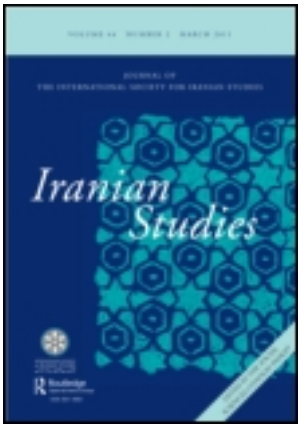

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H. E. Chehabi

Diversity at Alborz

This essay discusses the various dimensions of diversity at Alborz, both when it was run by the American missionaries and when it was under Iranian management. In the first part, the ascriptive traits of human beings are the object of the analysis: gender, race, language, religion and class. In both periods Alborz was characterized by its openness to Iranians of different religious backgrounds, both teachers and students. The second part of the essay discusses the variety of the educational experience enjoyed by students, and concludes that it gradually diminished, as education came increasingly to be defined as instruction and extracurricular activities were reduced after the mid-1960s.

Max Weber writes that scholars "are personally interested in [a problem] because certain concrete situations seem incompatible with, or seem to threaten, the realization of certain ideal values in which they believe."[1] This insight applies to my interest in Alborz, for which I harbor great affection, although I am also critical of certain aspects of it. I attended Alborz High School from 9th to 12th grade, entering in 1967 and graduating in the mathematics track in 1971. There can be no doubt that the topic I have chosen ultimately derives from my own positionality outside the mainstream of Iranian society, a situation that allowed me to experience Alborz as an insider while simultaneously observing it with the detachment of an outsider. But I am in addition a historian, and so the Alborz of Samuel Jordan is also of concern to me. In this article I shall try to address both the Alborz of Jordan and that of Mojtahedi, in the hope of teasing out both continuities and ruptures, for much of the existing scholarship on Alborz focuses on either the Jordan or the Mojtahedi periods, without making any effort to link the two.[2] Given the centrality of Alborz to Iran's educational system under both administrations, it is possible to draw inferences that I hope will shed light on recent Iranian history more generally.

Diversity at an educational institution can be looked at on two levels. First, there is the human diversity among students, teachers and staff; second, there is the diversity of subjects taught and talents fostered. I will take them up in this order.

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[1]"'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," in Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and ed. by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Shils (New York, 1949), 61.

[2]I am not normally given to such "baring of the soul," but in the case at hand some clarification is called for, as I am trying to write academically about a subject, the analysis of which largely depends on evidence constituted by my own recollections.

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Ascriptive Diversity

A good way to organize one's thoughts on the issue of human diversity is to look at those dimensions of a person's identity with which he or she is born, the so-called ascriptive traits. One can conveniently study them by aligning them on a spectrum proceeding from the biological to the social, looking successively at gender, race, ethnicity, religion and class.[3]

Gender. The Alborz I knew constituted a gendered space if there ever was one. The only women one might encounter were the wives or daughters of those employees who also lived on the sprawling campus, for instance in the apartment buildings beyond the great sports hall; such encounters were very rare. Alborz was an intensely homosocial milieu, and I wonder whether the bonds that unite its graduates would be so intense and long-lasting if Alborz had been coeducational.

Matters had not always been so. In Dr. Jordan's times, the wives of faculty members, such as Mrs. Jordan and Mrs. Boyce, played a major role in the running of the school, and also taught classes. In fact, Mrs. Jordan laid the foundation of Alborz's celebrated boarding department when she took into her home a number of boys whose parents lived outside Tehran. Moreover, in the all-too-short period in which Alborz was a degree-granting college, four women graduated with BA degrees. With the departure of the missionaries in 1940 matters changed, and Alborz became an all-male preserve.

In the 1970s the situation began to change a little. There were rumors that the school might merge with Nurbaksh, a nearby girls' high school, or admit female students independently. When the educational system was changed so as to create a middle school (*Rahnama'i*) going from 6th to 8th grade, the boys entering Alborz were so young that it was deemed safe to employ a number of women teachers for the lowest grades; by the academic year 1974–75 six women taught at Alborz, and one woman was a *nazem* (the staff member in charge of discipline for one age cohort).[4] But these timid developments came to an abrupt end when the revolution of 1979 ushered in a new era in which the state attempted (not very successfully) to deepen gender segregation in Iranian society.

It would of course be ridiculous to criticize Alborz for not having been a coeducational high school after 1940. It was, after all, a public school, and the state educational system, which had briefly experimented with coeducation in the late 1930s, mandated gender segregation of the student body after Reza Shah's abdication in 1941. Even among private high schools, coeducational ones were very few in number, limited to foreign schools and, much later, Iran Zamin.

At the same time, I do not think it is altogether trivial that an educational institution that self-consciously saw itself as the nursery of Iran's educated elite excluded

[3]I take these criteria and their order from Heinz Kloss, *Grundfragen der Ethnopolitik im 20. Jahrhundert: Die Sprachgemeinschaften zwischen Recht und Gewalt* (Vienna, 1969), 23.

[4]Mir Asadollah Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz va shabanehruzi-ye an* (Tehran, 1378/1999), 41 and 216.

as a matter of principle half the country's population from enrolling. The positive lesson I would like to draw from this brief discussion is that we should take a closer look at the schools that were created for the other half of the population. The same Protestant missionaries who established Alborz also set up the Iran Bethel School for girls, which became Nurbakhsh (Reza Shah-e Kabir) after 1940.[5] The links between the two survived the nationalization when Mohammad Vahid Tonekaboni became principal of both Nurbakhsh and Alborz,[6] but this arrangement lasted for only one year.

Race. Iranians have been taught that they belong to the "Aryan" race, and most have by now internalized this myth. While it has little basis in reality, very few, if any, Asiatic Turkmens from the northeast or Afro-Iranians[7] from the south attended Alborz, making this criterion of diversity quite literally inapplicable. But the very absence of Iranians of color at Alborz points to the marginality of the inhabitants of the periphery, and the socio-economic inequalities among the country's regions that underlie this marginality.

Ethnicity. Iran is a multi-ethnic country, and so is the capital Tehran, which has over the years attracted the cream of provincial society, given that in the tightly centralized Iranian state opportunities for social advancement have been located mainly at the center. For this very reason many provincial elite families chose to send their sons to Alborz's boarding school.

Under Jordan "all boarders were duty bound to tell each other about ... their home town or province, so that all would get acquainted with their homeland and learn that Lur, Kurd, Arab and Qashqai were all from the same land and the products of the same civilization."[8] This custom was maintained in the early years of the Iranian administration.[9]

Both the teachers and the students at Alborz reflected the ethnic diversity of Iranian society; in fact, no one exemplified it more than Mojtahedi himself, a talented Gilak from Lahijan who made his entire career in Tehran. His accent was forever parodied, and he is one of the few figures in Iranian history who begat his own genre of jokes. These *sounded* like Rashti jokes, but were based on a very *different* premise, namely his supposed propensity to take things literally.[10] At the same

[5]Monica M. Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran* (Costa Mesa, CA, 2001), 123. See also Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi, "From Evangelizing to Modernizing Iranians," *Iranian Studies*, xxxxi (2008): 213–40.

[6]Habib Lajvardi [Ladjevardi], ed., *Khaterat-e Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 31 n.35.

[7]The very existence of Afro-Iranians has only recently been perceived by a few Iranians. See Behnaz A. Mirzai, "African Presence in Iran: Identity and its Reconstruction in the 19th and 20th Centuries," *Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outremer*, lxxxix, nos. 336–37 (2002): 229–46.

[8]Shokrollah Naser, *Ravesh-e Doktor Jordan* (Tehran, 1945), 49–50.

[9]Ali Naqi Alikhani, "Zendegani-ye ma dar shabanehruzi," quoted in Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz*, 150. The author graduated from Alborz in the literary track in 1946 and later became minister of economics and president of the University of Tehran.

[10]Two examples: Mojtahedi is invited to attend the opening of the new road between Rasht and Lahijan. At the end of the ceremony, as he says goodbye to the minister of transportation, he tells

time, Mojtahedi's long tenure as director of Alborz and the presence at the school of so many teachers from outside the capital show that at the end of the day the system *was* meritocratic, and that there was no discrimination on account of ethnic background.

Still, there is more to the story. The leitmotiv of the Mojtahedi jokes, his literal-mindedness, illustrates the well-known fact that Tehranis regard provincials who speak Persian with a non-Tehrani accent as simple-minded and ultimately funny—as fair game for jokes. If the almighty Mojtahedi was the butt of ethnic jokes, one can imagine how provincial teachers and pupils fared. Teachers of course had their institutional authority to back them up, but I remember more than one teacher who failed to generate adequate respect and proper manners among his students at least in part because he spoke Persian with a *Torki* or a *Rashti* accent. How much more cruel must the situation have been for boys from the provinces. Adolescents are a famously conformist lot, forever eager to draw sharp boundaries between "cool" and "uncool," and, at least in the years I attended Alborz, few things were more "uncool" than speaking with a provincial inflection. Those who made fun of provincials would probably have insisted that it was all good-natured and innocent, but I wonder whether those on the receiving end of this innocent good-naturedness saw it thus. The way ethnic diversity was handled at Alborz was indicative of the Persocentricity and Tehranocentricity that pervaded Iranian society, which may or may not explain why after the revolution so many members of the new elite, beginning with the founder of the new regime, proudly used a *nisba* as a surname or in addition to it, so as to advertise the fact that their roots lay in the heartland beyond the capital.

Religion. As a school founded by Christian missionaries in a predominantly Muslim country, religious diversity was in a way part of Alborz's DNA; the first pupils enrolled were Armenian and Jewish.[11] The American Presbyterians who founded such centers of excellence as Syrian Protestant College (which later changed its name to American University of Beirut), Roberts College in Istanbul and Alborz College in Tehran[12] prided themselves on their willingness to take students from all religious backgrounds, teaching them to accept each other as equals.[13] As Jordan wrote:

> In Iran the different races—Moslems, Zoroastrians, Armenians, Assyrians, Jews—have had separate schools. The result has been suspicion, distrust, intolerances, and enmity. We have always enrolled students of all races, religions, and ranks of society without discrimination. They have shared the same seats, sat beside each other in

him: "it's very nice to have a road from Rasht to Lahijan. Now perhaps you could build one from Lahijan to Rasht." And: Mojtahedi goes to the bazaar to buy his daughter's trousseau. He finds some nice glasses, but something about them bothers him. So he asks the sales clerk: "why are they open at the bottom?"

[11]Arthur C. Boyce, "Alborz College of Teheran and Dr. Samuel Martin Jordan Founder and President," in Ali Pasha Saleh, ed., *Cultural Ties Between Iran and the United States* (Tehran, 1976), 176.

[12]Which might have become the "American University of Tehran" had it not been taken over by the Iranian state.

[13]For the SPC/AUB see H. E. Chehabi et al., *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years* (London, 2006), 16–18.

> classrooms, ... and the result has been that all have learned to be friends, and to cooperate enthusiastically in service of their country.[14]

To show that this was not an empty boast, let me quote from two Muslim graduates of these schools. The scholar-statesman Sadeq Rezazadeh Shafaq wrote about the Memorial School he attended in Tabriz at the beginning of the twentieth century:

> The Memorial School was one of the two foreign schools in Tabriz, (the other being [the] Catholic French School) where Muslims and Christians (i.e., Iranian Armenians) studied together. There it was that I realized for the first time that there were other faiths than mine, learning gradually to tolerate them.[15]

Sattareh Farman Farmaian, who attended the girls' school in Tehran, had a similar experience:

> The school, which more Moslem girls had also begun attending in recent years, was a magnet for the daughters of well-off minority families from all over Iran, and I now found myself sitting side by side not only with Moslems and several of my classmates from Tarbiyat [i.e., Baha'is], but with Iranians who were also Armenian Christians or Zoroastrians or Jews, with Kurds and Azeris and Bakhtiari chieftains' daughters.[16]

As for Alborz itself, a graduate remembers:

> Alborz students were no religious fanatics. One of Dr. Jordan's very useful ideas was the inculcation of a sense of patriotism and nationality in the students. ... There were Turks, Lurs, Kurds, Arabs, Chaldaeans, Armenians, Americans, and Indian Muslims who lived together, ate at the same tables, and slept in the same rooms.[17]

We can see the attractiveness of Alborz for non-Muslims in Iran from the fact that of the graduates of the year 1941, 30 percent in the scientific (*'elmi*) track (15 out of 49) and 27 percent (27 out of 100) in the commercial (*bazargani*) had obviously non-Muslim names, while not a single graduate in the literary track had a non-Muslim name.[18] In subsequent years the percentage of non-Muslims declined, as the total numbers of students shot up drastically.

[14]Samuel M. Jordan, "The Only Christian College in Iran," *The Missionary Review of the World*, lviii (1935): 394.

[15]S. Rezazadeh Shafaq, *Howard Baskerville: The Story of an American who Died in the Cause of Iranian Freedom and Independence* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 2. The text was originally written in 1959.

[16]Sattareh Farman Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from Her Father's Harem Through the Islamic Revolution* (New York, 1992), 59.

[17]Naser, *Ravesh-e Doktor Jordan*, 49.

Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi continued Jordan's policy regarding those pupils whose religious background differed from that of the majority. Let me share a bit of anecdotal evidence from the 1970s. The son of Armenian friends of my parents, a boy by the name of Abrahamian, was enrolled at Alborz. At the beginning of the school year the teacher was absent for some reason, and Mojtahedi himself went to teach the first class. He went down the list of students to choose a class monitor (*mobser*[19]) and obviously the first name he saw was Abrahamian. He called out this student's name and appointed him on the spot without going down the list—an act of affirmative action which went against customary practice in a country whose official religion teaches that non-Muslims must not acquire authority over Muslims. Another example of Mojtahedi's liberal-mindedness concerns a Sunni former classmate of mine. He recounts that his religion teacher, a cleric, kept insulting the two caliphs whose memory is dear to Sunnis, Abu Bakr and Omar; as a result my classmate skipped religion class and got a bad grade at the end of the year. This prevented his automatic registration the following autumn, and he had to see Mojtahedi to sort matters out. When he explained why he had skipped class, Mojtahedi accepted the explanation without comment and allowed him to register.[20]

Religious pluralism was also the norm at the level of teachers and staff. One man who was a living link between the Jordan and the Mojtahedi administrations was Tirdad Barseqiyan, an Armenian graduate of Alborz College who taught English and later took charge of Alborz's finances, a position he held until 1978.[21] As for teachers, almost all of Iran's religions were represented on the faculty of Alborz. The original staff of Alborz consisted of Presbyterian missionaries, of course, but when they were replaced by Iranians after the takeover of the school in 1940, religious diversity prevailed. Christian teachers included Armenians such as Arshavir Hovsepian and Assyrians such as David Pira; Jewish teachers included Baruch Berukhim, a physics teacher who was the main speaker when alumni in San Francisco commemorated Mojtahedi after his death. A number of Baha'is also taught at Alborz, most famously the longtime physics teacher Misaqollah Ma'ani. Mojtahedi also saw to it that non-Muslims were represented on the *Anjoman-e Khaneh va Madreseh*, the equivalent of the Parent–Teacher Association, that allowed parents to be involved in the affairs of the school.[22]

How did Mojtahedi acquire this *laïque* sensibility, remarkable for one who, as his surname indicates, was a scion of a clerical family? Perhaps it was because he grew up in Gilan, a province known for its progressive politics, or perhaps also because he spent his formative years in the fiercely *laïque* French Third Republic, where his sojourn (1931–38) coincided with the ascendancy of progressive parties, culminating in the Popular Front government of 1936. His French wife may have been an influence as

[18]Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz*, 348–54. Since most Baha'is and quite a few Jews do not have obviously non-Muslim names, these numbers probably underreport the total number of non-Muslims.

[19]A student who helps teachers to maintain order and thus enjoys a degree of authority over other students.

[20]Zahed Sheikholeslami, telephone conversation, 1 October 2009.

[21]Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz*, 52–53.

[22]Lajvardi, *Khaterat-e Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi*, 65–66.

well. At any rate, the progressive and non-discriminatory policies of Jordan and the Presbyterian missionaries were continued at Alborz until the revolution of 1979 ushered in an age of institutionalized religious discrimination.[23] Let it be recorded that of the Baha'is who throughout the years had taught at Alborz, four were killed by the regime after the revolution.[24]

Class. Until relatively recently education was the privilege of the upper classes in most of Iran. Jordan was proud that his school educated the sons of the elite. In 1929 he wrote:

> One of the remarkable things about the American College of Teheran, and especially the boarding department, is the class of students enrolled. While boys of every grade of society and of every race and creed are accepted without discrimination, an unusually large percentage of them are the children of the nobility and other influential families of the country. Many are the sons of government officials. Among them are the sons of prime ministers and other cabinet ministers; of royal princes; of members of Majles (Congress), of governors of provinces, and other influential men—boys who, whether educated or not, will in future years be among the rulers of Persia.[25]

But he was equally proud of that fact many boys were distinctly non-elite, and that, at least within the confines of the school, all were equals:

> In 1928 three sons of one of the greatest princes in Iran were graduated from our Junior College. When one of them was about fifteen years old he was playing in a football match one afternoon. He and another boy collided and they proceeded to scrap with all the vim and enthusiasm that American boys would show under like circumstances. A cousin on the side lines turned to the servant of the princes, who had come with their carriage to take them home, and exclaimed, "What a good-for-nothing servant you are! You saw the son of His Imperial Highness struck by the son of nobody and you did not avenge the insult!" The young prince overheard the remark. He stalked over to his servant and laid down the law thus, "When one of my friends and I have a difference of opinion on the football field, you understand it is a friendly fight. If you ever dare to interfere and strike one of my friends, I will report it to ... my father, and you will get bastinadoed." He then turned back and resumed the game.[26]

To make the enrollment of poorer boys possible, he overcharged the wealthy parents: "We have charged nine sons of the wealthy and well-to-do enough to

[23]For a brief discussion see H. E. Chehabi, "Religious Apartheid in Iran," *Viewpoints*, *Special Edition: The Iranian Revolution at 30* (2009): 119–21.

[24]These were Bozorg 'Alavian (?), Abdolhoseyn Taslimi (physics), Alimorad Davudi (philosophy?), and Ruhi Rowshani (history and geography).

[25]S. M. Jordan "'The Power Plant in Persia,'" *Women and Missions* (December 1929): 329.

[26]Jordan, "The Only Christian College in Iran," 394.

support ten. This has met with the full approval of the patrons. In this way we have been able to educate a number of worthy poor boys."[27]

When the number of students increased dramatically under the Mojtahedi administration, the student body became more diverse in terms of class. While many sons of the elite continued to attend Alborz,[28] no one was admitted solely for belonging to Iran's ruling class. I recall an occasion when Farideh Diba, the mother of Empress Farah, took the trouble personally to visit Mojtahedi's home across the street from the Alborz football field to plead the case of a particular boy, an effort which met with Mojtahedi's polite but firm refusal.[29]

While the vast majority of Alborz's students belonged to the middle or upper classes, talented boys from poorer backgrounds could gain admission. According to Mojtahedi, of the 5,500 students enrolled in 1971, 550 did not pay tuition (and many of these received pocket money as well), and of the 240 boarders, 24 paid no fees.[30] In other words, under Mojtahedi the 10 percent ratio of students who did not have to pay tuition that Jordan had instituted was maintained and financed in the same way, namely by voluntary contributions from those parents who *did* pay tuition, for as of 1951 the school's operating budget no longer received any funds from the state.[31]

Given the status of Alborz in Iranian society and the presence there of so many sons of the elite, poor students could be expected to feel self-conscious and ill at ease. But Mojtahedi endeavored to reduce their malaise by ensuring that they enjoyed the same material goods as the rest of the student body. He would ask well-to-do fathers to donate money, which he would then distribute among poor fathers so that they could take their sons to a draper on nearby Shahreza (now Enqelab) street; the sons would choose material, which they would then take to a tailor to be fitted for their *Nowruz* suits, never suspecting that it was not their own fathers who were paying for the material and the tailor.[32]

The above discussion shows that throughout its pre-revolutionary history Alborz was, by the standards of Iranian society, a remarkably diverse and pluralist institution insofar as ascriptive traits are concerned. Let us now turn to the non-ascriptive dimensions of the educational experience Alborz offered, namely the variety of subject taught, the balance between instruction and education, and the way Alborz handled diversity in achievement among its students.

[27]Jordan, "The Only Christian College in Iran," 395.

[28]The corollary of this is that Alborz graduates were over-represented in the country's power elite under the Shah. Marvin Zonis, *The Political Elite of Iran* (Princeton, NJ, 1971), 168–69.

[29]I heard the story from my mother, who had heard it from Mrs. Mojtahedi, with whom she had a weekly coffeeklatsch.

[30]Lajvardi, *Khaterat-e Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi*, 62. Sons of teachers did not pay tuition either.

[31]Lajvardi, *Khaterat-e Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi*, 30, 57, 65.

[32]Lajvardi, *Khaterat-e Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi*, 57, 61–62.

Diversity in the Educational Experience at Alborz

Diversity of subjects. The variety of subjects taught at the early American schools in Iran was meant to create rounded and well-balanced personalities. Literature, the sciences, history, the arts and physical education all had their place. In addition, laboratories helped students visualize the theoretical material learnt in class.

In 1928 the centralizing Iranian state introduced a uniform curriculum and standard textbooks for all schools operating in Iran, private or public.[33] Foreign missionary schools were not exempted; in addition to having to desist from teaching the Bible to Muslims (for whom Muslim religious classes had to be provided), they had to prepare pupils for examinations administered countrywide. In Arthur Boyce's opinion, this led to a situation where the examinations acquired greater importance than developing personality:

> In the years following, "passing the examinations" was the only object of education in the minds of most students. Students became increasingly unwilling to give time to anything which did not prepare them for the examinations. Presenting students for examinations meant that we had to cover carefully the details of the course of study to be sure that our students were prepared, especially at the end of the third, sixth and later fifth classes of the middle school. We were not prevented, however, from adding other details even if we could not subtract anything.[34]

The educational philosophy of the Americans did not meet with the unconditional approval of Jordan's Iranian successors. Mir Asadollah Musavi Maku'i, arguably the most important figure at post-1940 Alborz after Mojtahedi, paraphrased Jordan's views on education thus: "We have a factory for producing men, first we educate and then we teach sciences." Musavi added this personal evaluation: "Briefly put, the instructional work of the American mission was not that advanced and scientific. Instead, to foster [foreign] language and foreign trade, they only offered the literary and commercial tracks."[35]

When the national curriculum was introduced at Alborz, the scientific (*'elmi*) track was added, a track that the ministry of education divided into a natural science (*tabi'i*) and a mathematics (*riyazi*) track beginning in the school year 1940–41. One way to gauge the new educational policy of Alborz is to look at the demographics of the various tracks. In 1949 the last students in the literary and commercial tracks graduated from Alborz, meaning that, as of that year, students had the choice only between the natural sciences and mathematics as the other tracks were discontinued. Beginning in the academic year 1961–62 the numbers in the mathematics track overtook those in the natural sciences track.[36]

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[33]David Menashri, *Education and the Making of Modern Iran* (Ithaca, NY, 1992), 95.
[34]Boyce, "Alborz College of Teheran," 189.
[35]Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz*, 24 and 26.
[36]See table in Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz*, 203.

Mojtahedi had studied mathematics himself, and made no secret of his preference for mathematics and the hard sciences over all other branches of human knowledge. In Iran at the time students chose their functional tracks in the 2nd cycle (10th to 12th grades, also called 4th to 6th grades) not on the basis of taste and inclination, but on the basis of the prestige of the tracks: mathematics had the highest standing, and so the best students chose it, the assumption being that they would go on to university to become engineers or scientists. Natural sciences were for the next best, those who would typically become physicians. The literary track was for low-achievers, which is somewhat ironic in a country that prides itself on its literary heritage. History and geography were bywords for useless subjects that condemned one to a life of poverty as a school teacher. The elimination of the literary track was thus not only due to Mojtahedi's own preferences but also a consequence of the falling demand for it among high school students generally. This hierarchy of disciplines is not unique to Iran and can be found, in addition to most Third World countries, even in France, where the *baccalauréat* in the sciences is the most prestigious track. The reason for this has been diagnosed as lying in the supremely abstract nature of mathematics, which allegedly gives it a purity of purpose that is deemed not only noble in and of itself but also renders it useful to the pursuit of all other branches of knowledge.

Even though Alborz saw itself as the nursery for Iran's leaders, and even though a country can be assumed to need judges, lawyers, journalists, artists, educationists and businessmen as much as it needs engineers and doctors, these careers were not on Mojtahedi's (or most other educationists') radar screen. A statement of his is quite telling: "*mamlekat-e ma ra bayad javanan-e fazel va ba-iman-e irani abad konand*," loosely translatable as "our country needs to be developed by knowledgeable and believing Iranians."[37] The translation is loose, because *abad kardan*, "to render *abad*," has no precise translation in English. *Abadi* is a locus of human activity outside the towns,[38] and it has the connotation of constructing things. So *abad kardan* is really the work of engineers and scientists, and this probably explains why an intensely patriotic man like Mojtahedi would be so fixated on engineering. One former Alborz teacher, Mahmud Behzad, went so far as to suggest that Mojtahedi had no good rapport with literature teachers, one reason being that he was not well informed about language and literature, the other that most literature teachers he knew were undisciplined.[39]

It is true that the rigid nature of Iran's centralized educational system, with its prescribed number of subjects, left principals with little leeway to "add details," as Arthur Boyce had put it. There was however *some* wiggle room, but that wiggle room was not often used to diversify the instruction offered at Alborz in the direction of the humanities or arts. When it was, such as in the teaching of French in addition to English

[37]See Lajvardi, *Khaterat-e Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi*, 6.

[38]Ahmad Ashraf, "Ābādi," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

[39]In a talk given on the occasion of the first anniversary of Mojtahedi's death, as reprinted in Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz*, 254.

between 1964 and 1969,[40] it was motivated not by a desire to broaden students' horizons and make French civilization accessible to them but by the availability of scholarships to study in France—of course only in "the sciences and engineering."[41] As my friend Dr. Zahed Sheikholeslami—who dutifully chose the mathematics track at Alborz and then proceeded to go to Aryamehr (Sharif) University, where in his third year he discovered his vocation as a musician—put it to me recently: "Alborz was a geek factory, but the best geek factory in the country."

Instruction vs. education. The educational philosophy of the Presbyterian missionaries tried to engage the entire human personality, and to this end a great variety of extracurricular activities was proposed to students to turn them into well-rounded young men. The Jordans introduced music into the curriculum;[42] sang with their students, whom they encouraged to write songs with patriotic Persian lyrics; and had plays performed. Hikes were organized in the mountains that would later give the school its name,[43] and physical education was stressed as never before in Iran.[44] In other words, education mattered alongside instruction, and education also included character-building. As one alumnus remarked: "Dr. Jordan always emphasized education (*tarbiyat*), not merely instruction (*ta'lim*)," noting later in the text:

> The free and open environment of the College gave each student a chance to develop his own talents. To be the best student was not a major goal ... everybody developed his personality in whatever he was good at. For instance one student was the best in swimming, another was a good wrestler, and the third had memorized a dictionary.[45]

Although Iranian educationists in theory distinguish between instruction and education, routinely speaking of *ta'lim va tarbiyat*, Persianized as *amuzesh va parvaresh*, when the state system was established the *tarbiyat* or *parvaresh* part became in practice woefully subordinate to the *ta'lim* or *amuzesh* part. One man who was in a good position to compare the Alborz of Jordan and the Alborz of Mojtahedi was Zeynolabedin Mo'tamen, who had studied under the former and taught under the latter. In his reminiscences of Jordan's Alborz one senses a genuine nostalgia for an era in which education, *tarbiyat*, had counted as much as instruction, *ta'lim*. In an essay he contributed to a festschrift commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the founding of Alborz, he wrote that "in the American period Alborz College had the newest, most pleasant, and most correct educational methods," adding that "the alumni of that institution ... still remember that pleasant era." He then enunciated what had made Alborz so special, and perhaps one can read some veiled criticism of the Alborz of his time into his enumeration:

[40]Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz*, 87.
[41]Lajvardi, *Khaterat-e Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi*, 62.
[42]Samuel M. Jordan, "Constructive Revolutions in Iran," *The Moslem World*, xxv (1935): 350.
[43]See for instance "Climbing to the Top of Persia," *Boston Evening Transcript* (Boston, MA), 12 April 1930.
[44]By the mid-1930s the school boasted of three football fields, three basketball, four volley ball, and eight tennis courts, one baseball diamond, and a running track. Jordan, "The Only Christian College in Iran," 394.
[45]Naser, *Ravesh-e Doktor Jordan*, 17 and 49.

> The warm and friendly environment and the fatherly demeanor of the teachers, so free of falseness, and especially the spiritual and friendly face of Dr. Jordan; ... the daily mixing of pupils and their gathering in the great hall where lectures and various programs were organized; exciting sports competitions involving both students from within and from outside the school; the close and sincere relations between teacher and pupil and the breaking of the barriers of fear which still, after all these years, separate the two like two unacquainted and indifferent individuals; the establishment of scientific, literary, and artistic societies, especially the Ferdowsi Literary Society, which for forty years organized a Parents' Day on which the students' parents could witness for themselves the scientific and social activities as well as the lives of their sons at the school; the celebration of national holidays and the revival of old customs such as the *Sadeh* feast and *Cheharshanbeh Suri*; the performance of plays and music on different occasions; the publication of the newspaper *Javānān-e Iran*, which was published fortnightly in English and Persian by the students under the supervision of a teacher; the active participation of the students in the administration of the school; the use of the well equipped library; these were the characteristics of the school that will always keep its memory alive in its alumni.
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> In those days class periods were shorter but there were more of them. For this reason each day a student had one or more free periods in which he could participate in the activities of the various literary, musical, theater, and sports societies or read in the library. What with its size and facilities, Alborz College could have accepted 2,000 students, but their numbers never exceeded 500.
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> Classes usually had between 20 and 40 students, and the excessive density that today has become such a big but inevitable problem for instruction and education did not exist in those days. I myself studied in the literary track in a class of only five students, and it is obvious how much more fruitful the efforts of both teachers and students are under such conditions. But this era came to an end and new one began. Political and cultural circumstances led to the closing down of foreign cultural institutions. After seventy years of glorious service the American College ended its activities and all its facilities were transferred to Iranian administrators.[46]

Mo'tamen was an exceptional teacher, adored by those fortunate enough to have been his pupils, and it is interesting that Homa Katouzian, who was one of these fortunate people, ascribes his progressive teaching methods to the fact that he had earned his degree at the American College.[47]

For a while the spirit of the old Alborz lived on. In the 1940s and 1950s the school still made room for extracurricular activities; yearbooks and a number of publications

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[46][Zeynolabedin] Mo'tamen, "Alborz dar gozashteh va hal," originally printed in Manuchehr Adamiyat, ed., *Sadehnameh-ye Dabirestan-e Alborz* (Tehran, 1975), 260–61, reprinted in Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz*, 61–62.

[47]Doktor Mohammad Ali Homayun Katuziyan [Homa Katouzian], "Adam va mo'allem dar Zeynolabedin Mo'tamen," in his *Hasht maqaleh dar tarikh va adab-e mo'aser* (Tehran, 2005), 93.

came out until 1963.[48] But in the course of the 1960s these activities, while never altogether disappearing, declined in scope. The heightening repression of the Shah's regime may be one reason for this decline, but it is more likely that the growing availability to young people of all sorts of diversions and entertainments outside school is what explains the reduction of extracurricular activities at Alborz after the mid-1960s. Things were better in the boarding department, which, according to its longtime director Musavi Maku'i, organized field trips to the museums of Tehran for the boarders. It was also in the boarding department that Jordan's emphasis on involving students in the day-to-day running of the school was maintained.[49]

The paucity of extracurricular activities was of course a general problem with public education in Iran, and one cannot single out Alborz for privileging instruction at the expense of education. But schools *did* have some scope to tweak the state-imposed curriculum a little bit; yet Alborz used that to *do more of the same* rather than diversify the instruction it dispensed, introducing, for example, car mechanics. One was told to be proud of Iran's glorious past, but I wonder what percentage of Alborzis are familiar with the collections of the Iran Bastan Museum, where the vestiges of that glorious past might be admired but which was never deemed worthy of an organized visit by non-boarders.

If the Alborz experience contributed one thing to character-building, it was the inculcation of discipline. Teachers were dedicated to their task, and students followed their example. Mojtahedi himself was not only disciplined but also incorruptible; unlike many others who have held high positions in Iran, he did not die a rich man.[50] For this and for his other achievements, like the establishment of Aryamehr (Sharif) University, his persona has been the object of a certain transfiguration since the revolution—Homa Katouzian even speaks of "mythologization" (*ostureh-sazi*).[51] But let it also be said that the discipline and work ethic that are a matter of such pride for the alumni of Alborz had a dark side, perhaps inevitable where so many adolescent boys were involved. My and many of my friends' recollection of the feeling Mojtahedi inspired in us when we were at Alborz can be summarized in one word: fear. Most of us were terrorized by Mojtahedi, a feeling that was very different from that which our predecessors had for Jordan, who combined severity with friendliness.[52] As for the work ethic, it had a distinctly instrumental objective, in the sense that it was generated by a desire to succeed at examination time, not by the joy and satisfaction that derive from the sentiment of having accomplished one's task to the best of one's abilities.

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[48]See the bibliography of Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz*, 873–74.

[49]Adamiyat, *Sadehnameh*, 103.

[50]See Lajvardi, *Khaterat-e Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi*, 70–74, for Mojtahedi's account of how he resisted an influential father's entreaties to change his son's grade.

[51]Katuziyan [Katouzian], "Doktor Mojtahedi va masa'el-e khedmatgozari dar jame'eh-ye kolangi," in his *Hasht maqaleh*, 112.

[52]Cf. Mo'tamen's reminiscences quoted earlier. For a similar assessment see Naser, *Ravesh-e Doktor Jordan*, 6.

Ability tracking within subject tracks. One of the more puzzling aspects of Alborz was the way students were distributed among the many parallel sections in each grade. Originally students were assigned sections by alphabetical order of their surnames in all grades, as a result of which most of the average Alborzi's friends shared the same first letter of their surnames. Since personality probably does not correlate with family initial, this lack of alphabetic diversity cannot have had much of an effect. But then Mojtahedi noticed that the unevenness of students' knowledge made teaching them difficult, as many students had come from other schools and were ill prepared for the rigors of an Alborz education. It is true that in the academic year 1954–55 the number of students enrolled at Alborz jumped from 256 in the previous year to 452.[53] To remedy the situation, he decided to constitute the sections in the second cycle (10th/4th to 12th/6th grade) on the basis of the grade point average students had achieved at the end of the preceding school year. Thus, at the end of the alphabetical triennium, the best-performing fifty found themselves in section 1 of the 4th grade, called 4/1, while the next fifty (and most resentful!) were in 4/2, with the least well performing—informally dubbed *olama o fozala* (scholars and savants)—congregating in 4/7. The exercise was then repeated all the way to the final year, with each set of end-of-year examinations potentially providing an occasion for upward or downward mobility. By constituting homogeneous sections, he hoped to enable teachers to pitch their teaching to the abilities of their students. To help them in this endeavor, the weaker sections contained fewer students.[54]

The problem is that tracking students by ability and constituting homogeneous classes make sense only if they are taught different things, with the stronger students challenged more than the weaker ones.[55] But this was not the case: the curriculum was prescribed by the state, and all had to be prepared for the *konkur* (competitive entrance examination for the universities), which was the same for everybody and which determined whether one went to university or not and, in the former case, to which one. Given that the curriculum was the same for both the high and the low achievers, the only justification for physically separating them would have been to use different pedagogical methods, perhaps assigning the teachers with the greatest pedagogical abilities to the weakest students so as to help them to catch up. But that was not the case either. The only difference was that the "weaker" classes were a little smaller in size.

Even if the introduction of tracking based on performance was justified when Alborz grew as a result of a large influx of ill-prepared students, it is not clear why the system was maintained in the 1960s and 1970s, by which time the growth had stopped and the vast majority of students in the upper grades had received their education at Alborz itself. What is more, in its heyday only the best graduates of the elementary schools could enter the school in the first place. To achieve this goal

[53]See table in Musavi Maku'i, *Dabirestan-e Alborz*, 203.

[54]He describes his motivations and solutions to the problem in Lajvardi, *Khaterat-e Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi*, 55–56.

[55]Maureen T. Hallinan, "Tracking: From Theory to Practice," *Sociology of Education*, lxvii (1994): 79–84.

while maintaining transparency, candidates with a perfect grade point average of 20 were first called in to register, followed by those with a slightly lower one, until the full capacity was reached and all others were told to go home.[56] Whatever inequalities in achievement there were had therefore appeared *within* the school, after the initial expansion had played itself out. Thus it came to pass that the main result of this tracking system was a competition for grades, a competition that was unhealthy because the only reward for the winners was a feeling of superiority, while the greater number were condemned to sadness and disappointment, often generating shame and despair, even resentment.[57] Mojtahedi realized that this might be the case, and reports that he would personally visit the weaker sections and console them by telling them that all students were dear to him.[58] I should not be astonished if 6/1 graduates are disproportionately represented among those Alborzis who are active in alumni affairs.

Conclusion

For over a century Alborz, in its various incarnations, had a central place in Iranian education. Studying it through the prism of diversity, we can detect a clear continuity in Alborz policies regarding ascriptive traits, while when it comes to educational philosophies we discern a clear rupture between the American and the Iranian periods, although that rupture is less drastic in the case of the boarding department headed by Musavi Maku'i—perhaps because he was a history and geography teacher. The tunnel vision cultivated at Alborz in the decades before the Iranian revolution is where the discontinuity with Jordan's vision of fully developed personalities is most evident. Where Jordan, as the quotes given earlier show, hoped to form Iran's political elite, under his successor the emphasis was on training a technocratic elite. Perhaps this reflects not only the different personalities of Jordan and Mojtahedi, but also the changing nature of Iranian state and society. *Allahu a'lam*.

[56]Boys who had siblings attending Alborz were exempted from this procedure.

[57]More than one Alborzi has confessed to these feelings to me. Perhaps I should add that my criticism of this aspect of Alborz is not caused by any sense of "sour grapes": I was the only pupil of my cohort in 3/7 who went on to 4/1, 5/1 and 6/1. I am therefore speaking not out of experience but out of empathy.

[58]Lajvardi, *Khaterat-e Mohammad Ali Mojtahedi*, 56. By the 1970s these visits had stopped, however.