

In Memory of an Outstanding Philosopher and Historian, Seyed Javad Tabatabai

On 28 February 2023, an outstanding philosopher, historian, political scientist, Professor Emeritus, and Vice Dean of the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tehran passed away.

Seyed Javad Tabatabai, an Iranian Azari, was born in Tabriz on December 14, 1945, and died on the 28 of February 2023, at Hoag Hospital Irvine, Irvine, California, United States. His father was a merchant in the Bazaar of Tabriz. He graduated from the University of Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne with a dissertation on Hegel's political philosophy. After pursuing studies in theology, law, and philosophy, he earned his Ph.D. (Doctorat d'État) in political philosophy from the University of Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne; he returned to Iran and worked at the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tehran. He was a Professor Emeritus and Vice Dean of the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tehran. He has been a guest fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg (ZU) Berlin and the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs at Syracuse University. In addition, Dr. Tabatabai has published a dozen books on the history of political ideas in Europe and Iran. On 14 July 1995, he was decorated as a Knight of the Ordre des Palmes Académiques.

As a Professor at the University of Tehran, he contributed extensively to debating history, modernity, and political thoughts [*Tabatabai 1993/1994*]. He worked for several years at the University of Tehran before he left Iran and started his research activities in Germany and the United States of America. Dr. Tabatabai's life was devoted to Philosophy, History, and Political ideas, and he contributed immensely to developing these subjects. He began his research on the history, philosophy, and political thoughts in the early 80s and developed a consistent theory about Iran and its relationship to modernity. In addition, more than 30 years of work by Professor Tabatabai was associated with mitigating the consequences of the pseudo-social sciences produced during Iran's confrontation with modernity by the pseudo-intellectuals. He was the author of numerous books and articles discussing the false recommendations of these intellectuals on history, philosophy, and society that were contaminated with their ideologies. Dr. Tabatabai argues that ideologists block acquiring knowledge and explain that pseudo-intellectuals distort past and present relationships. However, the attention of ideologues to the past and future, which they compare to the requirements of the current political struggle, is not to explain its relationship with the present.

When we discuss the scientific works of Dr. Tabatabai to study history and society, we can distinguish three different periods but somewhat related ones. During the first period of his intellectual activities, we witness a trilogy of the history of political thoughts, the decline of political ideas in Iran, and studying the works of Nizam al-Mulk. Then, with

his work on Ibn “Khalidun and social science” [Tabatabai 1995]. Dr. Tabatabai gradually turned his attention to the subject of the downfall and decline in the history of Iran. In the second period of his intellectual project, Professor Tabatabai produced many books reflecting upon Iranian history and the project of Iranian modernity. In his study of Nizam al-Mulk [Tabatabai 1996], a Persian scholar, jurist, political philosopher, and Vizier (minister) of the Seljuk Empire, he elaborated on Nizam al-Mulks position within the empire and his political philosophy in the light of the political processes undergoing in contemporary Iran. Nizam al-Mulk became the de facto ruler of the kingdom effectively for 20 years after the assassination of Sultan Alp Arslan in 1072. He was serving as the archetypal “good vizier” and was viewed by many historians as “the most critical statesman in Islamic and Iranian history. The policies implemented by Nizam al-Mulk would remain the essential foundation for administrative state structures in the Muslim world up until the 20th Century. Nizam al-Mulk is also known as the Iranian Niccolò Machiavelli. Dr. Tabatabai’s study of Henry Corbin’s work and his translation of his book shed more light on the Islamic philosophy that was under a cloud of doubt and uncertainty for a long time [Corbin 1986].

The focal attention of Dr. Tabatabai in the second period of intellectual activity was to formulate a consistent theory of “decline”. He explained the failure of modernity in Iran from the perspective of the theory of “decline” [Tabatabai 2003]. In the third period of his intellectual effort, Dr. Tabatabai elaborated on the basic theoretical subjects such as nation, constitutional rights, and ethnic and language variation in the context of Iranian-ness [Tabatabai 2006/2007]. In developing the line of argument further, Dr. Tabatabai, from the perspective of philosophical reflection and rationalism in Iran’s historical destiny, a poet was of particular importance for him, Ferdowsi Tosi, the poet of “Melli” epic, who was the eternal renewer of Iranshahri’s (cultural Iranian-ness) wisdom in Persian literature and with eloquent language and expression. Policy writing was the first trend that flowed from the source of Iranshahri (cultural Iranian-ness) thought at the dawn of the Islamic period of culture and civilization in Iran and continued in various forms until the introduction of the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 and even beyond that [Tabatabai 2016/2019].

Tabatabai, a leading theorist and historian of political thought in Iran, presented a solid theory regarding the causes of the decline of political thought and society in Iran over the last few centuries. His ideas on Iranian decline have affected the intellectual debates on modernity and democracy in Iran. Tabatabai’s career-long research revolved around this question: “What conditions made modernity possible in Europe and led to its abnegation in Iran?” He answered this question by adopting a “Hegelian approach” that privileged a philosophical reading of history on the assumption that philosophical thought is the foundation and essence of any political community and the basis for any critical analysis. Dr. Tabatabai’s substantive writings on the question of modernity and the rule of law in an Islamic society like Iran benefit not only the respective country and the Orientalist debate on Islamic societies but also Western societies. Discussions and themes pursued by Dr. Tabatabai shed light on the tension between Islam and the West and a new way of approaching the issue of modernity in Islamic society that is confused with the politics of rage and hate. Professor Tabatabai suggests an intellectual project disjoining politics from anger and hates in Islamic societies striving to deal with tradition and modernity. Thus, it is an excellent opportunity to combine the significant strands of Tabatabai’s theoretical

work into a coherent whole and make it accessible to the broadest possible audience of Western scholars.

Dr. Tabatabai was a prolific scholar, and people around him were always attracted by his sense of humor, openness, kindness, and wish to assist students facing problems. His pleasant personality was contagious to everyone he met. Therefore, it is heartbreaking for the community of Iranian scholars to announce the death of this outstanding philosopher, historian, and political scientist.

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¹ The transliteration system used in the bibliography is a simplified version adapted from the standard set by the International Journal of Middle East Studies. All the diacritical marks have been omitted. All vowels are transliterated as pronounced in Persian.