolution's impact on women's education: "Today... the laws are much more anti-woman. However, at the same time, it seems that repeating over and over to women 'you're worth half of men, you're worth half of men' has meant all these women actually go and study more. So that today two-thirds – 70 percent! – of students in Iran are girls. [...] In the end, this means that when these girls and women marry, they will be more educated than their own father, their own husband, their own brother – and then they cannot give them s***!"⁴² Here, she is describing the paradoxical nature of the law; it provides a sort of "reverse psychology" effect where women, tired of being repressed, finally take it upon themselves to acquire their education. That is her personal view, though it does not take into account the plight of women who are forcibly barred from studies by their male family members, and how the change in

⁴¹ "Emma Watson Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi", *Vogue*, <https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>

⁴² "Emma Watson Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi." *Vogue*. <https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>

regime policy (from Pahlavi to Islamic era) made a significant number of men suddenly decide that it was acceptable for women to become educated. Nonetheless, her views bring a valuable point; her living, breathing experience as a student in Iran has informed her view on personal choice and agency in a theocratic dictatorship, and some of the small ways in which women can hope to take back control over their own lives.

Jacqueline Saper, the author of *From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran*, is a woman who grew up in pre-Revolutionary Iran. Her mother was English, and her father was an Iranian Jew. Because she spent so much time in Britain and knew English well, she grew up with a very Westernized view. From her point of view, the Shah was a great ruler, and the Islamic regime is repressive; it makes sense for her to have this view, not only because she has more Western views, but also because of her background as a religious minority in Iran. Jews, as well as other non-Shi'a Muslims, are heavily persecuted by the Islamic government in Iran. Saper went to a Jewish primary and secondary school, but the year before her graduation, the Islamic Revolution occurred, and the school system was overhauled. When she returned to school to complete her final year, she described how much the school changed: "[After the Revolution,] the Jewish principal of our school had been replaced by a Muslim woman. [...] Our history books that chronicled the... Persian monarchy had been tossed aside."⁴³ Eventually, the veil was imposed on everyone. Saper was also forced to use the name "Jaleh" (a Persian name), so she wouldn't stand out. She also describes the generational trauma of it all, how her own daughter was forced to endure the new regime's policies: "[My daughter] Leora... in 1986... started first-grade at [an]... all-girl elementary school. [She] was a part of a religious minority. How long would it take before her teacher and classmates started treating her differently?"⁴⁴ Eventually, Saper, her husband, and her two children fled to Britain. Her point-of-view as a religious minority is clearly quite different from many other women; her Western views, combined with her background as a religious minority, made her a target in the Islamic regime, forcing her to conceal many of her true beliefs while living in Iran.

In addition to reading published works, I also spoke to six Iranian women I know, who grew up in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution. These women grew up in larger cities such as Tehran, Karaj, Esfahan, and Shiraz, and smaller cities such as Qazvin and Ghaemshahr. I

⁴³ Saper, Jacqueline, *From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2018), pg 83.

⁴⁴ Saper, Jacqueline, *From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2018), pg 179.

sent them a questionnaire about their experiences in the Islamic Iranian education system and what they felt about their education. This is not meant to be a statistical analysis by any means – it is just a description of how they felt about their education.

All six of the women I interviewed have a bachelor's degree or higher. The breakdown of their different educational backgrounds is, as follows:

Respondent	Year Born	University (for undergraduate studies)	Field Studied	Highest Degree
Respondent A	1972	Shahid Beheshti University (Tehran)	Translation and language education	Master's (from Iran)
Respondent B	1976	Esfahan University (Esfahan)	Engineering	Bachelor's (from Iran and U.S.)
Respondent C	1983	Shahid Bahonar (Kerman)	Computer science	Doctorate (from Iran)
Respondent D	1986	Shiraz University (Shiraz)	Translation studies	Doctorate (from U.S.)
Respondent E	1982	Shahid Beheshti University (Tehran)	did not respond	Doctorate (from Canada)
Respondent F	1963	Shahid Beheshti University (Tehran)	Geography and urban planning	Doctorate (from Iran)

Of the six women I interviewed, three were born before 1979 and three were born after. Of the three who were enrolled in school before the Islamic Revolution, one said she went to a co-ed school, one said she studied at a girls' school, and the third gave no response. Two of the three mentioned they did not wear the veil to school before the Revolution, while one said she sometimes wore the veil to school.

All six women indicated they studied a wide variety of subjects in both primary and secondary school, not just limited to what would be considered more "feminine" subjects. This included religious education, though all respondents said it was not the main focus of the school day;

generally, it was either one hour per day or a few hours a week. Their opinions on religious education varied. Four of the six said they did not think religious education was necessary and should instead be something kept private to each family; one respondent said she couldn't remember anything from the religious education she received, except for the name of a few Shi'a Imams; and one respondent said, when she was a child, she just considered it a lesson like any other to get a grade. Their opinions on wearing the veil also varied. Four respondents said they disliked wearing the veil, as they felt it should be a personal decision up to each woman; one respondent said it was just a normal part of culture for traditional families; and one respondent said she had no opinion on wearing the veil.

When it came to the education of the women around them, all six respondents said most of the women around them went to university and completed a bachelor's degree or higher. Five respondents said the majority of the women around them were employed, mostly as teachers and nurses. One of the respondents said some women around her were professors and doctors as well. One respondent said the married women around her generally did not work. Five of the respondents said there were no policies by the Islamic regime that inhibited their studies. One said there was extreme vetting by the mullahs to get into her PhD program, though this applied to men as well as women. Four out of six respondents said women were allowed to and were studying the same fields as men, though two did not respond to this question. Four of the respondents said they were overall satisfied with their education; one respondent said the quality was not good, but didn't mention whether it was because of the regime's policies or for other reasons; and one respondent said she found university quite difficult because of the dress code, lack of socialization, and extreme vetting for graduate school.

It should be noted that these few memoirs and interviews are in no way representative of Iranian women as a whole. All the experiences I have detailed are from women who lived in urban areas, and who were encouraged by their families to go to school. Nonetheless, these few primary source memoirs and interviews do concur with the secondary scholarship on this matter: that there is a population of women in Iran – mainly urban and middle-class – who were able to achieve a complete education even under the repressive Islamic regime. For these women, the dogmatic religious education system benefitted them in the sense that they were fully literate and had access to comparable studies as their male counterparts. However, many still felt unsatisfied because they were still relegated to a certain role, as determined by the Islamized education system.

III. ISLAMIC EDUCATION SYSTEM VS SECULAR EDUCATION SYSTEM: WOMEN'S ROLE IN IRAN

The two most recent Iranian regimes represent the dichotomy of secular vs religious. The Pahlavi education system was secular, based on Western ideas of democratic values and what the government claimed would liberate women in a secular context. The current regime's education system is Islamic, inherently anti-Western and based on ideas of what the regime claims will liberate women in an Islamic society.

One dominant narrative in Western scholarship of Iran is that the Pahlavi Dynasty's secularism championed women's rights, while the Islamic Republic's dogmatic religious policies unilaterally oppressed women. But when it comes to education, the statistics do not reflect this conclusion.⁴⁵ Based on the statistics mentioned in Part I, it is clear that the Pahlavi regime's educational reforms did not improve school attendance and literacy rates for the majority of women in Iran. The main demographic that benefited from these reforms were urban middle-class women, who already were more likely to have families which supported their education. Yet, the Pahlavi regime tried to be pro-woman. It was the Pahlavis who codified women's suffrage into law,⁴⁶ coronated a queen consort alongside her husband for the first time in Iranian history,⁴⁷ and, most notably, were the first rulers to make a serious effort to get girls and women into schools.⁴⁸ They certainly deserve the credit for having some pro-woman policies, and for laying the foundation for female education in Iran; however, there are reasons why the statistics do not reflect success.

One thing to consider is Reza Shah's policy on de-veiling. In his worldview, if women were no longer allowed to cover their hair, that would be a first step towards women's empowerment. This was something which the West was constantly saying: Islamic dress codes were inherently oppressive of women. However, Laila Ahmed, scholar on Arab studies and Islam, makes the following argument about women's liberation when it comes to clothing: "It was never argued... even by the most ardent nineteenth-century feminists, that European women could liberate

⁴⁵ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 109.

⁴⁶ Pahlavi, Farah, *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2004), pg 121.

⁴⁷ Pahlavi, Farah, *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2004), pg 157.

⁴⁸ "Women's Education in the Pahlavi Period and After", 2011, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/education-xxvi-womens-education-in-the-pahlavi-period-and-after>

themselves from the oppressiveness of Victorian dress only by adopting the dress of another culture. Nor has it ever been argued... that because male domination and injustice have existed throughout the West's recorded history, the only recourse for Western women is to abandon the Western culture and find themselves some other culture. The idea seems absurd, and yet this is routinely how the matter of improving the status of women is posed with respect to women in... non-Western societies."⁴⁹ If we objectively examine the Pahlavi regime's de-veiling policy, inspired by Western views on secular democracy, it all comes down to imperialism. As a part of their colonial practices, Westerners were trying to impose their culture onto non-Western cultures and made up the myth that Islamic dress codes are *always* anti-woman. As a part of his pro-Western regime, Reza Shah was imposing Western practices on his people, while failing to realize that what works for Westerners in Western countries many not necessarily work in Iran. From a practical perspective, it is also inefficient to spend money on police forces tasked with de-veiling, when there are other more pressing issues faced by women.

Not only were the de-veiling practices unnecessary, but they also inhibited women's education. In some ways, women from rural or uneducated families were faced with a double-edged patriarchy. First, there was the patriarchy of their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons, who refused to allow them to leave the house without religious attire. Then, there was the patriarchy of the secular government, which banned women *from* wearing religious attire! Women who wanted to go to school and get a job were forbidden from doing so, both by their families and by the government.⁵⁰

In addition, there was a population of women who *wanted* to wear the veil. There were some women who felt like it represented a part of their identity as Muslim women and felt it empowered them, but were no longer allowed to wear them. When Reza Shah had women's veils removed, it became "an emotional challenge to many women who were not ready or willing to appear in public unveiled. [...] [These women] viewed unveiling as a moral violation. Forcibly unveiled women felt as if they were naked, and many women decided not to leave their homes."⁵¹ When it came to

⁴⁹ Ahmed, Laila, *Women and Gender in Islam: Roots of a Historical Debate*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1992), pg 244; quoted in Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al. *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 38.

⁵⁰ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al. *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 109.

⁵¹ Zahedi, Ashraf, "Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Islamic Regimes", pg 82, 2007, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/mew.2007.3.3.75>

education, “since girls were not allowed to attend school wearing the veil, [some mothers] refused to send their daughters to school. [...] Thus in some cases, compulsory unveiling had the adverse effect of limiting the education opportunities of the female members of religious families.”⁵² Of course, this is not to say that *all* women wanted to wear the veil. There was, of course, a significant number of women who preferred having their heads uncovered. But, as it turns out, banning the veil is as much an issue as enforcing it. In both systems, women lost their agency, as their right to choose what they wear is not recognized by those with authority. The double-edged patriarchy during the Pahlavi regime undermined not just their access to education, but their participation in *all* facets of society.⁵³

Even aside from de-veiling, there were issues surrounding education in the pre-Revolutionary period. In the era of the Qajar Dynasty, the ruling monarchy just before the Pahlavi Dynasty, girls’ schools were just coming into existence. As they were only just starting, they were faced with massive opposition from the clerics, who believed women would use the knowledge they learned at school to behave immorally. For example, clerics argued that if women were taught how to read and write, they would write to forbidden lovers. In addition, girls’ schools were often targeted by vandals; men would stand outside the school gates and harass the girls, even vandalize the property to express their disapproval. This made many girls terrified to go to school and discouraged parents from sending their daughters to school as well.⁵⁴

As a result, girls’ schools were faced with a dilemma: either find a way to legitimize girls’ education in a conservative society or get shut down. The headmistresses of the schools decided to use Shi’a Islam to their advantage. They revised their curriculum, devoting time to Islamic education, and made sure to have their students participate in Shi’a holidays. This included schools which were run by religious minorities. Muslim feminists also used Islam to argue for female education, saying that true Islamic values advocated for the education of girls and women. In the newspaper *Habl al-Matin*, one woman wrote: “The God we know and worship is too high and great to make such distinctions between men and

⁵² Zahedi, Ashraf, “Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Islamic Regimes,” pg 82-83, 2007, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/mew.2007.3.3.75>

⁵³ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 109.

⁵⁴ Rostam-Kolayi, Jasamin, “Origin of Iran’s Modern Girls’ Schools: From Private/National to Public/State”, pg 76-77, 2008, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/mew.2008.4.3.58>

women and ordain so unwisely.”⁵⁵ Thus, a new line of reasoning was coming into being: society had an Islamic duty to educate women. A true Islamic society would require women to have the same educational opportunities as men, because under God, men and women were equal. And so, when the Pahlavis and later the Islamic regime came into power, demand for women’s education grew higher. Thus, the education of women and girls was legitimized.

This is not to say the Islamic Republic was founded on the basis of gender equality. None of this is to say the Islamic Republic is a utopia for women. However, because the Pahlavis had provided the impetus for women’s education, it continued to expand during Khomeini’s time. Under the laws of the Islamic Republic, women could still be educated, as long as it was in a sex-segregated environment and otherwise adhered to “Islamic” values. And, paradoxically, it helped more girls and women get into schools. In an ironic way, “Gender segregation in this heteronormative revolutionary religious context helped women challenge patriarchal restrictions in their families and also facilitated the crossing of urban-rural divides.”⁵⁶ Although women were restricted to a religious, heteronormative gender binary, there were at times able to twist the gender binary to their advantage, therefore attaining education and higher positions in society.

CONCLUSION

Although the education in Iran is modeled from a dogmatic religious gender binary, women have still found some ways to make some of it work to their advantage. Women have attained higher levels of education after the Islamic Revolution than they ever had before the Islamization of the country. Literacy rates have gone up, and school attendance has also gone up. In that respect, religious education does not mean the same in Iran as it does in the West. While the West has found secular education as an effective way of bringing women into the public, it was Iran’s religious education that brought many lower-class women out of the home.

In the modern day, the protests in Iran continue on. Women continue to face human rights abuses for demonstrating against the Islamic Republic, and hundreds of protestors have been killed. It is not just the imposition of the veil they are protesting; it is also the multitude of repressive laws, which refuse to recognize women’s rights in many other areas, such as right to contraception, right to divorce and child custody, and right to travel without

⁵⁵ Rostam-Kolayi, Jasamin, “Origin of Iran’s Modern Girls’ Schools: From Private/National to Public/State”, pg 78, 2008, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/mew.2008.4.3.58>

⁵⁶ Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pg 106

male guardianship. These laws severely inhibit their agencies over their own lives, and therefore, women in Iran continue to advocate for the laws to recognize those rights.⁵⁷

In all of this, education is crucial. Although it is certainly not the only determining factor of a successful revolution, it is very important in elevating the status of women. It allows women to share their experiences with the general public, whether through a graphic novel like Satrapi's *Persepolis*, or a written memoir like Saper's *From Miniskirt to Hijab*. It also allows them to rise to positions of power. In a society where women are educated, repression against women cannot exist forever. It is important, therefore, to holistically analyze how women's education has been in Iran, to make an educated estimate as to how a revolution is planned to optimize success.

Education continues to remain an important factor in advancing women through society. Therefore, it is important to understand how Iranian women are accessing high levels of education despite living in a repressive society. Through combating misunderstandings about education and women's roles in Iran's Islamic society, we can improve our understanding of how education has transformed Iranian women's lives, and obtain a more genuine and nuanced picture of how women live in Iran.

⁵⁷ Howell, Samuel, "Women's Rights Movements: Vanguard for Social Change in Iran, Iraq, and Kurdistan", 3 December 2024, <https://www.us-iran.org/news/uselections-ypjgj>

Lakes, Dams, Ruptures: Water and Environmental Management in the Valley of Mexico in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

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Abstract:

This paper presents a comparative case study of Indigenous and Spanish water-management practices in the Valley of Mexico to critique the rigid understanding of geography found in traditional historical approaches to Latin American economic development. Such approaches have taken “geography” as a static, independent variable separate from human knowledge, alterations, and expertise; in doing so, they neglect long histories of Indigenous environmental manipulation. This comparison, then, shows the importance of human environmental management in rendering a given landscape agriculturally productive. The Aztec Triple Alliance, drawing upon their knowledge of the Valley’s lacustrine environment, constructed a fantastically productive and well-supervised water management system around the city of Tenochtitlan. Post-Conquest, population collapse and Spanish preferences for dryland agriculture eroded those systems of water management, leading to diminished agricultural production and devastating floods.

INTRODUCTION

When Bartolomé De Las Casas wrote his famous *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* in 1542, he described the Mexican mainland as if “God did set down upon these lands the entire multitude, or greatest part, of the entire human lineage.”¹ The first conquistadors to enter the lands of the Aztec Empire were similarly awed, both by the sheer amount of material wealth on display and by the extent to which the Aztecs had harnessed the lakes of the Valley of Mexico to support their burgeoning state. This was the pattern up and down the Americas as the first Spanish and Portuguese explorers arrived; they sent home wondrous reports of Edenic, garden-like landscapes, full of fertile fields and fruitful trees.

For the next 300 years, these landscapes proved to be quite bountiful; the extraction of vast mineral and agricultural resources, from gold and silver to sugar and brazilwood, fueled the Spanish and Portuguese empires and fill their treasuries. Most of these empires collapsed in the nineteenth-century Wars of Independence, but geography continued to play a role; the newly independent nations of Latin America had to work around geographic transportation costs, access to different resources and commodities, and a wide variety of climates and soil compositions.

Historians have thus debated over the extent to which geographic factors affected Latin American prosperity. Some have given them a central position, positing that the initial geographic conditions, or factor endowments, of a nation influenced its institutions, with rebounding economic effects that have lasted for centuries. Other historians have deemphasized geography, looking instead at power, colonial conflict, and, once again, the institutions this struggle created.² Much more important than geography, this position holds, were human politics and conflict.

However, geography is not a constant variable, and it did not go unchanged by human hands, either before or after European colonization. In particular, both orthodox interpretations fail to account for the Indigenous peoples of the continents, and the methods they used to manage and alter the environment in the millennia before European contact. The lakes of the Valley of Mexico are an excellent example in this regard, as the seat of a sophisticated Aztec state in the centuries before the Conquest and the center of Spanish imperial governance afterward. These lakes thus

¹Bartolomé De Las Casas, *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies : With Related Texts*, ed. Franklin Knight (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2003), 5.

² Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A. Robinson, “Reversal of Fortune: Geography and Institutions in the Making of the Modern World Income Distribution,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 117, no. 4 (November 1, 2002): 1231–94, <https://doi.org/10.1162/003355302320935025>.

provide a record of the ways that the Aztecs shaped their region's geography, creating productive agricultural systems and complex feats of hydraulic engineering that supported enormous populations. Post-Conquest, the Spanish approach to the same lacustrine environment represented a fundamental rupture in the methods and attitudes of dealing with nature, ultimately destroying the very productivity that had sustained the Aztecs' wealth and power.

GEOGRAPHY, INSTITUTIONS, AND COLONIAL LEGACIES

It is important to first define the arguments over the relationship between geography and economic prosperity, as neither position is without nuance. Contemporary economic historians Luis Bértola and Jeffrey Williamson describe a debate that has evolved over the past decades of scholarship, often focused on explaining the economic gaps between countries within Latin America and those of Europe or North America.³ Though such differences, as economic phenomena, have been most measured in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholars have tried to trace these "per capita income gaps" back to the colonial encounter.⁴ Bértola and Williamson are interested in explaining those newfound gaps. They introduce us to opposing explanations: the "endowment determinists" and the "institutional determinists," who disagree over whether endowments inform institutions or institutions inform endowments.⁵

The first "endowment determinist" camp emphasizes the initial geographic conditions of a country; as described by Stanley Engerman and Kenneth Sokoloff, these conditions are the "factor endowments" of "soils, climates, and the size or density of the native population."⁶ To different authors, these initial geographic conditions are more or less proximate causes of economic prosperity. Bértola and Jose Antonio Ocampo, for example, survey the ways in which geography can be a more significant cause, where some conditions, such as harsh terrain and distance from the coast, are directly disadvantageous for economic growth.⁷ In particular, the "commodity lottery" could have huge impacts through changes in demand

³ Jeffrey G Williamson and Luis Bertola, "Globalization in Latin America before 1940," in *The Cambridge Economic History of Latin America*, ed. Victor Bulmer-Thomas, John Coatsworth, and Roberto Cortes-Conde (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11.

⁴ Williamson and Bertola, "Globalization in Latin America before 1940," 19, 21.

⁵ Williamson and Bertola, "Globalization in Latin America before 1940," 20-22.

⁶ Sokoloff and Engerman, "Institutions, Factor Endowments, and Paths of Development," 220, 223.

⁷ Luis Bértola and José Antonio Ocampo, "The Economic History of the Young Independent Republics, 1810-70," in *The Economic Development of Latin America since Independence* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 48-80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199662135.003.0002>, 76-77.

for geographically-determined resources; the boom and bust cycles of such commodity lotteries might raise and sink a country's economy, independent of state policies. On the other hand, Sokoloff and Engerman are more interested in how geography influences the creation of institutions. They posit that, in Latin America, factor endowments led to highly concentrated land ownership and inequality, which themselves led to unequal and exploitative institutions that were harmful to long-term growth.⁸ Either way, initial geographic conditions are critical and influential, and paths of development can be dependent on the presence or absence of specific resources. Therefore, historical geography determines economic prosperity today.

In response, a second "institutional determinist" camp also points to the importance of institutions in determining prosperity, but this camp deemphasizes the importance of geography. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the persistent legacy of colonial politics and institutions, weak property rights, and capitalist transitions. Notably, Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson take this stance in their study of the "Reversal of Fortune." Observing a strong negative correlation between prosperity in 1500 and prosperity today in colonized regions, they reject the ability of geographic explanations to explain such a relationship.⁹ If geography determined success with "time-invariant effects," they write, then the same places that were wealthy centuries ago should be wealthy today—which is not what we observe with the reversal of fortune.¹⁰ Similarly, if technological advancements made previously harmful geographic variables beneficial later, then the reversal should have occurred when such new technologies were spread to colonial regions—which, again, is not what we observe in the data.¹¹ To this position, it is human institutions that create wealth, and the colonization of the Americas by Spain and Portugal created extractive, elitist institutions that were economically inefficient in the long run. Institutions and colonial conflict, then, determine economic prosperity today.

This quick dismissal of a geographic explanation, however, belies an inaccurate assumption that geography is constant—or "time-invariable," as Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson write. Similarly, Engerman and Sokoloff, by including native populations and labor as part of a factor endowment, seem to objectify such populations into the framework of a

⁸ Sokoloff and Engerman, "Institutions, Factor Endowments, and Paths of Development," 223-28.

⁹ Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, "Reversal of Fortune," 1232-34.

¹⁰ Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, "Reversal of Fortune," 1259-60.

¹¹ Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, "Reversal of Fortune," 1261.

static resource. These assumptions are adjacent to a set of beliefs that William Denevan labeled the “Pristine Myth”—the myth that the pre-Columbian Americas were an unspoiled, lightly populated wilderness, and that Indigenous populations didn’t or couldn’t alter the environment, instead maintaining an unblemished ecological balance.¹² Certainly, these authors do not subscribe directly to this myth. Both address the scale of Indigenous populations, and Acemoglu et. al point to the Aztecs and Incas as prosperous states—but there are still problems with both interpretations. The “geographic position” is too environmentally deterministic; it presents the resulting paths as inevitable and discounts the ways in which people shaped that geography for centuries before and after colonization. Similarly, the “institutional” interpretation is far too dismissive of geography. It takes the landscape as a constant to focus on institutions, when, in fact, human institutions, behavior, and customs are undeniably shaped by geography.

A more moderate interpretation may be a better one. Geography is an important factor in prosperity, but simultaneously one that is deeply mutable by human systems. It is not a constant, and a premier example of this comes with the Aztec Triple Alliance and its interactions with the lakes of the Valley of Mexico: Lake Texcoco, Lake Chalco, and Lake Xomichilco, amongst others.

PRE-COLUMBIAN MEXICO: LIVING ON THE WATER

In the highlands of Central Mexico, the Aztecs and their predecessors existed in a unique lacustrine environment: the Valley of Mexico, a closed basin without channels of water outflow. They engaged in a spectrum of environmental interactions. On one end, individuals and communities fished, hunted, and gathered to supplement their agricultural systems, in relatively sustainable cycles of resource appropriation. On the other hand, the Aztec Empire proper, using and concentrating tributary manpower, materials, and knowledge, “engineered the environment of the basin at a scale far beyond that of the localized works of lesser polities.”¹³ The result was concentrated, large-scale environmental manipulation, an obvious example of which can be found in Aztec cities. They were built along and on the Valley’s system of lakes, which were fed by numerous rivers and springs. Most notably, the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan was built on top of Lake Texcoco, originally founded on two small islands and eventually growing outward through the construction of multiple artificial islands.

¹² William M. Denevan, “The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82, no. 3 (September 1992): 369–85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1992.tb01965.x>.

¹³ Vera S Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 23.

The Aztecs also utilized high-yield wetland farming techniques to support large urban populations. In the central lakes of the Valley, they assembled *chinampas*, a type of artificial island used for agriculture. Chinampas were created by piling up alternating mats of vegetable matter and mud from the bottom of the lake, staked into place by underwater fences woven with reeds. Aztec farmers reinforced the boundaries of each plot with willow trees and branches, laying out multiple rectangular plots next to each other. In this way, they could build up small networks of canals between chinampas, for both transport and irrigation purposes.¹⁴ The setup was scientifically sound; the canal channels allowed crops to benefit from the humidity of well-watered soil, and the system established an incredibly valuable permanent irrigation system. Once finished, chinampas were sustained by nutrient-rich lake soil and replenished with organic material from aquatic vegetation and manure.

Alongside other agricultural techniques and crop cultivars, chinampas contributed to the size of Aztec urban populations, and throughout the fifteenth century, the lords of Tenochtitlan sent colonists to different sectors of the Lakes to spread the chinampa system. They were extraordinarily fertile; in a two-year period where European agricultural techniques might have yielded one crop per field, the Aztecs' techniques yielded eight crops per field.¹⁵ This remarkable productivity explains how the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan was able to support a population of 200,000 in 1492.¹⁶ For centuries after the Conquest, no colonial city or region surpassed it—in 1850, three centuries later, the average population size for a Mexican regional capital was 24,000, supported by basic rain-fed agriculture and grazing techniques.¹⁷ For the Valley of Mexico as a whole, its 1492 population of around 1 million would not be reattained post-Conquest until the twentieth century.¹⁸ Mexico City was one exception, buoyed by the persistence of chinampa agriculture through the colonial period and afterward. It was still home to around 200,000 inhabitants in 1850 and benefited from the chinampas still active on the shores of lakes Chalco and Xochimilco, even as the lakes had been partially drained. The

¹⁴ Braulio Robles et al., "The Chinampa: An Ancient Mexican Sub-Irrigation System," *Irrigation and Drainage* 68, no. 1 (December 10, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1002/ird.2310>.

¹⁵ Shawn William Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 21.

¹⁶ William F. Maloney and Felipe Valencia Caicedo, "The Persistence of (Subnational) Fortune," *The Economic Journal* 126, no. 598 (January 20, 2016): 2363–2401, <https://doi.org/10.1111/econj.12276>, 2379.

¹⁷ Germán Vergara, *Fueling Mexico: Energy and Environment, 1850-1950* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 32-33.

¹⁸ Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America*, 10-11.

level of productivity that the chinampas provided in 1850 was still impressive; the technique could yield 3 tons of maize per hectare, a level later matched only by the mechanized tools and synthetic fertilizers of the twentieth century.¹⁹

Yet perhaps more impressive than the chinampas themselves were the techniques that the Aztecs used to control the water that fed them. The lakes of the Valley of Mexico—and Lake Texcoco, the most important one—were a source of life and livelihood. They provided hunting and fishing grounds, raw materials for construction and clothing, and incredibly fertile lands for agriculture. At the same time, they were unpredictable, and could be prone to flooding or drought, which were both enormous threats. Furthermore, the hydrology of the basin meant that all inflowing water moved toward the lower Lake Texcoco, where, due to the lack of outlets, the water stagnated, only exiting through evaporation.²⁰ This had the effect of concentrating salt in the water, making large portions of the lakes, especially Lakes Texcoco, Xaltocan, and Zumpango, brackish—which harmed agricultural efforts. Thus, water that was too high, too low, or too salty threatened cities through flood damage or famine.

As such, the Aztecs responded by making every effort to harness the waters. By the time of the Spanish arrival, dozens of causeways cut across Lake Texcoco, many spiraling outward from Tenochtitlan. But they were not simply for transportation—canoe transport predominated there—or for defense; instead, they were agricultural and hydrological. To both reap the benefits and ward off the dangers associated with the waters, the Aztecs undertook an enormous construction program of dams, dikes, and diversions, stretching across and around the lakes. These hydraulic engineering schemes were meant to accomplish a variety of goals, such as to “maximize food production, prevent floods in urban centers, segregate brackish waters from fresh ones, import fresh water, and ensure canoe navigability.”²¹ One twenty-two-kilometer dike, established by Lord Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco in 1449, cut Lake Texcoco in half to control floodwaters from the north and maintain proper salinity levels for the chinampas of the western and southern shores.²² Other dikes supported roads and aqueducts on their backs, bringing fresh drinking water from

¹⁹ Vergara, *Fueling Mexico*, 31-32.

²⁰ John P. Bradbury, “PALEOLIMNOLOGY of LAKE TEXCOCO, MEXICO. EVIDENCE from DIATOMS,” *Limnology and Oceanography* 16, no. 2 (March 1971): 180–200, <https://doi.org/10.4319/lo.1971.16.2.0180>.

²¹ Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 15.

²² Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 24.

Chapultepec and Churubusco into the capital.²³ Sluice systems maintained proper water levels for different sectors of the lake, whether for irrigation or storage.

In particular, this entire interlocking system depended on an organized Aztec state, as well as the resources it marshaled through its tributaries. The Triple Alliance was based on tribute: the rulers of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan received labor, resources, and commodities from dependent kingdoms, cities, and provincial elites.²⁴ The state was thus responsible for coordinating the people and resources of settlements throughout the valley and utilizing the hydrological expertise of engineers and administrators. This tributary system enabled the largest of the hydraulic projects in the lake, as artisans, materials, knowledge, and skills were assembled from across the empire to construct them. Engineers oversaw miles of hydraulic construction directed to water their crops, guard against drought, and ward off floods. At the same time, those projects secured non-saline water and irrigation for farming communities in the hinterlands, just as the food produced in those communities sustained the urban centers of the Valley.²⁵ In this way, the interplay between Tenochtitlan and the various subject settlements along the Valley of Mexico was mutually sustaining. The Aztecs thus created a productive water-use regime by fine-tuning their management efforts to maintain the balance of water use between the imperial center and the hinterlands.

The Aztecs could so effectively manage the waters of their environment in the face of chaotic fluctuations and population pressures because of their centuries of experience in dealing with a very particular landscape. This expertise informed an approach to environmental management that emphasized multifunctionality, accepting that water and land “were in constant flux, not just in terms of location but also in terms of qualities.”²⁶ Water was not just an enemy to be tamed and destroyed, as it would be to the Spanish. Neither was it an unequivocal blessing that came with no challenges. The lakes were a source of food, fuel, and fertility, even as sudden droughts threatened crops; they were a valuable transportation network, even as floods could damage urban centers. The Aztecs recognized that their societal productivity was connected to the water cycle, even as water was a threat to lives and livelihoods. This was not a society that

²³ Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America*, 22.

²⁴ Michael E Smith and Lisa Montiel, “The Archaeological Study of Empires and Imperialism in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 20, no. 3 (September 2001): 245–84, <https://doi.org/10.1006/jaar.2000.0372>, 261.

²⁵ Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 24–25.

²⁶ Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 16.

maintained a mythologized benevolent relationship with nature; the Aztecs had harnessed the land and water, not harmonized with it. This attitude toward land and water management came about not because they intrinsically held more reverent views toward nature, but because “they tapped into a broader spectrum of what water in combination with land encompassed,” thanks to that deep-seated experience.²⁷ In short, they understood their landscape as a fluid one and acted accordingly.

POST-CONQUEST MEXICO: A BREAK FROM THE PAST

Where the Aztecs had benefited from centuries of experience with the lacustrine landscape, the Spanish entered completely unfamiliar. Nevertheless, when Hernán Cortés chose the site of Tenochtitlan as the imperial capital of New Spain, he committed the Spanish Empire to managing the same environment according to wholly different perceptions of how nature could and should be interacted with. They prioritized different objectives in agriculture, governance, and urban design and had wholly new colonial incentives pushing different behaviors. This was a fundamental rupture in environmental interaction—one that caused seismic shifts in the Valley of Mexico and its lakes and rivers.

Though the new Mexico City was still located on the water, the Spanish had no great amount of affection for the lakes. They disliked the salinity, and viewed the warm and stagnant waters as unhealthy—even as they discharged their raw sewage into the lake.²⁸ Where the Aztecs had built their houses and monuments with broad foundations, the Spanish favored “tall, heavy stone buildings” that slowly sank the artificial land that Tenochtitlan had been built upon.²⁹ And above all else, the Spanish were averse to the threat of flooding. With their attention focused primarily on the urban centers of the Valley, and with different conceptions of land use, they did not consider nor prioritize the importance of flooding in maintaining the valley’s fertile soil. Historian Vera Candiani describes how a divergence between Spanish goals and Indigenous goals for water management made itself clear in the decades following the Conquest:

“The type of hydraulic engineering that the Spanish city required was in line with this more specialized role of the urban hub, which needed to import water for consumption, to remove it after consumption, and to prevent an overabundance of it from causing floods... Hispanic hydraulic engineering tended to be focused on controlling wet-season events, rather than on controlling

²⁷ Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 18.

²⁸ Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America*, 71.

²⁹ Ibid.

but ensuring the benefits of wet and dry season alternation.”³⁰

The Spanish were unaware of the complex, mutually beneficial relationship between lacustrine urban center and agricultural hinterland settlement when it came to water levels. They appropriated urban water infrastructure to guard against flooding and recognized the structure of individual dams or dikes, but did not have the experience with the broader, lake-spanning system to utilize it effectively.

Interestingly enough, it was also because of the Spanish—inadvertently and advertently—that flooding became a larger concern post-Conquest, since previous water projects decayed and topsoil eroded. One glaring problem was the rapid loss of Indigenous expertise. As waves of disease decimated native populations, so too did the skills related to the construction, upkeep, and use of hydraulic structures decline precipitously.³¹ The demographic collapse also meant that there were simply fewer people available to maintain raised fields, shore up barriers, and patch holes in earthworks. Spanish demands for labor exacerbated this. The labor drafts that previously “had been devoted to the constant upkeep demanded by the waterworks—the cleaning of the canals, the maintenance of causeways and dikes, the monitoring of water levels in different parts of the lake, and the corrective openings and closings of dams—were siphoned off” to various projects within the city.³²

Furthermore, rapid deforestation hurt the land’s capacity to absorb water. In Mexico as a whole, the mining industry was the primary devourer of surrounding forest: fire was vital in multiple parts of the metal extraction process, from loosening ore veins to smelting to refinement.³³ On a local level, the trees of the Valley of Mexico were chopped down for the construction of new building foundations.³⁴ Spanish residents tried to secure their houses on shaky artificial land by driving deeper stakes, and colonial authorities eventually had to put in place regulations against deforestation. This forest removal contributed to soil erosion, aridification, and the spread

³⁰ Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 27.

³¹ Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 29.

³² Barbara E Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City* (Austin University Of Texas Press, 2015), 193.

³³ Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert and David Schecter, “The Environmental Dynamics of a Colonial Fuel-Rush: Silver Mining and Deforestation in New Spain, 1522 to 1810,” *Environmental History* 15, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 94–119, <https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emq007>, 98.

³⁴ Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan*, 194.

of fewer shrub ecologies that were less productive for human purposes.³⁵ The effect certainly was not helped by Spanish efforts to reproduce a European diet in the region, as they imported wheat, cattle, sheep, and goats to eat—all domesticates that required dry land, and offered little reason to maintain canals and aqueducts. In particular, the animal species often expanded across the continents faster than European settlers, causing ecological upheaval, stripping grasslands for pasture, and further eroding the soil.³⁶ In the Valley of Mexico, the imposition of this new agricultural regime resulted in increasing amounts of sediment being washed into the lake.

It is important to note that the new Spanish rulers of Mexico were not preternaturally predisposed to despoil the environment; they did not chop down forests and erode the soils for sport. Candiani writes of a “regnant narrative” surrounding Spanish effects on the environment, where such effects are perceived as universally destructive.³⁷ This narrative, though accurate in some places, is sometimes based on a “moral metric” rather than a rigorous look at cause and effect. Shawn Miller similarly writes that “relationships to nature come out of particular historical experiences as much as broader religious and cultural traditions.”³⁸ It would be a mistake to label the difference in environmental interaction as simply a result of monolithic cultural differences in attitude. The Spanish had lived with relatively sustainable agricultural practices in Europe for centuries, so the question remained: what differed in their interactions with the New World?

Though it may seem obvious, one aspect of that difference was in the nature of the Spanish colonial project. There was a separate, more vicious incentive structure for Spanish overseas conquerors than there might have been for Aztec rulers in native territory. Trans-oceanic colonialism went hand in hand with the opening of new global markets, which meant that producers of commercial goods were no longer limited by local demand. Thus, increasing economies of scale for commodity production, fueled by voracious European demand, required ever-intensifying resource usage.³⁹ Monocultural crop cultivation for commerce, centering around crops such as sugar, brazilwood, and tobacco, became

³⁵ Studnicki-Gizbert and Schecter, “The Environmental Dynamics of a Colonial Fuel-Rush,” 111.

³⁶ Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan*, 194.

³⁷ Vera S. Candiani, “Social and Ecological Impacts of Conquest and Colonization in New Spain,” ed. William Beezley, *The Oxford Handbook of Mexican History*, January 13, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190699192.013.3>, 2.

³⁸ Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America*, 76.

³⁹ Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America*, 80.

both viable and profitable. The presence of abundant “vacant” land for settlement—sometimes depopulated as a result of the demographic collapse, but often with persistent Indigenous populations—meant that there was less reason to invest in sustaining a particular plot of land. And of course, colonists did not identify with the New World’s land; they identified as Spanish or Portuguese, and often sought to return home with newfound riches, rather than making the colonies a permanent home.

Thus, the Spanish approached the unfamiliar lakes of the Valley of Mexico with attitudes and incentives that were sharply discontinuous from Indigenous traditions. This rupture in environmental alteration uprooted landscapes to support new modes of production and patterns of land use, crippling the productivity associated with Indigenous traditions. Massive floods threatened Mexico City multiple times throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Dams and dikes across the lakes fell into disarray, leading to the diffusion of increasingly brackish water. The diversion of river channels compromised riverfront environments by preventing moisture and nutrient delivery, diminishing vegetation growth, and hurting local aquatic ecosystems.⁴⁰ Chinampas were abandoned as collapsing Indigenous populations “retrenched on their more productive lands,” leading to Spanish acquisition and consolidation of lakeshore territories.⁴¹ Over the next several centuries, colonial authorities struggled to drain the lakes, not succeeding until the Porfiriato—drying up many of the areas where chinampas had persisted through the colonial era in the process.⁴²

CONCLUSION

It is clear that geography was a constant for neither the Aztecs nor the Spanish. Before and after the Conquest, both utilized different methods to harness the waters of the Valley of Mexico for specific purposes. Geography, then, was a time-variant variable, mediated by environmental understanding, technical knowledge, and political power. Importantly, Indigenous traditions did not vanish with the Conquest; in many cases, they survived in a “patchwork” of areas or were appropriated for Spanish usage.⁴³ But more and more throughout the colonial period, the Spanish-dominated landscapes of the Valley of Mexico were placed on a path emphasizing specific—dry—modes of production, even where a millennium of Indigenous environmental alterations had optimized for the exact opposite conditions.

⁴⁰ Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 293.

⁴¹ Candiani, “Social and Ecological Impacts of Conquest,” 11.

⁴² Joseph Sorrentino, 2019. “Can the Chinampas Survive?” *Commonweal* 146 (14): 38–43, 40–41.

⁴³ Candiani, “Social and Ecological Impacts of Conquest,” 9.

This rupture came about not because of unnatural malice or anomalous acquisitiveness, but simply the Spanish attempt to harness a landscape they were unfamiliar with using principles and priorities from a wholly different environment. My conclusion, then, is more analogous to John Coatsworth's position in the debate over geography's importance in Latin American development; Coatsworth puts aside what he views as presentist concerns over inequality and exploitative institutions, dismissing both camps as too prone to modern-day moralizing.⁴⁴ Instead, scholars should recognize that both competing claims are overly rigid and make sweeping generalizations in their explanations.

The Aztecs, thanks to their expertise with the particularities of the Valley of Mexico's waters, were able to shape the basin in a way that enhanced the productivity that could be derived from those waters. The Conquest, meanwhile, forcibly supplanted the region's dominant philosophy of environmental alteration. It was changed from a fluid one, where water and land fluctuation informed lifestyles and production methods, into a static one, where only dry land held utility and water was either an input or an annoyance. This rupture, regardless of intentions, fundamentally disrupted the Valley's systems of agriculture, land use, and water control. While not a complete explanation for the "reversal of fortune," it was certainly a redirection, and Mexico City would be defined in the following centuries by the struggle to reshape the landscape in support of an alternate mode of economic organization that Indigenous peoples had not cultivated it for.

⁴⁴ John H. Coatsworth, "Inequality, Institutions and Economic Growth in Latin America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40, no. 03 (July 17, 2008): 545–69, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022216x08004689>.

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