Manijeh Nasrabadı traces an alternative genealogy of the Iranian diaspora in the U.S. and of U.S.-Iran relations, one that challenges the dominant conceptual reliance on clashes between “east” and “west,” “religious” and “secular,” “tradition” and “modernity,” in order to explain the violent rupture of the “special relationship” between the two nations. While the majority of extant scholarship on Iranians in the U.S. has treated this rupture as the inciting incident in the production of the Iranian diaspora as a community of post-1979 exiles, this talk looks at the earlier population of foreign students who arrived here as a result of the 1953 C.I.A. coup that ushered Iran into the U.S. sphere of influence. By naming these students “imperial model minorities”—members of a privileged cohort afforded access to American universities in order to ensure the success of U.S. Cold War modernization schemes—Nasrabadı foregrounds the ongoing project of U.S. empire in the Middle East in the making of Iranian diasporic subjectivities. Iranian imperial model minorities refused to fulfill their assigned roles as technocratic managers of Iran’s neocolonial development and decided instead to devote their lives to the cause of revolution. Drawing on extensive archival research and in-depth interviews with former members of the Iranian Students Association, Nasrabadı examines the revolutionary temporality and sociality that defined the movement’s political culture and turns a critical eye on the highly contradictory implications of the movement’s gender and sexual politics.

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Prof. Ervand Abrahamian (History, Baruch and the Graduate Center, Center CUNY) will be the discussant.