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What is Radicalism? Power and Resistance in Iran

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My basic thesis is that today's humankind is generally incarcerated within several prisons, and naturally it becomes a true human being only if it can liberate itself from these deterministic conditions. (Ali Shariati 1998)¹

What does it mean to be radical? In European political theory, radicalism has long been associated with leftist ideas and socialist theories. 'To be a "radical",' Anthony Giddens writes, 'was to have a certain view of the possibilities inherent in history—radicalism meant breaking away from the hold of the past.'² Some radicals were immersed in the idea of revolution and many were fascinated by the possibility to bring about an entirely 'new' historical sequence. 'History was there to be seized hold of, to be moulded to human purposes,' Giddens argues, 'such that the advantages which in previous eras seemed given by God, and the prerogative of the few, could be developed and organised for the benefit of all.'³ This definition of radical politics as a revolt against the *status quo* is also emphasized by Fred Halliday. He focused on revolutions more specifically when he conceptualized them as 'a break with the constraints of the past, the traditional or established society.' Revolutions made it possible to imagine 'a new society, even a new world, to be constructed. This emphasis upon breaking with the past, the creation of something new,' he continues, 'was to become a prominent strain in the appeals and self-justification of revolutions.'⁴

Both Giddens and Halliday point to an important object of radical politics: the negation of the prevalent order. When Lenin said that without theory there will be no revolutionary action, Ernesto Guevara stressed the indispensable need to explain the motives, ends and methods of the revolution in Cuba, and Marx imagined the final moment of the class struggle when everything would be decided in a momentous battle for the end of history, they alluded

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¹ Ali Shariati (1998) *Humanity and Islam*, in: Charles Kurzman (ed.) *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, pp. 187–195 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 187.

² Anthony Giddens (1994) *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Polity), p. 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fred Halliday (1999) *Revolution and World Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), p. 36.

exactly to the necessity and possibility of a systematic confrontation with the *status quo* that would yield a transcendent order which was imagined in a largely secular sense, a Utopia that would be attainable here and now. Yet in their many pamphlets and writings, as much as in the scholarly treatment of radical politics and revolutionary action presented by Halliday and Giddens, it does not become entirely clear what the difference between ‘radical politics’ and ‘revolution’ would be. It appears that both radicals and revolutionaries attempt to overcome what they consider to be the injustices of the respective system, but that the radical would be satisfied with radical transformation, whilst the revolutionary aims at overthrowing every political, socioeconomic and cultural determination all the way down to the consciousness of the individual and all the way ‘up’ to the constitution of History. As Giddens puts it: ‘Radicalism, taking things by the roots, meant not just bringing about change but controlling such change so as to drive history onwards.’⁵ From this perspective, the radical subject retains some linkage and dependency with the prevalent order; there remains a degree of complicity with the determinations of history. He/She is a ‘passive revolutionary,’ an agent of *transformismo* to use two of Gramsci’s ideal-types.⁶ Conversely, such relative interdependency with the *status quo* is wholly unacceptable, in theory and practice, to revolutionaries for whom the ‘vision of revolutionary change is that of a world restructured and regenerated in all its aspects—social, political, economic, cultural, and familial.’⁷ In this sense one of the primary differences between revolutionary and radical politics, in their contemporary conceptualization, is the degree of the transformation envisaged and implemented. This is a nuanced difference between radical reform and a total break with the past, between agonistic and antagonistic politics, between a revolt and a mass movement, between a molar digression from the temporal order and the imagination of a parallel universe: RADICALISM ↔ revolt ↔ agonism ↔ riotous violence ↔ temporal trajectory (transformative); REVOLUTION ↔ mass movement ↔ antagonism ↔ structural violence ↔ temporal break (Utopian).⁸ In this sense, radicalism is ‘second’ to revolution in the typology of demands for political change. It is followed by ‘reform,’ which Halliday defines as ‘change that is more cautious or limited, and “evolution,” suggesting change that does not involve a radical break with the past.’⁹

⁵ Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p. 1.

⁶ See Antonio Gramsci (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quinton Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds. & trans.) (London: Lawrence and Wishart), pp. 58ff. The concept of ‘passive revolution’ is revisited persuasively in Adam David Morton (2007) *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press).

⁷ Isaac Kraminick (1972) Reflections on Revolution: Definition and Explanation in Recent Scholarship, *History and Theory*, 11(1), pp. 30–31.

⁸ Similarly, Hannah Arendt emphasizes the element of a complete transformation, a temporal break with the prevalent order with regard to the revolutions in France and America: ‘These two things together—a new experience which revealed man’s capacity for novelty’ she writes, ‘are at the root of the enormous pathos which we find in both the American and the French Revolutions, this ever-repeated insistence that nothing comparable in grandeur and significance had ever happened in the whole recorded history of mankind . . .’ H. Arendt (1990) *On Revolution* (London: Penguin), p. 34.

⁹ Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics*, p. 38. Halliday (pp. 46–47) further argues that Theda Skocpol’s theory of revolution unnecessarily prioritizes war, and external factors in general, in the making and success of revolutionary movements. See T. Skocpol (1979) *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). A similar argument against Skocpol’s top-down approach is presented by Nikki Keddie (ed.) (1996a) *Debating Revolutions* (New York: New York

In the following paragraphs I will move along and traverse the two types of politics espoused by radicals and revolutionaries with two principal digressions, one empirical and the second theoretical. I will take the contemporary emergence of radical and revolutionary politics in Iran as my empirical departure point, partially in order to contribute to a comparative conceptualization of theories of power and resistance. Both historiographers and critical theorists largely have ignored the Iranian case despite the international tremors that Iranian politics continue to provoke. And yet the recent unrest after the controversial re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the summer of 2009 and the crackdown on the oppositional 'Green Movement' that continues at the time of writing, reveal the salience and obduracy of radical political subjectivity in Iran. Thus, delving into the dialectics between state and society in the country promises to unhinge a wealth of theoretical insights. In many ways, Iranians have never really ceased to believe in 'making history,' and many theoreticians of politics and comparative historiography have failed to ask why.¹⁰ In order to address this shortcoming and to position the Iranian case more firmly in those fields, I will discuss how the contemporary radical subject in Iran emerged out of the dialectics between state and society in the late nineteenth century. I will sketch, moreover, how out of the depth of the political disillusionment with the Pahlavi monarchy, political radicalism turned to revolutionary action yielding the Islamic Republic in 1979. Throughout the following paragraphs, I will attempt to identify, at once cautiously and tangentially, aspects of the Iranian case that merit theoretical deduction.

A (Short) History of Radicalism in Iran

The contemporary 'radical subject' is very different from earlier ideal-types of Iranian politics in that its political activism is systematic, institutional, (theo-)nationalistic and ideological. This is largely due to the historical syntax out of which the radical subject emerged. Radical politics developed only gradually within Iranian society, in the many institutional and organizational loci that increasingly were networked and politicized at least from the late nineteenth century onwards. A variety of agonistic political discourses were perfected by oppositional clerics, intellectuals (another 'new' subject), students, philosophers, teachers and workers who were positioning themselves both against the arbitrariness of the state and the structural violence of imperialism, at first in its British and Russian manifestation and later in its American form.

More specifically, the contemporary radical subject in Iran emerges out of the dialectics of the first mass upheaval of Iranian history engendered by the 'tobacco revolt' of 1891. We are transferred back to a period when Iranian politics was seriously affected by the interplay of the imperial interests of Russia and Britain. In 1891, the Qajar monarch Nasser al-Din Shah granted an exclusive monopoly for the sale and export of tobacco to Major Talbot, a British citizen. The shah had to cancel the monopoly not only because of Russian opposition, but primarily due to the nationwide protests and an ensuing boycott of tobacco products. For the first time in contemporary Iranian history,

Footnote 9 continued

University Press), p. viii; and in Said Amir Arjomand (1988) *The Turban for the Crown: the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 191–192.

¹⁰ A comprehensive re-treatment of subjectivity and agency is offered by Elías Palti (2004) 'The 'Return of the Subject' as a Historical-Intellectual Problem, *History and Theory*, 43(1), pp. 57–82.

different strata of society cooperated in order to bring about and sustain a radical 'counter-regime' that was intrusive enough to affect the politics of the state. The emerging discourse thus signified was uttered by a whole range of clerics, intellectuals, military personnel, merchants and Islamic 'revivalists.' The category 'society' was distanced from the category 'state' whose claim to exercise 'sovereign' power without accountability was suddenly questioned. Now some members of the *ulema* (Muslim clergy), the Islamic revivalists and nationalists created fields of political activism that were disintegrated from the formal power of the monarchy. It is in this way that in the tobacco revolt, the *fatwa* (religious verdict) of 'Grand Ayatollah' Shirazi forbidding his followers to use any tobacco-based product, merged with the 'anti-imperial' pamphlets of Jamal-al-din Afghani and the speeches and secret memoranda of 'nationalists' officers who called for resistance against any economic concessions that would galvanize foreign influence in Iran. Similarly, the mosques were increasingly reorganized to serve as places of political activism and resistance providing sanctuary to protesters. They did not function merely as places of worship and social activity. Rather, they increasingly became sites of communicative, mass-ideological transmission. For the first time in contemporary Iranian history diverse strata of society were equipped with both a national 'micro-geography' to organize their political agenda and the structural (religious and non-religious) legitimation to that end. The contemporary radical subject emerges out of this modified dialectic between state and society in the country. From now on resistance is not merely scattered, the radical subject does not only utter a whisper in the cacophony of Iranian politics. From now on the radical subject speaks with a voice that is simultaneously peremptory in its ideological ellipses and emphatic in its sublating demands.

Ervand Abrahamian, Homa Katouzian and Nikki Keddie have chronicled the contemporary history of Iran most comprehensively, and they rightly interpret 1891 as a precursor to the 'Constitutional Revolution' of 1905–11.¹¹ However, the term 'revolution' to designate these events has been applied without much theoretical reflection. It is not the revolutionary subject that was dominant during this period. In Persian, the Arabic term *inqilab* which is derived from *qleb* meaning 'to overturn' or 'to knock over,' attains its ultimate revolutionary politico-cultural signification in the discourse of the Marxist–Leninist, the Communist *Tudeh* Party and, more significantly for the trajectory of the revolution in 1979, in the influential writings of Jalal al-e Ahmad, Ali Shariati, and the clerical revisionists supporting Ayatollah Khomeini.

The revolutionary subject in Iran is a hybrid creature constituted by the tapestry of overlapping Utopian–romantic ideas espoused by both the Islamic and leftist revolutionaries. This revolutionary subject had stopped to negotiate and called for a new social and political *status quo* at least from the 1950s onwards. Yet the radical subject, who was at the center of the constitutional revolt, was satisfied with an amendment to the political order. The radical constitutionalists did not call for a wholesale overthrow of the political and social system (neither did they command the discursive capabilities to do so).

¹¹ See Ervand Abrahamian (2008) *A History of Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 39; Homa Katouzian (2006) *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis* (London: I.B. Tauris), pp. 33ff.; and Nikki Keddie (1966b) *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Iranian Tobacco Protest of 1891–1892* (Abingdon: Frank Cass), p. 131.

The events leading up to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1906 centered on very specific grievances: in Mashhad bread rioters agitated against high food prices; in Tehran women demonstrators protested against worsening social conditions; senior clerics deprecated the 'trade' of Iranian women who were forced into 'sexual slavery' because of the deteriorating economic conditions; *bazaaris* (merchants) contested the high taxes that were levied in order to bankroll the lavish life style of the monarch and his court; and students of the Dar al-Fanon began to translate constitutional and republican forms of governance into the political situation encompassing Iran. Consequently, the outcome of the revolt was a radical, not a revolutionary, transformation of the political order in the country. On August 5, 1906, Muzaffar al-Din Shah, the fifth monarch of the Qajar dynasty, agreed to institute nationwide elections. According to the new constitution, the shah's oath of office had to be made before the newly established National Assembly; and he had to accept both the ministers and officials proposed by it and the bills signed into law by its elected members. At the same time, the shah would be the head of the executive, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and would retain significant legislative and executive rights.¹² The *majles-e melli* was born, and the discourse of democracy and republicanism emerged. However, the monarch remained a significant institution of the political system, for in 1907 Iran was divided into Russian and British 'spheres of influence,' and the country subsequently descended into a virtual civil war until the *coup d'état* of Reza Khan on February 21, 1921. The latter eventually established the Pahlavi dynasty (1925), and the mandate of absolute monarchic authority was reconstituted, this time not around God, but around a novel, modernistic mythology that proved to be by far more susceptible to this-worldly contention.

The political culture enveloping and delivering the constitutional movement that I can dissect only rather sketchily here, equipped the radical subject with extraordinarily diverse institutional and discursive powers. The new moment in Iranian society was an expansion of the geography of politics. This expansion can be discerned from two interdependent factors: first, the emergence and re-imagining of a whole new vocabulary constituting the political discourse. Terms denoting the new phenomenon of the 'masses,' such as *tudeh* and *khalgh*; terms conscribing the idea of democracy, constitutionalism and the exigencies of the nation-state model, such as *jomhuri* (republic), *mashrute* (constitutional), *melliyat* (nationality), *demokrasi* (democracy) and *vatan* (homeland); terms differentiating the newly established political field and the party competition exercised therein, such as *chab* (left), *rast* (right), *melli-gera* (nationalist) or *sosialist* (socialist); and terms that were re-signified in order to construct a radical discourse of Islam that would depart from the quietist tradition of the orthodox Shia clergy. It is within this latter field that the Ayatollah establishes his (no women Ayatollahs yet) significance. From now on those senior oppositional *mujtahids* who sided with the demands of the people were referred to as *Ayat Allah*, a sign of God, a discursive challenge to the religious authority of the shah who was traditionally referred to as *ill-Allah* or the 'Shadow of God' and at times as *Ayatollah* as well. In this way the dialectics of the constitutional movement produced an important factor of the Islamicized revolution of 1979. Since the constitutionalists emphasized, in the name of equality, that no aristocratic or religious titles should be used anymore, the *Ayatollah* turned into an exclusively clerical ideal-type. It is true, as Fakhreddin Azimi

¹² See further Abrahamian, *A History of Iran*, pp. 45–49.

recently argued, that the ‘constitutional demystification of monarchy meant that the shahs could no longer claim to be shadows of God on earth, fully entitled to their patrimonial fiefdom.’¹³ But it seems equally true to argue that God cast another shadow: from now on, God exited the domain of the palace and wandered back into the praying rooms of the mosque. Here, He increasingly deified what was considered to be the ultimate form of political authority by an increasing number of Iranians and Shia Muslims more generally.

Second, this political discourse now was professionally dispersed by a set of new institutional ideal-types: places of education, such as the Dar al-Fanon, which was established under the patronage of Amir Kabir in 1851 and which was turned into the University of Tehran in January 1935. Dar al-Fanon, whose faculty was dominated by European academics under the Qajars, further facilitated the translation of canonical European books in the fields of the human sciences and literature, including the works of Darwin, Voltaire, Dumas, Fenelon, Descartes and Verne. A whole new archive informing an ‘Iranian’ dialectic with European modernity was engineered during this period. Yet, far from educating the ‘native’ population into apathy, the European presence enmeshed in the newly devised ‘Iranian’ narrative provoked its own ‘native’ form of resistance. Various political organizations, a range of *anjumans* (associations), stratified in accordance with ‘sub-national’ affiliations (Armenians, Azeris, Lurs, Kurds, etc.) or, interdependently, religious preference (Muslim, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, Baha’i), institutionalized their political agendas and transmitted them through the pages of a burgeoning local press and publications such as *Asr-e now* (New age), *Esteghlal* (Independence), *Eghbal* (Progress) or *Sur-e Israfil* (Israfil’s trumpet), the latter written mainly by the famed lexicographer Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda.¹⁴ A second rather more contested factor has to be added here, that is the role of institutionalized discourses of Islam in the radical politics of this period. As Hamid Enayat noted: ‘The religio-political tracts of the time denote an attitude which, while returning to the compromise of the Safavid period, is as anxious to prevent the monarchy from lapsing into despotism and corruption.’¹⁵ Enayat points to the writings of Mullah Muhammad Kazim Khorasani and Mohammad Hussein Naini to support his argument, and to the emergence of a ‘pre-constitutionalist mentality’ in the chief doctrines of the *usuli* school of Shia Islam with its emphasis on the necessity of *ijtihad* and critical reasoning, which had become increasingly influential in Shia jurisprudence since the emergence of Mohammad Baqir Wahid Behbehani (1704–91).¹⁶ The *usuli* discourse equipped progressive members of the *ulema* with the critical devices to accommodate and further the constitutional demands for democratic legislation and public accountability of the state, both in the build up and in the aftermath of the constitutional revolt.¹⁷

The point of adding this latter factor is not to unearth the signposts of a ‘truer’ history of the constitutional movement. I am not interested in fighting History with History here. Yet it

¹³ Fakhreddin Azimi (2008) *The Quest for Democracy in Iran: A Century of Struggle Against Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 3.

¹⁴ See Abrahamian, *A History of Iran*, p. 46.

¹⁵ Hamid Enayat (1982) *Modern Islamic Political Thought: The Response of the Shi’i and the Sunni Muslims to the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan), p. 174.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁷ See further Hamid Algar (1980) *Religion and State in Iran, 1785–1906: The Role of the Ulema in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press); and Abdul-Hadi Hairi (1977) *Shi’ism and Constitutionalism in Iran: A Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents of Iraq in Iranian Politics* (Leiden: E.J. Brill).

must be added that, in the name of a critical attitude toward the way History is written in general and the political economy of 'Iranian Studies' in particular, the fortunes of Islamo-centric, nationalist or socialist representations of this pivotal period do not ebb and flow in accordance with their truth value, but too often instead with political allegiance and/or the hegemonic political culture of the day. It is such guided cultural constellations and the discursive regimes of truth that they inform that set the conditions for the production of a 'truer' history of Iran.¹⁸ Hence, Ahmad Kasravi, who managed to chronicle the history of the constitutional movement in sublime prose and from a staunchly anti-clerical perspective, has been central to the nationalist narrative and its adherents, while the writings and pro-constitutional activities of clerics, such as Naini, are rather more pronounced in 'Islamist' representations of Iranian history. It is no coincidence, of course, that the 'Islamist paradigm' proliferated in many quarters, especially after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979.¹⁹

Such battles over the official history of Iran too often are parochial and ideologically tainted and shall not concern me beyond their value for a critical reading of the way discourse/power/knowledge constellations determine how an Iran is represented. What has been rather more central to my reading of Iran thus far is to show that, at least from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards, the radical subject revolted in the name of nationalist fervor, anti-imperial passion, socialist rationality and/or Islamic reasoning. Of course, these are all my ideal-typical 'categories' that do not exhaust the range of causes that challenged the political *status quo* during that period.

What can be discerned from the developments at least since the latter half of the nineteenth century is a steady growth and networking of the sites—institutional and individual—of political discourse in Iran. The radical subject was endowed with a new space to function and to propagate against the state. Out of the fierce nationalism and constitutionalism of this moment, many voices were raised, female and male, in condemnation of Iran's subservience to imperial powers and the abandonment of the constitution of 1906 by the Pahlavis, in the accent of an elite class that was adamant to constrain the power of the monarchy. At least from the latter part of the 1940s onwards, the target was Mohammad Reza Shah, who acceded to the Peacock Throne in 1941, after the British forced his father, Reza Khan, into exile on the pretext that he wanted to collude with Nazi Germany.

The primary driving force of the opposition to the shah's rule in the period 1949–53 was not only Mohammad Mossadegh, the Swiss-educated 'aristocrat' who died a great and almost 'prototypical' nationalist. The expansion of the discursive geography of politics brought with it the emergence of politically functional individuals who were introjected by a range of counter-hegemonic ideas. There emerged a mass psychology that was geared toward achieving the Utopia of full independence and to constraining the authoritarianism of the state. The radical subject thinks and acts within a political counter-culture that is entirely sophisticated both in terms of its ideological vigor and its internationalist outlook. The radical subject has privileged access to socialist, Marxist–Leninist, social-democratic, nationalist

¹⁸ For this political economy, see Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2008) *Iran in World Politics: the Question of the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press).

¹⁹ See Ahmad Kasravi (2008) *Tarikh-e mashruteh-ye Iran* [History of the Iranian Constitution] (Tehran: Negah Publications); and Mohammad Hussein Naini (2003) *Tanbih al-ummah wa tanzih al-millah* [Advising the Muslim Community and Purifying the Religion] (Qom: Bustan-e Ketabe Qom Press).

and ‘Islamist’ discourses, all of which created their own fulminate momentum merging on the demand for radical change. The radical subject joined a variety of different groups: those espousing violence as a political strategy, such as the *Fedayan-e Islam* (Devotees of Islam), who were responsible for a range of terrorist atrocities in Tehran and beyond; the Communist *Tudeh* Party which was established in 1941 and which turned increasingly pro-Soviet in the latter 1940s, bowing to the irresistible ideological pressures and financial incentives of Stalinism;²⁰ clerics, such as Ayatollah Seyyed Abol-Qassem Kashani, who was sympathetic to the nationalists cause; and at the helm of them all Mohammad Mossadegh and his National Front party (*Jebhe-Melli*). Mossadegh managed to turn the prevalent mood for radical action into a popular movement that would bring about the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951, two years before he was ousted by a MI6/CIA-engineered *coup d’état* which would reinstate the dictatorship of the shah.

Mossadegh is a singularly important figure in history, not merely because he managed to nationalize the Iranian oil economy or because of his democratic credentials. Mossadegh demonstrated that it was possible to overthrow, on the one side, the institution of the monarchy in Iran and, on the other, to resist the ‘superpowers’ of the day. Henceforth, the new counter-culture in Iran is no longer organized around questions such as: How can we negotiate with the state? How can we pressure it to accept a particular agenda? How can we confine its authoritarianism? How can we bargain with it? How can we play the superpowers off against each other? Since Mossadegh, the dialectic between Iranian society and the state is no longer ordered around the agonistic politics, semi-ordered revolts and ‘realistic’ calculations of the radical subject. It is premised on revolution, on a total break of the prevalent system both within Iran and beyond—from now on Utopia is not only thought, from now on it is enacted.

Licentious Power versus Revolutionary Libido

For the revolutionary subject death is a beginning, justice is transcendental, martyrdom is *Erlebnis*, an ineffable concession to the cause. The revolutionary subject craves climactic events; it functions according to what I term a ‘libidinous bio-ontology.’ The revolutionary subject is adamant to demonstrate political prowess, the ability to channel passion into political action. The revolutionary subject relentlessly tries to elicit as many ‘ineffable’ events as possible in order to establish a superior counter-discourse which would be linked, with the help of an intellectual vanguard, into a strident, ideologically charged counter-culture which would simulate the viability of a temporal break with everything that ‘is.’ This is what Marx called the ‘sixth great power,’ and which would overwhelm, quite inevitably, every other power in its way. In *Labor of Dionysus*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri allude to this transformative dynamic that drives the revolutionary subject. According to them: ‘It is as if the world is unmade and reconstructed on the basis of a set of thoughts, actions, and intuitions established on the individual and collective singularity that organize it through its desire and its power.’²¹ This desire and power of the revolutionary subject is organized, infused by the Utopia that everything is possible. Time and being are

²⁰ On the history and politics of the Iranian ‘Left,’ see Stephanie Cronin (ed.) (2004) *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New Perspectives on the Iranian Left* (Abingdon: Routledge).

²¹ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri (1994) *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 7, 286.

conceived of as limitless, and the revolutionary subject is placed at the edge of that possibility, with a clear view of what is to come in the future. The revolutionary subject employs a distinctly modern, positivistic syntax that is almost impervious to disappointment and taking as its primary battle ground the official writing of history and the national narratives thus spun.

Charles Kurzman has termed the revolution in Iran ‘unthinkable,’ a coincidence of several factors that were unpredictable and that delivered the revolution almost as a *bonne chance* of history.²² However, Kurzman does not take into account that Iranians began to ‘think’ the revolution at least since the late 1950s. Indeed, in the most influential writings of Iran’s prototypical revolutionary intellectuals, such as Jalal al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, Iranian history in particular and Islam in general were rewritten to function as building blocks for a viable, and uncompromising discourse that was quite overtly and explicitly revolutionary. So for the former, the thirteenth-century astronomer and philosopher Nasir ad-Din Tusi (1201–74) becomes the prototypical ‘aggressive intellectual’ (*rowshanfekr-e mohajem*), ‘who made history’ after obliterating the prevalent order seeking to ‘destroy the contemporary governmental institutions in order to erect something better in their place.’²³ Whereas for the latter we find a comparable signification of revolutionary change which is likened to a golden age of justice, a classless society, social equality, and the final victory of the oppressed masses against their oppressors. According to Shariati, there was no choice toward that end since the victory of the revolution was historically determined. This would make it mandatory for the vanguard to ‘object to the status quo and to negate the ruling systems and values.’²⁴ With al-e Ahmad and Shariati then, an entirely new ontology for Iran is imagined and increasingly enacted.

This newly imagined Iran was not provincial, as some scholars have argued. The revolutionary subject in Iran was not confined to a nativist habitat, even if it indulged in the Utopia of ‘authenticity.’²⁵ In the writings of intellectuals such as al-e Ahmad and Shariati we hear echoes of—and see direct reference to—Che Guevara, Marx, Sartre, Marcuse, Fanon and others. It is in Shariati especially, where East meets West, and where the potentialities of a seemingly contradictory ‘Islam-socialist’ discourse are exploited in order to channel what was considered to be the emancipating message of Islam and socialism to receptive constituencies within Iranian society. This internationalist cross-fertilization was not limited only to the intellectual/theoretical realm. For instance, the nascent Iranian armed movements of the 1960s drew their inspiration from theories of guerrilla warfare developed in Cuba, Nicaragua, Vietnam, Palestine and China. Che Guevara’s manuals were particularly popular: ‘[A]long with centres for study of present and future zones of operations, intensive popular work must be undertaken to explain the motives of the revolution, its ends,’ he suggests in his manual for guerrilla warfare that was translated and widely distributed in Iran in the 1960s. It is imperative, according to Guevara, ‘to spread the incontrovertible truth that victory of the enemy against the people is

²² Charles Kurzman (2004) *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

²³ Quoted in Anja Pistor-Hatam (2007) Writing Back? Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s (1923–69): Reflections on Selected Periods of Iranian History, *Iranian Studies*, 40(5), p. 565.

²⁴ Quoted in Ali Rahnama (2000) *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I.B. Tauris), p. 305.

²⁵ There is emphasis on ‘nativism’ in Mehrzad Boroujerdi (1996) *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press).

finally impossible. *Whoever does not feel this undoubted truth cannot be a guerrilla fighter.*²⁶ In Iran such ‘bio-ontological’ re-education toward the revolutionary subject gained momentum out of the disillusionment with the political order after the enforced downfall of Mossadegh in 1953, and more exponentially in the late 1950s. From now on the revolutionary subject plots to reverse History *in toto*. From now on, the revolutionary subject in Iran takes on a dual combat: resisting the ‘bipolar’ world order, dominated by the Soviet Union and the United States on the one side and combating the monarchy of the shah on the other.

So at least from the 1950s onwards something quite ‘bio-ontological’ occurs in Iranian politics. On the one side, politically conscious Iranians become the target of rather more systematic, certainly more consequential revolutionary agitation. On the other side, *zoon politikon*, the political ‘animal,’ becomes the target of a formal, systematic and overbearingly paternalistic form of state-power which is entirely ‘licentious.’ The power of the state, that the revolutionary subject not only is attempting to resist, but also to conquer, turns to a perversely excessive form of ideational self-assertion. ‘Identity’ becomes the major issue in the representation of Iran’s national narrative and in the making of the legitimacy of the state. Now we enter the world of ‘genetic’ manipulation: licentious power forcefully induces, on the ‘macro-level’ of the state, the factor of race into the idea of what the Iranian nation ‘is.’ In the political biology propagated by the Pahlavis, Iranians were first and foremost ‘Aryan,’ quite Indo-European due to the Persian language and very much distinct from the Semitic Arabs and ‘their’ Islamic history. Accordingly, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was to be referred to as *Aryamehr* or ‘Light of the Aryans.’ At the height of his megalomania, exemplified by his Napoleon-esque self-coronation in 1967 and the extravagant festivities at Persepolis in 1971, the shah changed the Islamic solar *hegra* calendar into an imperial one. Suddenly, Iran was in the year 2,535 based on the presumed date of the foundation of the Achaemenid dynasty. In lieu with the effort to Iranianize the Persian language, which had already been pursued by his father Reza Khan, the Pahlavi state also sponsored systematic efforts to substitute Arabic terms with Persian ones. The situation in Iran was assessed, with increasing worries for the stability of the Pahlavi regime, in an intelligence report by the CIA, dated May 1972 and declassified in June 2006:

The Shah sees himself in the role of a latter-day Cyrus the Great who will restore to Iran at least a portion of its old glory as a power to be reckoned with in its own part of the world. His coronation in 1966, 25 years after he assumed the throne, and the grandiose celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Monarchy were the Shah’s way of publicly affirming his belief in the validity of royal rule. Although he frequently insists on the possibility of a true constitutional monarchy in Iran, his actions suggest that he does not foresee it in his time. A noncharismatic leader, he has taken on many of the trappings of totalitarianism; scarcely a town of any size does not have its Avenue Pahlavi and it is a mean city, indeed, that does not have a traffic circle dominated by a statue of the Shah or his father. Massive rallies are held, complete with giant portraits of the Shah and banners bearing quotations by him, and no politician ventures a suggestion without carefully pointing out that it fits

²⁶ Che Guevara (1969) *Guerrilla Warfare* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 21, emphasis in original.

within the framework approved by the Shah ... The Shah is the master of what has been called the 'Pahlavism.'²⁷

The ideational architecture of 'Pahlavism' was crafted around the symbolism of monarchic rule and the metaphysics of modern nationalism consisting of romantic myths about the authenticity of the 'Persian' language and the 'Iranian civilization.' Their impact on the making of a modern 'identity' of Iran devoid of an intrinsically 'Islamic' component comes out in an article which the shah placed in *Life* magazine in May 1963: 'Geographically Iran is situated at the crossroads of the East and the West; it is where Asia and Europe meet,' the shah asserts. 'On one side thrived the old civilizations of China and India; on the other those of Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Rome, and, later on, the modern Western World.' His country was not a part of any civilization *per se*, but 'Iran welded her own civilisation from all those many sources.' This distinctly 'Iranian civilization' holds a universal religion and universal art which 'have left their traces all over the world.' But this universal religion that the shah refers to is not conceptualized as Islamic. Rather, he heralds the pre-Islamic era, 'the old Iranian religion of Mithra' and the 'teachings of the mystic prophet Mani.'²⁸ So an Islam did not have much of a role in the making of an Iran during this period. A discourse of Islam only re-enters the re-imagination of what it means to be Iranian in the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s and after the Islamicized revolution of 1979.

There were more dramatic developments for the dialectic between state and society. On the micro-level the *vision* of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi about the past (Aryan), present (transitory) and future (*tamadon-e bozorg* or the great civilization) was enhanced by a sophisticated *supervisory* regime that extended the licentious power of the state on the very body of its object of desire, that is Iranian society. In 1957, the shah established a new 'intelligence agency' called SAVAK which employed thousands of operatives and informants across the country and beyond. SAVAK, which was created under the tutelage of the FBI and the Israeli Mossad, introduced, for the first time in Iranian history, 'professional' techniques of torture to the expanding number of prison cells in the country. Other intelligence institutions, such as the Imperial Inspectorate and the J2 Bureau, which functioned as the intelligence branch of the imperial army, joined the supervisory network. The budget for the military—meant to be one of the pillars of the shah's rule and hence closely supervised by him—expanded from \$US60 million in 1954 to \$US7.2 billion in 1977 (at 1973 prices and exchange rates).²⁹ In the latter 1970s the military budget of Iran was one of the largest in the world—per Gross National Product. Much of this expansion of the security bureaucracy was possible because of increasing oil revenues, which skyrocketed after the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) boycott of 1973.³⁰

At least from the early twentieth century onwards and later on abetted and catalyzed by the modernization doctrines of the Pahlavis themselves, the state in Iran was confronted

²⁷ CIA, Directorate of Intelligence (1972) *Intelligence Report: Centers of Power in Iran*, pp. 10–11. Available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/70712.pdf>, accessed December 24, 2009.

²⁸ Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1963) A Future to Outshine Ancient Glories, *Life*, May 31, p. 66.

²⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (1977) *World Armaments and Disarmament Yearbook for 1977* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 228–229.

³⁰ See further Ervand Abrahamian (1982) *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 435–436.

with three novel social tendencies: First, the urbanization of Iranian society, the physical concentration of persons in towns which the growth of the population of the country facilitated; second, the social and political expansion of the geography of politics that caught more and more people into its space; and third, the emergence of new politically savvy ideal-types in society, such as the *rowshanfekr* (intellectual), *kargar* (the worker), the *zan-e mobarez* (resisting woman) and the oppositional Ayatollah. All of these actors now were endowed with enough institutional space and discursive leverage to impinge on the territory of the sovereign.

This impingement on the sovereignty of the state that the expansion of the geography of politics brought about dramatized the problems of management and surveillance of an increasing number of persons. The state reacted by instituting a range of novel disciplinary strategies, techniques of power and knowledge that made it possible for its bureaucracy to organize the population and to make it visible; to attempt to turn society into an object of formal power (e.g., judicial and administrative), especially after the shah was reinstalled in 1953. A particularly prominent example in this regard is the so-called White Revolution launched by the shah ten years later. It not only led to land reform but also to unprecedented levels of industrialization and social change (women's rights, including the right to vote, and growth of the educational sector). It was not merely an ideological device to pre-empt the revolutionary rhetoric of the burgeoning 'Left' in the country. The 'White Revolution' simultaneously territorialized Iranian society and made it visible to the 'gaze' and the disciplinary apparatus of the state. As part of the land reform which was the main pillar of the proposed changes, a professional census was taken of Iranians and they were mapped in accordance with the newly devised 'provinces.' This made possible, for the first time in Iranian history, the authoritative, 'scientific' language of the second census of the country published in 1966, which established that 'Iran had a population of 25,323,064 distributed over an area of 628,000 square miles.'³¹ From now on everything and everyone within this newly delineated anatomy—the Iranian body politic—was affected by the state, at least formally: families who wanted to apply for birth certificates to enable their children to go to school or to marry; people who had to apply for a passport in order to be able to travel abroad; farmers who had to qualify for government subsidies to finance the fertilization of their crops; students who applied for government scholarships, and so on.

But despite this modernization of the disciplinary apparatus of the state, it would be wrong to assume that the licentious form of power, despite its 'rational,' 'scientific' pretensions and despite the FBI/Mossad torture handbooks, is equal, in status and efficiency, to the omnipresent, yet 'clandestine' power that Michel Foucault thinks. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes such 'panoptical power' as unspectacular, capillary, almost invisible. It strikes from afar, it is not immediately identifiable: 'If it is still necessary for the law to reach and manipulate the body of the convict,' Foucault writes, 'it will be at a distance, in the proper way, according to strict rules, and with a much "higher" aim.' Consequently, the executioner was relieved of his task by a whole army of technicians, such as 'warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationalists.' By their very immediate presence close to the prisoner these professional enforcers of the law 'sing the praises that the

³¹ The first census in Iran was undertaken in 1956, but it was largely considered to be unreliable or 'unscientific.' See further Ferydoon Firoozi (1970) Iranian Censuses 1956 and 1966: A Comparative Analysis, *Middle East Journal*, 24(2), pp. 220–228.

law needs: they reassure it that the body and pain are not the ultimate objects of its punitive action.’³² No Iranian polity, including the Islamic Republic which reintroduced the ‘spectacle’ of public executions, really has been successful in instituting a micro-strategic disciplinary regime that would be as ‘omniscience’ as the panoptical model that Foucault ponders. That is not because the state in Iran is somehow ‘primitive,’ but exactly because modern power, at its tangents, retains a degree of unmitigated aggressiveness toward the political enemy that is not at all ‘measured’ and ‘capillary’ as Foucault imagined. A few examples from liberal democracies illustrate the point. On May 4, 1970, members of the Ohio National Guard entered the campus of Kent State University in the United States, killing four unarmed anti-war students and injuring nine others, one of whom remained paralysed. On June 2, 1967, Benno Ohnesorg was killed by a plainclothes German police officer during a protest against the state visit of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.³³ And during the miners’ strike between 1984 and 1985, the Thatcher government in Britain was directly and indirectly responsible for the arrest of thousands of protesters, the jailing of hundreds of others, the injury of tens of thousands and the killing of two miners who died on the picket lines and eight more who died in related events. And, of course, there is the sadistic sexual violence unleashed on the inmates of the Iraqi Abu Ghraib prison complex and as a part of the international rendition regime that the George W. Bush Administration supervised. Modern state power was never as timid as Foucault believed. When the interests of the power elite are at stake, democracies will kill, if necessary with frightening arbitrariness.³⁴

Perhaps I am describing what Susan Buck-Morss terms a ‘wild zone of power,’ which she conceptualizes as ‘a zone in which power is above the law and thus, at least potentially, a terrain of terror.’³⁵ As she rightly observes, this zone never really can be total; it never really can subsume all segments and particles of society. So both in the panoptical model of Foucault and beyond the wild zone of power of Buck-Morss, the possibility of escape, dissidence and an arena for rebellion—however contracted and minute—retain the promise for political transformation. Where there is power, there is resistance, Foucault was right to claim. The points of resistance are not only ‘a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat . . . [N]either are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed.’ Rather, most of the time, ‘one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance.’³⁶

This power–resistance dialectic is an important part of the explanation of why the radical subject has not been subdued until today, in Iran (and elsewhere). While the shah launched the ‘White Revolution’ and professionalized the disciplinary apparatus of his increasingly oppressive state, the opposition managed to extend the geography of revolutionary politics,

³² Michel Foucault (1991) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan (trans.) (London: Penguin), p. 11.

³³ Subsequently, Karl-Heinz Kurras, who shot Ohnesorg in the courtyard of Krumme Strasse 66 in Berlin, was cleared of all charges in two trials.

³⁴ See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2011) *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and Them Beyond Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press), chap. 3, esp. pp. 212–232.

³⁵ Susan Buck-Morss (2002) *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 2–3.

³⁶ Michel Foucault (1998) *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, Robert Hurley (trans.) (London: Penguin), p. 96.

the transitory points of resistance to the arbitrariness of the formal power of the monarch. From the late 1950s onwards all strata of Iranian society became a target of ideological agitation. This is exemplified by the range of new associations that were involved in mobilizing the masses, now more visibly than before from an explicitly 'Islamic' disposition, for instance the Islamic Association of Engineers (*anjuman-e Islami-ye mohandesin*), the Islamic Association of teachers (*anjuman-e Islami-ye mo'allemin*) or the Monthly Religious Association (*anjuman-e mahanih-ye dini*). Unfazed and determined to push his policies through, the shah held a mock referendum on the 'White Revolution' and announced its 'victory' in January 1963. Ayatollah Khomeini reacted with a strongly worded declaration denouncing the shah's domestic and foreign policies. In the same month, the shah ordered the army into Qom, the religious center of Iran and the place where Khomeini lived, taught and studied. Army units stormed the seminaries which had become a hub for revolutionary agitation and, in another signpost of the 'discursive war' characteristic of this period, the shah denounced the clergy as 'black reactionaries' (*irtijai-e siyah*). The confrontation cumulated in Khomeini's speech at the Feiziyyeh Seminary on the afternoon of Ashura (June 3, 1963), which is commemorated by Shia Muslims as a day of mourning for the 'martyrdom' of Hossein (the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed), his family and his followers who were killed by the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazid at the Battle of Karbala in the year 61 of the Islamic calendar (AD 680). 'O Mr. Shah, dear Mr. Shah, abandon these improper acts,' Khomeini advised with the full force of Shia symbolism behind him.

I don't want people to offer thanks should your masters decide that you must leave. I don't want you to become like your father. When America [the United States], the Soviet Union and England attacked us [during the Second World War] people were happy that Pahlavi [the Shah's father, Reza Shah] went. Listen to my advice, listen to the clergy's advice, not to that of Israel. That would not help you. You wretched, miserable man, forty-five years of your life have passed. Isn't it time for you to think and reflect a little, to ponder about where all this is leading you, to learn a lesson from the experience of your father? . . . You don't know whether the situation will change one day nor whether those who surround you will remain your friends. They are the friends of the dollar. They have no religion, no loyalty. They have hung all the responsibility around your neck. O miserable man!³⁷

Two days after delivering this speech, Khomeini was arrested and incarcerated, sparking the historic uprising of Khordad 15, 1342 (June 1963). Unrepentant, Khomeini continued resisting the shah, especially after the monarch pushed through the Iranian parliament what came to be known as the 'Bill of Capitulation' in the jargon of the revolutionaries, granting US military personnel diplomatic immunity on Iranian territory. As a consequence of his intransigent opposition, Khomeini was exiled, first to Turkey, then

³⁷ Khomeini quoted in Baqer Moin (1999) *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris), p. 104. On Israel, Khomeini was particularly uncompromising, declaring elsewhere that Iranians, Muslims and the oppressed of the world never would accept the state of Israel and that Iranians always would support 'their Palestinian and Arab brothers.' See Ruhollah Khomeini (1373 [1994]), *Ain-e enghelab-e Islami: Gozidehai az andisheh va ara-ye Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Moasses-ye tanzim va naschr-e assar-e Imam Khomeini), p. 200.

to Iraq and finally to France before he returned to lead the final stage of the revolution in 1979 and the creation of the Islamic Republic.

The conceptual point underlying the preceding snapshot of Iranian history can be summed up with an analogy in reverse: if Bentham's Panopticon is Foucault's ultimate architectural and organizational example for the invisible, omnipresent 'carceral' complex that contributes to controlling (European) society, Evin, Iran's first professionally designed modern prison, is an example for the way the state has failed to produce politically apathetic and socially submissive objects. Foucault witnessed for himself how the Pahlavi state failed to discipline society, when he travelled to Iran during the revolution, and when he wondered how Iranians produced 'a movement strong enough to overthrow an apparently well-armed regime while being close to old dreams that the West had known in times past, when people attempted to inscribe the figures of spirituality on political ground.'³⁸ It is very likely that the excesses of the revolution prevented Foucault from engaging with the Islamic Republic in a more conceptual manner. Yet, if Foucault would have theorized the confines of modern power in Iran, if he would have expanded the empirical scope of his scholarly corpus beyond Europe, he may have taken more seriously his own proposition that resistance is inherent to power. Modern panoptical power, whether in its Iranian or western variance, never really can be all-encompassing. Political subjects continue to express agency; they continue to think political change and to put revolts into practice.³⁹

Thus, the absence of an all-encompassing disciplinary regime in Iran that would educate society into submission can be isolated as one of the reasons for the success of the revolutionary subject at least from the late 1950s onwards. It is no coincidence that all of the major figures of the revolution—Khomeini, Montazeri, Taleghani, Khamenehi, Rafsanjani, Motahari, Bazargan, Bani-Sadr, and Shariati—had a prison experience in pre-revolutionary Iran at some stage of their lives. Neither the political 'bio-ontology' espoused by the Pahlavis, nor the modern prison system 'disciplined' these individuals. Rather the contrary. If they entered the prison as notorious radicals, they exited as angry revolutionaries. It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish a threshold according to which radicalism turns into revolutionary action, but the inability of the shah to (a) socialize society with the 'bio-ontology' of Pahlavism, (b) the expansion of the geography of politics in the country and (c) the creation of a functional revolutionary counter-discourse within that space, can be isolated as major factors in the molding and success of the revolutionary subject.

The extraordinary devotion to a new order of things was inscribed in the names of the burgeoning militant parties, for instance the *Fedayeen-e khalgh* ('devotees' of the masses) which employed urban guerrilla warfare tactics against the state in the 1970s, the *Mujahedin-e khalgh* (the 'warriors' of the masses) which mixed socialist ideology with Islamist imagery, and the discourse of the aforementioned intellectuals, such as Jalal al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, who deprecated the shah's cultural and political subservience to the 'west' and who called for a return to Iran's 'true identity,' which increasingly was imagined in Islamic, rather than in 'Aryan' terms.⁴⁰ To sum all this up: the 'wild zone of

³⁸ Michel Foucault (2002) *Power: Essential works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 3, Robert Hurley et al. (trans.), James D. Faubion (ed.) (London: Penguin), p. 451.

³⁹ On this 'lapse' in Foucault's theory, see Michael L. Fitzhugh & William H. Leckie, Jr. (2001) Postmodernism, and the Causes of Change, *History and Theory*, 40(4), esp. pp. 63ff.

⁴⁰ See further Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics*, part 1, esp. pp. 43–67.

power' carved out by the Pahlavi state remained 'licentiously modern;' it did not perfect a panoptical disciplinary regime that would be truly totalitarian and omnipresent.

Iran's *Zoon Politikon* Today

What is 'radical' can be measured only against what is considered to be normal in a given society. What is considered to be normal in a given society is seriously affected, if not entirely determined, by the cultural texture which sets the normative guidelines according to which society is supposed to function and deliberate. The state, due to its administrative tentacles which follow us into our living rooms and its ideological power which assaults our cognition, is a central agent of the normative consensus that is meant to keep radicals at bay, exactly because radicals are coded to question the *status quo*. It must follow quite logically that any increase in the number of political prisoners in a country is not indicative of the ability of the state apparatus to subdue the combatant population. Rather the contrary. It is a measure of opposition, defiance and resistance.

I have argued that the state apparatus of the shah introduced the 'modern' prison system to the country in the 1970s. This was not merely an institutional development. With the modern prison there came 'modern' interrogation techniques, a culture of incarceration and physical violence that increasingly was 'professionalized.' To that end, interrogators were sent to the United States and Israel so that they could learn the trait of 'scientific torture' that would not unnecessarily kill, but discipline, through nail extraction, sexual violence, water boarding, stress positions, sleep deprivation and/or mock executions.⁴¹ This was merely one of the central excesses of western modernity in Iran. The overheating economy, the colossal socioeconomic upheavals, cultural uprooting and alienation that the 'developmental' ideology of the Pahlavis brought about, were others. No wonder then that the country's revolutionary intellectuals expressed their antagonism to the 'west' in so vivid and, at times, utterly melancholic terms. They encountered western modernity at first through the political-economic violence of imperialism and then through the psychological violence of the *developmental* state. Both were rejected.

But the revolution in Iran also points to the impossibility of total change. Power and resistance, once reversed, remain power and resistance. Revolutions as we know them, do not merge them into one, because they have not nullified *either* resistance *or* power. So after the Islamic revolution of 1979, the power of the Islamic Republic, which had been used to fuel the resistance to the shah, remained as licentious as the power of the Pahlavi state, if less pretentiously 'modern' in its respect for universal declarations of human rights and prohibitions against torture. If the Pahlavi state punished in the name of a royal prerogative, a monarcho-formal jurisdiction that rationalized the brutality of the state, the Islamic Republic punishes in the name of a deity, it exercises licentious power that is mandated by God. A central pathology ensues. The state turns God into an accomplice and the punished is relieved of his right to pray for mercy. The *mohareb* (enemy of Islam) and *mofset fel arz* (corrupters on Earth) enter the politico-judicial discourse as the archetypal enemies of the state. Both offences are punishable by death. From being a callous method

⁴¹ See further Ervand Abrahamian (1999) *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 106; and Fred Halliday (1979) *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), pp. 75ff.

to exert the sovereignty of the king, punishment is imagined as a moral necessity to safeguard humanity from itself.

I do not have the luxury here to present a comprehensive analysis of the judicial discourse after the revolution. Suffice it to say that in terms of disciplinary surveillance and the securitization of state and society, the Islamic Republic is by far more 'professional' (namely, modern) than the Pahlavi state ever was. This is due to the mandate that the state usurped and the sovereignty that it appropriated which Khomeini, quite from the outset, did not restrict to worldly matters. If the French revolution in 1789 promised a new order for humankind and communism rendered the end of history inevitable, the Islamic revolution thrust into the transcendental space beyond humankind and History the very space that used to be the sole prerogative of God. The humble outfit of the Iranian nation-state was not merely elevated to the level of ontological transcendence, but it was heaved higher, in close proximity to the otherworldly. In this sense, the Islamic revolution in Iran also promised to bring about the first metaphysical revolution in the history of humankind. To that end, the constitution, adopted by a plebiscite in 1979, institutionalized the sovereignty of the *velayat-e faqih*, the Supreme Jurisprudent who represents the highest institution of the political system in Iran. The *faqih's* mandate is both transcendental, privileged in relation to God, and transnational, mandated to rally the *umma* (Islamic nation) and the oppressed (*mostazafan*) masses of the world against the oppressors. No wonder then that Iran's 'enemies of the state' are not only considered counter-revolutionaries, but exactly *mohareb*, i.e., enemies of God on Earth. They are considered to be enemies of *the* state that is positioned at the nexus of the here and now and the millenarian promise of a Utopian tomorrow.

This hubristic extension of the sovereignty of the ruling elites in Iran, a sort of Islamic reincarnation of the Hegelian *Geist* that was meant to descend upon nation-states in nineteenth-century Europe, is safeguarded by a range of rather this-worldly institutions that have been created after the revolution in order to discipline Iranian society into accepting the ideology of the state. Henceforth, SAVAK was substituted by the Intelligence Ministry, the army units of the shah's Imperial Guard merged into the *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelabi* (Revolutionary Guards Corps), which joined the national army and the military wings of the *Baseej-e Mostazafan* (Mobilization of the Oppressed) to constitute the defense forces of the country, which were placed under the command of the *velayat-e faqih*, i.e., at first Ayatollah Khomeini and since his death in 1989 Ali Khamenehi. In recent years, the *Sepah* has become a major economic player, creating, for the first time in Iranian history, a sophisticated military-industrial complex with political clout. Moreover, today, almost every major street in Iran has its own military compound, police station, *Basij* headquarters or Islamic 'committee building' attached to the Intelligence Ministry; and, at the time of writing, major streets in Tehran, Shiraz and Isfahan are being equipped with CCTV cameras; before the revolution the Iranian police drove two-door hatchbacks, today they are equipped with E-class Mercedes and BMW motorbikes.

Moreover, the Iranian state has put the World Wide Web under surveillance as well. In December 2001, the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution set up an inter-agency organization called the 'Committee in Charge of Determining Unauthorized Sites,' which is responsible for centralizing and formalizing the criteria according to which websites are filtered. The Committee is comprised of members of the ministries of Islamic Guidance, Intelligence and Communication. Additional layers of regulation have been added since then. Under one of the most central censorship legislations, voted into law by the conservative-dominated parliament in 2006, it is the owner of commercial Internet Service

Providers (ISPs) who would be charged if their clients break the Cyber Crimes Bill. Political agitation and pornography are particularly high on the list of censorship priorities.

Yet, despite all of these formal levers of policing and surveillance, state power in Iran remains dysfunctional. The ‘wild zone of power’ exists, but the radical subject continues to operate at its tangents. The disillusionment and lost causes that have punctured so disastrously radical activism in much of the late capitalist world seem like marginal impediments when compared with the continuation of radical politics in Iran, not entirely different, in audacity and vigor, from other contemporary manifestations of radical politics in the non-western world. Much of this has to do with the dialectics between state and society in contemporary Iranian history, as I have explained. The revolution of 1979 added an additional factor to this interaction: the revolutionary libido that was absorbed by the state and re-channeled on to the populace created the social and political conditions for the re-enactment of radical politics today. On the one side, in political terms, the revolution granted Iranians the absolute right to rise up and question authority, exactly because the oppressed–oppressor dialectic espoused by Khomeini suggests and creates the conditions for an ongoing interrogation of the state and—given that the state is mandated to interpret the law of God—the realm of God itself. Yet, once this Utopia of a just and transcendental state was ideologically appropriated, it set the high standard according to which the Islamic Republic is measured and judged. As I have argued, we are not talking about merely an ideological Utopia that was central to the French, Russian and Chinese revolution here. This is a ‘divine’ Utopia encapsulated in the millenarian promise that the Twelfth Imam of the Shia will return to create the just rule of God on Earth. Today, this interpretation of the Islamic Republic is espoused by the current president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, and the functionaries of the Revolutionary Guards among others. They have attempted to monopolize the custodianship of the divine Utopia and reserve it for a tight clique organized around the current Supreme Jurisprudent Ali Khamenehi. This nucleus of Iran’s current power elite is by far less inclusive than the ‘Khomeinists’ revolutionaries during the first decade of the revolution when Khomeini successfully forged cross-political alliances. Moreover, the rather closed interpretation of the Shia mythology and the revolutionary heritage adhered to by the current administration and its supporters are rejected largely by the old conservatives and the reformists. The opposition, which is galvanized by Iran’s radical civil society, continues to argue that the revolution has failed to live up to its expectations, certainly in realizing a rather more democratic and just political order which was thought to be possible under the banner of Islam. Consequently, a counter-discourse has emerged that is confronting the ideologized Islam of the guardians of the disciplinary state with a transformative, ‘secularized Islam’ defended by the cumbersome reformists.

On the other side, social policies, such as the wide-ranging literacy campaign implemented immediately after the revolution and the massive expansion of the higher education sector in the 1990s, further expanded what I have called the geography of politics in Iran. Indeed, one central reason why women’s right activists are at the forefront of political dissent in the country is their central position in Iran’s highly educated middle class.⁴² As such, the radical subject which today speaks in an emphatically feminine voice, not at least because the female body itself has been a site of war in modern Iran, has become an integral part of the ‘pluralistic momentum’ in the country.⁴³ It is this pluralistic

⁴² See further Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics*, part 4, esp. pp. 159–164.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

momentum—diffuse, scattered, molar, eclectic, yet full of political impact—which is both the effect of, and the arena for, Iran’s burgeoning civil society and the radical democratic politics that it engenders. I offer this in cautious conclusion of the two central topics of this essay: First, as a part of the genealogy of the radical subject in Iran, who today is neither apathetic, subdued by a feeling of political paralysis, nor unduly euphoric, intoxicated by a sense of an impending triumph over its right-wing competitors. And secondly, in support of my disquisition on the centrality of the Iranian experience to a truly comparative and critical theory of contemporary power and resistance and the histories of defeat and triumphalism that they provoke. After all, what is the purpose of critical theory if not to reposition nationalized histories in a global context?

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