

August 11, 2023

Dear colleagues,

It is my pleasure to recommend Sivan Balslev for an Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Scholar Award at the University of Toronto.

Balslev is the author of *Iranian Masculinities: Gender and Sexuality in Late Qajar and Early Pahlavi Iran*, a book that has impressed me for more than one reason.

First, its subject matter. While scores of scholars have studied women and the women's question in Iran, fewer have tackled the issue of masculinity. If they have, they have concentrated on a certain aspects or types of masculinity. Balslev's book is to the best of my knowledge the first book-length study of the topic. She concentrates on a crucial era in modern Iranian history, i.e. the period from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, when educated Iranians enthusiastically adopted aspects of European culture, setting the stage for the culture wars that have characterized Iranian society since the 1970s. The thematic span is equally wide: individual chapters deal with education, marriage, clothing, scouting, physical education, a juxtaposition of themes that strikes me as original as it is convincing. In each chapter she painstakingly documents and analyzes the changes brought about in both dominant and subaltern conceptions of masculinity as a result of ongoing efforts to modernize the country. Many of the issues she raises have never been studied before, and if they have, not in such depth.

Second, the wealth of the primary source material she uses, which more than compensates for an Israeli scholar's inability to do field work in Iran. Two of these sources stand out: photographs and newspapers. Balslev has left no stone unturned to locate revealing photographs, and interprets them with a creative minuteness that I have never encountered before. As for old newspapers, which are hard to find to begin with, she pays attention to articles and letters to the editor that previous scholars have largely overlooked, so as to document the debates that were carried out around issues of manhood and masculinity in this transitional era of Iranian history. She reads between the lines and against the grain to extract new meaning from her sources.

This brings me to the third point: her mastery of the Persian language. Nineteenth-century Persian is not easy to understand even for a native speaker like myself, and it is quite obvious that Balslev put enormous effort into deciphering the sometimes arcane prose of the old newspaper articles and books she cites. I am a stickler for transliteration, and I did not find a single case of erroneous transliteration.

In sum, *Iranian Masculinities* is about much more than what one would expect from the title. Balslev takes pains to put her discussion of evolving conceptions of manhood into the wider socio-political context, and for this reason the book can also be read as a cultural history of Iranian society.

Balslev's scholarship since the publication of her book has continued in this vein. In her soon-to-be-published articles on children as political actors during the Constitutional Revolution, child labor in the Iranian carpet industry, and scouting under Reza Shah, she skillfully interweaves social, cultural, and intellectual history while placing the case of Iran in international context.

During her stay at the University of Toronto, Balslev plans to work on a second monograph, a history of children and childhood in Iran circa 1870-1970. In view of her record as a scholar, I am sure that she will be able to advance her book project considerably while in Canada. Her application for an Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Scholar Award has my enthusiastic support, as I see an excellent fit between her research interests and the resources the University of Toronto offers, especially the unique Tavakoli archive. Let me conclude by adding that my recommendation is not based on intellectual prowess alone. I have frequently interacted with Balslev over the last few years and found her to be a very pleasant person and a helpful and always cheerful colleague. You will all enjoy her company.

Yours sincerely,

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