

Post-1979 Iran: Anti-colonialism and legacies of Euro-American spaces and temporalities

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ABSTRACT

The argument I put forth rests on an ostensibly simple and straightforward idea: the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran did not serve as an epistemic or epochal break in Iranian history. By viewing pre- and post-1979 Iran as mutually constitutive parts of a continuing history, and tracing the dynamic of the Islamic Republic of Iran's ongoing dialogue and engagement with Western representational practices, I show how Iran's current clerical leaders sought to reinterpret, appropriate, deflect and resist Eurocentric notions and constructions and, in doing so, also give them new meanings. The fact that Iran's representational strategies remain wedded to, and embedded in, Eurocentric discursive formations and subjectifications, I argue, is perhaps another testimony to the 1979 revolution's failure to live up to its decolonizing emancipatory vision. This predicament, no doubt, is common to many other postcolonial projects. However, the Iranian case is perhaps more intriguing, because the Islamic Republic of Iran is currently posited as *the* West's quintessential "other."

Introduction

Writing about colonial and independent India, Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown how the legacies of Eurocentrism have continued to haunt even their most passionate Indian detractors—indeed, how “even the very critique of colonialism itself...[is] unthinkable except as a legacy, partially, of how Enlightenment Europe was appropriated in the subcontinent” (Chakrabarty, 2000:4). To be sure, historians and social scientists dealing with “the postcolonial” should find this assertion to be common knowledge. After all, our world today, “the West” and the “non-West,” is saturated with the legacies of Euro-America. Resulting from unequal power relations over the last five centuries, these legacies are to be seen everywhere—from global structures to daily economic practices, from state formations to household practices, from feminism to the centering in politics of race and ethnicity.¹ It is

precisely in relation to these circumstances that the renowned Indian sociologist and psychoanalyst, Ashis Nandy, much like Frantz Fanon in an earlier day, located these legacies in the psyches of “Europe’s others” (Nandy, 2004; see also Dirlik, 2000:119–141).

However, it is fair to argue today that the pervasiveness of Eurocentrism in its various dimensions has been largely lost to an array of observers of post-1979 Iranian realities. In certain respects this oversight is understandable, particularly given the orientation and composition of the revolutionary movement that toppled the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979, “a mass movement under the leadership of men whose image matched the most deeply entrenched Orientalist stereotypes” (Mirsepassi, 2000:17). Rooted in the putative spatial and temporal “denial of coevalness,” to use Johannes Fabian’s useful terminology, readings of the Iranian revolution and its aftermath thus produced an axiomatic distinction in popular and expert imagination in which Westerners and Iranians, moderns and pre-moderns, existed not only in two different geographies, but also in two different temporalities (Fabian, 1983:26–31). Elsewhere (e.g., Ram, 2006, 2009) I have provided indepth critical analyses of this problematic. Suffice it to note here that such readings consigned Iran to an “anachronistic space”—space that is, as Ann McClintock has put it, “prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity” (1995:40).²

Reactions in the West—including in my own country, Israel—to the legitimacy crisis engendered by the June 2009 presidential election in Iran provide telling examples of the ways in which the “denial of coevalness” has blinded us with respect to anything Iranian. Indeed, for more than 30 years Israeli experts and laypersons, like many of their counterparts elsewhere, have been particularly keen on identifying Iranians mainly with swastikas, sacred rage and a penchant for martyrdom and jihad. On other occasions, by rendering them into ignorant, gullible and manipulable masses, relieved of a will of their own and stumbling blindly to the tune of heartless manipulations orchestrated by tyrannical and cynical clerics, they refused to grant them even an inkling of human agency (Ram, 2009).³

Yet, in view of the palpable tremors of the popular earthquake that has shaken Iran to its core since June 2009, Western commentators can no longer deny these very same Iranians the imaginative, improvisational practices through which “we” ceaselessly elaborate our world. The “discovery” of people from all walks of life—among them, lo and behold, unveiled women dressed in fashionable European outfits, and even ordinary people looking “just like us”—peacefully, and in many cases courageously, standing up for their rights, was unsettling to them. Consider, for example, the Israeli media reports on the post-electoral fraud in Iran as encapsulated in a discussion on Channel 10’s extremely popular current affairs television program, “London & Kirshenbaum,” named after the two famous Israeli broadcasters who joined forces to host the show. As footage from a huge anti-

government demonstration in Tehran was running in the background, one of the hosts, Yaron London, passionately exclaimed his own private eureka: "I'm astonished at the spectacle of Iranian culture, which is unlike anything we ever knew!" Seconding London, the Arab affairs correspondent in the studio disclosed yet another "revelation" regarding the nature of the Iranian polity: "This is so much different from the Arab world; it doesn't resemble the [Arab] dictatorships and it's entirely different; it's a different dynamic altogether." The excitement taking hold of the studio in reaction to revealing these two obvious facts—the one that Iran is home to a rich and vigorous culture; and the other that Iran is not an Arab country—speaks volumes to how Western representational practices have overshadowed analyses of Iranian realities since the 1979 revolution.⁴

It is my objective here to present a corrective to these (mis-)understandings of Iran, which, as many a commentator has demonstrated over the years, are shared by many countries in the capitalist West (see, e.g., Hurd, 2004; Little, 2002; McAlister, 2001:198–234; Naficy, 1995; Said, 1981). The argument I put forth below rests on an ostensibly simple and straightforward idea, namely that the 1979 Islamic Revolution did not serve as an epistemic or epochal break in Iranian history. (I say "ostensibly" because, although some of us have now attained a critical awareness of such notions of epochal breaks, these notions continue to dominate the discourse of history, including the discourse of Iranian history, and refuse, as it were, to go away.⁵) Theda Skocpol reminds us that "revolutionary crises are not total breakpoints in history that suddenly make anything at all possible if only it is envisaged by willful revolutionaries" (1979:171). Although Skocpol's observation refers to the Russian, French and Chinese revolutions, which she studies comparatively, it can just as easily apply to the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Following that proposition, I view pre- and post-1979 Iran as mutually constitutive parts of a continuing history and trace the dynamic of Iran's ongoing dialogue and engagement with Western representational practices, while also acknowledging the instability and contested nature of these Eurocentric legacies in the Iranian setting.

Transcending the conceptual pitfalls of the vision of epochal breaks, I draw on a diverse body of sources—Friday sermons, political posters and school textbooks—and ask how political leaders in post-1979 Iran sought to reinterpret, appropriate, deflect and resist these legacies and, in doing so, perhaps also give them new meanings. The implications of my analysis for the theme of decolonization (of history and/or of the mind) are thus not far to seek: contrary to commonsensical Western views, which trace the Iranians' thoughts and actions merely to "the pathologies that are supposed to inhere within 'the world of Islam'" (Gregory, 2004:23), my analysis will show how the Iranians' world has, in fact, remained entrenched in Eurocentric constructions. The fact that Iran's postcolonial realities remain wedded to, and embedded in, Eurocentric discursive formations and subjectifications is perhaps yet another testimony to the 1979 revolution's failure to

live up to its decolonizing, emancipatory vision of overthrowing the Shah's brand of repressive modernity in favor of what Michel Foucault controversially described as the politics of "Islamic spirituality."⁶ This predicament, no doubt, is common to many other revolutionary struggles in the postcolonial world that have run out of vital sources of energy and creativity and are left with an exercise of power bereft of any pretense of the exercise of vision (see, e.g., Scott, 2004). Yet, the Iranian case is more intriguing perhaps because the Islamic Republic of Iran now stands as *the* West's quintessential "other."

Lastly, I should note that I don't view the cultural interactions between Iran and "the West" to be one-sided but rather a two-way street. Just as this cultural traffic transformed Iranian outlooks and sensibilities, European mores and practices were also changed through interactions with other societies that Europe "discovered" and, in some cases, colonized. "Neither Iranians nor Europeans invented themselves out of whole cloth" (Najmabadi, 2005:5).

Intertwined histories: Iran and Euro-American imperialism

First, it is necessary to ask how Iran has come to share these assumptions of European Enlightenment in the first place. The question is of utmost importance inasmuch as mainstream accounts of contemporary Iran hardly bother to give us any clues to that perplexing issue because, simply put, history doesn't seem to matter to them. Indeed, explanations about Iran's confrontational posture—for example, its intransigence in the nuclear standoff, its claims to regional power status, its support for the Lebanese Shiites and the Palestinian Hamas government and, last but not least, its anti-Jewish, even anti-Semitic sentiments—can be grouped into three main categories. The first category relates to the domestic public sphere within Iran itself. Iran's international confrontational posture, so the argument goes, not only reflects existing power struggles within the faction-ridden Iranian regime, but also that regime's endeavor to divert attention away from economic and social problems at home so as to reestablish control over an increasingly dissatisfied population.⁷

A second group of explanations views the regime's confrontational posture, specifically with regard to Israel, as a calculated attempt to garner popular support in the "Arab street"—or, as the editors of *Middle East Report* recently put it, "to impress the Arab public as capable champions of the Palestinians, in contrast to the impotent grumbling of the U.S.-allied Arab regimes ("Letting Lebanon burn," 2006). A third group of explanations situates Iran's confrontational posture within a fundamentalist discourse that dates back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Thus, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's inflammatory public utterances are explained either as a revival of "early revolutionary slogans mouthed by Ayatollah

Khomeini himself” or as deriving from a “mystical belief in a divine mission and heavenly oversight” (Menashri, 2005).

While I don’t necessarily disagree with these accounts, I think they suffer from at least one major flaw: they reveal the well-known tendency among Western observers to accept the privilege of contemplating the Iranian “other” while refusing to acknowledge his/her gaze in return.⁸ Indeed, in most analyses there is hardly any mention at all that Iran’s confrontational posture may in fact be explained also in terms of Iranian misgivings with colonial—British, Russian/Soviet and American—interventions since the early nineteenth century. In the absence of any talk about the implications of Euro-American coercive power in Iran, one might be left with the impression that this posture is, to draw upon Gyanendra Pandey’s critique of colonial historiography of India,

a matter of natural, automatic and autonomous growth, an immaculate conception—uninfluenced...by the development of world capitalism, European dominance, scientific racism and other related phenomena (2001:47).

To be sure, these grievances over Euro-American power are not products of delusionary minds, although, as I mentioned above, their invocation has proved very useful in the regime’s calculated efforts to justify domestic repression and bolster its anti-Western image in the Muslim world. Iran, it should be recalled, “is a country that has been abused, humiliated and looted by foreign powers for 200 years. As Ahmadinejad repeatedly made clear, this has left deep scars” (Kinzer, 2009). Although Iran was never under direct colonial rule, it increasingly became, since the early nineteenth century, a victim to the rush for profit, looting and enrichment that constituted the foundations of an “imperial structure” (Judd, 1996:3). The capitulations regime and the economic concessions that Britain and Russia coercively extracted from Iran throughout the nineteenth century are a case in point. Even the arch-imperialist Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, who is not known for his compassionate treatment of colonial subjects, described one such capitulation agreement, the 1872 Reuter Concession, as the “total surrender of all the resources of the kingdom into foreign hands, an agreement that no one has ever thought possible and no one has ever achieved, throughout history” (cited in Abrahamian, 1982:55). Real or imaginary threats to imperial interests frequently prompted Western powers to invade Iran by force and partition its territory. Such was the case, for example, in 1941, when Britain and the Soviet Union occupied Iran, divided it into “zones of influence,” deposed and banished Reza Shah (the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty), and enthroned his son, Muhammad Reza, in his stead. “Empire giveth; empire taketh away,” as Ryszard Kapuściński (2006:25) has noted succinctly.

Another example of the entanglement of Iranian history with the history of Euro-American colonialism is, of course, Britain's domination of Iranian oil. During the first half of the twentieth century, this domination kept the British Empire up and running, while also keeping most Iranians in abject poverty. Stephen Kinzer provides a distilled description of the colonial situation that emerged in the oil refineries at Abadan during those years: "Before long," he writes,

Abadan was a bustling city with more than one hundred thousand residents, most of them Iranian laborers. From its private Persian club, where uniformed waiters served British executives, to the tight-packed Iranian workers' quarters and the water fountain marked "Not for Iranians," it was a classic colonial enclave (2003:50).

But it was the U.S., to make a long and tormented story short, whose exercise of coercive power in Iran really "left an indelible imprint on several generations of Iranians" (Lockman, 2004:120). As popular resistance against the British petroleum monopoly grew in the early 1950s, the Iranians pinned their hopes on Dr. Muhammad Mossadeq, the celebrated liberal and democratic Iranian politician who resisted the state of dependence in which Iran had found itself. Mossadeq kept to his word: he nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which at that point was the most profitable British business on earth, and took direct control of the mammoth oil refineries at Abadan, but forgot one of the most painful historical lessons: "that might makes right" (Kapuściński, 2006:31). Determined to eliminate Mossadeq, the British found in the U.S. government a willing ally. And so it was that in August 1953 the U.S. helped the British to overthrow the democratically elected Iranian government of Mossadeq in order to keep cheap oil flowing abroad. The coup cut short a fledgling attempt at democratic government in Iran and kicked off the Shah's lengthy dictatorship. "After that," as Sami Zubaida pointed out, "political repression proceeded apace, and during the 1960s and 70s any oppositional political organization was ruthlessly crushed, and even clandestine, underground organization was successfully undermined" (1993:58).

Iran's defiance of Euro-American hegemony is certainly inspired by an Islamist discourse, and it is not altogether farfetched to argue that it is meant to stifle dissent at home and shore up Iran's standing in the Muslim world. However, I would like to suggest that this defiance should also be viewed in the context of the protracted entanglement of Iranian history with the history of Euro-American colonialism. More than anything else, it is this colonial legacy in Iranian history that explains the regime's uncompromising attitude in the international arena. The Iranians surely have this legacy in mind when they charge that the current U.S.-led campaign against its nuclear program smacks of previous colonial campaigns to keep that country at a state of underdevelopment (Melman and Javedanfar, 2007). It is not

altogether clear whether Iran is in any violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—if it is, in fact, pursuing nuclear weapons under the guise of a civilian energy program. Leaving aside this contested issue, it is nevertheless important to remember that Iran's experiences with Western colonialism are one major reason why "Iranian leaders expect neither to receive nor give much quarter in confrontation with their [Western] enemies" (Cockburn, 2006). "One has to connect these dots, and a number of other dots, and put forward a historical account that will enable people, young people in particular, to speak truth to predatory warmongers," as Dabashi (2007:9) pointedly contends. Ironically, however, Iran's battle against Western hegemony was fought in ways that ultimately preserved the colonial legacy, as I shall presently demonstrate.

Pre-1979 Iran and the Aryan-Semite discourse

To appreciate the irony, it is necessary to return to the closing decades of the nineteenth century, which, as shown above, coincided with increasing imperial expansion across the globe, including Iran. These colonial intrusions not only rearranged the Iranian economy, society, politics, gender relations and so on, but also erased or drove to the margins pre-modern ways of knowing space and time. In the process, a newly emerging class of professional intellectuals hailed as secular embraced the Enlightenment paradigm of the rational humanist subject as *the* subject of history ever moving forward to fulfill the demands of human progress. Ervand Abrahamian, in his classic *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, examines how these intellectuals, in turn, have rendered the European experience of history into the fate of Iran and humankind at large:

Western ideas, especially the French Enlightenment, convinced them that history was neither the revelation of God's will, as the *'ulama* [religious scholars] believed, nor the cyclic rise and fall of dynasties, as the court chroniclers endlessly described, but rather the continual march of human progress. Western history persuaded them that human progress was not only possible and desirable but also easily attainable if they broke the three chains of royal despotism, clerical dogmatism and foreign imperialism (1982:61–62).⁹

A decisive part of this transformation of time and space was affected by these intellectuals' discovery of the so-called Aryan-Semite discourse or Aryan hypothesis. Formulated in Europe in the course of the nineteenth century by the new "scientific" discipline of philology, this hypothesis designated Iran as part of the

illustrious Indo-European, Aryan diaspora, which was sharply juxtaposed against the stationary and stagnant “Oriental” Semites, namely Arabs and Jews (Vaziri, 1993).¹⁰

Like most other disciplines of the human sciences in nineteenth-century Europe, philology, as the study of words and the relations among them, was a growth of the positivist, critical spirit of the Enlightenment. As such, it apparently dealt the final death blow to the time-honored belief in the divine origin of language.¹¹ Yet it would be overly simplistic to render the Aryan-Semite discourse merely into the triumph of secularity over religion because, in the end, this discourse was primarily “invited to contribute to the revelation of Providence’s secrets” (Olender, 2002:14). The construction of the Semites as two enemies, Arab and Jew, was introduced in the wake of the Enlightenment, political revolution and universalism—that is, at the precise moment when Christian Europe appeared to vanish—but, in effect, it helped Christendom to retain its identity and power. By recasting the old Christian disputations against Judaism and Islam in the new “scientific,” positivist language of “race,” “ethnicity” and “nation,” the discourse of Aryanism was an integral part of the endeavor “to infuse new Aryan life into a Christianity that had suffered much at the hands of the Enlightenment and Revolution” (Olender, 2002:8). Thus, the appropriation by Iranians of the Aryan-Semite discourse paradoxically marked their acceptance of a basic Christian, albeit secularized, approach to history. In concrete terms, it meant accepting the perception of the European “self” as the exclusive carrier of history, thereby defining Iranian identity in classical Orientalist terms as European and as opposed to the Arab Orient.¹²

So it was that nineteenth-century secular Iranian intellectuals set out to discover the origins of the Iranian “nation” in the Indo-European domination of the Iranian plateau beginning in the tenth century B.C., establishing what Benedict Anderson (1991:48) deftly described as the “subjective antiquity” of that nation, a phenomenon common to nearly all racial-cum-ethnic nationalist projects in the modern world. By introducing “Iran” as an entity with profound historical roots, these intellectuals were also able to displace the traditional Islamic system of historical narration, in which the rise of Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia was constituted as the beginning of a new civilization, and the period prior to it, *jahiliyah*, as the age of darkness and ignorance (Ram, 2000; Tavakoli-Targhi, 1990). Instead, they painted a glittering picture of ancient, pre-Islamic Iran as one honored by the great Persian Empires and adorned by great artists, poets and other luminaries and, what is more, as a vigorous agent in that great Aryan enterprise that had given “the West mastery over nature, exploitation of time and space, the invention of mythology, science and art” (Olender, 2002:14). Inversely, they portrayed the Muslim Arab conquerors of Iran in highly chauvinist and racist epithets. For instance, Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, the celebrated nineteenth-century Iranian intellectual, described the Arabs as “ignorant, savage lizard eaters” and

“bloodthirsty, barefoot camel riders,” and lamented the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh century as the root cause of Iran’s misery down to the present: “I spit on the Arabs”; “shame on those cowards who have attacked such a great state [i.e. Iran],” he grieved (cited in Bayat, 1982:168).

During the era of the Pahlavi Dynasty (1928–1979) the term “Aryan” came to play a crucially significant role in the *official* conceptual nationalization of Iran (Schayegh, 2010). Hamid Dabashi, for instance, reprimands the generation of Reza Shah (reigned 1925–1941), claiming that they

believed in that nonsense [i.e. “the Aryan race”], completely bought into it, and taught and thought itself into believing that we were really European in our origin but by some unfortunate geographical accident had ended up among Arabs and Semites (2007:151).

It was to that end that, in 1935, Reza Shah changed the official name of “Persia” to “Iran,” that is to say “Land of the Aryans.”

Apprehensive of his pro-Nazi sentiments, in 1941 the allied forces stationed in Iran forced Reza Shah to abdicate and pass on the Peacock Throne to his young and inexperienced son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (reigned 1941–1979).¹³ Contending with tumultuous domestic politics, including the 1951–1953 Mosaddeq interregnum, it took the young monarch some 15 years before he felt strong enough to be able to pick up where his father had left off. Like his predecessor, the second Pahlavi shah, now self-styled “King of the Kings, Light of the Aryans,” had chosen Aryanism so as to keep the Arab Orient at bay, as well as to promote a definition of “Iranian-ness” that would displace the religious affiliation still underpinning the collective identity of the Iranian polity (Schayegh, 2010). From then on, only secular criteria—language and somatic traits (in short, Aryanism)—constituted irrefutably objective evidence for nationhood. In the historical narrative that evolved from this outlook, an unchanging body type constituted the authentic origins of the (Iranian) people and thus became the moral source of political unity in Iran (Ram, 2000, 2002). Clearly, as the Shah asserted in the early 1960s,

[O]ur culture is more akin to that of the West than is either the Chinese or that of our neighbors the Arabs. Iran was an early home of the Aryans from whom most Americans and Europeans are descended, and we are racially quite separate from the Semitic stock of the Arabs. Our language belongs to the Indo-European family which includes English, French, German and other major Western tongues (Pahlavi, 1981:18).

The Aryan myth proved to be crucially important in the Shah’s ambitious reform programs of the 1960s and 1970s, collectively known as the “White

Revolution.” The primary aim of these programs was to bring about the development of Iran so it would be able to catch up with, and homogenize into, the economically, politically and culturally modern West (Mirsepassi, 2000:14). Few things were better suited to this end than the Aryan myth, which claimed Iran’s shared ancestry with European civilization. Allowing the Shah to package his modernizing-cum-westernizing reforms as a recovery of the Iranian self rather than an alienation from it, this construct was vigorously inculcated through various media, from monuments and architectural designs to dress codes, postage stamps, banknotes and school textbooks (see, e.g. Chehabi, 1993; Chelkowski and Dabashi, 1999; Grigor, 2005; Kashani-Sabet, 2002; Ram, 2000; Schayegh, 2010).

Yet, even if the Shah presumed that, by renewing links with the pre-Islamic Aryan past, Iran would leap forward and restore to life what he called “The Great Civilization” (*tamaddon-e bozorg*), in the eyes of the average Iranian this “was above all a Great Pillage” (Kapuściński, 2006:63). In the final analysis, the Shah was a typical postcolonial ruler whose ideas were fashioned after colonial and imperial ideals of modernization. Immersed with the spatial, temporal and civilizational assumptions of post-Enlightenment Europe, the Shah personified the predicament of many a colonial subject whose anatomy Franz Fanon has brilliantly dissected in his essay *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008). He assimilated the dominant Orientalist stereotypes of European culture, on the one hand, and desired to break free of these stereotypes, on the other hand. His mindset was thus marked by the notorious dialectic of self-hatred and the desire to assimilate into Euro-America. In short, his was a true “civilizing mission,” inducing his Iranian subjects to renounce their “traditional” (Oriental and religious) customs and embrace in their stead the new forms of civilized and rational social order.

The dreadful implications of the Shah’s mission were adequately summed up by Ali Mirsepassi:

The massive and brutal overhaul of society and tradition, the tyrannical and almost childish lust for the raising of a completely “new world” upon the decimated remains of the “old,” the broadest and shallowest conceptions of “human progress”; such “ideals” could only be achieved with the aid of a modern state in all its darker and more sinister dimensions (2000:6–7).

Ultimately, of course, these and other depredations would bring about the fall of the Shah regime, showing it to be “not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature,” to borrow from Franz Fanon’s scathing critique of postcolonial ruling juntas (Fanon, 1963:175).

Yet, as I will elaborate below, the Islamic republican regime that succeeded the Shah’s was neither willing nor able to break away from the fetters of the very temporal, spatial and civilizational assumptions against which the revolution had

been launched. Rather, by employing unique practices of translation and selective appropriation, the Islamic Republic of Iran reconfigured these assumptions into a discourse which provided “a critique of, and an alternative identity to pit against, the twin process of dictatorship and dependency” (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994:98). The Shah had drawn on these assumptions as a means of joining—or rather rejoining—all that was envisaged by the concept of “Euro-America.” The Islamic Republic of Iran, for its part, seized on these same assumptions so as to resist Euro-American domination, thereby providing one more illustration of how “the legacy of Eurocentrism...continues to bedevil even its most ardent critics” (Loomba et al., 2005:4).

The contested nature of the Aryan myth in post-1979 Iran

To varying degrees, then, Iran at the time of the last Pahlavi shah was guided by a political theology whose strategic objective was to transform “Oriental” Iranian subjects into deracinated replicas of Europeans, even while they remained affiliated with their own religious culture. The tensions and contradictions inherent in this objective can be aptly demonstrated by paraphrasing Gauri Viswanathan’s (1998) fascinating analysis of religious conversion in colonial India. The Iranian Shah was committed to the idea of shading religious identity into the artificial fabrication of a *secular* Iran, which was still made interchangeable with *Muslim* Iran. The pre-1979 Iranian nation-building project was rooted in the liberal colonial idea of transforming the community into a non-religious religious community—or, in other words, turning the Iranian people into “non-Muslim Muslims” (Viswanathan, 1998:4–5).

It is my argument here that the very same conflation of religion and secularity can be traced in the nation-building project of the post-1979 Iranian polity; only that in contrast to the ancient regime, this was now done consciously and candidly. Let me exemplify this with a vivid illustration: Nearly seven months after the toppling of the ancient monarchical regime, Ayatollah Seyyed Mahmud Taleqani, a prominent figure in the revolutionary movement and one of its most celebrated thinkers (see, e.g., Dabashi, 1993:216–272), spoke to the congregation at the Friday prayers in Tehran. He began his sermon by urging the faithful to be “The torch-bearers of monotheism and Islam in a world of heresy, idolatry and matter worshipping, in order to deliver the world.” Taleqani then went on to explain why he thought Iran should assume this leadership status:

After the first century of Islam it was primarily the Iranians who were able to make Islam blossom—all these men of religion, all these religious jurisprudents, all these transmitters of tradition (*akhbariyyun*), all these

philosophers, all these painters, all these artists, they were all...Iranian. For this very reason we must be attentive. We have a heavy responsibility of the world's leadership: "And thus we have made you [i.e., Iran] a medium nation that you may be the bearers of witness to the people and the Apostle may be a bearer of witness to you" (Qur'an 2:143) (*Dar Maktab-e Jom'eh*, 1986:21).

What emerges from this excerpt is a conflation of two corresponding—not contradictory—visions, the one Islamist and universal and the other nationalist and particular. Taleqani's universalism is conditioned by his nationalism, a vision of a special divine mission which the Iranians, he says, have undertaken to liberate the oppressed of the world from Euro-American colonial domination. In such a way, Iran assumes the role of the *redeeming nation*, which is common to many a nationalist project. Taleqani's universal Islamist commitment does not militate against his prior commitment to the nation, which remains the ultimate subject in history. As a matter of fact, his sermon may be read as revolutionary Iran's version of the French imperial notion of *mission civilisatrice* which "brought together nationalism with the desire to offer 'backward' populations the benefits of a progressive French culture" (Young, 2001:88). To be sure, in the excerpt above Taleqani views the Iranian nation as the field and the model in terms of which to think of all the other commitments and loyalties.

Moreover, in his sermon Taleqani assumes a distinctive national "we" with profound historical roots. What is particularly telling is the view that Islamic civilization during the Middle Ages owes much of its glory to the achievements of an exemplary Iranian nation whose members, Taleqani asserts, "were able to make Islam blossom." In this, I argue, Taleqani draws heavily not only on the defunct Shah's nationalist historical narrative (see, e.g., Ram, 2000) but also (perhaps primarily) on one of the most notorious Orientalist propositions put forward in nineteenth-century European philology, most notably by the celebrated French philosopher Ernest Renan.

Indeed, in his treatise *The Poetry of the Celtic Races, and other Studies* (1896), Renan claimed in a typical manner that Islam was the creed of a Semitic stock and thus inherently and eternally antirational, antiscientific and immobile.¹⁴ He was then presented with the following paradox: if such was the predicament of Islam, how can we explain the brilliance of Islamic sciences, philosophy and arts in medieval times? Renan resolved this problem by surmising that, during the Abbasid period (which is precisely the period Taleqani is referring to), ancient Persian civilization and the ancient Greek learning asserted themselves beneath an Islamic façade and produced a flowering of philosophy, science and culture. The caliphs who patronized this cultural efflorescence could, Renan argued, hardly be called

Muslims, and though this civilization used the Arabic language, it was not really Arab but essentially Greek and Persian—that is, “Aryan.”

As Taleqani’s sermon exemplifies, and as I have shown elsewhere (Ram, 2002), this historical-mythological narrative, which takes after the Aryan-Semite discourse, prevails in post-1979 Islamic Iran as it prevailed in pre-1979 monarchical Iran and in nineteenth-century philology. Administration, government, religion, philosophy, commerce, crafts, literature, language, drugs, medicine, luxuries, music and even the games of polo, chess and backgammon—all of these things are (still) said to be Iranian, “Aryan” contributions to the irredeemably immobile Semitic Arab Muslims (and to humankind in general). Thus, Ayatollah Hossein Montazeri, the one-time designated successor to the revolution’s Supreme Leader Khomeini, ceremoniously sermonized in December 1979, “From the Advent of Islam to this very day, the nation of Iran has rendered great services to Islam. Although the cradle of Islam is Arabia...the services that this nation has rendered Islam are profuse” (*Dar Maktab-e Jom’eh*, 1986:168–169). The Aryan hypothesis thus survived the Islamic Revolution and it clearly emerges from the midst of radical Islamization.

Paradoxically, then, official discourse in Iran under the “reign of the Ayatollahs” is riddled with Orientalist assumptions which follow directly and naturally not only from the defunct Pahlavi monarchical regime, but also from nineteenth-century European Orientalism. This discourse stems in no small part from Euro-American assumptions about time, space and civilization, which many present-day Iranians also take as their own; and it reveals a deep sense of contemporary estrangement: a proud Aryan nation feeling that it is systematically disowned of a rightful and respectful place in world affairs—even though this nation has, as the Europeans themselves discovered, played a crucial role in universal historical progress. That, I believe, is exactly what lies at the core of President Ahmadinejad’s demands that “Iran’s enemies” (or the West) “bow down” before Iran and apologize for having held back Tehran’s nuclear program. “You must bow down to the greatness of the Iranian nation,” he exclaimed (“Iran’s Ahmadinejad,” 2006). That claim to “greatness,” I argue, has to do with post-1979 Aryan identity, which the Iranians had picked up from European texts as early as the nineteenth century, no less than with that country’s Islamic or Islamist heritage-cum-outrage.

An examination of post-1979 Iranian school textbooks in history, language, civic studies and religion reveal a similar approach to Iranian history. On the one hand, despite the Iranian Islamists’ reservations about the pre-Islamic period—which they render as *jahiliyah*, or the age of ignorance—they nevertheless stretch back the lineage of the Iranians to the pre-Islamic past, thus, in effect, reinforcing the Iranians’ “subjective antiquity.” A fifth-grade primer in the Persian language points out, for example, that

the people of our country...have been involved in sports since time immemorial. At the very same time when the Greeks inaugurated the Olympic Games, the ancient Iranians taught their children horseback riding, archery and the game of polo (*Farsi*, 1989:173).

On the other hand, even if the same Iranians portrayed in this excerpt are constituted by secular, that is, primordial linguistic and somatic traits, they are also identified as the most fitting converts to Islam—or in other words as proto-Muslims. A primer in history for twelfth graders thus reads as follows:

Parallel to the advent of Islam, when the people of Iran got acquainted with the concepts of...justice and the methods of a just Islamic government, they submitted to the values of this religion without resisting the armies of Islam (*Ta'rikh-e Mo'aser-e Iran*, 1986:52; see also *Ta'limat-e Ejtema'i*, 1986:136).

Sam Kaplan, in an illuminating study of education and the politics of national culture in post-1980 Turkey, has shown how Turkish “religious nationalists” engaged with secular, rational values and practices and set in motion “novel reconfigurations of sanctity and profanity” (2006:75). In this process, as Kaplan compellingly demonstrates, they

insert the universal Islamic community into the geopolitical borders of the Turkish nation-state. Islam provides the nation with a powerful element of historical legitimacy and continuity. The final product is an Islamic secularity (Kaplan, 2006:75).

My discussion has shown the case of the post-1979 Iranian polity to be strikingly similar. Here, too, “religious nationalists” have conflated Islamic universalism and the Iranian nation-state, giving rise to “Islamic secularity.”

A poster issued by the IRI authorities (Figure 1) likewise shows how the terrain labeled “Euro-America” has in fact changed even as Iran’s Islamists seemed to be conducting their battles for recognition on Euro-American terms. Among the many praying workers, representatives of various ethnic groups in Iranian society may be identified. Yet in this poster the unique characteristics of each ethnic group—Persian and Arab, Turkmen and Kurd, Shiite and Sunni—are subdued and integrated into a single, homogeneous, all-consuming “national womb” whose will and that of the state are one and the same. Despite (or in addition to) its distinct Islamic iconography, the poster thus demonstrates how minority groups in Iran have become part of a single meta-national saga. The unique cultures and histories of each of these groups are silenced or marginalized with a view to creating a coherent and neat

account of the Iranian “nation.” In this poster these groups become passive objects of a hegemonic meta-narrative. Remembering them is, therefore, conditioned on their assimilation into one unfractured cohesive narrative rather than on the construction of alternative narratives conveying their distinctive subjectivities. This poster thus graphically captures what Partha Chatterjee identified as the “moment of arrival,” the third and final stage for nationalist thought to attain its paradigmatic form. In this stage nationalist discourse is not only conducted in a single, consistent unambiguous voice,

it also succeeds in glossing over all earlier contradictions, divergences and differences and incorporating within the body of a unified discourse every aspect and stage in this history of its formation. This ideological unity of nationalist thought it seeks to actualize in the unified life of the state (Chatterjee, 1986:51).

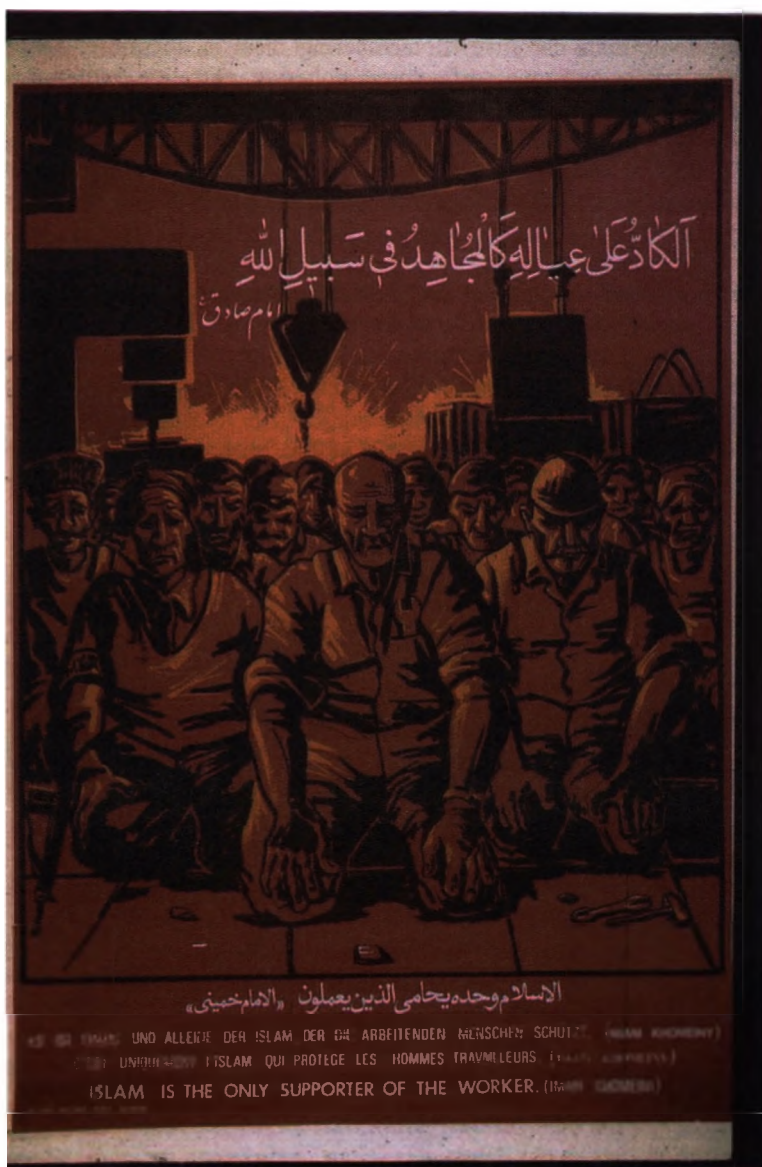


Figure 1: IRI poster

Furthermore, this poster also demonstrates how the Iranian government appropriated traditions of the secular Iranian (and European) left and reproduced them in an Islamist framework. The poster makes blatant use of stylistic and thematic motifs of socialist realism. This socialism, however, is domesticated or naturalized, appearing as an integral part of the Iranian post-revolutionary Islamization project: first, the workers for whom this poster was designed are represented as pious Muslims kneeling for prayer. Second, the saying attributed to the sixth Shiite Imam Ja far al-Sadiq (702–762)—“Eradicating poverty is similar to practicing jihad in Allah’s way”—appears in Arabic at the head of the poster, and is intended to create the impression that Shiism preceded (or anticipated) the values of the political left regarding workers’ welfare. Lastly, the adage attributed to Khomeini—“Islam is the only supporter of the worker”—which appears at the bottom of the poster (in Arabic, French, German and English) amounts to sketching a straight line from the “socialist” ethos of Imam al-Sadiq in the eighth century to the “socialist” ethos of Imam Khomeini in late twentieth-century Iran. In short, this poster offers a one-to-one correspondence between the goals of the atheist left and those of the Islamist Iranian state.¹⁵

A final word

I would like to conclude with a brief note on post-1979 Iranian anti-Semitism and Holocaust denials. As we have seen above, Western (including Israeli) laymen and experts have conjured up a picture of Iranian realities as a direct derivative of omnipotent and omnipresent Islamic injunctions. However, there is also much consensus among them that the only sphere in which Iranians have actually been able to break through Islam’s straightjacket is the sphere concerned with their attitudes toward and hatred of Jews and the Jewish state. On this latter issue, as they claim, Iranians have been able to draw on extraneous, non-Islamic (European) sources, such as anti-Semitic ideologies of past and present (Ram, 2009).¹⁶

Now, it is true that there is “a horrid and persistent anti-Jewish racist trait endemic in Iranian popular culture and even in Persian literature” (Dabashi, 2007:151) dating back to Iran’s nineteenth-century encounter with European philology. Hannah Arendt has warned us not to confuse Aryanism with racism; as a linguistic-cultural construct, Aryanism, she maintained, did not constitute “the origin of a racial concept only because racial ideology later was particularly fond of this idea” (1951:19). All the same, by virtue of the ardent inculcation of Aryanism by the defunct Pahlavi monarchy, Aryan racism was “in the air” in Iran throughout much of the twentieth century. Indeed, racial and racist Aryanism is certainly a construct which Ahmadinejad and other like-minded Iranians are particularly fond of. Though

a wild thorn, it is but another Western legacy which some Iranians have incorporated into their own cosmology.

NOTES

¹ Thus, as Fredrick Cooper argues,

On an imperial scale Zulus or Bengalis, whatever their political strategies were to be, had a much greater need to learn the English language and frame their projects in relation to European models than Europeans had to learn Zulu or Bengali or envisage the modes of understanding that Zulu or Bengali brought to their histories (2005:31).

² Similarly, Reinhart Koselleck has shown, in another context, that the motif of present realities being anchored in a distant past stands in stark contrast to the idea of leaping forward into an “open future”—a future where “new things would continue to come about”—which has been an essential part of the experience of European modernity (2002:154–169).

³ As the religious-Zionist daily *Hatsofeh* unequivocally stated on February 23, 1979—at the height of the revolutionary struggle—the Iranians are “simple-minded and ignorant masses,” a “furious mass” for which “religious slogans are far more powerful than...democracy, civil rights and social justice.”

⁴ One also wonders why Israelis value Arab affairs experts as authoritative voices on Iran, but that’s a different issue altogether.

⁵ A typical conception of an epochal break in Iranian history is thus provided by historian of Iran, David Menashri:

By all accounts, Khomeini’s worldview presented a mirror image to the Shah’s creed. Thus the attachment to the legacy of Cyrus the Great—which typified the shah’s vision of history and politics—gave way to a return to the traditions of Imam ‘Ali. While the shah sought to generate affection and loyalty to Iran’s pre-Islamic heritage and to the monarchy, the Islamic Republic has based its policies on strict adherence to Islamic culture and values. ... Also, in clear contradiction to the shah’s stress on Iranian nationalism, Khomeini’s theory ignored the existence of political boundaries within the Muslim community (*ummah*) of believers (2002:381).

⁶ On Foucault’s views and writings on the revolutionary struggle in Iran, see, e.g., Afary and Anderson (2005) and Leezenberg (2004).

⁷ A keen observer thus remarked, in relation to the nuclear standoff with the Bush administration, “It is incontestable that U.S. threats of regime change [in Iran] have contributed significantly to the quietude of opposition political activists, encouraging the Iranian regime to greater abuses of power” (Ehsani, 2006:9).

⁸ This, no doubt, is what novelist John Wideman described in the wake of 9/11 as the dismissal of “the possibility that the native can look back at you as you are looking at him” (cited in Gregory, 2004:21).

⁹ In an instructive and compelling study, Afsaneh Najmabadi (1998) offers both a critique and an alternative historical narrative of Iranian histories of modernity in general, and Iranian histories of the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911) in particular. Specifically, she shows that these histories were gendered in ways that excluded women and neglected gender analysis precisely because they were tailored according to the general European model of writing “scientific” history. On the ways in which intellectuals in nineteenth-century Iran began to establish the institutional, intellectual and ideological foundations for a modern historiographical system, following the positivist tradition of European historiography, see also Tavakoli-Targhi (2001).

¹⁰ In the words of Maurice Olender:

The multitude of Indo-European tongues reflected the migratory abilities of the Indo-European peoples, who were great conquerors: their diaspora extended from India to the western extremities of Europe. The Semites, on the other hand, remained settled in one place and thus attached to their languages, cultures and religions. Immobile in time as well as space, they played little if any part in what the nineteenth century saw as universal historical progress. The polytheistic dynamism of the Aryans was contrasted with the monotheistic stagnation of the Semites (2002:11–12).

¹¹ Shlomo Sand contends that, in the course of the nineteenth century, philology emerged as

the most important secular weapon for the destruction of the religious myth viewing language as a divine gift. From here on out, it became vividly clear that if there was such a thing as a purely human creation, it was none other than verbal interaction (2009:10–11).

¹² Beginning in the nineteenth century, as Nikkie R. Keddie observes,

Western nationalist and racist theories provided a model for Iran’s nationalists, especially since, because Persian is a language in the Indo-

European or “Aryan” family, nationalists could adopt widespread Western racial theories saying that “Aryans” were superior to others (2002:8; see also Ram, 2009:52–62).

¹³ These suspicions were not baseless. During the 1930s, both German and Iranian diplomats frequently stressed their alleged common “Aryan” descent when dealing with each other. It is also plausible that it was German diplomats and scholars who induced Reza Shah to change the name of the country from “Persia” to “Iran.”

¹⁴ This brief discussion of Renan’s treatise is based on Lockman (2004:78–83).

¹⁵ According to Ervand Abrahamian, with this kind of appropriation of the secular left, the clerical regime wanted “to mobilize the urban working class, forestall any threat from the secular Left, and, at the same time, bring as much of that Left as possible under its own hegemony” (1993:61).

¹⁶ Thus Eldad Pardo contends,

The massive anti-Zionist educational campaign [in Iran] is not only reminiscent of severe European anti-Semitism, it also draws on it. This ideological axis is major and longstanding and it is not necessarily connected to the rise of Ahmadinejad (2008:164).

Pardo further suggests, “although ostensibly directed against Zionism and not against [Iranian] Jews, who know their place, a comparison between Iran’s policy and that of Nazi Germany reveals similarities” (2008:167). See also Pardo (2007) and Litvak (2004).

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