

UP IN THE MOUNTAIN

Bernard Hourcade – I have been working on Iran these last 40 years. Everybody wonders whether the Iranians are able to safeguard their heritage and above all their enthusiasm and willpower to go ahead and not give up. One does not know the answer. Perhaps I have the clue: possibly the mould of the Iranian genius is in the mountain. Indeed, the mountain, I know it pretty well. I began my career studying the Ossau Valley and the Pyrenees, then the Alborz, which I canvassed from village to village on the summer pasture lands to meet the nomads and country people. I had two research subjects, very different: the revolution and the mountain. Two incompatible subjects? In fact not, because the explanation of quite a lot of facts in today's Iran stem from the mountain.

Indeed, Iran is a country of mountains, girded with high mountains, a plateau. It is from the Alborz, the Zagros mountain, that the water streams down along with the coolness and life. It has been used in Iran as a refuge to resist all invaders: Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks. The place is the heartland of Iran. It is said that Tehran is the daughter of Alborz. In fact, the whole of Iran has its origin in the mountain, with its abundant water and that life of resistance. In fact, nowadays, over one million Tehranis take to the hills on weekends, on the slopes of the Towtchal which overlooks the city from its 4000 metres, in order to take a breath of fresh air above the pollution, but mainly to meet with friends aloof from all censorship. Also to find a way to cope with a difficult situation. That pilgrimage is a lot more than a quest for cool air. It is a quest for freedom.

At the beginning of year 1979, as the religious power did not control the country's political and social life as yet, I overheard *L'Internationale* in the mountain. I came nearer and realized that a young militant was teaching the revolutionary song to a group of friends. It is indeed easier to sing *L'Internationale* on the mountain than in an apartment in Tehran. So, I drew nearer and asked "Why that?" They gave me the clue to the Iranian system. They said "Above 2500 metres the laws of the Islamic Republic do not prevail any more." It was a joke of course but that was pointing to the Iranian genius. I thank them sincerely every day because they showed me that both my subjects of research were connected: the mountain and the revolution

The mountain I know well. I often climbed, when I was much younger, beautiful cliffs such as the three stages of the Gavarnie Wall or the North face of the Vignemale. I am very proud of such climbs which are as important in my personal life as writing books on Iran because they enabled me to understand the Iranian people better. Touching the rock with your fingers allows you to unite body and heart with the mountain and its values. So, rather than an iranologist – I do not like the word – I feel a mountaineer, or at least I feel indebted to the mountain for all it taught me. Particularly learning how to wait,

keep modest, how to find the right way up, find a passage not overestimating one's capacity, a typical Iranian behaviour. Nowadays, Iranians suffer from a political system that no longer meets their expectations, but they know how to wait too. They know how to wait for the right time and conditions suitable for a change, without haste, as in a mountain climb. So, in order to understand the mysteries of Iran's political life and the Iranians' expectations, only one method: you have to go to Iran, at an altitude of 2500 metres.

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