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Slavoj Žižek and Iran's Summer of Discontents: Return to Ayatollah Khomeini's Dreams?

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Slavoj Žižek's intellectual forays into areas for which he possesses no deep knowledge may at times offer brilliant insights, often eluding academics burdened by detailed knowledge of their particular expertise – the unique worth of an iconoclast who pokes his inquisitive nose into every torrid pot of human absurdities. However, occasional faux pas may also accompany such nifty insights.

By observing that “the protesters saw themselves as returning to the roots of the 1979 Khomeini revolution, and canceling out the corruption that followed it,” Žižek misreads the essential differences between the 1979 crowds and the 2009 protestors. (Žižek 2009: 3) “This was evident in the way the crowds behaved: the emphatic unity of the people, their creative self-organisation and improvised forms of protest, the unique mixture of spontaneity and discipline. Picture the march: thousands of men and women demonstrating in complete silence.” (Žižek

2009: 3) Early in 1979 I stood on Tehran's sidewalks and bewilderedly watched the furious crowds, tramping shoulder-to-shoulder kilometers of its main streets. The 2009 demonstrators were so unlike the 1979 crowds; the latter were organized by the neighborhood mosques, and once they hit the main streets of the revolution, they were anything but silent: aggressively self-righteous and violent, spewing slogans with particular Iranian rhythmic fervour, one of which implored Khomeini to let them "spill blood". The Ayatollah's consent came tacitly, and the crowds' "spontaneous" zealotry bloodied the secular Iranians and forced them out of the mainstream of the revolution. The 2009 events did not indicate "a genuine popular uprising on the part of the deceived partisans of the Khomeini revolution." Not surprisingly, they looked ahead, seeking no return, particularly to a grand, "liberating" narrative that by its very grandiosity becomes stifling and exclusionary of those who don't deserve being "liberated" – no return to the totalistic demands on the individual citizen for sacrifice and self-diminution.

The most befuddling aspect of the Iranian sociopolitical realities is the country's class-culture divide, which remains untouched by Žižek masterful strokes. A country at a culture-war with itself, it exhibits a bizarre class realignment where men of peasant origins and medieval dispositions, playing thuggery, rise to the highest level of military power; where the working class finds itself in a tactical alliance with their potential exploiters, the secular bourgeoisie; and where after thirty years of clerical rule reclaiming the Islamic authenticity of the dispossessed, the mainly secular modern middle classes are still the nation's cultural arbiters/enchanters. The regime constantly puts on display the "real" face of Iran – the scruffiness of the lower classes combined with unsophisticated piety and Islamic political militancy. This austere image is contrasted with the "other" Iran of secular middle-class habits often on display in the economically better-off neighborhoods of northern Tehran. It is not a class-struggle exhibit. Moreover, whatever the original sins of the West in generating this in-house divide, by now the struggle has become indigenized. The West-versus-East paradigm has lost much of its political currency among young Iranians.

How can one find the fault lines of Iranian politics today? A vigorous class analysis will create little clarity; it is hard to see manifestations of class struggles buried under thick lavas of cultural debris, authentic or manufactured. Ayatollah Khomeini and supporters have channeled Iran's raw populist feelings against their domestic opponents. It can be shown that neither their class-based political view nor their cultural grandstanding has been progressive, at least in terms of their predictable outcomes. The religiously-infatuated minds of the "masses," constantly being reminded of the nation's humiliation in the hands of Western new-imperialist powers, have generated their own psychopathology. The Islamic republic offers a trophy of learned lessons:

rendered marginalized, the populist crowds, with their broken spirits and sickened hearts, can ignite a militant fundamentalism. The “masses” mobilized by religious fundamentalism play into the hands of national demagogues. Backward-looking policies ensue. It becomes utterly perilous when the “masses” no longer constitute a majority of the population. The regime’s real policies do not even serve the interests of the urban working classes. Almost all the working class attempts to organize genuinely independent trade unions have been frustrated by the regime. One wonders what Karl Marx would say about this intersection of the (non-proletariat) “masses” and a religiously fundamentalist culture.

What is the genealogy of the “other” Iran? Despite periodic sociopolitical convulsions in the modern Iranian history, one phenomenon keeps pushing forward – at times crawling along – on its winding course. At least since the early 1920s a small but growing number of men and women, enchanted with Europe, have begun to negotiate its modernity and redefine its meanings for their own lives. They hatched an urban lifestyle that, despite its bewildering contradictions, cast its seemingly irresistible charms over Tehran. The relatively secular foundation that last ruling dynasty set up has outlasted it; not even the semi-divine ordinances of a fiendishly ambitious Grand Ayatollah could dismantle it.

By the late 1960s, the newly-built sections of Tehran began to look, sound, and smell differently than its older, less affected neighborhoods. The seemingly ostentatious sons and daughters of the city’s upper and middle classes set a new standard for public tastes. As the less fortunate youths began emulating the new lifestyle, an intellectual backlash occurred; its wordy furor was indicative of the new lifestyle’s seductive reach beyond its original class confines. As the nativist intellectuals of the 1960s had recognized, the most enduring inroads were not necessarily made by Western cultural images and sounds, but by the modernity’s commodified substantiality and materiality – the burgeoning consumerisms and advertisements that widened the appeals for the enchanting tastes. The intellectuals’ take on Western capitalism was conspiratorial, assuming that Western domination was being deliberately realized by turning the non-Westerners into blind customers of the capitalist commodities. The burgeoning consumerism in culture was depicted as the most obvious symbol of ‘Weststruckness’. The most paternalistic among them, those who dreamed of Islamic revivalism, particularly resented the stylish women who had turned themselves into “European dolls”. As an anti-imperialist discourse, traditionalism appeared progressive.

However, the Westernization vogue, altering the substance of the urban life, could not be possibly expunged by the hurried words of impatient intellectuals, obsessed with the concept (Weststruckness) they had coined. The trend created the desiring consumers of modern

products that in turn fashioned new signs and symbols; the immediacy of appearance signified the onset of new social distinctions, replacing the older, more restrictive categories ascribed by the tradition. Under the Shah or the Ayatollah, the consumers of the Western commodities and signs, delineating a modern lifestyle, kept growing. Today, the Asian economies are successful not because they are the purveyors of the authentically Asian tastes, but because they are highly attuned to the prevailing global modalities of the Western-designed goods and services, cheaply flooding all the non-Western urban markets, including Tehran's. American observers, often obsessed with it themselves, call it "outsourcing," diminishing the trend's transformative – for better or worse – influences. The highly negative aspects of such a transformation cannot be checked by cultural-religious fundamentalisms.

This way of life is characterized not so much by its anti-religious ethos as by its immanently practical and self-serving disposition and attitude towards the contemporary needs and desires, ultimately rejecting the permanency of anything that claims legitimacy beyond and above its rendered value. With great cost and immense sacrifices, the modern middle class culture of the "other" Iran – despite all its paradoxes and contradictions that the earlier nativist intellectuals had so patiently exploited – has refused to be molded or remade by the power of the ecclesiastical master plan. And today, much more deliberative efforts are needed to reverse the enormously costly consequences of the current globalization than the ones concocted by the regressive states, or in Iran's case, by the dimwitted functionaries of the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance.

As the Islamic republic failed to meet the raised expectations of many in the traditional middle classes and as a new "clergy capitalism" emerged, a gradual reversal of political fortune took place, decoupling class resentment from highly negative reaction towards modern lifestyles of the "other" Iran. The issue of culture in politics has begun to loosen its potency as an agent of mass mobilization. The Shah's regime's curse that had blended economic privileges with modern ways of life has largely been dispelled from the political lives of the modern middle classes. The pragmatically secular women and men of the "other" Iran seem to be exhausted by the craftiness of the Islamic rulers, by their policies and actions that belie their profusions of Islamic pieties. The Islamic republic has become the nexus between the typical oppressive modern state apparatus and the old cultural norms and values that discriminate and stigmatize. This reality was dramatically demonstrated in the summer of 2009. No longer willing to play dupes, it is surprising that many Iranians have not become cynics.

In every successive electoral cycle since the late 1980s, all the prospective candidates who may have a foot in the "other" Iran had been rejected. The anguish shown by millions of

mostly young Iranians fervently reclaiming their votes in the summer of 2009 can only be comprehended within the context of the structural limitation that makes every election cycle potentially explosive. The very logic of this carefully designed electoral procedure would be subverted by a candidate who may appear willing to be co-opted by the “other” Iran and become solicitous toward the needs and aspirations of those who are not terribly loyal to the institutions of the Islamic Republic. The reasons for such an apparent co-option are complex, often depending on the public image of the individual candidate at a particular time. In the 1997 electoral cycle, the relative popularity of the presidential candidate Mohammad Khatami alarmed the conservative forces only because they had located his appeals in the “other” Iran. They made every effort to show that his “supporters were *Weststruck*, corrupted, and anti-Islamic youths.” (Khosravi 2008: 85) The strength of the “other” Iran had begun to have direct political repercussions.

It is in this sense that Mir-Hossein Moussavi was called the “accidental leader.” If the electoral system had no structural constraints, Moussavi could not have been the natural candidate for the “other” Iran. The more modern and pragmatically secular Iranians have learned to play the system whenever possible by rallying around an insider who could possibly be tempted to reach beyond the officially approved constituencies. That temptation would not have been strong if the “other” Iran had remained weak, or perceived itself as such. Moussavi appeared on the scene, accidentally, as the right person at the right time. He was an insider who had nevertheless refrained from taking an official responsibility since the late 1980s. Above all, he was not Ahmadinejad. The candidate Moussavi faced a temptation that was far stronger than the “other” Iran had presented to the candidate Mohammad Khatami during the 1997 electoral cycle. Yielding to it, Moussavi rode for a fall. He became an outsider and thus a threat to the system. The supreme leader rode roughshod over the entire election. In each cycle, the “other” Iran dealt with a system that severely restricted their options in voting for the candidates of their own choosing. Now, the hitherto ignored Iranians felt, as never before, the strength of their presence, and they no longer felt terribly intimidated. This is the context within which the presidential election of 2009 grounded to a fraudulent halt. No return to Khomeini’s original dreams was ever contemplated.

This brings me back to Žižek and his juxtaposition of Silvio Berlusconi and Tehran. It seems that Žižek constructs a unique discursive plain, wherein he places the rigged election in Iran, the Western “crisis of democracy” and the Asian “authoritarian capitalism.” Thinking about Iran, I ask: What comes after such knowledge? What practical lessons for the youths of the “other” Iran? The West faces “the crisis of democracy,” and Žižek and Alain Badiou are not the

only perceptive political thinkers who issue dire warnings. The current maladies in Western polities are attained under the well-established rules of democratic processes that are demonstrably subverting their expected, desired outcomes. Culpability lies in the intricate intersection of entrenched political parties and privileged economic interests. “This transcendental frame is never neutral – it privileges certain values and practices – and this becomes palpable in moments of crisis or indifference, when we experience the inability of the democratic system to register what people want or think.” (Žižek 2009: 6) Žižek insists that elections “are not in themselves an indication of the true state of affairs...” And he adds that in Berlusconi’s Italy “state power is directly exerted by the *bourgeois*”. As a magician handler of the system, Berlusconi “parades his personal life as if he were taking part in a reality TV show.” (Žižek 2009: 6)

The multi-party liberal democracy creates an “inertia” that is both skeptical and cynical. Using Berlusconi’s Italy as the Western political theater of the absurd, Žižek writes, “This is how ideology functions today: nobody takes democracy or justice seriously, we are all aware that they are corrupt, but we practise them anyway because we assume they work even if we don’t believe in them.” (Žižek 2009: 6) Even with all these dark outcomes, Žižek still does not say that citizens should discard the basic rules of the democratic elections. Sifting through the second half of his essay, I wonder why Žižek incorporates Iran in this particular essay.

I can only hope that a new political movement reflective of Žižek’s unbounded imagination would emerge and progressively move the Western societies beyond the 19th century Bills of Rights that under the impact of corporate capitalism may now appear formulaic, at least to the Žižeks of the Western world. In the meantime, such an imagination should not create a political discourse that may complicate the political vistas of the progressives in other polities – in this case, Iranians who have to navigate their torturous paths ossified in the pre-modern traditions. Iranians need not devalue the moral currency of a democratic electoral process, or its practical usefulness. Despite globalization’s leveling, Ahmadinejad and Berlusconi do not cohabit a shared political landscape. In Iran, the political crisis reflects a rather rudimentary stage in the development of the basic rules of democracy. Iranians who became visibly defiant in the summer of 2009 will be satisfied, at least for now, if they pass the modernity’s political Rubicon so that no divinely guided “supreme leader” can fitfully abort the electoral process. When they reach a “state of affairs” equivalent to what the Europeans and Americans face today, they will have gained from the Westerners’ benefit of hindsight, resolving their “crisis of democracy” without recourse to authoritarianism. Comparing Ahmadinejad with Berlusconi may psychologically soothe the vivacious mind of the intellectual who comfortably

resides in a metropolis, where the democratic process still offers a protective shield, an enormous personal space, that such an intellectual requires. However, it offers little practical insights to be used by young Iranians whose restricted personal space suffocates and whose “crisis of democracy” lies not in its postmodern ossification but in its infantilism, in its arrested growth in pre-modernity.

The Western “crisis of democracy” deepens. Žižek postulates that “democracy’s authentic potential... is losing ground with the rise of authoritarian capitalism, whose tentacles are coming closer and closer to the West.” Only time would show what “coming closer and closer” may mean. To coin interesting terms and throw them around may not necessarily lead to clarity, particularly in a case that purports to link Iran’s buffoon with Italy’s clown. In Berlusconi’s Italy, the bourgeois directly controls the state power. “Berlusconi is a significant figure, and Italy an experimental laboratory where our future is being worked out.” Thus, the West faces an approaching “authoritarian capitalism” that cohabits with “fundamentalist populism” and concurrently reconciled with “permissive-liberal technocratism.” This is an amazing admixture, particularly if we keep in mind that one of its tripartite components is Asiatic in its reincarnation, “coming closer and closer to the West”. Berlusconi may not be such an enduring figure in Italian politics, and under intense scrutiny by Italy’s magistrates, he seems embattled today.

I am still puzzled. How did my curiosity about what Žižek may say about Iran bring me to Berlusconi’s “fundamentalism”? Is it supposed to resonate with my image of Ahmadinejad’s “fundamentalism”? I have to keep in mind that Žižek’s discursive swing from the Ayatollah’s Iran to Europe came with his mentioning of the Singaporean Lee Kuan Yew, who gave currency to the “Asian values” in order to deflect the charges of human rights violations. Žižek links the concept of “Asian values” to capitalism. “The virus of authoritarian capitalism is slowly but surely spreading around the globe.” Then, he comes to the seemingly unstoppable plague that is spreading from Asia to Europe. “Deng Xiaoping praised Singapore as the model that all of China should follow. Until now, capitalism has always seemed to be inextricably linked with democracy.... Now, however, the link between democracy and capitalism has been broken.” Did it break in China? How could there be a link between two things (capitalism and democracy) that China never had in any substantive way? How could the link between one nonexistence and another nonexistence be broken? How could the Chinese model that had never been based on either “capitalism” or “democracy” be applicable to Western Europe that, following Žižek’s own argument, have shown acute crisis of over aging in both of those fronts? Things are far from clear.

Even if we grant that in Berlusconi's Italy the bourgeoisie is the master puppeteer, exploiting the state to maintain its class interests, we may have difficulty recognizing its counterparts in the Chinese "authoritarian capitalism." Such a class is stillborn in China, even though the Communist Party is hoping to better register its birth pangs. Those who reside in Western metropolises, where political democracy makes their lives pretty tolerable, to say the least, do have intellectual responsibility to "confront the limitations of parliamentary representative democracy." However, Iranians do grapple with its absence. If globalization is to entice our political philosophers to sidestep the problems created by the specificities of the global pre-modern and the post-modern experiences, they offer no valuable vista to either one of these experiences to move forward, progressively. In the case of Iran, to project postmodern experiences onto a cultural swamp of the hard-to-die residues of Islamic medievalism is a downright misreading of the predicaments, not to speak of the aspirations, of the Iranian youths.

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