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ISLAMIC FORCES OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION:

A CRITIQUE OF CULTURAL ESSENTIALISM¹[1]

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“The very concept of history asserts that human development is not predetermined – not by nature, nor by God, nor by the totality of history itself” (Susan Buck-Morss 2003, 41). However, there is always a combination of “a willful action of knowledgeable actors within constrains and possibilities supplied by pre-existing structures”. This is to suggest that there is a web of possibilities for agents to make choices within given limits. Agents are both “active and structured” (Luke 1977, 29).

In the same token, a dialectical relation between structure and agency can better explain the role of socio-political forces in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. To clarify my argument, let me propose an operational definition of structure and agency in the context of the Iranian Revolution. In such a context, structure evolved in three major forms: first, ‘uneven development’, which came as a result of the Shah’s authoritarian modernization (Abrahamian 1982); this made a significant impact on structural relations between and within classes and state. Second, the autocratic-rentier state or “petrolic despotism” (Katouzian 1981); this created a context in which the more the Shah relied upon the state’s dependent-coercive system the more he removed himself from the society. And, third, the ‘transnational structure of power’ under the shadow of the Cold War; this favored the strength of the clerical institutions and affected the revolutionary outcomes. The post-1953 Iranian polity undermined the whole republican structure and democratic politics and destroyed all secular and progressive Muslim – liberal or left-wing – parties. The traditional clerical institutions, however, remained almost untouched. Given the structural constraints, the extent to which Iranian social and political forces could play a role was limited to three following agencies: radical/populist discourses, traditional institutions, and the clerical charismatic leadership. In the following part, I will briefly discuss the nature and diversity of political forces, and in particular Muslim’s forces of the revolution. The focus of my talk will not allow me to discuss the role of gender, ethnicity and social forces in general.

II.

Pre-revolutionary Iran, unlike what cultural essentialism suggests, never experienced a *homogenous*, unified clerical Islamic culture. Rather, there were chunks of cultural and political discourses, representing their own histories and social bases and, in fact, reflecting multiple aspects of pre-revolutionary social cleavages. Leaving aside a traditional clerical quietism, there was a diverse ideological interpretation of Islam within the grand alliance that led to the 1979 revolution. The first three Islamic discourses were Khomeinism, Shariati's Islamic-left ideology, and Bazargan's liberal-democratic Islam. The fourth discourse was the socialist guerrilla groups of Islamic and secular variants, and the fifth one was secular constitutionalism in socialist and nationalist forms (Foran 1994).

Ayatollah Rohollah Musavi Khomeini was a high ranking Shiite clergy whose populist and radical-militant discourse became a political ideology called Khomeinism (Abrahamian, 1993). Khomeinism, like other versions of Islamism, is not a traditional discourse; rather, it is a modern phenomenon. It makes little sense to characterize as anti-modern or even pre-modern, a phenomenon profoundly engaged with modernity. Yet, one has to be cautious not to see it as postmodern either; for in as much as the clerical Islamism insists on absolute foundations, is opposing to the anti-foundational feature of post-modernity (Euben 2000). Khomeinism is simultaneously a reaction against modernity and an expression of it. Ayatollah Khomeini's emergence as the leader of the revolution had more to do with his *political* critique of the regime. His critique of the Shah was well-known than his theory of the *velayate faqih*, that is, rule by an Islamist jurist. Khomeinism, in this sense, became an ideologized account of tradition and therefore a modern political construction. Such political phenomenon attracted Muslim and secular intellectuals while its primary social base remained among cleric, their bazaari allies and marginal urban poor.

As Skocpol suggests, it will make a difference which mixture of idioms is available to be drawn upon by given groups. But the choices and uses of available idioms will also be influenced by social and political situations of the acting groups (1985). Ali Shariati's radical-left Islamic discourse was very much affected by, and responding to, the socio-political situations. The core of Shariati's discourse was best encapsulated in his trilogy of "Liberty, Equality, and Spirituality"; a synthesis of *Azadi*, *Barabari*, and *Erfan* in which liberty and democracy would

be without brutal capitalism, equality and social justice without materialism and totalitarianism, and spirituality and religion without clerical institution and the *Shari'a* itself (Shariati, Vol.1, 1979). One of the continuing objectives of his writings was the critique of systems of power, referred to in his text as *Esetbdad* political dictatorship, *Estesmar* material injustice and *Estehmar* religious alienation – cultural hegemony in the Gramscian sense. Shariati charged that the clergy were trying to gain ‘monopolistic control’ over the interpretation of Islam in order to set up a ‘clerical despotism’, *Estebdade Ruhani*; this would be, in his words, ‘the worst and the most oppressive form of despotism possible in human history’ (Shariati, Vol.20, 1981). Indeed, “it was precisely over this issue of clerical authority that Shariati called for an Islamic Renaissance and Reformation” (Abrahamian 1989, 119).

This was a revolutionary and difficult task because the precedent and centuries of history were clearly on the side of the ulama and their conventional interpretation of Islam. Furthermore, the question was who is better equipped to judge what is true Islam? Is it the traditional *ulama* or the modern Western-educated intellectuals? There was also a practical problem: Luther and Calvin in the West had succeeded, both because they had been accomplished Biblical scholars capable of challenging the church on its own ground, and because they had enrolled the active support of monarchs and local states against Rome. The equivalent would have been to ally with the Shah against Qom, which Shariati would never do this. Also, Shariati’s project for an Islamic Renaissance and Reformation had to deal with a few troublesome questions: If Shiism was a revolutionary ideology, why was it surrounded to the iron law of clerical or political establishments? If revolutionary ideologies were capable of changing the infrastructure, why then had Shiism failed? And, if it had failed in the past how could one be sure that it would not fail again in the future? (Abrahamian 1989, 123-24) Despite all these practical and historical problems, the prospects for Iran’s progress, Shariati thought, was to raise public consciences through a radical transformation of social order: not a political but a social revolution. To perform such a historical revolutionary task the cardinal question was ‘where is Iran in the historical process?’ and he answered that contemporary Iran was neither in the twentieth century, nor in the age of the industrial revolution, but still in the age of faith in the late feudal era just on the eve of the Renaissance. The *rushanfekran*, that is the intelligentsia, Shariati argued, are the critical conscience of the society. Their main task is therefore to initiate a ‘Renaissance’ and

‘Reformation’. All they have to do is to raise public consciousness; people will do the rest (Shariati, Vol.4, 1980). Observers notice that Shariati’s later writings, unlike the earlier ones such as *Ummat va Emamat*, clearly take a turn on the question of people and democracy. In *Bazgasht*, for instance, there are repeated references as to the fact that intellectuals or any elite are not to command or provide revolutionary leadership; but only to educate in a conscious raising form. He quotes Rousseau as having said that intelligentsia is not to make plans for people. Political leadership is not the task of the vanguard. It is not for us to create a plan for all the future, what we have to do is the critical analysis of all that exists (Shariati, Vol.4, 1980). Such radical critique of the *statue quo* therefore made university students, intellectuals, urban classes of workers and migrants as the main social base of Shariati’s discourse.

A third variant was liberal Islam, whose adherents sought political power through principles of constitutionalism and democracy and favored an accommodation of Islam with liberal-democracy. The modern bourgeoisie, some merchants, the modern middle class, small segment of the clergy and some students and teachers embraced this liberal orientation, which took its organizational form in Mehdi Bazargan’s Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI). The fourth discourse was the left-wing ‘guerrilla’ organizations with a revolutionary, socialist discourse, in forms of the Islamic *Mojahedin* and the Marxist *Fadaian*, which appealed to some students, intellectuals, and workers. And finally there existed secular constitutionalists, both in forms of nationalist and republican-socialists. The former were followers of Mosaddeq’s National Front back in the 1950s and were supported by a small segment of the bazaar, white-color workers, and professionals. The latter, the *Tudeh* socialist party, was supported by a small portion of the intelligentsia.

Given the diversity of the political forces, therefore, the essentialist, monolith, wholesale and unified concept of Islamic discourse is simply misleading. Indeed, out of these complexities came a set of ideas and ideologies that mobilized complex and various social classes of intellectuals and students, young *ulama*, bazaari’s merchants, urban poor and workers whom were influenced in one way or another by nationalism and radicalism, post-colonialism and democracy, liberalism and socialism, and finally Islamism and democratic Islam.

III.

The cardinal question, however, is why Khomeinism and not other discourses dominated the field? First of all, Khomeinism was a *radical*, revolutionary discourse and radicalism was a hegemonic political culture of the 1960s and 1970s. The formation of an autocratic state in post-1953 Iran blocked peaceful and parliamentary politics and successfully destroyed the already fragile democratic and secular political institutions. In reaction to the Shah's Sultanistic modernization, Iranians experienced a social and cultural alienation. This led to the formation of a new type of ideology which utilized Islamic symbols and ideas to provide a new and yet familiar meaning to the subjectivity of Iranians. The construction of a new Islamic ideology evolved as a radical and viable political alternative. (Mirsepassi 2000, 59-60) In post-coup era, Bazargan's liberal democratic Islam, among other secular-nationalists and constitutionalists had experienced a phase of discursive and institutional decline and therefore could not respond to the popular radical and revolutionary atmosphere.

Second, Khomeinism was a *populist* and also Islamic discourse, which could easily communicate with the people. However, the secular opposition, both in nationalist and leftist forms, remained largely restricted to secular intelligentsia and therefore could not construct a popular ideology, nor institutionalize a mass revolutionary political culture. In other words, the constitutionalists, both secular and Muslims, and the secular opposition, both nationalists and leftists, were in no position to form a revolutionary *radical* and *popular* ideology. While the former was short of a radical character, the latter lacked a popular links with the masses. The 1979 Revolution, as Bayat, an Iranian historian, has observed: "has pointed out the most fundamental weakness of Iranian political life in modern times – namely, the absence of a secular, nationalist ideology strong enough to sustain a war on two fronts: both against the absolutist regime of the Pahlavis, and against the predominant clerical presence in politics" (Bayat, 1982 quoted in Mirsepassi 2000, 60).

The puzzling case was that of Shariati's radical Islamic discourse, which enjoyed both radical and popular Islamic elements and yet could not compete with Khomeinism. Its failure in shaping the revolutionary outcomes needs further explanations. First, Khomeinism was a *political* construction; a mixture of ideas and a marriage of opposite. It hired modern idioms and

used both secular and progressive Muslim's concepts, and in particular those of Shariati's, and incorporated into a third worldist, populist, radical, and Islamic revolutionary discourse. Shariati's words and idioms were, in fact, utilized out of their intellectual context and therefore created much confusion among many intellectuals. Second, in the absence of Shariati, his followers, the *rushanfekran*, were left with no clear *project* or any solid social theory to continue what Shariati had started. Shariati's discourse of radical 'de-construction' of Islamic thought was lost in the midst of the revolutionary waves. His ideas lost their power not in the 'battle of ideas', but in battles that some actors failed to use his ideas and some other actors succeeded to abuse them. Had Shariati himself thought of how difficult and dangerous was to have revolution under the banner of religion and yet keep the leadership of that revolution out of the hands of the religious authorities? Had he considered an Islamic revolution had the potential danger of becoming a clerical revolution? (Abrahamian 1989, 119) There is a desperate need for an academic inquiry into such significant questions. What is clear, however, is on the eve of the revolution, Shariati's discourse, like other secular and progressive Muslim groups, was suffering from its institutional weakness and the absence of leadership. During his life Shariati challenged the political (autocratic) and religious (conservative) establishments and therefore was under attack from both sides. For this reason he neither succeeded in making a modern political party nor achieved a full cooperation with traditional institutions. The institutional weakness made Shariati's discourse extremely dependent on his personality and therefore led to a discontinuity, confusion and misrepresentation of his ideology. This was, in fact, the third factor, which excluded his discourse from the revolutionary outcomes. While, this institutional flaw and failure left modern Muslim intelligentsia alone, the traditional groups were benefited from the nationwide network of mosques, theological seminars, religious shrines, charitable endowments, and religious lecture halls. The organized modern opposition in general was closely monitored; the clergy, however, emerged from "the relative shelter of the mosque." On the eve of the revolution no secular or progressive Muslim – liberal or left-wing parties operated legally. Khomeinism filled this institutional gap.

In addition to all of this, Ayatollah Khomeini was a masterful charismatic leader and able to rally a wide spectrum of social forces. Also, in the absence of other charismatic revolutionary and national leaders, like Mosaddeq, Ayatollah Khomeini was seen as the incarnation of Iranian

nationalism, anti absolutism and anti-imperialism in the form of Iran's dominant mass culture.

IV.

To sum up, we can only appreciate the puzzling meaning of the Iranian Revolution by defamiliarizing some concepts and going beyond the prevailing essentialist interpretations of the Iranian revolution. The rise of Islamic politics was a new effort to come to terms with the challenge of modernity in Iran. The Revolution was a historical turning point in the crisis of the Western-centric project of modernization. "The most striking factor behind the rise and popularity of Islamic alternative in Iran was that it articulated an alternative discourse to that project, enabling Iran to try and accommodate modernity within the context of her own historical and cultural experiences." It presented itself as the only desirable answer to the country's dilemmas. This was an ideal, real or imagined, that no other modern movements were able to achieve or even to offer. The hegemony of Islamic alternative in the course of the Iranian revolution was not a historically pre-determined phenomenon, nor an accident. The crisis and decline of democratic institutions resulted in a political vacuum in the country. Ayatollah Khomeini took advantage of the existing traditional institutions to fill the gap. The anti-Shah movement was actually delivered to him (Mirsepassi 2000, 94).

In addition to that, however, drawing on Richard Rorty's thought, one could argue that Islam was a thinnest phrase in the Iranian Muslims' final vocabulary and the Shah's Sultanistic modernization challenged this thinness. Under this autocratic modernization, Islamic belief, while remaining the matrix of meaning in everyday life, became, to put Jacques Derrida's words, the "constitutive outside" of Iranian identity and thereby its extent. Paradoxically or dialectically, as a counter-hegemonic discursive field, Islamic alternative became not simply a medium through which secular demands of dissatisfied classes were expressed but a means by which interests and identities formed (Sayyid 1997). The discourse of *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication) was a response to such crisis of identity and a reaction against the Western-centered project of modernization. It was a complex and contradictory concept, which cannot simply be reduced to an anti-Western polemic. For in an age of republicanism, radicalism and nationalism, the Pahlavi's discourse appeared to favor monarchism, conservatism, and Western imperialism (Mirsepassi 2000, 76-7). The *Gharbzadegi* was an expression of dignity and in a post-colonial

context dignity is freedom in a different sense.

V.

And my final words are on the prospects of Islamic politics in Iran. In re-visiting the Islamic alternative today, one can argue that despite a quarter-century intensive project of clerical Islamization from above, the age of clerical Islamism or any version of political Islam in Iran is over. This is largely due to the social, cultural and political changes, which have taken place in the post-revolutionary Iran. Iran, as a nation and as a political culture, wishes to enter the age of modern democracy. Islam, however, will certainly play a significant role in years to come. This is not to say that Islam will play a role only in the people's private life. Rather, it implies the relocation of religious institutions from the state and from political society to civil society. This relocation does not necessarily mean the privatization of Islam. Privatization of religion is neither possible nor desirable. Unlike what classic liberalism suggests calls for the privatization of Islam as a condition for modern democracy in the Muslim world will only produce antidemocratic Islamist responses. "By contrast, the public reflexive elaboration of Islam's normative traditions in response to modern challenges, political learning experiences, and global discourses has a chance to generate various forms of public civil Islam which may be conducive to democratization" (Casanova 2001). A 'public civil religion', as it discussed by a group of Western philosophers or to some extent exists in a number of democracies, does not harm democracy; it, rather, could support it in a number of ways. As Jurgen Habermas suggests democracies are threatened by the power of states and markets. To question and contest the claims of these two major powers a strong civil society and public sphere is warranted (Habermas, 1996). A public civil religion, in this sense, can play a role on the part of public sphere by counter-balancing the power of state and market. By questioning the undemocratic claims of states, inhuman demands of capitalist markets, and individualist rational choice theories it can serve democracy, social justice and social ethics. In the challenges that lay ahead for today's Iran, such as transition to democracy and encounter with modernity, globalization and politics of identity, various forms of public civil religion may play a positive part. This could happen only, and if only, there is no state-sponsored Islamism. The problem in the Muslim

world, unlike what cultural essentialism suggests, is not that an ‘essentially’ fanatic religious tradition prohibits democracy, but rather that modern authoritarian states, secular or Islamist, do not allow the open public sphere where democratic debates could take place. In an interview shortly before his death in 1993, Mehdi Bazargan remarked: the greatest threat to Islam in Iran since the revolution has been the experience of living under the Islamic Republic!

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