

With the Support of the Jahangir and Eleanor Amuzegar Chair in Iranian Studies

Bilingual Lecture Series on Iran

present

Two Public Lectures by Rasmus Christian Elling, Copenhagen University

The Oil City in an Age of Jazz: Nostalgia and Modernity in Abadan, Iran

شهر نفت در عصر جاز: مدرنیته و نوستالژی در آبادان
(Shahr-e naft dar asr-e jâz: moderniteh va nostalgzi dar âbâdân)

Sunday, June 1, 2014 | 4:00 PM - 6:00 PM | 121 Dodd Hall
*LECTURE IN PERSIAN

Looking for Ethnicity in Iran

Monday, June 2, 2014 | 2:00 PM | 10383 Bunche Hall
*LECTURE IN ENGLISH



The Oil City in an Age of Jazz: Nostalgia and Modernity in Abadan, Iran. We often hear how oil is both a blessing and a curse that engenders wealth for the select few and misery for many: black gold for the elites and ‘the devil’s excrement’ for the masses. The discovery and extraction of oil entails environmental pollution, political violence and economic corruption, it feeds dictatorships and smothers democratic forces. To nuance this common narrative on oil, the present paper instead focuses on the generative and creative powers of oil, and its intersection with culture and memory in oil-producing societies. The discovery of oil in south-western Iran in 1908 brought about not only the world’s biggest refinery in the city of Abadan near the Persian Gulf, but also a unique urban society and culture under the aegis of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Corporation. Around the refinery, one of the Middle East’s most modern and cosmopolitan cities took shape. Today however, Abadan is a mere shadow of its former self: the turmoil of the 1978-9 revolution was quickly followed by the devastating Iran-Iraq War, and the city has never fully recovered. Abadanis today remember and romanticize the city’s Golden Age through the publication of memoirs and local histories, through websites and popular societies, and through the collection of visual material and memorabilia by amateur historians and enthusiasts. In this paper, I will explore how this nostalgia is connected to ideas of modernization and modernity in Iran more broadly.

Looking for Ethnicity in Iran. The question of ethnic and national identity constitutes a highly complex and controversial topic in Iran, and only recently have scholars questioned Persian-centrist, majoritarian or nationalist bias in Iranian historiography and research. One example of this critique is in Rasmus Christian Elling's recent book "Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). A key finding from this book is that while it can be more or less easy to identify particular ethnic or religious minorities, it is not altogether easy to identify a particular majority in Iran: indeed, who are the Persians? How do Iranian scholars challenge Western frameworks for studying ethnicity? And why are many Iranians opposed to the use of certain terminology such as "minority"? In this talk, Elling will discuss theoretical and practical aspects of studying ethnicity in Iran today and in history.

Rasmus Christian Elling is Assistant Professor at the Institute for Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies (TORS) at Copenhagen University, Denmark. He holds a PhD in Iranian Studies and has studied and lived in Iran, Istanbul and New York. His PhD has been published as 'Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini' (Palgrave Macmillan 2013), and he has published several articles on ethnicity, nationalism and identity politics in post-revolutionary Iran. In 2011-2012, he worked as a Research Associate at The School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, and he is associated with the Anglo-German research project 'Urban Violence in the Middle East'. His current research focus is on the urban history of Abadan, a topic on which he is writing a book. Rasmus Christian Elling teaches Middle Eastern and Iranian history, politics and sociology at Copenhagen University, and is fluent in Persian.

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