Bernard Lewis offered, in the late 1980s, a survey of what he calls the primordial Political Language of Islam that determined both the leadership of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the nature of the post-revolutionary state. Lewis sees essential differences between this political language and the languages of the French and Russian Revolutions. He selects a series of concepts used during the Iranian Revolution, identifies their origins in the Islamic sources, and calls them the political language of Islam. What Lewis totally ignores is that the meanings that these concepts communicated and the references they provided were radically different from the original ones, but in line with the languages of these modern revolutions. In fact, the language of the Iranian Revolution emerged from the Iranian political language, of which Lewis seems quite unaware. Lewis seems unfamiliar with or reluctant to deal with the real contents and meaning of the revolutionary language. In fact, Lewis reflects the general academic reluctance to take the Iranian political language seriously. Since the late nineteenth century, this language has enabled the elites and ordinary people to make their thoughts and actions meaningful to one another. The history of the formation and transformation of this language is a history of the Iranian people who have shaped and reshaped the Iranian public sphere as the space of their intellectual and political experience. Similar to any other language, this language has an arbitrary nature. It does not entirely determine or limit the ways the intellectual and political subjects think and act, but presents a possibility that can be used by anyone and everyone. It constitutes a linguistic space that enables the Iranian people to reinvent themselves, intellectually and politically, at different historical junctions.

A history of the Iranian political language allows us to reflect on the overlooked themes in the customary political and intellectual history and the historiographies of the socio-political structures and cultural constructions. Whereas the former historiographies maintain the
significance of historical events but emphasize the role of intellectual and political elite in the events, the latter downplays the role of historical events and individual agencies. Despite their differences, both historiographical approaches disregard the ordinary people’s intellectual and political agency. The study of events should be the focal point of all historical writing, regardless of their happening to the intellectuals or ordinary people, individuals, collectivities, or the public sphere.

The Iranian political language shaped the ideals of the constitutional revolution (1905–1909), the oil nationalization movement (1951–1960s), the 1979 Revolution, the reform movement (1997–2005), and the green movement (2009). It encouraged electoral mobilization, which resulted in the presidency of Hassan Rouhani in 2013. Likewise, these struggles have reshaped this language. During the interlude between these political events, this language created the condition of possibility of the intellectual and political subjects who fashioned new ideological constructs and political arguments. This language was born with a democratic kernel, easily recognizable in the modern political struggles in Iran. The relations between the kernel and different components of this language are logical and empirical. Iranian nationalism, socialism, Islamism, and post-Islamism have expressed different aspects of this language. Through these intellectual and political constructs, the Iranian people demanded freedom and equality and defended popular sovereignty and state sovereignty. By means of this language, the Iranian people defended their political freedom and the sovereignty of their state.

In the wake of the constitutional revolution, this language caused the Iranian people to reconfigure the Iranian state as a body politic consisting of citizens with equal rights to approve or discard governments and parliaments. The first Iranian constitution authored by the people’s representatives declared the Iranian people or its popularly elected representatives as the only legislator in the Iranian body politic. It declared the equality of all citizens before the law and recognized freedom of speech and assembly for all citizens.

This study is an attempt to develop Pierre Rosanvallon’s conceptual history. Rosanvallon defines conceptual history as a multifaceted historical analysis of modes of reception and interpretation of grand theoretical and artistic works by nonintellectuals and the study of the society’s mentality and political culture. Also, he argues, conceptual history is a study of the public discourses, opinions, journalistic production, pamphlets, images, songs, and so on. It is, in fact, about practices and their representations. It clarifies the indeterminate and evasive nature of modern political concepts and the way they constitute a political field