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# Why is A Political Act in Iran The Worst Thing to Do?

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## The deformation of an inaugural lecture

At the beginning of his inaugural lecture at the College de France given 2 December 1970, Michael Foucault said:

I wish I could have slipped surreptitiously into this discourse which I must present today, and into the ones I shall have to give here, perhaps for many years to come. I should have preferred to be enveloped by speech, and carried away well beyond all possible beginnings, rather than have to begin it myself. I should have preferred to become aware that a nameless voice was already speaking long before me, so that I should only have needed to join in, to continue the sentence it had started and lodge myself, without really being noticed, in its interstices, as if it had signaled to me by pausing, for an instant, in suspense. Thus there would be no beginning, and instead of being the one from whom discourse proceeded, I should be at the mercy of the chance unfolding, a slender gap, the point of its possible appearance. (Foucault 1981: 48)

In order to provide my argument concerning the above excerpt, I first need to have a short discussion of a few points on the Persian grammar. Unlike English verbs whose flexibility to take the first person singular form is limited to an inflection of “to be” (for

example, I “am” a student), all Persian verbs (to win, to certify, to go, etc) can take the first person singular form. Moreover, according to the Persian grammar, the subject of a sentence might be omitted; however, if the sentence has a subject, the subject and verb, as expected, must be in agreement with each other. In today’s Persian, in order to express something like humility, however strange to a foreign (especially western) reader, Iranian people occasionally put “the servant” or “the slave” (*bandeh*) in place of “I” as the subject of the sentence they make. For example, they might say “the servant went to my office yesterday” when they actually mean “I went to my office yesterday”. Nonetheless, only through the form of the first singular verb (representation of which is impossible in English) can you understand that by “the servant” or “the slave” one means “I.”<sup>1</sup>

What is more, reading *The History of Baihaqi* written by one of the most reliable Persian historians Abul-Fazl Baihaqi nearly one thousand years ago, one comes across cases in which *even the verb takes the third person singular form, while the subject (bandeh) is still the first person singular!* Consequently, by reference to the enunciated content, you cannot realize who is speaking or writing, unless you hear or see the speaker or writer, have a look at his signature at the end of the letter or at her name on the manuscript, etc. Here are two examples<sup>2</sup> (perhaps these two are all the examples that you can find within the text):

“...the Hajib Mentigrak kissed the earth [out of salutation to the Sultan Masoud] and said [to the Sultan]: “The master [the Sultan Masoud] is to command the servant Ali to accompany the servant [the Hajib Mentigrak] and the other servants with him [Ali], as the servant [Hajib Mentigrak] has ordered that a pottage<sup>3</sup> be made”. (Baihaqi 2011: 99)

“... [Bou Sahl Hamdavi said:] ... if the master [the Sultan Masoud] would consider it the right decision, the rule over Rey and Iraq should be registered in the name of his son, and the servant [Bousahl Hamdavi] should head for those areas as deputy, so he [Bousahl Hamdavi] makes orations in the name of the son ... The servant [Bousahl Hamdavi] said what seems right to him. The Supreme point of view [i.e. the Sultan’s point of view] would be superior.” (ibid: 435)

Moreover, one stumbles upon cases in which the narrator mentions himself by name as either subject or object of the sentence, while the very subject/object is still referred to as the third person singular:

“So said Khaji Abulfazl [Baihaqi], the scribe who authored this book, that ...” (the narrator is Khaji Abulfazl Baihaqi himself). (ibid: 579)

“...and he took Amirak Beihaghi with him” (the narrator is Amirak Baihaqi himself). (ibid: 379)

In such a discourse in which “I” is identified with “he” (who obviously is not a specific person but somebody who I *must* be)<sup>4</sup> the subject *disavows* the gap between the enunciated - what it actually says - and its position of enunciation that it must identify with in order *to be* a subject. Thus, here it can easily be seen how the subject slips “surreptitiously” into the discourse, “enveloped by speech ... , carried well beyond all possible beginnings”, “without really being noticed”, instead of being obliged to “begin” it itself, since “ a nameless voice was already speaking long before” it so that it only needs “to join in” (Foucault ibid). Therefore, perhaps, we are witnessing a short circuit i.e. the coincidence of a mortifying discourse of heteronomy with the desire of a dignified critical theorist!

### ***Difference***

However, in order to explain how a true political act in Iran may involve a situation much worse than the above described humiliating situation that Michael Foucault desired, first we should differentiate between the socio-symbolic order in Iran and the one in countries where capitalism is established. The difference can be illustrated by economic activity. Within capitalism, if a fine is considered for the breach of contract, you will be free after you pay for your fault. In Iran, however, things are complicated by these two alternatives: 1. even if you pay for your breach of contract, you are still responsible for what you did, if the other party is powerful enough not to forgive you. 2. Not only do you not have to pay for your fault, but also you are able to claim that you did not do anything wrong at all, simply because you are powerful enough to impose responsibility on somebody else. In other words, there is not a real contract in the strict sense of the term that makes your transgression determinately exchangeable with money. In Iran, this remainder of responsibility characterizing arbitrary rule renders absent a basic feature of capitalism i.e. the equivalence between your labor force and money, since the contract, the symbolic bond between people ( $S_1$ ) that guarantees the equivalence is nothing but an accidental psychic economy of a specific person or group

that occupies the position of truth, as it is considered in the discourse of the university (Zizek 1998: 78, Verhaeghe 1999: 112-114). Consequently, this accidental psychic economy rather the iron law of capitalism seems to be the real of the symbolic order in Iran.

Since pre-modern times, mercantile capitalism, of course, has been active in present-day Iran, providing part of the financial support needed for administration – not to mention that as capitalism develops throughout the world, Iranian governments are forced to allow for its new shapes and complications much more than they did before. To put it the other way, who is doubtful about the financial reliability of the bourgeoisie, if you are, to use Louis Althusser's terms, *in the last instance* superior over them? So (why not?), one could even say that arbitrary rule in Iran has always favored capitalism to some extent. This is the point both supported and missed by the theoretician of Iranian arbitrary rule Homa Katouzian when he says that, considering the unpredictable nature of arbitrary rule, one is amazed by the accumulation of financial capital and extensive commercial activities in Iran (Katouzian 2004: 62).<sup>5</sup> However, having been supported by the Iranian government, the bourgeoisie may not remain the same as in established capitalism; rather it is transfigured by arbitrary rule, so that even in such aspects of life as your everyday shopping, you do not have a *right* to seek refuge in the safe world of the bourgeoisie!

### ***Let's do something?***

Now, to illustrate how a political act in Iran is the worst thing to do, one can look at the opportunity lost by the Iranian people in the 2013 presidential election. Perhaps, during the election almost everybody was deceived by Khamenei the Iranian Supreme Leader except for those who were deemed complete idiots i.e. those who voted for Said Jalili. Immediately after Hashemi Rafsanjani (the then hope of the majority of so called reformists and political dissidents) was disqualified by the Guardian Council (consisting of clergy and lawyers appointed by Khamenei), it was a commonplace that Khamenei really does not believe in a "maximized participation" and just pays lip service to it. The presence of Said Jalili on the slate of candidates, however, refuted the commonplace.

Due to their previous experience in administration, seven other candidates were more or less competent to be at least rivals for each other, as they were just seasoned enough to preclude the breakdown of the political system. The point, however, is that Jalili could not find a proper place on the list because in his only significant position by then he had been in effect a mere spokesman for Khamenei rather than a fairly successful administrator. Therefore, the presence of Jalili on the list of those qualified by the Guardian Council could not be justified except at the price of the contradiction of criteria applied to other candidates, which means Jalili was *objet petit a* in the strict Lacanian sense of the term, since he was undeniable part of the list which deformed it as a meaningful whole. To put it in larger detail, it is asserted that the actual list of candidates cannot ever satisfy the ideals of the Islamic Republic, so we should resign to a list that is modestly composed of people who are closest to the criteria. The Lacanian twist, however, is that this modest attitude is exposed as imposture if we notice that there is the name of a candidate on the list which *does not conform to the modest attitude itself*. Here, one cannot fail to understand the reason why Khamenei unprecedentedly called for the participation of “all Iranians” in the election, even “those who had some problem with the system of the Islamic Republic”: from the point of view of “neutral knowledge” (Zizek 1998: 78), even if you do not have a bias in favor of the “ideology” of the Islamic Republic, you must participate in the election to vote for some candidate other than Jalili; considering his so called extremist stances, Iranian voters were afraid that, if elected, Jalili would insist on the Iranian nuclear program so that more paralyzing sanctions would be imposed on the country, which in turn makes the life of Iranian people more and more complicated. Jalili thus appeared like a scarecrow, out of fear of which people should opt for another choice to avoid danger. This seems to be the way Khamenei held an election with the “maximized participation”,<sup>6</sup> which Western countries are wistful for these days! Here, the true political act, perhaps, was to vote for Jalili (this very scarecrow itself) in order to transfer *objet petit a* to the position of master signifier ( $S_1$ ). In other words, the reason is not primarily that if Iranians had voted for Jalili, the Islamic Republic would have lost its balance and gone to extremes and then we would have got rid of the governance of the Mullahs,<sup>7</sup> but that at the moment of voting for Jalili *we could not behave as if we did not know that what has made up the*

*whole list “in the last instance” is the arbitrary power and not the consistent criteria on the basis of which every candidate is evaluated.*

It may be found easier to accept this argument, if we keep in mind that something quite similar happened during the protests of the Green Movement in Iran. There is an Iranian television program *Navad* (meaning 90, from the time set for football matches) broadcast from the Channel 3 of the Iranian state TV, which mainly addresses football matches played in the Iranian Premier League every week. Although its function usually has not been more important than the one of a safety valve, *Navad* has been “truly critical” of the situation of football in Iran and is one of the most “modern” television programs ever broadcast from the Iranian state TV,<sup>8</sup> as it has been mentioned by Yousof Abazari in one of his short essays (Abazari 2002: 24). During the Green Movement, protesters were coordinated to take part in the SMS-Win segment of the program in order to vote for the option that was known in public as obviously wrong! In fact, the positive content of the option was an embarrassing endorsement of then incompetent managers of the Iranian national football team; *that is why*, however, making the choice disclosed the truth.<sup>9</sup>

In her memoirs entitled *Da*, which are not very popular with many Iranian intellectuals and political dissidents,<sup>10</sup> Zahra Husseinini describes the scene of an aerial bombardment of the Iranian southern city of Khorramshar by Iraqi jet fighters during the Iran-Iraq war (1981-1988):

“ ... While I was leaning forward to jump, my eyes fell on the doorkeeper of the motor municipality building. He was running outwards from the end of the yard ... a 35 or 40-year-old man, wearing a blue shirt, rolling its sleeves up to his elbows, trying to get as far from the building as possible ..... While I was lying on my chest, and a cloud of dust was coming to me, my look fell again on the municipality worker; in space of a few seconds during which I was jumping, shrapnel decapitated his body, the bloody body still *running without its head*.<sup>11</sup> After taking a few steps, when it arrived at the open gate, it collapsed over there ...” (Husseini 2009: 390-391).<sup>12</sup>

Now let’s read the following excerpt written by a successful businessman Ali Nazemzadeh describing in his weblog of how he made an impulsive decision to visit dead bodies in funeral parlors instead of visiting the burial place for artists in the Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery:

“... I do not know how come the other sign absorbed me: Funeral Parlors [where dead bodies are washed and prepared during a religious ceremony, and can be seen by people]; I thus followed the signs one after the other until I arrived at a parking lot. Sense of curiosity, sense of death-ism, sense of non-imagination, sense of imagination, I do not know what sense pushed me forward to see the Funeral Parlors. As I was getting closer, various bunches of mourners dressed up in black were coming, going, crying and/or sobbing; one or two coffins were carried by people also. I saw everybody was in black, while I was wearing my blue navy suit with a white shirt! ... I buttoned up my coat so the whiteness of the shirt would not stick out ... I noticed some mourners were seeing those “things” through the window! I did know what they would be ... *My feet themselves moved towards them*. Perhaps my heart wanted me to move but my reason did not, or, quite the contrary, my reason wanted me to move but my heart did not. However *here it was only my feet that pushed me towards seeing dead bodies ...*”<sup>13</sup> (Nazemzadeh 2013: un-paginated)<sup>14</sup>

I humbly dedicate this manuscript to Ali Nazemzadeh for his repeating authentically the last move by that municipality worker.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> . It might be objected that in such cases the Persian word “*bandeh*” must not be translated as “the servant” or “the slave”; rather, in order to translate the word, considering the context of its

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usage, one must convey its meaning (the sense of “humility”) to the target language rather than taking it literally. However, the very reason itself for this criticism can lead us to the necessity of the literal translation of the word: You should not translate it literally, because, when they refer to themselves as “*bandeh*”, Iranians really do not mean it!

<sup>2</sup> . Translated by me

<sup>3</sup> . Original “Shourba”

<sup>4</sup> . If you asked from people who talked in the above described way the direct question whether they really think that another specific person speaks instead of them, their answer probably would be: “No, of course not! We are not idiots!”

<sup>5</sup> . Only the Persian translation of the book is available to me.

<sup>6</sup> . “Liberals” who, just about three weeks before the election, had accused Khamenei of not believing in the maximized participation because of disqualifying Hashemi Rafsanjani did participate, although, in all fairness, I must add that the Iranian “critical intellectuals”, including those interested in Slavoj Zizek, either joined the people who did not participate in the elections (an option that Khamenei did not hate, because, if you look at the list of candidates, you easily notice that it was not made up to cause a landslide victory in favor of a specific candidate, so that people who did not participate effectively made the result more pleasant to Khamenei, given that if they had, they most probably would have voted for Rouhani); or they did vote for Rouhani.

<sup>7</sup> . Things in all likelihood would have become more complicated than it may seem.

<sup>8</sup> . These days, after Rouhani’s election as president, the number of *Navad*-like programs in the Iranian state TV has been unprecedentedly increasing, while some say *Navad* is regressing.

<sup>9</sup> . I do remember that the option was so obviously vulgar that, innocently ignorant of what was going on, the guest of the program Muhammad Dadkan, one of the reformist football managers at the time of the former president Mohammad Khatami, objected to the popular host of the program Adel Ferdowsi Pour that he does not know *who* is voting for this option, because he knows that Iranians are quite informed people, etc!

<sup>10</sup> . The main reason behind this seems to be that Khamenei the Supreme Leader has praised the book.

<sup>11</sup> . My italics

<sup>12</sup> . Translated by me, with few adaptations

<sup>13</sup> . My italics

<sup>14</sup> . Translated by me