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ESSAY



Iran and the Permanence of the Theologico-Political?

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The “Iranian Revolution of 1979” has long come to stand in as an empty signifier by which contesting parties have sought to advance broader narratives about modernity and the place of religion in our contemporary world. From the “return of the repressed” and backlash against modernization to the challenge of “Islamic revival” and the redundancy of the “secularization thesis,” from the notion of an inexorable “clash of civilizations” to the stubborn persistence of coloniality and Orientalism – Iran’s social and political revolution has emerged as a “quilting point” for anchoring grand narratives of historical transformation as well as several political and existential crises confronting us in the present.

Beyond the revolution broadly defined, the “Islamic Republic” has also enjoyed a varied reception and has been seen as harboring different stakes depending on the positionality and politics of the participant/observer. For some it has been understood as the vengeful return of Europe’s Middle Ages. Here Ayatollah Khomeini is cast in the role of Iran’s very own Savonarola and as a recrudescence of European caesaropapism. This specter, which we are told must be resisted at all costs, continues to haunt Europe despite the firm belief that it had been decisively banished centuries prior. For many liberals, the new regime represented a veritable assault on secular reason and was thus held up, not only as a reminder of Europe’s own grim and bloody past, but also as signifying the perennial danger of the return of “pre-modern” atavisms. For Western liberals and many self-avowed leftists, the revolution, and its fallout, came to be horrifyingly exemplified in Khomeini’s infamous fatwa against Salman Rushdie, and reignited liberalism’s need for a more muscular and assertive posture in the face of a resolute, committed, and irrational enemy. For a time, “radical Islam” supplanted the “Evil Empire,” even as the United States played no small role in nurturing transnational jihadists in its own moral, political, and military crusade against the Soviet Union.¹ As numerous critics of contemporary “real existing liberalism” have made clear,² the practice and history of liberalism has never been short of official enemies, even when there might have been some truth to the convenient caricature shorn of context or historical understanding. In this sense, Western liberalism met a strangely familiar counterpoint in Ayatollah Khomeini’s symbolic denunciation of the American imperial republic as the “Great Satan” and

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¹Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

²Barry Hindess, “Political theory and ‘actually existing liberalism’,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 11 (2008).

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what he took to be its deplorable and degraded moral status and its malevolent role in the world. In distinct contrast to the liberal reaction, other commentators have highlighted the creative potentials the revolution had unleashed (often in contrast to the regime that was ultimately established) in what amounted to a profound response to American neocolonialism and European colonial modernity. Some even went as far as to claim that it harbored the capacity to break with many of the latter's worst and most self-destructive excesses. The latter view is perhaps most frequently identified with the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, whose views provoked considerable outrage and irascible calls for him to recant across the Parisian intellectual scene.³

Despite the elapse of more than four decades since the revolution it is fair to say that the jury is still out and that the prospects of final victory for one historiographical school over another improbable. Popular reactions and scholarly debate remain as polarized as ever.⁴ In this short intervention I will provide a rudimentary sketch of some of the chief points of contention around questions of political spirituality, the political and theologico-political, and how they have been engaged in the scholarly literature around Iran's 1979 Revolution, the Islamic Republic, and their generative, as well as destructive effects. Before going any further, it should be noted that the term "political theology," in Persian *elāhiyāt-e siyāsī*, is only of recent vintage and is a direct translation of its European counterpart. Schmitt's seminal *Political Theology* itself was only translated into Persian in 2011 (1390), though there were ample commentaries and analyses of the concept which predate it by several years. The flurry of interest and receptivity to the term was in crucial respects made possible by the post-revolutionary process of Islamist state-building and policy, which prior to 1979 had been a palpably underdeveloped aspect of Shi'i jurisprudence and theology. Apart from using it as one way, among others, to analytically frame my previous research on the political theology of Iran's so-called "religious intellectuals" (*rowshanfekrān-e dīni*) and the reform movement of the 1990s and early 2000s, there is an ongoing debate within Iran over the relevance of such an approach to its political history and constitutional development.⁵

Foucault's critique of a doctrinaire variety of Stalinist unilinear stagism are at the forefront in his running commentary on the Iranian Revolution in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della sera*. In those writings Foucault sought to understand the nature of the revolt, a revolt which palpably unsettled several Stalinist orthodoxies around the character of the "national bourgeoisie" and the "non-capitalist road to development,"⁶ the dominant

³Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), Appendix.

⁴For example see, Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 2017), Chapter 6.

⁵Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and its Discontents: Reform and Political Thought in Iran*, The Global Middle East (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), Introduction. Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi and Yaacov Yadgar, "Jalal's Angels of Deliverance and Destruction: Genealogies of Theo-politics, Sovereignty and Coloniality in Iran and Israel," *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 1 (2021). For more on the translation of the term and an insightful account of the reception of Schmitt in Iran see, Milad Odabaei, "The Outside (*Kharij*) of Tradition in the Aftermath of the Revolution: Carl Schmitt and Islamic Knowledge in Postrevolutionary Iran," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39, no. 2 (2019).

⁶Nūr al-Dīn Kīānūrī, *Barressi-ye masā'el-e gūnāgūn-e Iran dar sāl-e 1357* (Enteshārāt-e hezb-e Tūdeh-ye Iran, 1358 [1979]), 16-17. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Kīānūrī's position was at times more sophisticated than that which has been frequently caricatured. Asghar Shīrāzī, *Modernīteh, shobheh va demokrasī bar mabnā-ye yek baressi-ye moredī dar bārehe-ye hezb-e Tūdeh* (Tehran: Akhtarān, 1386), p. 227-230.

discourses and social forces prevailing in the revolutionary tumult, and the moral and political leadership that would come to hegemonize the political field as the revolution unfolded. In the words of Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, “[o]ne needs to grasp Foucault’s writings on the Iranian Revolution in the context of his general opposition to any ontology that contains teleological elements ... he reads the Iranian Revolution as a moment when historical subjects refuse to subject themselves to History.”⁷

Dissident Iranian intellectuals such as Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad (d. 1969) and ‘Ali Shari‘atī (d. 1977), both of whom died before the *ancien régime* met its demise, had fashioned their own visions of the agents, and means by which political transformation might be realized, as well as possible futures to come. The two men delineated their own projects both in and against the models of socio-political organization and development defined by the American and Soviet camps.⁸ Their postcolonial visions for the future, however, remained for the most part indeterminate and unspecified, and even when broadly defined, vacillated between messianic deferral (or sometimes, messiah as Kantian regulative idea) or continued reliance on more familiar repertoires and forms of political voluntarism, mobilization, and organization e.g., democratic centralism, the kibbutz, guided democracy, among others.⁹ Such critics grasped on a basic level not merely the shortcomings of the Pahlavi regime’s visions of modernity and development and their irreconcilable contradictions, but also the distinct limits of the recalcitrant Stalinism held to dominate the Tūdeh Party of Iran, in response to which many Muslim and leftist thinkers and movements, felt compelled to respond, both intellectually and politically. Stalinism or an irredeemably vulgarized brand of Marxism-Leninism was not only used to justify Soviet realpolitik and geopolitical objectives,¹⁰ but for several major Iranian intellectuals dispelled the imaginative hold of Marxism altogether, as both its secular and religious critics found it wanting in terms of its delineation of the key agents of revolutionary transformation, the temporality of revolution, as well as its understanding of the normative sources of revolt and *ressentiment*.¹¹ In response to the Tūdeh Party’s historic shortcomings there emerged a generation of revolutionaries who came to advocate a fiercely independent brand of Marxism,¹² while others became convinced social democrats, and others still, came to embrace various incarnations of ethnonationalism or hues of Islamism or religiously-inflected politics. The unsalvageable nature of Stalinist and Stalinized Marxism-Leninism would be further compounded in the aftermath of the devastating outcome of the 1979–1988 period for the Iranian left as a whole.¹³

⁷Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), Loc 1139–1143.

⁸Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Kindle ed. (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chapters 1 and 2.

⁹A flurry of recent scholarship has sought to speculate on how these thinkers provide ways of thinking through the process of extrication from the binds of the postcolonial predicament. Golnar Nikpour, "Revolutionary Journeys, Revolutionary Practice: The Hajj Writings of Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Malcolm X," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no. 1 (2014). Siavash Saffari, *Beyond Shariati: Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, and Islam in Iranian Political Thought* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁰Cosroe Chaqueri, ed. *The Left in Iran, 1941–1957*, vol. 10, Radical History (London: The Merlin Press, 2011).

¹¹Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Gharbzadegi, Colonial Capitalism and the Racial State in Iran," *Postcolonial Studies* 24, no. 2 (2020).

¹²"The origins of Communist Unity: anti-colonialism and revolution in Iran’s tri-continental moment," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 5 (2018). Peyman Vahabzadeh, *A Rebel’s journey: Mostafa Sho’aiyan and Revolutionary Theory in Iran* (London Oneworld 2019).

¹³Nasser Mohajer, *Voices of a Massacre: Untold Stories of Life and Death in Iran, 1988* (London: Oneworld 2020); Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (New York; London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), Chapter 3.

In the 1960s and 1970s, radicals in the core and the periphery, to use the now familiar language of dependency theory, were united in their anticipation of what Bernard Yack famously called “total revolution.”¹⁴ These were revolutionary times pregnant with possibility. On the one side, Iranian dissidents and rebels in the Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union and beyond, bore witness to European student radicals demands for an end to the racialised imperialist capitalist system and, on the other, militant Third World mass movements in the midst of a life and death struggle for national liberation and armed resistance from Cuba and Vietnam to Angola, Dhofar, and Palestine. In Foucault’s mind, the Iranian Revolution stood apart from these anti-colonial revolutions, which for all their differences, continued to be heavily indebted to familiar ideologies and recognizable ways of doing politics. In the revolution he saw “another form of life” and kind of “spirituality,” namely, “a certain practice by which the individual is displaced, transformed, disrupted, to the point of renouncing their own individuality, their own subject position.”¹⁵ This amounted to a revolutionary will “to change everything, and above all to change oneself, to become other, but essentially without knowing what that other will be—it’s that radical will for alterity with regard to oneself.”¹⁶ This is the distinguishing gambit Foucault espied in the Iranian Revolution and to which he saw Iranian revolutionaries commit themselves. With the benefit of hindsight this gambit and “will for alterity” has been the recipient of many names, running the gamut from radical indeterminacy to unalloyed voluntarism and reckless folly.¹⁷ Subsequent decades would impress more somber and melancholic temperaments as many figures of this revolutionary generation reached the conclusion that there was no escape from colonial modernity or the capitalocene, only ways of mitigating their darker consequences and realities. Meanwhile, several scholars have continued to stress Foucault’s dilettantism and lack of familiarity with Iranian conditions and socio-economic context, and his, at times, careless projection, and deployment of Iran as a mere foil for his own provincial axe to grind.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic and its idiosyncratic institutional configuration, far from representing a direct translation of Khomeini’s hierocratic vision, stood as a patchwork fashioned from the material condensation of social forces in conjunction with the unleashing of a flood of terror and violence in the years following the revolution’s victory – a political configuration in which the ideological prevalence of statist top-down Islamist social engineering and a rough and ready egalitarian ethos consolidated by eight years of brutal interstate war with neighboring Iraq – continued to dominate.¹⁸ Khomeini’s notion of *velāyat-e faqīh* was both realized and transformed through his strategic acumen and charismatic authority, his instinctive and ingenious ability to both respond to and channel popular discontent across manifold social classes and constituencies. Khomeini’s facility to embody, re-signify and draw upon the collective

¹⁴Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Berkeley & Oxford: University of California Press, 1992).

¹⁵Michel Foucault, “Political Spirituality as the Will for Alterity: An Interview with the *Nouvel Observateur*,” *Critical Inquiry* 47 (2020), 124.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁷Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and its Discontents.*, Chapter 4.

¹⁸This is not to say that it was not contested by influential social formations and classes, but merely that the left broadly conceived, possessed a decisive edge. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform* (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), Chapter 3.

memorialization of Imam Hossein's struggle of redemptive suffering and the millenarian promise of the Mahdi's return to the end of establishing a deeply hierarchical and autocratic revolution from above and a clerically-led Islamist state, formed the normative basis of his status as both representative and leader. Even when the source of Khomeini's appeal was to be found in his "secular" critique of arbitrary power and authoritarian rule, corruption, and imperialist domination, it derived a considerable amount of its normative and critical power from exactly those sources which positivist social science is wont to ignore or dismiss as epiphenomenal.

Khomeini and his supporters established the "impossible" state in clear defiance of the longstanding tradition of Shi'i political theology where, at least in principle, sultans and kings oversaw the domain of *'orf* (customary law), while the *'olema'* pronounced on the *sharī'ah*.¹⁹ This in turn bespoke another division of powers between *hokūmat* (government) and *velāyat* (guardianship), which despite being theologically and analytically separate, were in a sense always dependent on the presence/absence of one another. On one extremely influential interpretation, Khomeini's historic role served as a mischievous iteration of the Hegelian "cunning of reason," where he had managed to break the deadlock between *sharī'ah* and *'orf/qānūn* and bring about a decisive transition to a genuinely modern sovereign state. Its proponents held that Khomeini had succeeded where Iranian kings had failed hitherto and unified these irreconcilable spheres of legality (namely, customary law and Islamic law), subjugating them to the imperatives of *raison d'État*. Further insisting that Khomeini had laid down the conditions whereby Iran might finally enjoy popular sovereignty and a social compact where the people live in accordance with the laws, they gave themselves.²⁰ This trajectory has for the most part been propounded in the framework of Weberian disenchantment and rationalization. Much as the young Marx (in *On the Jewish Question*) and Weber had suggested before them, Iran's reformist intellectuals such as 'Abdolkarīm Sorūsh, Sa'īd Hajjārīān, Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari and Akbar Ganji, were of the opinion that the only way to "save" religion and religious values was through recourse to a liberal state. In their mind, the reformed state should abandon what was in effect the civil religion of jurisprudential supremacy backed by state violence. Others like Hajjārīān were disposed to a republican reading geared around popular sovereignty, contending that Khomeini's valorization of the "public good" (*maslahat*), would ultimately propel Iran's political system to transition into one based on principles of democratic self-determination. Sorūsh, by contrast, took a broadly Lockean position outlining the case for natural rights, state neutrality on questions of faith or lack thereof, and constitutional government.²¹ Several of these high-profile reformers and internal critics had reached the conclusion that the secularizing civil state exerted an inexorable pull on the institutions and imaginations of the Iranian polity, but the reality of the situation proved to be considerably more uneven and less assured than its advocates had anticipated. Khomeini's imprimatur was required to continue the brutal eight-year conflict with Iraq, but also to decisively end it. It was

¹⁹Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

²⁰Sa'īd Hajjārīān, "Imām Khomeini, faqih-ye dōwārān-e gozār: az feqh-e javāherī tā feqh al-maslahat [Originally published in *Kiyān*, no. 46, Farvardin-Ordibehesht 1378 (March-April 1999)]," in *'Orfi shodan-e dīn dar sepehr-e siyāsāt* (Tehran: Tarh-e now, 1380 [2001]).

²¹Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and its Discontents.*, Chapters 6 & 7.

Khomeini and no one else who drank the “poison chalice” and thereby accepted UNSC Resolution 598. Could the constitutional order in the aftermath of his death be said to have truly rid itself of decisionistic elements or was such an optimistic prognosis ultimately misplaced?

Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the “end of history” and the seeming poverty of alternatives appeared to give credence to those who claimed they would vanquish the political or class struggle through recourse to technocratic competencies and “free markets,” and those who held that in transforming the Islamic Republic into a liberal constitutional polity, disagreement would be settled through recourse to electoral politics and legal norms grounded in a new post-ideological consensus. Both were creatures of their historical moment and have over-played their hands and fallen victim to (neo)liberal eschatology complacent in their own finality and common sense, and the conviction that legitimacy would necessarily give way to legality (in the sense used by Hans Blumenberg). But instead of the inevitable telos of liberal democracy and free market capitalism, which constituted the horizon for so much wishful thinking and saccharine moralism,²² the scope and seriousness of capitalist crises, planetary emergency, states of exception and bio-politicization of life have found themselves augmented and deepened. Some prominent voices such as the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein ‘Alī Montazerī (d. 2009) endeavored to escape political deadlock,²³ as they sought to fashion a vision through which *velāyat* and popular self-rule might converge. Despite coming close to power, reformers have almost without exception found themselves suppressed and pushed to the margins, even as they enjoyed, at least for a time, a kind of “hegemony without dominance”.

Taking our leave from Claude Lefort’s famous essay on the permanence of the theologico-political, one could argue that the Islamic Republic is founded on two kinds of symbolic regime and corresponding forms of representation. One which claims its line of descent directly from the principle of Imamate and its deputyship, and another which is popular in character and thus in effect left empty. However, there is a further qualification which is often overlooked. The conception and institutional configuration of *velāyat* forged by Khomeini and the post-revolutionary constitutional settlement, was always already inscribed in a symbolic order, namely, democratic rule, which destabilizes it at every turn. Despite the *valī-ye faqīh*’s (Guardian Jurist) endeavors to bring about closure, he is no longer capable of doing so in his own terms (and so long as the Hidden Imam remains absent), and his office is anchored in legitimating frames not of its own making. The theologico-political has persisted, but now by virtue of ontological uncertainty, not its obverse. As Lefort powerfully argued, democracy is that system whereby the place of power is left “empty” and vacant,²⁴ and yet in the face of such emptiness we observe continued calls for power’s embodiment to the end of unifying a society divided against itself. Whether it be a “return” to the “golden age of the Imam,” the values of the “sacred defense,” God’s shadow on earth, or a simulacrum of Cyrus the Great, the desire to impose an irretrievable unity in the face of the agonistic energies of democratic life continue to blight Iran’s past, its present, and will almost certainly shape its future.

²²Raymond Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), Chapter 3.

²³Sussan Siavoshi, *Montazeri: The Life and Thought of Iran’s Revolutionary Ayatollah* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁴Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 225.

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