In Iran, murder is considered private harm and the state has only a secondary and limited role, while the determination of life and death “remains the unalterable right of the private plaintiffs” (p. 2). After the 1979 Revolution, parts of the national law were rewritten to conform with Islamic tenets as the religious clergy saw them. Major revisions instituted severe sanctioning, but also legislated the victim's or his/her family's right to forbearance or retributive sanctioning, based on religious sources encouraging compassion, as well as the state's obligation to promote reconciliation.

In such framework, one crucial question Osanloo addresses is to understand how (perhaps why) individuals decide to forgo retributive sanctioning and keep on asking for the murderer's death. She argues that this incitement to private forgiveness in criminal matters has created an “arena outside of the state's judicial apparatus”, a space swiftly occupied by an “informal cottage industry of advocacy”, which progressively professionalized and created its own rules and practices, something she analyses through Sally Falk Moore's concept of “semi-autonomous social fields” (p. 3). This semi-autonomy refers to the fact that Iran's victim-centered penal system is both self-organized and constrained by the state.

Another important feature of Osanloo’s Forgiveness is the attention she pays to the affective dimension of the social and legal rituals and practices surrounding killing in Iran. Affects, which accompany the proceedings in matters of willful homicide, also characterize social relationships in cases of manslaughter. There is the law, on the one hand, which stipulates monetary compensation in case of negligent homicide (diya), but there is also what she calls “a socio-cultural dialectic of redemption-seeking and pardon that, if not
expected, is highly valued for ending conflict and sowing peace and reconciliation” (p. 8). Interestingly, Osanloo insists that the expression of emotion is ubiquitous and therefore embraces domains such as bureaucratic administration and judicial institutions, all the more so that the law does not organize how forgiveness should proceed and thus leaves open the cultural ways and rituals through which victims and perpetrators interact.

According to the author, on the one hand, forgiveness bears upon a civilization narrative that is enmeshed with “aspects of Iranian Twelver Shi‘ism, which include mazlumiyyat (grace in suffering), rahmat (compassion), aql (reason), and hekmat (inspiration derived from God’s divine wisdom), all of which are expressions of ‘true’ faith” (p. 12), as well as with pre-Islamic Persian virtues. On the other hand, forgiveness is a process that can stretch on years, for both victims and defendants, and such time span heavily contributes to the development of contrasting emotions. For these reasons, among others, it does not come as a surprise that the month of Ramadan concentrates special attention to forgiveness, as it is a period stressing the moral and religious values of forbearance, generosity, and compassion, prominently featured by mythical figures such as Imam ‘Ali and his wife Fatemeh, or Maryam, Jesus’ mother, who is praised “for the qualities of purity, sincerity, loyalty, honesty, nurturing, and compassion” (p. 14). Woman’s forbearance is especially valued and important in the process of forgiveness, to the point that most often the mother is “the proxy decision-maker for everyone” (p. 14).

Osanloo cautiously distinguishes clemency from mercy: the former is a legal concept playing with the range of punishment established by the law, while the latter is a moral concept linked to ideas of charity and compassion (p. 19). She emphasizes that it is not only the state that accords mercy. Actually, there are numerous modes of accountability that aim at restoring social peace, in a process in which the figure of the modern, sovereign state is only relatively involved. The whole “cottage industry”, whose members — judges, prosecutors, defense lawyers, NGO actors, social workers, community elders, ‘ulama — and practices the author finely describes play their roles in a choreography that is closely articulated around, if not orchestrated by, the Iranian modern state.

The book is organized in two parts. The first one explores the legal framework of forgiveness in Iran, as well as the processes through which attempts at reconciliation and forbearance advocacy take place. Chapter 1 examines Iran’s victim-centered justice system. It shows how Iran’s criminal justice system “allows a privileging of victims’ rights over those of the state, even as the state’s delegation of the right of life and death both legitimates the system and makes the plaintiffs complicit in that system” (p. 60).
Chapter 2 centers on the Iranian Penal Code, passed in 2013, and the role of judges in seeking reconciliation and grounding their reasoning. While claiming to directly apply the *sharīʿah*, Osanloo observes that judges have some latitude, especially in the determination of intent. She also observes how much they reflect the state’s aim of containing extrajudicial violence. Moreover, she emphasizes that the judge’s actions not only revolve around legal issues, but also around social and moral ones.

Chapter 3 describes law in action and especially how judges use the law and are constrained by its provisions. This reflects a specific socio-cultural *qahr va ashti* (conflict and resolution) system. In other words, the Iranian system is made of both the laws and the void surrounding them, which encourages social practices of forbearance. Retribution is an exorbitant right of the victim’s next-of-kin, but its procedural organization maintains the state’s control on legitimate violence. Moreover it helps halting the cycle of violence. In this way, Iranian law achieves a balance.

Chapter 4 examines the propensity to work for forbearance. Through Osanloo’s ethnographic work, we understand that it is the result of a “complex interweaving of law, religious duty, scientific or expert knowledge, and sometimes compassion” (p. 147). It shows that the law exerts constraints on the public official’s work, even though it does not mean that the penal system has no flexibility and is impervious to change. As nicely phrased, “what is sometimes referred to as ‘Islamic law’ is actually a process of becoming; it is neither singularly ‘Islamic’, nor exclusively ‘law’. Laws come into being through dynamic and changing interpretations, if not through their substantive form, then through procedural praxis by practitioners, including some activist members or the judiciary” (p. 148).

Part 2 of the book relates to the lifeworlds of the people involved in forgiveness work. Chapter 5 deals with the victims’ families and the burden of the decision placed upon them. There are only few rules guiding the way in which forbearance happens, something that permits to adapt each case to its specific circumstances. Obviously, bureaucratization transformed the *sharīʿah*-based justice system aiming to close the cycle of revenge, recycling old norms into “novel forms that afford new possibilities for ethical practices” (p. 172).

Chapter 6 studies social workers’ approaches to forgiveness. Several particularities of criminal issues, among which their gender-biased structure and the difficulty for women to tell their stories and win their cases, have led social workers to develop strategies adapted to the various types of cases, which all aim to obtain forgiveness. In that respect, social workers also develop specific expertise, which differentiates them from, e.g., lawyers. By so doing, they
actively contribute to the “social project of changing the culture of how individuals viewed the rights of the victim's family” (p. 211).

Chapter 7 describes a group of performing artists trying to change the social meaning of forbearance in a village. It shows that “art performs cultural work which aims to provoke empathetic imaginings that could lead to forgiveness, but may not have direct causal impact on the victims' families” (p. 240). In other words, it aims to operate cultural shifts, far from the law, while its direct effects on the case at hand are rather limited.

Chapter 8 is concerned with the work of criminal defense lawyers. In the same way social workers specialize, so do attorneys, who “pave the unregulated field of forgiveness work” (p. 263) and find innovative strategies to defend their clients. They do so by playing with the law, both abiding by its rules and trying its limits, igniting debates and even changes in legislation.

In conclusion, Osanloo proposes some reflections on the modern bureaucratic state and its relationship with what she calls the “semi-autonomous social field” of forgiveness work in Iran (p. 3). She stresses how much the system privileges the victims' rights over those of the state, while at the same time inscribing forgiveness work within the boundaries of the state. She also emphasizes the ethical dimension of forgiveness, which propels it much beyond the law.

In sum, Osanloo’s Forgiveness Work is an impressive achievement which combines ethnography, law and philosophy to propose a sensitive and informed account of a phenomenon reflecting the complexities of the Iranian society while at the same time accompanying its transformations. It is also an important contribution to the law-and-society theory, as it shows in a refined manner how the law both translates and constrains social, ethical, and religious values and norms. Osanloo's anthropological contribution to the understanding of Iranian criminal law is subtle. It treats the legal issue, of course, but also takes it as an opportunity to explore the radical transformation of Iranian society's lifeworld, a “story about injury and punishment, mercy and retaliation, forbearance and retribution, forgiveness and justice, and ultimately, life and death, as articulated through the multiple valences of ritual, faith, law, social relations, and politics” (p. 2).

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