

30 years of the Islamic Revolution in Iran: the tragedy of the Left

Chris Cutrone

[Presented at the Platypus forum on 30 Years of the Islamic Revolution: The Tragedy of the Left, Univ. Chicago, Thursday, November 5, 2009.]

I am going to speak on the failure of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. I would like to pose the question: What can the history of the Islamic Revolution in Iran teach the Left?

The 30th anniversary of the toppling of the Shah of Iran witnesses the controversy over the election results in the Islamic Republic, in which the incumbent (Mahmoud) Ahmadinejad claimed victory over his opponent (Mir-Hossein) Mousavi, and mass protests against this result were subject to brutal, violent repression.

These two historic moments, those of the birth and of the potentially fatal crisis of the Islamic Republic of Iran, communicate over time, and can tell us a great deal about the nature and trajectory of the contemporary world, and the role of the demise of the Left in it.

We in Platypus approach the history of the Islamic Revolution in Iran as a specific story in the overall history of the death of the Left — its historical decline and disappearance. The self-destruction of the Left in Iran is a good entry into investigation of the death of the Left internationally, over the course of at least the past generation.

It is instructive that, where once the Left in Iran was the most vital and potentially significant in the Middle East or Muslim world, today the Left has been completely eradicated in Iran.

Whereas the Shah simultaneously sought to repress and co-opt the Left, the Islamic Republic has brought about its entire elimination in Iran (and has sought to do so elsewhere, for instance in the Lebanese civil war, through its proxies Hezbollah). It is in this sense that one can meaningfully talk about the reactionary, Right-wing character of the Islamic Republic, relative to what came before it under the Pahlavi dynasty. There are fewer possibilities for Iranian society today than there were 30 years ago. This bitter fact is something most try to avoid confronting, but is where I want to focus attention in my presentation.

The Left is defined by potential and possibility, the Right by its foreclosure. The Left expresses and reveals potential possibilities, while the Right represses and obscures these.

For this reason, the role of the Iranian and international Left in repressing and obscuring the true character of social possibilities in Iran, during the period leading up to Islamic Revolution, is crucial for grasping, not only how the Left destroyed itself, but also, and more importantly, how it destroyed itself *as a Left*, and thus contributed to the construction of a new *Right*. Only justice for past crimes committed by the Left can recover old, and open new possibilities in the present. Only by confronting its problematic historical legacy can the Left today be a Left at all. But this is something virtually no-one wants to do.

Slavoj Zizek, in his recent book *In Defense of Lost Causes*, cites Heidegger's embrace of Nazism and Foucault's embrace of the Islamic Revolution in Iran to demonstrate the importance and necessity of what Zizek calls "taking the right step in the wrong direction." Zizek is eager, as he expressed in his writing on the recent election

crisis in Iran, to find the “emancipatory potential” of “good Islam.” He thinks that a more radical emancipatory potential was grasped, however uncertainly, by Foucault in 1979 (and by Heidegger in 1933!). I wish to argue the contrary, that Foucault’s — and the rest of the “Left’s” — embrace of Islamism was and continues to be a conservative move, thinly veiled by claims to more radical *bona fides*. They have lied.

This phenomenon of seeking the “emancipatory potential” of “good Islam” can be traced all the way through the recent election crisis in Iran, if we examine the trajectory of supposedly “Left” Islamist discontents and opposition to the Shah’s regime leading up to the Islamic Revolution, and how this plays out for the continuers of such politics in the Islamic Republic in the present.

The New Left Islamist figure Ali Shariati is key to understanding the relation of the Left to Islamism, both around the 1979 toppling of the Shah and the political divisions in the Islamic Republic of Iran today. For instance, opposition presidential candidate Mousavi, and especially his wife Zahra Rahnavard, were students of Shariati who worked closely with him politically in the 1960s and ’70s. The largest political organization on the Left in the 1979 revolution were the MEK (Mojahedin-e-Khalq, or People’s Mojahedin of Iran), who found inspiration in Shariati’s approach to Islam.

The fact that Mousavi and Rahnavard eventually joined the Khomeini faction, and that there is a significant likelihood that Khomeini’s agents were responsible for Shariati’s untimely death in 1977 at age 44, should not obscure the New Left Islamist roots of the Khomeinist Islamic Republic, of which Mousavi was Prime Minister from 1981–89, under Khomeini’s “supreme” leadership. The present controversy in the Islamic Republic establishment is not to be understood in terms of new wine in old

bottles but rather the old in the new. The Islamist politics on both sides is a Right-wing phenomenon, now as before. Mousavi as standard bearer for discontents in the Islamic Republic is a phenomenon of political confusion, to which any Left must attend. There are significant problems to be addressed in the relation of ideology to social and political reality. The point is that Khomeini's supremacy in the Islamic Revolution is not to be explained by his superior insight and grasp of realities, but rather his successful navigation of them, which is a different matter. The present dispute between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi amounts to this.

Khomeini did not lead a revolutionary transformation of Iranian society but rather the reconsolidation of Iran after the crisis and fall of the Shah. The phenomenon of the so-called "Left," for the most part, calling black white, does not change the fact that Khomeini represented a Right-wing response to the discontents and crisis of Iranian society in the 1970s. The Left's support of Khomeini expresses its disorientation and confusion theoretically, and its Right-wing role practically. There is no mystery here: telling women to cover themselves is not an emancipatory act!

The collapse of the Shah's regime did not increase but ultimately decreased the possibilities for Iranian society. The Khomeiniite Islamic Republic was not the expression but the repression of potential, in the context of diminished possibilities. To understand how this was so, it is useful to consider the historical trajectory of Iran in global context. The developmental states of the post-colonial world underwent a severe crisis starting with the global downturn of the 1970s. The 1970s were the period in which so-called "Third World debt" manifested itself as a serious problem for these states. This also manifested in the so-called "2nd World," as the IMF called in its loans

to countries such as Poland and Yugoslavia, setting the ground for the long-term crisis and disintegration of these states.

Oil revenues could not provide remedy in the case of Iran, because what was encountered, throughout the world in the 1970s, was the crisis of the transformations that went on under the mantle of “modernization.” In Iran, this was carried out through the Shah’s White Revolution, in which he had been goaded, beginning in the early 1960s, by the U.S. Kennedy Administration, and continued to be by those subsequent. Khomeini’s rise as a politician originated in protest against the policies of modernization — and liberalization — implemented by the Shah, under pressure from the U.S. Khomeini was always clear about this in ways the “Left” has not been. The Left abdicated from providing an emancipatory response to the changes in Iranian society. The Shah stood between Right- and Left-wing discontents, but the Left steadily liquidated its own concerns.

Indeed, despite that discontents with the Shah were channeled into New Left “anti-imperialist” politics, the Shah indeed was bucking the “Great Satan” on his own accord. Not only was the Shah’s regime prompted to transform Iranian society, through the White Revolution reforms of the 1960s–70s, exacerbating social and political discontents, but indeed responsibility for the ultimate demise of the Shah can be laid at the door of U.S. policy, for President Carter refused to support the Shah against the tumult of protests that broke out in 1978. The U.S. not only supported the Shah’s regime but significantly undermined it as well. This was not a mistake on the part of the U.S., but expressed the differing interests of U.S. policy as against the Shah. A salient example of this was the U.S. attitude towards the Shah’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, which he

pursued. The U.S. firmly opposed this — as it opposes the Islamic Republic’s pursuit of nuclear weapons technology today.

So much for “anti-imperialism.” — So, what happened in Iran? Certainly the close if not always happy relationship between the Shah’s regime and the U.S. became symbolic for discontents in Iran. But symbolic in what sense? The New Left conception of “imperialism” got in the way of a sober perception of the problems facing Iranian society in the 1970s. Iran was not suffering from U.S. imperial oppression. Rather, Iran faced a crossroads in its development in which an insurgent Islamist politics found purchase. The nature of this Islamist politics was obscured by the Left’s conceptions of the potential social-political divisions in Iranian society and in its greater global context.

Iran was the site for the most significant political Left in the Middle East and Muslim world. Many thousands of Iranian students with Leftist inclinations studied abroad in Europe and North America. In their encounter with the metropolitan New Left, they were encouraged to embrace the supposed Muslim roots of Iranian society and find potential there for emancipatory politics. But emancipation from what, for whom?

The issue of Islamist politics looms. Already in 1965, the Communist Party of Indonesia was completely wiped out, with hundreds of thousands of its members and those associated with it (such as ethnic Chinese) butchered, by Islamist political groups in a popular movement. Communists were hacked to death by enraged masses, in numbers sufficient to clog rivers. In the 1970s Pakistan under Bhutto charted a so-called socialist Islamism that paved the way for the U.S.-supported Islamist military dictatorship of Zia and Pakistan’s sponsorship of the Mujahedin in Afghanistan and cultivation of the Taliban to the present. What all of these phenomena have in common is the repression

— the slaughter — of the Left. This is the political significance of Islamism, nothing other than this.

The New Left Islamist Shariati considered himself a follower of Frantz Fanon. Others, including Khomeini, also found resonance with Fanon's writings (on Algeria and Africa), on what they considered to be the problem of "cultural imperialism." So, according to this view, Iran suffered, not from structural and political problems in modern historical context, so much as from cultural problems, of so-called "Westernization," which was pathologized. The problems of modernization became the problem of Westernization, which thus needed to be eradicated. Islamist politics was the means by which the cure for this "disease" has been attempted, all the way to banning kite flying in Afghanistan.

To this day, the Islamic Republic of Iran is premised on a culturalist conception of politics. Ahmadinejad and others speak of Iran's "political frontiers" as if they were just lines on a map. Their "Islamic Revolution" is civilizational and global in reach. It is not about Iran. Ahmadinejad wrote an "open letter" to President Bush chastising the failure of "liberal democracy" and urging the embrace of the principles of Islamist politics instead.

Khomeini's Islamic Republic, whose legitimate mantle was in dispute between Mousavi and Ahmadinejad in the recent election, is premised on the idea that the entire Iranian population, suffering from the illness of "cultural imperialism" by the West, needed to be held as minority wards of the mullahs. This is why there is a Guardian Council and a Supreme Leader above all elected officials. When Ahmadinejad referred to the election protesters as "shit," this was the social imagination behind it: he

considered them to be religiously fallen, culturally corrupted, and hence evil, in a disqualifying, dehumanizing sense. The powers-that-be of the Islamic Republic, still pursuing the Islamic Revolution, have moral contempt for the people of Iran — as any Right-wingers do for their subalterns.

This is why it is worse than tragic, indeed, I would argue, criminal, for the Left to continue to embrace today, in whatever form, the presuppositions of such Right-wing politics of Islamism — as the Left did in the Islamic Revolution 30 years ago. It was worse than a mistake then, and it continues to be so today. It is part of the deliberate obscuring of social realities behind bad ideology and worse politics. The history of the past 30 years proves that when European and North American political activists and professors on the so-called “Left” in the 1970s encouraged their Iranian students that Islamism was a way to address their discontents and ameliorate the problems of Iranian and indeed Muslim society, this was not only a lie, but a crime. It continues to be today.

§

* In response to comparison with Michelle Obama, Rahnavard balked, saying, “I am a follower of the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, who has the same name.”

* There is the question of the Left’s opportunism regarding Islamism. The Left thought that it could use Khomeini, whereas Khomeini successfully used and discarded the Left.

* For an example of the Western Left’s responsibility for the turn to Islamist politics, Jean-Paul Sartre once famously said that while he personally was not religious, if he were to be so, it would be the Islam of Shariati. But this was disingenuous and condescending.

* Protesting the Shah for the plight of the Iranian Left was a *cause célèbre* for the international Left in the 1960s–70s.