

The Possibility of the Political Act for Political Prisoners in Iran

(A Zizekian Analysis of Torture from the Shah to the Islamic Republic)

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Abstract: Although exercising torture has been a commonality between the previous regime in Iran (a secular government headed by the Shah) and the Islamic Republic, based upon Zizek's reading of the discourses of the master and university we can detect a qualitative difference in the two regimes' approach to torture. During the Shah, torture complemented the Shah's gesture of the symbolic father of the nation, thereby desexualized even in cases where torture involved prisoners' sex organs, whereas in the Islamic republic era, torture complements conservative hardliner's lesson that Islamic teachings are not dictated by them but, rather, are neutral knowledge about innate inclinations of human beings. In the conservative hardliner's version, western culture, apart from its science and technology, leads people astray as it propagates animality in human beings, especially when it comes to sexuality. Our efforts to learn the lesson are doomed to failure, yet because the unconscious remains unarticulated this failure is embodied including in the figure of the Islamic Republic's interrogator who knows something about us, especially about our sexuality, which we ourselves can never know; hence torturing political prisoners is sexualized in the Islamic Republic even in cases where it does not involve physically or verbally prisoners' sex organs. In this situation, a political act involves a hyper-agreement with the interrogator: we wouldn't mind making confessions to anything attributed to us by the interrogator if he is included in the confessions as the one who told us to do it.

Key Words: The Shah, the Islamic Republic, Slavoj Zizek, the discourse of the master, the discourse of the university, Ervand Abrahamian, torture, sexualized, desexualized, political act.

The Shah vs. the Islamic Republic

Unlike in the Shah's regime where political prisoners were dealt with and in many cases tortured *given* their political, religious, sexual etc. identities, a curious feature of the experience of political imprisonment by *some* prisoners in the Islamic Republic is that they are mentally and/or physically tortured to confess that they have done things which they did not even imagine before their incarceration, much less did they consider them part of their identity. In fact, confronted by the Islamic Republic's interrogator, they feel that *the more they emphasize their moral, religious, sexual, political or cultural identity, the more they are considered worthless by the interrogator.*

This crucial point, which seems to be missed even by Ervnad Abrahamian in his *Tortured Confessions*ⁱ perhaps marks a *qualitative difference* between the approach of the Shah's regime to torture and the Islamic Republic's. To be sure, Abrahamian tries to explain the differences between tortured confessions under the two systems. For him, however, these differences seem to be finally variations on the same motif:

“[T]he Shah in the early 1970s was beginning to resort to torture for reasons very similar to those of the subsequent Islamic Republic. These reasons had little to do with modernity and tradition but much to do with ideological warfare, political mobilization, and the need to win ‘hearts and minds’” (Abrahamian 1999: 4)

According to him, the tortures were exercised with more or less the same approach even though with very different propagandas. In my view, however, we can detect a qualitative difference in the two regimes' approaches, because while during the Shah torture, even in cases where it was psychological, was experienced by the prisoner before anything perhaps as an extraneous pain - as though a test of their moral or spiritual strength - in *some* cases in the Islamic Republic the torture seems to target before anything precisely the self which is supposed to protect the prisoner from the extraneous pain. To put it more precisely, the ways in which the physical or mental pain is given to *some* prisoners suggest that the interrogator's target is not to make

prisoner's self weak enough to confess (thereby presuming that a stronger character than the poor actual prisoner sitting before the interrogator could still exist), but *to make the prisoner confess that their self, the way the prisoner used to perceive it, simply does not exist.*

But it is also crucial to note that although only *some* of the political prisoners undergo this type of torture, it betrays a universal logic of political imprisonment in the Islamic Republic, as it will be explained in this writing.

To illustrate the Islamic Republic's different approach, let's examine a scene, a bit long as it might be, of the interrogation of a female prisoner Fahimeh Dorri in 1999 in Islamic Republic of Iran Intelligence Ministry, at which she was tortured by the interrogators until she confessed that she and her husband Saeid Emami,ⁱⁱ both extremely religious Muslim persons, had been involved in sexual relations with some others:ⁱⁱⁱ

"Prisoner: you [the interrogators] are asking me whom I link to whom. When I don't have the information, how I am to tell you?

Interrogator: [Let's say] Musavi^{iv} [a male prisoner] was standing here [another interrogator adds:], or maybe here. All right? And you were in between [him and Saeid Emami]. How did you play the role of the link? In the front you were linked to him; in the back you were linked to the other. Explain this.

P: I didn't have such a relationship.

I: Yeah? The one who has betrayed it, to where your mouth was linked and to where your bottom was linked, [shouting in reaction to the prisoner who is trying to say something] Listen! The one who has betrayed this has also betrayed the rest. They did not have mercy on you, you wretch! Today, you are a filthy promiscuous spy. Ok? Are you done [with talking about your innocence]? If you liked, half an hour long details would be revealed. Your filthy wishes would be revealed: who would use his thumb? Who would do this? Who would do that? They are all available.

P: Mr. Amoli [the other interrogator]! Look! Mr. Amoli!

Amoli: you caught what he said, didn't you?

P: Yes, look! I don't know ...

I: [Scornfully] The pious chaste lady!

P: Look! I don't know why they said these things...

I: We even know the diagonal of your cucumbers. We even know which finger they were to use for you. Do you want me to tell you the rest? [In reaction to the prisoner who has bent her head out of embarrassment] Lift your head! Don't put on an act! Look at me! Look at me! You cannot. Don't put on an act.

P: I'm not putting on an act.

P: You Jewish^v witch! You're full of shit! You piece of shit! In my eye, you trash are like a female cockroach. A female cockroach doesn't have any impact on me, does she? I, maybe, have dissected fifty female rats and removed their fetuses. You rat! Look! [she looks at him]. You piece of shit. It was because we knew what you were doing outside [the jail] which we were telling you to repent. Don't become greedy!

P: I haven't become greedy.

I: We knew what your diabolical, filthy wishes were from morning till night. Tell me! What part of your body did you get the men to lick? [Shouting] Look at me! Look at me, you piece of shit! What part of your body? You have to say it exactly. What did Musavi [a male prisoner] do so you became satisfied with him?

P: Don't enter into these matters.

I: Shouldn't I? Why did you?

P: Don't enter into these matters.

I: Don't put on an act, you piece of shit! What did Saeid [her husband] do? He would bring men for you? And then you would give him marks, for one man was better than the other (though I'm talking about the beginning. Towards the end, you even forgot to

give him such appreciations!)? What did you like them to do? You have to make these confessions. If you want to repent, then why when you face us, you find it difficult, and ask us not to bring it up? We bring it up; you did it! Who were they? What was their action like? Raise your head!

P: [she raises her head] Yes.

I: What was their action like? Explain! And don't put on these acts! They are just an appearance. And you're not putting it on for me. You are putting it on for Mr. Amoli [the other interrogator], because you know that your hand is revealed to me. You know that your hand is revealed to him too; you are just taking advantage of his bashfulness! Look at me!

P: Yes

I: Look at me! Spill the beans, you trash! What was the action like? If you explain it the right way, [it means that] you have surrendered. If you don't, I'll bring them [the men] to explain.

P. If I explain, will you lay off me?

I: Yes, but you have to explain it the right way! If you play a bit fast and loose with it, I won't lay off you.

P: Ok. If I explain it the right way, will you lay off me?

I: Yes, if you explain it the right way, and then you repent and eat fucking humble pie!

P. Ok. I already eat fucking humble pie!

I: Ok. Go ahead.

P: [with a lump in her throat] I made them lick my front thing.

I: Look! Look at me! And don't shed artificial tears! It's an implication by itself [that you are confessing under pressure]! ...^{vi}

What that female prisoner experienced in 1999 bears a striking resemblance to the experiences in 2018-2020 of another female, environmentalist prisoner Nilufar Bayani, imprisoned by a different Iranian state organization the Intelligence Organization of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, whose letters on what she had been enduring were leaked in 2020:

“[F]requent repetition of the dirtiest sexual insults with imaginary gross details during long interrogations attended by a large team of interrogators asking me to supplement their sexual ideas.”

A male prisoner Nader Nurikuhan who underwent incredibly severe tortures by interrogators of Iran Intelligence Ministry in 2012 to confess that he was an agent of Mossad (national intelligence agency of Israel) and responsible for the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists (2009-2011) also mentions that he was forced to confess that he and his so-called accomplices had had affairs with the wives of the Iranian nuclear scientists! (Nurikuhan 2020)

More and more of such accounts are getting revealed. It might be objected, however, that if it is just a matter of sexual torture, whether psychological or physical, there are some accounts showing that sexual torture was used by interrogators even at the time of the Shah. So, what exactly is the above claimed “qualitative difference” between the two regimes when it comes to their approach to torture? To respond to this objection, first let us have a look at an excerpt from the memoirs of Mohammad Ali Salehi, a political prisoner at the time of the Shah that gives the most graphic account of physical sexual torture in the Shah’s regime I have ever encountered during my 25 year continuous study of Iranian modern history:^{vii}

“In my first interrogation, after hours of torture, while I was semi-unconscious, one of the interrogators asked me what kind of coke I fancied. Although faced with other detainees’ interrogations I had witnessed time and again interrogators’ brutal and unbearable act of pushing coke bottles into the prisoners’ anuses, I failed to understand what he meant. With difficulty I answered: ‘I would prefer a glass of water.’ My answer was met by the interrogators’ belly-laughs. When they calmed down a bit, one of them scornfully said: ‘I

swear on your aunt's life that it is impossible. In interrogations, you have to be served with a coke'. Still failing to get what they meant, I said: 'Ok, a Coca-Cola, please!' Again, they started belly-laughing, one of them telling the other: 'He is a person of taste: he likes wasp waists.' Now I got it ... They pulled my ankles outwards, making an angle between the legs. When I became conscious my body had been left covered in blood and feces, and in an excruciating pain..."

(Salehi 2014: 115-116)

The methods described in the prisoner's vivid account – application of figurative language by the interrogators, making a ritual out of the sexual torture (no matter who you are you have to go through it), not even insisting that the prisoner must be conscious while going through the sexual torture, etc. etc. - clearly indicate that, however outrageous, *the methods were not meant to make the prisoner confess that they had a different sexuality than they thought they had*. On the contrary, the interrogators humiliated the prisoner, *given the latter's sexuality*. How can we explain the difference between the two approaches?

From the Shah...

In his “four discourses, four subjects” Slavoj Žižek uses the example of a “proverbial high manager” to show how the figure of the master is supplemented by his sexual masochism (Žižek 1998: 76). Here I do not intend to elucidate his argument for the claim (I have tried to do so elsewhere in great detail (Mehraein 2021)), but, rather to offer and respond to a problematic historical fact. Especially from 1963 onwards, the Shah of Iran began not to even try to dissemble his desire to be the master, the one to have the final say. A great deal of historical evidence about the Shah's sex life, however, does not show that he had any masochist sexual tendencies (Alam 2006).

But, before we rush to the conclusion that we have found “the counter example” of Žižek's theory, we may need to mull precisely over *the empirical content* of the concept of “the Persian King” versus Žižek's “proverbial high manager” (hence the absurdity of

the criticism of the Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis including Zizek's theory that it always treats empirical evidence in a way that keeps it safe from falsification). While from time to time Zizek's can pay a visit to a brothel to get involved in masochist rituals with prostitutes, a Persian King cannot even consciously think that he feels compelled to do so, simply because unlike for the manager, for the king, *even the prostitutes are his servants, not in a sexual way*.^{viii} Thus, while the Shah could and in fact did distance himself from his royal position and at least one time had an affair with an Iranian woman (though this could never be officially declared) (Behnud 2018), he could not even consciously desire to get involved in masochist rituals with Iranian women. One may go further and hypothesize that even with the foreign women his court minister Asadullah Alam procured for him he could not have any conscious desire for such masochist rituals, because the close friendship between him and Alam which was to some degree based on their sexual exploits with women had its roots in his gradually-built confidence in Alam as a loyal servant (Alam 2006). In their friendship the two seemed to have come to the conclusion that relationships with foreign women would be easier to keep secret (ibid). So, the mere fact that Alam as his servant-friend knew all about the affairs, that the relationships with women assumed a particular meaning in the link of friendship between them (something like: we men sometimes need to distance ourselves from our obligations and have some "fun" beside the work), *that in a sense the Shah was not all alone with the foreign women but saw himself in his relationship with them as a person like Alam*, protected the Shah from the unconscious, masochist core of his desire.

The unconscious, however, has to be spoken, which is why the Persian King's masochist sexuality is represented on the conscious level as his sadist desire to persecute and torture his subjects. At the symbolic level, he is the Father of the whole nation (including prostitutes), yet at another level which is a necessary correlative of the first, he is the sadist (Zizek 1998: 85) who says he just *serves* the people (that is, almost everyone else living under his rule) who want to be treated like an object, or, in a nutshell, the King projects masochism onto his people. But for the same reason, i.e. precisely because almost everyone else than the Shah is among his servants, in contrast to the sexual quality of the masochism of the high manager, the sadist tortures, even those involving sex organs of the prisoner, are *desexualized*: they were not

exercised to make the prisoner confess that they had a different sexuality than they thought they had; nor were they meant to show any sexual predilection on the part of the interrogator and thus of the Shah. Instead, the tortures involving the prisoner's sex organs seemed to form just part of the strategies intended to break the spirit of the prisoner, as we saw in the above graphic account of the sexual torture.

Attribution of such desexualized masochism to inmates (it is you who want us to imprison and torture you) or to ordinary people (it is you who want us to make you be always living under the shadow of the secret intelligence, SAVAK) was never officially declared by the Shah, yet it was arguably digestible to his consciousness, just as it is to the consciousness of the fathers who from time to time beat up their children for they show him through their "wrongdoing" that *they want to be punished*.

In such a situation, a political act in the strict sense of the term (i.e. in the sense in which even though your act may not immediately stop the interrogator from torturing you, *it sets you free from his approval or disapproval, and therefore protects your "self" against the interrogator*) is illustrated by the reaction of Ezzatullah Ezzatshahi, a religious political prisoner at the time of the Shah, to his interrogator's demand: "... In these interrogations I was always naked, which was how they [i.e. the interrogators] sought to break my spirit, but ... when they told me to take off my pants, I took off my shorts too..."

Presumably what happens through making such a simple gesture of hyper-agreement/over-identification with the interrogator is that while the interrogator tried to reduce him to an object of interrogation techniques (given your religious sensitivities, I know how to make you spill the beans step by step: first I make you take off your pants, then your shorts, etc. ...), he refused to take the position of such an object, not through naively insisting on his religious identity but precisely through elevating the interrogator to the position of God incarnated and speaking, that is, to the position of the big Other. To put it the other way, is Ezzatshahi's reaction to the interrogator not in accordance with a basic theological understanding that for God, existence of things is one and the same with God's conception of them? For us finite human beings the existence of a tree is one thing and our conception of the tree is quite another thing, whereas in divine

understanding they are one and the same. When the interrogator asks him to take off his trousers, counting on his fear lest the interrogator should proceed to ask him to take off his shorts, the prisoner treats the interrogator as God: the mere fact that you *think* that I take off my shorts means that I *must act* accordingly, which not only in an interesting, paradoxical way means that I am not the object of your interrogation techniques, but also through untimely realization of the interrogator's un-formulated demand betrays that on the unconscious level the interrogator has literally identified with the prisoner: you do not know me objectively, so, how can you assume what I will do if not through the unconscious assumption that you are already literally identical with me?

Although through giving the interrogator what he really wanted, such a political act set Ezzatshahi free from the interrogator's approval or disapproval, it is crucial to note that a *necessary by product of the act, of such a display of indifference towards the concerns and worries which the interrogator attributed to him, was a disturbance in the interrogator's enjoyment of torture*. Let's have a look at what an interrogator had to say to Ezzatshahi:

"Ezzat! Do you think I'm a beast? I am a human being too. I have sympathy. I have fairness. I am a human being. I'm not wild, unlike you! Do you think that when I leave, I go home and get a restful sleep? No, that is not how it is. I always think about you. I swear that last night when I had fallen restfully asleep I dreamed of you being here in misery and distress." (Ezzatshahi 2011: 313)

These confessions *to the prisoner* clearly indicate the disturbance of the unconscious enjoyment obtained by maintaining on the conscious level a distance towards the crimes he committed (although I am a torturer, deep down I am a human being, I have sympathy, etc."). To put it the other way, the temptation to be avoided is to think that those comments are *per se* a "new phenomenon" (even though I do not remember to have read or heard any other case of an interrogator confessing to a prisoner like that, not least to the one whom he gives severe tortures), because probably for a long time the interrogator and the likes of him each said those nice things to themselves. The point, however, is that with Ezzat the interrogator could no longer enjoy interrogating

through saying those things to himself, which is precisely what threatens the reproduction of the system under which he is able to enjoy.

... to the Islamic Republic

With the Islamic Republic, however, *torture is sexualized even when it does not physically or verbally involve the prisoner's sex organs.* To understand how, we need to mull over the Iranian conservative hard-liners' version of the Islamic Republic.

In this version, which has almost always held the coercive power in post-revolutionary Iran, the superiority of the West over Muslim countries has never been philosophical and cultural but scientific and technological (Khamenei 2009). Therefore, according to this version, although Muslims may need to learn and adopt western science and technology, when it comes to *why* they should adopt them, it is promised that their Islamic culture and philosophy shall adequately provide the answer. A particular understanding of the concept of *fiṭrat* (literally meaning innate inclination) thus assumes great significance, as it is about *what humankind wants deep down*, no matter what actual religion or belief it has: living in accordance with divine teachings (Mesbah Yazdi 2005: 46). Now, according to that version, *vilāyat-i faqīh* (the guardianship of the experts on Islamic jurisprudence) is all about the best way of organization of society in accordance with those teachings. It is crucial to note that the version considers the foundations of western culture as opposed to *fiṭrat*, to what humankind wants deep down, since the Western culture, from the conservative hardliner's point of view, is founded upon the primacy of animal instincts in humans. Why? Because, according to that version, the modern western philosophy originates in the Cartesian cogito: I think, so I am; and for the conservative hardliner a conception of human being in separation from God, as independent from God means missing what makes humans human, and therefore what remains of human with the Cartesian cogito is precisely the animality in the human being.

But there is also a reason why sexuality is the most important aspect of this animality. A crucial part of the conservative hardliner's social teachings is that man knows what

woman wants deep down: to be the sexual object of her man's desire.^{ix} This female desire is precisely what is most sacred in woman, determining her most significant duty in the Muslim community. The western culture which defines sexuality and sexual orientation as contingent thus not only promotes animality, but also deals a fundamental blow to the backbone of the Islamic society, the way it is perceived by conservatives.

Hence the conservative hardliners holding coercive power in Iran do not scruple to attribute immoral, animal-like sexual desire to anyone whom they consider westoxicated (*gharbzadi*): for them, there remains little difference between actually promoting the most unbridled sexual behaviors in society, and simply being active in some pro-democracy, environmentalist etc. group. *The political prisoners, according to them, should not mind doing what the Islamic Republic's interrogator insists they have already done.* As Ervand Abrahamian competently explains:

"They considered prisoners by definition to be guilty. Why, otherwise, would they be in prison? Even if not "objectively guilty," they were "subjectively guilty" since their minds had been "contaminated" with alien "ideologies" and their hearts harbored ill will toward the Islamic Republic." (1999: 138)

However, the simple yet crucial point which seems to be missed by Abrahamian is that basically, tortured confessions are a matter of filling the gap between what, according to the conservative hardliners, the political prisoners do not mind doing, and what the interrogators say the prisoners have already done: in their tortured confessions prisoners are not supposed to say that they did not mind doing it, but that they actually did it.

Let us have a look at a talk between the interrogator and prisoner in 1990:

“... [The interrogator] named a member of the executive board [of the Association for Defense of Freedom and Sovereignty of the Iranian Nation]^x and said: “did you know that his wife has been promiscuous?” I was taken aback by this comment, and, he asked wearing a surprised expression: “how did you not know that? Some in the Association knew it.” I said: “by God, this kind of things would never occur to me.” Haj Aqa [the title referring to the interrogator] smiled bitterly and then named a member of

the council and asked: “have you heard anything about his queerness?” I had got into a sweat about that surprise; what I did not expect to hear whatsoever was this kind of things. Understanding my surprise, Haj Aqa said, before I say anything: “That happened among you too. I am amazed that it’s new to you”. I said: “well, maybe they did not consider me close enough to talk with me about it.”

Pursuing the subject of queerness, Haj Aqa described the United States of America as the Tribe of Lot incarnated and said that Mehdi Bazargan^{xi} regards himself as a Muslim, whereas he is seeking the government of the Tribe of Lot ...””” (Behbahani 2003: 143)

So, the question is why do the conservative hardliners feel compelled to get the gap filled?

Conservatives’ above explained doctrines are represented by them as a factual knowledge about the nature of human beings rather than a set of instructions dictated by them, and Iranian people are supposed to be learning those doctrines *as such*. What remains unconscious in such a discourse (namely the discourse of the university (Zizek 1998: 79-80)), is not merely that the doctrines *are* dictated by the dominant conservative hardliners, but that *we cannot distance ourselves from those dictated instructions, that we cannot but over-identify, hyper-agree with them* (Zizek 2012: 354-356). Since this remains unconscious, try as they might, the people always appear to the conservatives as those who have *yet* to learn that it is not the conservatives who are imposing the teachings, but it is the people themselves who deep down, in spite of an appearance of discontent, want to act according to them. However, this logic is doomed to failure, because if the people are to be the ones who *tell* the conservative hardliner to organize society in accordance with his teachings (even though, let’s not forget, for the conservative hardliner the people always *appear* to say something else), they have to be the ones *told* in an unquestionable way *by* the conservative hardliner what they are *really* telling him to do. Hence not only the people but also the conservative hardliner himself are each in truth different *within* themselves between the big Other (the one who tells someone what to do) and the small other (the one who is told by someone in authority what to do). Yet precisely because this rather simple point remains unarticulated, the above explained failure is represented on the conscious level as *the*

figure of the Islamic Republic's interrogator who knows something about you which you can never know: when the failure is not properly articulated it is simply projected onto the prisoner, which is how she is said by the interrogator to have already committed such and such an obscenity, even though she thinks to herself not only that she has never done so, but also that the idea of doing it has never occurred to her. It is precisely in this sense in which the system thrives on its own failure: failure as such is never questioned, but invoked as the proof that you still have to learn something from the conservative hardliner and, at another level, that the interrogator knows something about you which you can never know.

It might be precisely for this reason that the conservative hardliners do not mind if their agent himself gets involved in what he attributes to the prisoner (immoral animal-like sexual behavior), *but nonetheless remains the Islamic Republic's agent* versus the prisoner: after all, the point is to confront the prisoner with what she wants deep down in spite of an appearance of dissatisfaction. This point is exemplified by another excerpt from the leaked letter written in 2020 from the aforementioned environmental activist Nilufar Bayani describing the interrogators' behavior:

"[I was] taken to a private villa in Lavasan [the countryside in northeastern Tehran] to watch their immoral and non-Islamic behavior in a private swimming pool, my refusal notwithstanding."

At first sight, it might appear that ascribing animal-like sexual instinct to the prisoner is aimed at returning them to the universal project of *fitrat*: you make confessions to your sin (i.e. to your deviation from *fitrat*), you pay the price (punishment, incarceration) and then you are free of your sins (Jahanbaglu in Bahari 2012). Ironically, however, that moment never arrives, because the mere fact that you are alive and talk means that you still have to be taught by him. If he is really done with you, he will kill you, either symbolically (e.g. through giving you a life sentence) or really (execution).^{xii} If he does neither, and instead releases you from prison after a while, you will return to the point where you started, because although you have made some public recantations, according to him you still have not realized the depth of his point. Hence political figures such as Saeid Hajjarian, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Mohammad Atrianfar etc. who made

their public recantations in 2009 (Abtahi 2009; Hajjarian, Atrianfar & Shariati 2009) and got released later are now considered no less suspicious by the conservative hardliners than they were before incarceration.

Herein also lies the reason why the conservative hardliners continue to obtain and then broadcast tortured confessions on the Iranian state TV even now that, at least according to some, these confessions have lost their impact on people and even turned into a reason for public opposition to the government (Bahari 2012): far from ignoring the opposition the conservatives regard it as *the reason* why they do it. For them, that is a semblance of opposition which sets the agenda for them as it shows that people have not yet realized that these confessions are what they want deep down, which means the conservative hardliner should try the same thing even harder and harder, just as for a sexual sadist the victims' tears is the reason why he continues to exercise torture: this appearance of dissatisfaction means that the victim has yet to realize that deep down she really likes it. Hence attribution by Abrahamian of "irrationality" (2012) to the conservative hardliners seems to miss the point: the *subjective* opposition is the *objective reason* why conservative hardliners obtain the confessions and broadcast them on TV.

A political act in this situation would mean incorporating the above explained unconscious part (Zizek 2008: 68) when talking to the interrogator: far from refusing to accept what the interrogator attributes to the prisoner and stressing her moral or religious identity, she would be willing to carry out the interrogator's dirtiest sexual imaginations or make public confessions to committing most depraved deeds *on the condition that not only he qua the interrogator tells her what to do in every single stage of his sexual dreams, but also accepts to be included in every single part of her public confessions: she did it, because the interrogator said so.*

Although this gesture may not stop the interrogator from torturing her as immediately as we might wish, it can not only set her free from interrogator's approval or disapproval, no matter how brutal the tortures are, but also will gradually undermine the institution of torture, because, as was explained before, it will make it impossible for the torturer to

maintain a distance on the conscious level towards what he does to the prisoner, thereby castrating him in the Lacanian sense (Evans 1999: 22-24), i.e. *depriving him from the unconscious enjoyment he obtained through consciously maintaining the distance*. Therefore, perhaps one of the greatest possible achievements of a political movement i.e. demotivation of the interrogator/torturer can be made precisely by the people whom we tend to consider mere victims.

Notes

ⁱ . In all fairness, his book was released in 1999, when a great deal of evidence was not available yet. However, he did not seem to have changed his stance after some of the evidence had become available. See his interview in BBC Persian's documentary directed by Maziar Bahari on forced confessions in the Islamic Republic. Having read the manuscript which I sent him before submitting it for publication, however, he was kind enough to tell me in his email on August 6th, 2021 that he "thoroughly enjoyed reading it" and that "I ... look forward to following up on some of your new sources."

ⁱⁱ . Once a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Intelligence of Iran, Saeid Emami (1958-1999) was imprisoned on a charge of orchestrating the chain murders which had been committed by some elements in the ministry during 1998. Involved in torturing too many political prisoners before, now it was he and a number of others including his wife and colleague Fahimeh Dorri who were tortured to confess that they committed the murders **by order of foreign governments**. Months after his imprisonment, the officials claimed that he committed suicide by drinking a depilatory compound.

ⁱⁱⁱ . A three hour long selection of much longer interrogation films was leaked in June 2001. The long extract in the main text is just a small part of that three hour selection.

^{iv} . Not to be confused with Mir Hussein Musavi, the leader of Iran's Green Movement in 2009.

^v . No need to remind readers that she and her husband were always extremely religious Muslim people.

^{vi} . In this article all the translations from Farsi to English are conducted by me.

^{vii} . His memoirs sadly show that, sometimes, to be captured and tortured severely as a political prisoner at the time of the Shah, you did not even have to be exactly a "political activist"!

^{viii} . No need to spell out the distinction between the sultan and the king. The Shah was a king.

^{ix} . This is why for all serious criticisms which can be leveled at Khomeini's teachings and performance, I do not think it is fair to reduce them to Islamic conservatism: to the embarrassment of conservatives, Khomeini's teachings seemed to have added *some further basic roles* for women than just being a sexual object for their men: participation in the elections and going to school and university (not to mention that late in his life he had reached the conclusion that women should not be prohibited from singing in public (Kalantari 2020)). In fact, Khomeini disturbed the conservative balance in Iran in an irreversible way.

^x . Founded in 1985 by some Iranian prominent political activists such as Mehdi Bazargan and Ali Ardalan (See footnote 5).

^{xi} . Mehdi Bazargan (1907-1995) was an Iranian religious public intellectual who had graduated in thermodynamics and engineering in Ecole Centrale Paris. He was a pro-democracy activist who alongside many others had fought in the Iranian National Front for the movement of nationalization of Iranian oil industry led by Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq (a democratically elected Iranian prime minister whose government was overthrown in a British-US coup in 1953). However, in 1961, Bazargan and some of his kindred spirits such as Ayatollah Taleqani and Yadullah Sahbai founded the Freedom Movement (1961-), because unlike the members of the National Front, they maintained that religion should not be separated from politics, as religion could and should be interpreted as compatible with such modern values as freedom and democracy. Bazargan endured years of incarceration during the Shah. After the

victory of the 1979 Islamic revolution of Iran, he was appointed by Ayatollah Khomeini as the Prime Minister of the interim government. Following a turbulent nine-month period, eventually his government officially stepped down in November 1979 in response to the US embassy takeover by a group of Iranian university students. In 1980 he was elected as a representative of the people of Tehran in the first post-revolutionary parliament. After 1984 he was effectively removed from Iranian official politics in the Islamic Republic, although he did continue his pro-democracy activities. For example, he was a co-founder of the Association for Defense of Freedom and Sovereignty of the Iranian Nation in 1985. In 1990 he put his signature on an open letter sent by the association to then Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. After the letter was released, 23 out of the 90 people who had signed the letter were arrested, including Farhad Behbahani an excerpt of whose published memoirs on his detention days I have quoted in the main text (Mehdi Bazargan was not among the arrested).

^{xii} . Even if the prisoner gets executed following their confessions, they cannot be remembered as Muslim brothers or sisters, because according to the conservative teachings, receiving worldly punishment does not guarantee that there will not be divine retribution.

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