

ISSN 1751- 8229

Volume Three, Number Four – Special Issue: Žižek and Iran

## The Discrete Charm of European Intellectuals

Hamid Dabashi - Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative literature,  
Columbia University

*One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in his bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug.*

Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (1915)

The idea of Slavoj Žižek waking up one morning from anxious dreams and discovering that in his bed he had been metamorphosed into a Shi'i Muslim and catapulted into the rambunctious capital of an Islamic Republic is quite wickedly intriguing. Whoever put him up to that idea? "What's happened to me," he would wonder like the good old Gregor Samsa, as his bewildered gaze would turn to the window and notice the dreary weather—the raindrops falling audibly down on the metal window ledge in Evin Prison in Tehran, making him quite melancholic for his comfortable apartment in his native Ljubljana.

I can well imagine Žižek in those prison pajamas, sitting next to an array of Iranian reformists, wishing he were only there in name and spirit, like Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas, or even Richard Rorty. But here he was, in person, in Tehran, jailed and charged with having plotted a velvet revolution to topple the Islamic Republic. With your permission though I will only imagine Prof. Žižek in Evin Prison and not in Kahrizak, for given what the custodians of the Islamic Republic have been doing to their inmates in that particular detention center it would be quite disconcerting, if not outright disrespectful, to imagine the leading European intellectual under those circumstances.

After Michel Foucault terribly misread the Iranian revolution of 1979, wrote a few quite curious articles for *Corriere della Sera* and kept his admirers and detractors busy and confounded for over some thirty odd years, we have had no prominent European philosopher collecting his courage, mustering his wits, and crossing that proverbial psychological barrier, enough to say something sensible about those Muslim Orientals the way Žižek did recently about the post-electoral violence in Tehran. This was a good thing to have happened under circumstances when American neoliberals and neoconservatives had joined forces, patting Iranians on the back for their knowledge of Nabokov and Habermas alike—all in the condescending and custodial tone of “now, ain’t that cute, they are reading *Lolita* and *Legitimation Crisis* in Tehran.” In no uncertain terms, bless his soul, and at a time when what in North America and Western Europe passes for “the Left” was quite baffled as to how to respond to the mid-June uprising in Iran, Žižek came out and brushed them all aside and defended our cause, all in a clear and confident prose. We—we the native sons and daughters, as Richard Wright would say about us colored folks from Chicago’s South Side to Iran’s southern provinces—were quite happy to welcome the dandy, groovy, and cool philosopher in our midst.

This was no “orange” revolution Georgia style, Žižek told Europeans; nor was it a neoliberal-democratic secular uprising. He countered those who thought “Ahmadinejad really won: [that] he is the voice of the majority, while the support of Mousavi comes from the middle classes and their gilded youth.” He dismissed those “who dismiss Mousavi as a member of the cleric establishment with merely cosmetic differences from Ahmadinejad,” and above all he denounced “the saddest of them all [who] are the Leftist supporters of Ahmadinejad: what is really at stake for them is Iranian independence. Ahmadinejad won because he stood up for the country’s independence, exposed elite corruption and used oil wealth to boost the incomes of the poor majority – this is, so we are told, the true Ahmadinejad beneath the Western-media image of a Holocaust-denying fanatic.” He missed a couple of crucial characters who also championed Ahmadinejad’s cause—failed academics and career opportunists who seized upon their chance to cash in on the beleaguered “President’s” need for someone with half decent English to rush to CNN to defend his cause, or else deeply alienated second generation Iranians growing up in suburban North America and rushing to Tehran and Isfahan to discover their roots in Ahmadinejad’s deep pocket and take a stance against “Western decadence” and its “liberal democracy.” It was and it remains quite a pathetic scene. But we thought Žižek was quite eloquent in sorting things out and setting the record straight.

We all read all those wise, timely, and true words and admired the big old funny philosopher and thought he deserved all those accolades coming his way, including a whole International Journal of Žižek Studies, no less, and dubbed “the Elvis of Philosophy.” How could he be so smart and know all these things! Europe may not be literally the creation of the Third World after all, as Fanon suspected, and “Western Civilization” does indeed sound like a good idea, as Gandhi

conjectured.

The analytic becomes a bit blearier, however, when Žižek comes to his own assessment of what's happening in Iran. "The green colors adopted by the Mousavi supporters and the cries of 'Allahu akbar!' that resonated from the roofs of Tehran in the evening darkness," he surmised, "suggested that the protesters saw themselves as returning to the roots of the 1979 Khomeini revolution, and canceling out the corruption that followed it." What happened, how, and by what authority? How did Žižek make that conclusion? Just from the color green? Wow! That is some serious *Farbenlehre*! How can we, mere mortals, make that transcontinental assumption, that thirty years after the Islamized revolution of 1977-1979, this new generation wishes to go back and relive that experience—and saying so on the basis of two floating signifier of a color (green) and a chant (Allahu Akbar)? No, sir! It makes no sense. So the question is: who was the native informer who thus misinformed the European philosopher? For that is precisely how Foucault was mishandled by his handlers when he was chaperoned to Tehran in 1979—some Islamist activists got hold of him and kept feeding him food to theorize.

Žižek provides more evidence: "This was evident in the way the crowds behaved: the emphatic unity of the people, their creative self-organization and improvised forms of protest, the unique mixture of spontaneity and discipline. Picture the march: thousands of men and women demonstrating in complete silence. This was a genuine popular uprising on the part of the deceived partisans of the Khomeini revolution." This is all partially apt and impartially accurate. But how does it amount to these demonstrators wishing to go back 30 years ago and no longer being "the deceived partisans of the Khomeini revolution"? Logic? It does not add up. What we were witnessing was a genuine, grassroots, social uprising (in part spontaneous, in part *the logical growth* and in fact the forbidden fruits of a crescendo of events that began thirty years ago and thus by definition cannot be a going back to thirty years ago)—but whence and how the assumption of a retrograde, nostalgic return to the fetal position of the nascent revolution? Shouldn't in fact "the improvised forms of protest" (a very apt description) alert the philosopher that we have had, perhaps, a massive generational shift, an epistemic shift even (occasioned by the narrative exhaustion of ideological legacies, exacerbated by the internet, computer literacy, and cyberspace social networking) after which there is no illegal/illogical U-Turn?

I am, to be sure, completely on the same page with Žižek when he rightly says, "We should contrast the events in Iran with the US intervention in Iraq: an assertion of popular will on the one hand, a foreign imposition of democracy on the other;" or when he asserts, "the events in Iran can also be read as a comment on the platitudes of Obama's Cairo speech, which focused on the dialogue between religions: no, we don't need a dialogue between religions (or civilizations), we need a bond of political solidarity between those who struggle for justice in Muslim countries and those who participate in the same struggle elsewhere." I so wish Žižek had written Obama's Cairo speech, instead of Rahm Emanuel (or whoever else helped him write it). But none of this provides

evidence that those who were demonstrating were after reliving their parents' lives thirty years ago. No, sir! If anything, they were (all the indications suggested that they were) sick and tired of that revolutionary zeal and political animus, and were in fact holding their parents responsible for the calamity they had found themselves in, hanging over their heads the banality of the idea of an Islamic republic, or even worse a *Velayat-e Faqih*. So still the mystery persists—how in the world did Žižek conclude that these masses of demonstrators were seeking a return back to thirty years ago? The man is a philosopher, must have studied logic—so where is the 2+2 that equals this particular 4?

I am also (almost entirely) with Žižek when he rightly says that “Ahmadinejad is not the hero of the Islamist poor, but a corrupt Islamofascist populist, a kind of Iranian Berlusconi whose mixture of clownish posturing and ruthless power politics is causing unease even among the ayatollahs,” though I wish he had reconsidered that “Islamofascist” bit—for it exposes his Eastern European angst of out-Western Europeanizing Western European anxieties more than it reveals anything about Iran. Iran is not fascism, though fascism has always threatened Iran. Islam is an abstraction, as much capable or abhorrent of fascism as Judaism and Christianity—and I have not heard of any talk about “Judeofascism” sixty years after the Zionist armed robbery of Palestine, or “Hindufascism,” for that matter, after any of the Hindu slaughters of Muslims in India. Be that as it may, Žižek has me on his side when he says, “His [Ahmadinejad’s] demagogic distribution of crumbs to the poor shouldn’t deceive us: he has the backing not only of the organs of police repression and a very Westernized PR apparatus. He is also supported by a powerful new class of Iranians who have become rich thanks to the regime’s corruption – the Revolutionary Guard is not a working-class militia, but a mega-corporation, the most powerful centre of wealth in the country.” *Chapeau*—as some Francophone Lebanese say on such occasions! But, yet again that nagging “but,” the assumption that if you are poor you are gullible and for Ahmadinejad, or you don’t see through his incompetence and chicaneries, that you have no dream, no democratic aspiration for your homeland, is positively disconcerting to come from an otherwise progressive European philosopher. I know of quite a number of rich second generation Iranians, grown up in suburban north America, who are totally taken by the darvishi demeanor and lumpenism of the demagogue infinitely more than any poor person from southern Tehran would. But, hey, what can you do—but move on!

Žižek, again, loses me completely when he declares that:

...we have to draw a clear distinction between the two main candidates opposed to Ahmadinejad, Mehdi Karroubi and Mousavi. Karroubi is, effectively, a reformist, a proponent of an Iranian version of identity politics, promising favours to particular groups of every kind. Mousavi is something entirely different: he stands for the resuscitation of the popular dream that sustained the Khomeini revolution. . . . Now is the time to remember the effervescence that followed the revolution, the explosion of political and social creativity, organisational experiments and debates among students and ordinary people. That this

explosion had to be stifled demonstrates that the revolution was an authentic political event, an opening that unleashed altogether new forces of social transformation: a moment in which 'everything seemed possible.' What followed was a gradual closing-down of possibilities as the Islamic establishment took political control. To put it in Freudian terms, today's protest movement is the 'return of the repressed' of the Khomeini revolution. (Žizek 2009 website)

"Closing down of possibilities" might be a fine euphemistic way of saying how Khomeini & Co. brutally suppressed alternative voices that wanted to have a say in the aftermath of the revolution—but the revolution itself, what occasioned these possibilities, was no meteor coming at Iran from the heavens. It was in the making for some two hundred years—and it was poly-vocal from the outset. Khomeini aborted a full delivery of a healthy and robust republic and delivered a mismatched Siamese twin called "Islamic Republic," topped by an authoritarian doctrine called "Velayat-e Faqih." What is happening today in Iran, as a result, is the full-bodied, material, symbolic, discursive, and institutional historicity of the multifaceted Iranian cosmopolitanism (that just remembering it makes you cringe with anger against these neoliberal Americans who think they have discovered an earth-shattering phenomenon that Iranians read Habermas!) finally bursting out of the tight and unbecoming medieval jurisprudence that was violently clothed around it.

Unless we begin where we must begin, upstream from the violent over-Islamization of the 1979 revolution in the course of the American Hostage Crisis of 1979-1980 and the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, a fact that Žižek's precursor, Foucault, terribly failed to see, we are bound to fall into Žižek's trap of cyclical historiography, which in our case amounts to a vicious circle, spinning after our own tail, chasing after yet another charismatic father-figure we want to follow to kill by way of our version of what Freud called "deferred obedience," which in our case is actually "deferred defiance." That cyclical historiography also prevents you from seeing the nature of *leadership* in this movement and misleads you to come up with flawed assessments of people like Mousavi, Karroubi, or Khatami. Both Karroubi and Mousavi, and before them Khatami, are the *product* of this movement, and not this movement the product of their visions and leadership. If we begin with any kind of typological contradistinction between Karroubi and Mousavi in reading this movement, we will end up on a goose-chase, or worse (better metaphor) yet, chasing like a puppy after our own tail, trying to figure out this movement. This movement invented a Mousavi, crafted a Karroubi, and envisioned a Khatami out of its deepest visions for a different future, which means killing its future father-figures at the very beginning by splitting them into at least three alternates, and thus celebrating its own boastful bastardy—once and for all for Sohrab to outwit Rostam and set his mother Tahmineh and the rest of us free.

Let's not get too carried away with Persian mythology, lest we lose the European philosopher, and return to his familiar turf and simply suggest that instead of a Freudian "return of the repressed" in this particular case, we are better off with a Jungian "collective unconscious."

There is something about the Green Movement that prompts Žižek towards the Freudian “return of the repressed,” except it is not repressed, for what we have is a perfectly alert and conscious attempt at the retrieval of the violently denied cosmopolitan political culture of a people that was militantly “repressed” (not in the Freudian psychoanalytic sense but in the Khomeinian political terms of sending club-wielding thugs to close down your newspaper and beating up your editorial staff so you would shut up and be quiet and not utter a word against the violent over-Islamization of a multifaceted revolution). But Žižek’s preference for Mousavi over Karroubi, and the way he talks about him, gives me a nagging suspicion that his native informer must have been a pro-Mousavi activist who set the European philosopher off on the same wrong track that Foucault was by his overzealous Islamist activists. Now, as someone who actually voted for Mousavi, I have nothing against that particular presidential candidate, but not to the point of collapsing the analytic of the phenomenon we are now facing into yet another cult of personality, to which we Orientals (so we seem to our European Orientalists) are particularly prone.

It is upon this Freudian slip, as it were, that Žižek then falls down like that very cat he invokes early in his essay, and just like that cat, he does not immediately notice it: “What all this means is that there is a genuinely liberatory potential in Islam: we don’t have to go back to the tenth century to find a ‘good’ Islam, we have it right here, in front of us.” Here, Žižek in fact picks up precisely where Foucault left off—concurring with the militant over-Islamization of a worldly and poly-vocal political culture, and then seeing an emancipatory force emanating from it. While Foucault saw this as the very “soul” of a soulless world that Marx had prophesied, and Žižek sees it as a warning to “the West” that unless they see Ahmadinejad for the charlatan that he is, Berlusconi and even worse is what it is in the offing for his fellow-Europeans. The result, yet again, is all the same: Iran, Islam, as the rest of the world, is just a laboratory for testing the maladies that are threatening “the West.” One might even trace this particular proclivity back to Max Weber himself, who begins his diagnosis of capitalist modernity with a reading of the Protestant ethics and “Western nationalism,” and ends up in an Iron Cage that can only be broken down by chronic charismatic outburst. Fortunately for him, Weber was not alive to see Hitler and the Holocaust coming his particular German/European way, though he (and even before him Tocqueville) certainly saw them coming. In the European context, and in the aftermath of the horrors of the Holocaust, at least Adorno and Horkheimer saw to it that the dangerous instrumentalization of reason, written into the dialectics of the Enlightenment was fully exposed for Europe. But the same old nostalgia for charismatic outbursts (and thus Žižek’s jaw-dropping “[but] Mousavi is something entirely different”) seems to have transmuted into European philosophical fascination with bearded or bespectacled third world revolutionary prophets—at the heavy cost (for us) of helping distort our cosmopolitan worldliness, to which our religions are certainly integral but by no means definitive.

The problem with the European Left is that they care a little bit about just about everything, and yet there is nothing in particular about which they care deeply. This is very similar my old

teacher Philip Rieff used to call “the Monroe Doctrine”—not the famous President James Monroe doctrine of warning Europeans to keep their hands off the Americas, but the little known Marilyn Monroe doctrine, named after the famous actress for having once said, “I believe in everything,” and then pausing for a moment before saucily adding, “a little bit.” The difference between European and colonial intellectuals is summed up in the difference between Sartre and Fanon, or between Foucault and Said. Sartre and Foucault cared widely about the entirety of the colonial and colonizing world, while Fanon and Said cared deeply about Algeria and Palestine, and from these two sites of contestation they extrapolated their politics and ethics of responsibility towards the rest of the world. Žižek is precisely in the same tradition and trajectory as those of Sartre and Foucault—caring widely but not deeply enough, for (and here is the philosophical foregrounding of their political proclivity for vacuous abstractions) they know widely and variedly but never deeply and particularly. What passes for the Left in the US is even worse. Since they have seen me (as one example among many) preoccupied with Iran, they think I have compromised my stand vis-à-vis American imperialism or its Israeli colonial outpost—for they too care in abstraction and act in generalities. I am preoccupied with Iran in 2009 precisely in the same way I have been with Iraq since 2003, and with Afghanistan since 2001 (when the best of these Americans thought Afghanistan was a “just war”), and precisely the same way I have been with Palestine all my adult life: from the site of specific crimes against humanity opens up your frame to see the rest of the world.

There is something charming about the European intellectuals when bored with nothing happening in Europe and turning their theorizing gaze beyond the banks of the Danube River. That antiquarian charm hangs over the memory of the Europe of our youth when we colored folks sought to sustain the hope with which we have been born and bred. Kafka concludes his *Metamorphosis* with a happy ending to Gregor Samsa’s demise, when Mr and Mrs Samsa notice how much their young daughter Grete has grown up and become a “good looking, shapely” girl. Thinking to themselves that “the time was now at hand to seek out a good honest man for her. And it was something of a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions when at the end of their journey their daughter stood up first and stretched her young body.” The same is with the tall and handsome body of Žižek’s fine essay on Iran, an indication that the European philosopher is finally ready to get up and move and wed his piercing intelligence to a singular cause, stop the promiscuous philandering with generalities and learn the honesty of a monogamous commitment to one moral site. Who was it who said, “O Plato! I can see horse, but not horseness!” Bless his soul! There used to be something worldly and exciting about European indulgence in generalities they call “Philosophy,” which now seems only so irresistibly charming the way one might feel about an old armchair sitting idly by at a marché folklorique in an old European town off the shores of Lac Lemman. Yea—I do sometimes miss them!

No—come to think of it I wish never to see Professor Žižek in any of those unseemly prison

pajamas at Evin in Tehran. It would be so unbecoming of our old Oriental ways to put a prominent philosopher on display like that. Let's wait for a few years—hopefully this Green Movement will become a *vanishing mediator* and we will all be able to give him a warm welcome at Tehran University.

## Reference

Žižek, S. Berlusconi in Tehran London Review of Books Vol. 31 No. 14 · 23 July 2009. Pages 3-7. Available at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n14/slavoj-zizek/berlusconi-in-tehran>