The Revolution *Was* Televised: Reimagining the Islamic Revolution as a Primetime Performance

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By Kevin Greene

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses fundamental misunderstandings of the Islamic Revolutions in Iran in the 1970s. Considering contemporary ideological material and Western media coverage of these events from 1978 to the present, the revolution was the result of a number of social factors, not a monolithic event forwarded by extremists. Given the wide array of ideological factions, the revolution became inherently performative; this paper ponders the ways revolutionaries co-opted westernized media and revolutionary mores to accomplish anti-Western ends.

Keywords: Islam, Iran, revolution, liberation theology, media criticism, postsecularism, politics

La Revolución fue televisada: Reimaginando la Revolución Islámica como una actuación postsecular

RESUMEN

Este documento aborda los malentendidos fundamentales de las revoluciones islámicas en Irán en la década de 1970. Teniendo en cuenta el material ideológico contemporáneo y la cobertura de los medios occidentales de estos eventos desde 1978 hasta el presente, la revolución fue el resultado de una serie de factores sociales, no un evento monolítico presentado por extremistas. Dada la amplia gama de facciones

ideológicas, la revolución se volvió intrínsecamente performativa; Este artículo reflexiona sobre las formas en que los revolucionarios se apropiaron de los medios occidentalizados y las costumbres revolucionarias para lograr fines antioccidentales.

Palabras clave: islam, Irán, revolución, teología de la liberación, crítica de los medios, postsecularismo, política

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电视广播了革命：将伊斯兰革命重塑为后世俗主义表现

摘要

本文研究了有关20世纪70年代伊朗伊斯兰革命的根本误解。通过考量当代意识形态构成和1978年以来西方媒体对伊斯兰革命的报道，这场革命是由一系列社会因素造成的，而不是由极端主义者所推动的单一事件。由于存在大范围意识形态派别，这场革命从内在上变得具有施为性；本文思考了革命家如何利用西方化媒体和革命习俗实现反西方目标。

关键词：伊斯兰，伊朗，革命，解放神学，媒体批判，后世俗主义，政治

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MISE-EN-SCENE

Numerous critics, such as BD Forbes, Jeffrey Mahan, and Philip Goff, have commented on the intersection between religion and popular culture. They've drawn many apt comparisons to speak about both as cultural facets, which are in constant dialogue with each other, and have configured frameworks which seek to discuss both with a common vocabulary (Goff 300). Many analyses, such as Goff's chapter, "Religion and Popular Culture," look upon seminal popular culture productions such as *Star Wars* and *E.T.* with a particular attunement to the religious themes visible in these works (298). On its face, this point seems almost obvious—of course, one of the major social drivers of the past several hundred years and beyond, religion, and one of the major social drivers of the last hundred years, popular culture, at their nexus, would intersect, conflict, and contradict each other in complicated manners.

One such example is the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the late 1970s, which presents a moment in which so-called traditional Islamists overthrew a so-called modern, secular regime. Much like the messy relationship between religion and popular culture in general, as proffered by Goff and others, this specific example of the Islamic Revolution offers its own unique nuance to the equation. Some of the realities of that moment illustrate this—the revolution was, in hindsight, declared backwards, decidedly anti-modern, and regressive;

but, at the same time, the revolutionary praxis—transmitted, globally, via television airwaves and covered extensively by western media—illustrates the contemporary means revolutionaries employed in order to topple the existing regime. Complications do not end there—the means of activating many of the participants of the revolution was achieved via traditional religious pathways, regardless of their political ideologies. That is, in a rare confusion of contemporary political alignments, factions as diverse as the conservative, fundamental Islamists, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, all the way across the political spectrum to Marxists, such as Ali Shari'ati, were mobilized in shared religious vernaculars in the name of common political desires.

This paper will discuss each of these three complicated, and seemingly contradictory, facets of modern life: religion, popular culture, and political revolution. Due to the proximity, per Goff's figuration, of religion and popular culture, it seems almost natural to bring revolution into the fold. Goff argues, "Purveyors of popular culture must appeal to the masses inside the margins and employ methods and even messages... that are common and familiar" (296). Substitute either religion or revolution with popular culture in that sentence, and it rings no less true. Goff himself has noted the popular culture means which have been co-opted by religious figures, particularly in the west, and one would not struggle to find such figures today, like Joel Osteen and Pat Robinson, who have transformed their brands of religion with communicative techniques typically associated with entertainment, hosting religious services on television and in arenas akin to professional sports. Likewise, populist politics, often the harbinger of revolutionary politics, operate in much the same way, exemplified in our moment by the immense success of both right- and left-wing populist movements gaining cre-

dence and dominating cultural production in ways thought impossible merely a decade or two ago. An apt term for this may be the normalization of extremism, which, using Goff's framework, fits neatly: "[P]opular culture is willing to look beyond what has worked in the past even if it employs tropes that appear recognizable and comfortable" (296).

What does this have to do with the Islamic revolution? Many Iranian revolutionaries viewed religion not as antithetical to secular life; rather, they viewed their vision of modernity as the synthesis between modern statism and traditional spirituality, an Islamist modernity which takes into account both learnings from contemporary politics and religious communities. Furthermore, this negotiation, between old and new, modernity and tradition, were translated to the world via means of popular culture, in which scenes of Islamists marching adjacent to Azadi Tower in Tehran were broken up by commercials for Coca-Cola and Tide. Religiously-influenced groups voiced their political wills through a performative showcase of ideas in this moment, via images which appealed at once to modern post-secularists as well as fundamental Islamists, particularly in the early stages of the revolution, in which the messy, malleable, negotiative process of building a state both Islamist and contemporary was captured in the only means able to subsume all of that contradiction and complexity and turn it into entertainment: on television.

ACT I: IDEOLOGY

In order to think about the complex reimagination of both modernity and traditional religion as configured in the midst of the Islamic revolution, it is useful to turn briefly to the idea of the post-secular, which refers to the chronological timeframe beginning in the late 20th century as a period

when the secularizing project—which was included in the larger, Western project of modernization—was challenged by inhabitants of the various global regions in which these projects were being implemented. To refer to Jose Casanova, this was not a wholesale rejection of secularity and its call for the differentiation of public spheres, but rather an acknowledgement of

> the need to refine the theory [of secularization] by distinguishing between the general historical structural trend of secular differentiation and the different ways in which different religions in different places respond to and are affected by the modern structural trend of differentiation. (212)

"Secular differentiation" refers to the central goal of the secularizing project, namely the differentiation of public spheres, most importantly of church and state, such that each sphere interacts with populations in its own particular way as decided by the state and its citizens. For Casanova, this is the idea that is the core of his theory of the post-secular: not that these spheres should or shouldn't interact in a particular way, but rather that each state needs to configure for itself the nature of the interaction between itself and religion. At its core, the post-secular project can be seen as a rejection of the idea that religion is backwards or premodern, calling attention to several notions within the West which confound this idea. These issues include: the idea that Western modes of modernity are themselves rooted in religious language and doctrines, most obvious in the confluent rises of Protestantism and capitalism; and that secularism was itself deified in the West, such that it transformed into its own worshipable endeavor no less fetishized than the religious formations it meant to render obsolete.

The post-secular then denotes an especially anti-Western-as-self ideology which attempts to reinstate the will of those populations forced into secularity by rethinking secularity itself and installing formations which are less complicit with the institutions that rose alongside the secularizing processes (the global slave-trade, the colonial project, western-normative state-building, etc.), and more complicit with the ideological formations replaced by that intrusive Westernization. As Casanova offers in summation of his project in "The De-privitization of Modern Religion"—"there was a need to rethink systematically the relationship of religion and modernity, and the possible roles religions may play in the public sphere of modern societies" (211). Though it is clear that a return to the pre-secular order was both out of the question as well as not wholly desirable, the post-secular project essentially aims to replace those particularly toxic facets of Christian-rooted modernity with facets compatible with the various regions in which that modernity was imposed and those regions' particular religious identities. Though this manifests itself differently in these various regions, what is consistent is the radical departure from Christian-statist normativity which has gone rather unexamined by Christian-normative communities themselves.

This is consistent with various postcolonial/-secular theories—specifically critics such as Mae Henderson, Theotonio Dos Santos, and W.E.B. Du Bois—who each in their own way posit that the Other (non-West; non-white) is not in a relationship to the Self (West; white) in which the Other is to emulate the Self, but rather that the Other is situated alongside and uniquely well-suited to offer a critique of the Self. In the words of Du Bois: "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-conscious-

ness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (5). Or Henderson, venerating the unique positioning of female writers of color in the global West and their ability "to see the other, but also to see what the other cannot see, and to use this insight to enrich both our own and the other's understanding" (137). As opposed to imagining the non-West as an apprentice developing into the mold of the West as a young boy becomes a seasoned blacksmith, it is more accurate and justifiable to view them as coworkers—with admittedly divergent styles, but the same salary nonetheless—in which each is well-suited to offer critiques of the other. In the Westernized global order, though, a hierarchy was instituted wherein the non-West was oppressively forced into a role as a veritable West-in-training.

Ultimately, the theory of post-secularity is an issue of representation. Casanova and others are asserting the right of a state or its constituents to choose for it or themselves their political, social, and cultural orders as opposed to being forced to adopt the orders prescribed by the West. To use the word democracy here may feel limiting, because of its evocation of legislative chambers and the limited definition it has garnered within the Western(ized) context, but democracy can also be larger: the idea of democracy as a manifestation of the collective will and self-determination of a constituency, however a particular constituency elects to implement this will—an arche-democracy (to borrow the underpinning logic of Derrida's arche-writing). One instance where this uniquely intersects with notions of the post-secular is Iran in the late 1970s, where the collective will to depose the Shah was radically asserted in the urban streets, seizing democratic power that had been denied by the Pahlavian monarchy in a moment that mimicked Casanova's formulation of post-secularity as a reimagining of the secular within a particular con-

text—Iranians did not reject the notion of Iranian statehood in its basic form as a grouping of Iranians in a united populace, only its secularized and Westernized iteration.

ACT II: CHARACTERS

I t is useful to invoke the Foucauldian response to the events in Iran as he too is interested more in the act of revolution than the ensuing regime. Foucault, amongst the likes of non-academic critics like Reza Aslan and Roya Hakakian, recognizes that above all, the revolution in Iran was not in favor of one singly-faceted thing to be done, but centered around one "leitmotif": upon arriving in Iran and asking citizens what political order they wished to establish, he reports one consistent response: "we want nothing from *this* regime" (Aslan; Hakakian; Foucault 195, his emphasis). He goes on to sketch why various populations within Iran rejected the Shah—wealthy landowners and rural peasants alike were "discontented with agrarian reform;" artisans and petty manufacturers had not benefitted from changes in the economy; wealthy elites were forced to invest their money in other global markets because of developmental shortcomings in Iran (196). What this symbolizes is the collective will of the people, intriguing to Foucault as an extremely unique basis for social revolt due to the outdated modernizing project that was both supportive of and supported by the Pahlavis. What Foucault is approaching in "The Shah Is a Hundred Years Behind the Times" is, without naming it, the post-secular nature of the collective will in Iran as made manifest by the revolution.

The Shah was insistent upon instituting a Kemalesque and thoroughly Westernized social order, in essence subjecting Iranians to a colonial yoke despite the lack of an oppressive

colonial ruler. Another way, the Shah was attempting to mimic the order of the West, that order which was venerated in the global (read: Westernized) imaginary. The Shah was not so much behind the times as he was attracted by the positions of his Western counterparts whose countries had in the past several centuries amassed unthinkable fortunes of wealth and power at the expense of the Other, and who were now taking advantage of the Shah himself—both overtly in the support behind the Shah from the U.S. and U.K., mostly as a means to secure the country's precious oil, as well as covertly in the expansion of the capitalist mission, to hint at Shari'ati's theory, to make "all human beings become 'consumer animals" and strip all nations of their "authenticity" and thus even the Shah of his actual power to rule (Shari'ati n.d.: 29). Foucault's formulation regarding the discontent in Iran is supported interestingly by the sociological work of Farideh Farhi whose *States and Urban-Based Revolutions* explores the ways in which Iranian discontent, as the result of mass migration to the cities, was one of the direct causes of the Islamic Revolution, as well as a trend which had an impact on the performance of the revolution itself.

ACT III: SETTING

Farhi situates the revolution within a particular context of rapid urbanization in Iran resulting in a major shift of the social order in a remarkably short period which tested the relationship between the people and the state (7). This test was not simply one of keeping up with the rapid urbanization, though. As she argues in her chapter, "Urbanization and Political Protest," such a test also resulted in a fundamental change in the manner in which the formerly rural populations related to the state, "the manager of the means of daily life in the cities" (66). Farhi points out the increased

ubiquity of the state within the lives of the new urbanites who had become accustomed to a much less obtrusive order in their rural communities. Therefore, when it came time to address the inevitable grievances which accompanied such rapid urbanization—particularly, the lacking infrastructure and financial opportunities in the cities faced with mass migration—there was a monolithic opponent against which the revolutionaries could cast aspersions. Revolutions in these types of urbanized environments

> become conflicts between urban classes and the state, which has acquired tremendous power within the urban context. This creates the potential for the creation of a multiclass, negative coalition that can be mobilized to transform the state. (66)

This is a fundamental departure from the typical form of revolution as we've grown accustomed to in the Marxist-inspired view of class conflict. Instead of the wealthy ruling class being the diagnosed oppressors causing the chagrin of the masses, in this case the (Westernized and secularized) state was viewed as responsible and therefore in direct conflict with the people.

While this may seem a rather obvious point which would ring true in any urban revolutionary environment, what is perhaps even more interesting in the Iranian case is the rejection not only of the state of the state, but of the institution of the modern, Westernized state itself. Although the land somewhat consistent with the contemporary boundaries of Iran has long been more or less united under a monarchic order—as commemorated by the Azadi Tower—the formulation of that land into a secular state was new, rising alongside the Shah, himself a Western, modern imposition.

Though it would be nearly impossible to attempt to parse out the various institutions which were native or not to the Iranian/Persian social order, what remains is the fact that these urban environments which were to Farhi so essential to the revolutionary moment were innately Western-approved developments as part of a larger project of capitalist urbanization, perhaps especially at this particular moment during the rising ubiquity of the Western welfare state. This urbanized and consumerized order in Iran—judging by the nature of the revolution—was rejected by the people.

Farhi highlights an urbanization project wherein the "growing destitution of the countryside became the classic 'push' factor to the cities. The thriving urban sector [resultant of the oil-based economic boom] added a 'pull' factor" (69). Thus, the bustling urban environment concomitant with the generally bullish nature of the economy of the 1960s and 1970s became a draw to many countryfolk disillusioned by the failing agrarian reform who saw the city as a unique opportunity to make ends meet and leave behind the rising levels of rural squalor. But, as Farhi notes,

> Although some migrants were absorbed into the growing urban economy, many barely survived on the fringes. This underclass dwelt in the sprawling new slums and squatter settlements, which were in sharp contrast to the luxury high-rise buildings, banks, office blocks, and exclusive residential neighborhoods where foreigners and wealthy Iranians lived. (69)

This is dramatic imagery of the contrast between city and country which is itself reminiscent of the juxtaposition of West and non-West. There is a cruel reality wherein those

Iranians complicit with the Westernizing projects were essentially rewarded, and the classes religiously resistant to the globalized West were warehoused into abject slums or continued suffering in the country. With nowhere to turn, the struggling classes of the city were primed for revolutionary fervor.

But further for Farhi, there is one essential identity-based factor which was realized in Tehran particularly which allowed for the large-scale mobilization of the struggling classes that is a necessary bridge between the mass-migrative trends as well as of the religious nature of the ensuing revolution. She describes an increase in religious associations which accompanied the urbanization, in the form of *hay'ats* which allowed the formerly rural populations to resist the secularization often paired with urban development as well as maintain part of their original geographic identity (70). She describes these associations as ones which "[functioned] loosely as networks of interrelated associations organized ostensibly for religious purposes" and "organized on the basis of common ethnic of geographical origin ..." (70). These associations provided financial, spiritual, and emotional support for the incoming rural peoples. This established a network which would be taken advantage of in the revolution, as these associations forged means of communications between communities which were largely displeased to begin with. Paired with the growing discontent of the masses due to the worsening economy "as the oil boom turned into a bust," it became far more attractive for urban wage earners to join the revolutionary forces as "their lack of internal organization was rapidly replaced by traditional channels of communication as the bazaar guilds, religious sessions, mosques, and coffee houses provided the necessary linkages between the traditional intermediate class and the urban poor" (71-72). And it was this

established link between the poor and middle classes which in turn brought about the startling mobilizations of millions of urban Iranians in 1978 and 1979.

In his book *Democracy & Public Space*, John Parkinson provides a useful linkage for viewing the mass mobilization and representation of urban populations as inextricably tied to the physical settings they occupy, an interesting perspective from which Farhi's account of the mobilization in Iran can be seen (Parkinson). Although this text avoids mention of Iran or its revolution directly, the theoretical framework Parkinson develops is a useful one as it presents both a way of looking at the prerevolutionary context in Iran in terms of how cities are developed infrastructurally, and how in Iran in particular the Westernization of that infrastructure could be viewed both as a causal factor in the revolution as well as supportive of the revolutionary performance.

ACT IV: THE DRAMA IS IN THE SPACE

Parkinson begins with the premise that "democracy depends to a surprising extent on the availability of physical, public space," maintaining that "[a] democracy that lacks a single site for binding collective decision-making is a more-easily attenuated democracy, because it is one that is taken less seriously by its citizens, and one in which decisions can too easily pass undetected and undefended" (2-3). This can be seen to be the case in prerevolutionary Iran—to reiterate language from Farhi—where the ruling Pahlavian regime was considered "personalistic" and "autocratic" with a distinct spatial distance between the governors and the governed (71). Instead of uselessly limiting democracy to its modern, Western manifestation in the existence of congresses, legislatures, and various forms of representational

democracies, Parkinson instead prefers to view democracy as an unspecified means by which a group of people amassed within a state make known their will (15). This is perhaps most provocative in its application to revolutionary Iran, as it resists the perspective of the revolution as religious and thus backwards and anti-modern and allows it to be viewed as an informal referendum within a space "maintained relatively empty and featureless so that large purposive crowds can gather when they need to ... ," as was the case when the Iranian populace seized, amongst other spaces, the vast plaza surrounding the Azadi Tower (18). Such spaces for Parkinson constitute the performative stages of democracy, which he often refers to in language similar to drama.

The ideas of public space and of stages for democracy are central to Parkinson's claim, particularly in the capitalized, Westernized order. Public space for him is not those spaces owned by the public, but rather spaces in which individuals can interact in an unscripted manner with strangers regardless of ownership (54). But, he argues, public spaces are hardly ever truly unscripted. He writes,

> Whichever way one thinks of it, urban theory ... leads to the view that, in the absence of regulations to the contrary and the will to enforce them, space is organized, designed and built in ways that favour the powerful over the powerless, economic interests over social interests, private gain over public good ... and developers, corporate tenants, and landowners over the owners and users of small corner shops, community centers, playgrounds, and parks. (84).

Overtly or covertly, Tehran, as many cities in Parkinson's formulation are, is grounded in the capitalist and secularist projects because space is simply portioned off to the highest bidders, who would prefer, in the case of rapidly urbanizing Tehran for instance, to build luxury buildings for the wealthy as opposed to public housing projects for the mass migrants, such that spaces in which demonstrations of democracy are possible are not a priority.

But this capitalization of space, which Parkinson sees as a means of delivering consumers to products, need not be limited in its relationship to capital, which is but one form of power. In the case of Azadi Plaza, a vast public space was cordoned off by Reza Shah and dedicated to display a symbol of his unilateral modernization project in Iran, which accompanied the influx of capital in Iran in the oil boom of the 1960s and early 1970s. According to the architect of the tower, Hossein Amanat, the design of the tower centered upon

> the main arch in the center, [the design of which] represents the pre-Islamic period. Then there is a broken arch above it representing the Islamic period of Iran .... And then the network of ribs that connect one arch to the other as if it connects the pre-Islamic to after Islamic. (Riazati)

The tower, originally known as the *Shahyad* (King's Memorial) Tower was meant to represent 2,500 years of continuous monarchy—a historically dubious claim considering the Shah's own lineage—and the manner in which Iran was leaving behind both its pre-Islamic and Islamic epochs, departing from the arches below and moving "up towards the sky" to illustrate that Iran "should be moving towards a higher level." This was part and parcel of the Shah's missions of modern-

ization (instituting Westernesque monuments into the city-scape) and secularization (those monuments symbolically rising above and beyond the Islamic era in Iran). One might not be able to garner such connections between a single work of architecture and the Pahlavian forces of modernization, except in this case, the architecture occupies a prominent public square and was in fact directly chosen by the regime through a public contest, similar to the design process of many American war memorials, most notoriously the Vietnam War Memorial. It is clear that this work was funded by the state as symbolic of its secularist agenda aiming to specifically differentiate between the spheres of religion and state, if not to erase the religious sphere altogether.

But as is clear in the events to follow, an enormous portion of Iranians did not endorse this project of secularization—this was, after all, one of the main bases of the revolution. The movement against the Shah was not only monolithically anti-secularist because of the notable factions, as delineated by Farhi, of Marxist revolutionaries and mainstream democrats (1990). Also, much of the revolutionary mobilization was established through traditional networks of religious communication. This, paired with the sense discussed by Hakakian that those non-Islamist factions—for better or for worse—gave into the "lie of Khomeini," in which he stated before seizing power that he'd be content to retire quietly to Qom and continue his study of the Quran, allowed for the revolution's particularly religious fervor (Hakakian). This abdication by the secular factions solidifies this revolution's distinctly religious flavor as opposed to strictly political that was necessary for the revolution's role as post-secular—a reimagining of the secularized state.

Ideologically, the religious fervor of the revolution can be traced to the theology of Ali Shari'ati. Although Shari'ati

himself was no longer alive at the time of the revolution, and although the revolution resulted in a state which was not in line with his imagining of an ongoing, Islamic, critical discourse, termed *tauheed,* he positions himself in such a way that his ideas are particularly relevant in the postsecular perspective of the revolution (Shari'ati). In "What Is To Be Done?" Shari'ati presents an Islam that is under attack from within ("the sham quarrel between the pseudo-intellectuals and pseudo-religious leaders that has split our society into two groups") as well as without ("the real war ... between East and West, producer and consumer, colonizer and colonized ...") (46-47). Shari'ati rightly sees, in a vein similar to Casanova and the post-secularists, that "the ridiculous war of modernity versus traditionalism" is not that which faces Iran. If there is said to be a war at all, it is more an attempt to view the limitations of the "fraudulent duality" and to reconcile the Islamist state with the Western one as I've already spelled out. For Shari'ati, this war is combatable only by injecting into religion a spirit of growth, intellectuality, and cultural openness: "Reviving the cultural and spiritual lives of the wandering generation and returning it to its true self is the only course which will enable it to stand on its own feet" (48). This means seizing Islam from those structures of power which benefit from Islam's divisions and perversions, as well as seizing religion in general from the Western attempts to render it obsolete as a means of thinking and being. In a world in which individuals' minds are themselves poisoned by the Westernizing projects per Shari'ati, and in which, as Parkinson argues, even physical public space is set up to buttress these projects, there is but one reasonable response—to reclaim that very public space aided via mass mobilization of the "traditional" religious networks which have remained least obstructed by modernization and best suited to offer a worthwhile critique of the secular mission.

This post-secular aspect is best envisioned not through a study of the resultant Iranian order in the time since 1979. Whether the Khomeinian regime was in line with the democratically-willed image of Iran is somewhat beside the point. Even if we take for granted the Western view of postrevolutionary Iran as oppressive, premodern, and anti-Western, there remains a literal manifestation of the post-secularness of this revolutionary moment. Borrowing logic from Parkinson, because of the role of physical space in the administration of governance there is an argument to be made that the very act of revolution itself was always already post-secular in this context, because of the specific rejection of the Shahyad Tower as a symbol of modernity coming to Iran and the specifically religious framework which made the revolution possible. In the reclamation of this public space is a religiously-sanctioned and -motivated moment of revolution that constitutes a unique moment of post-secularity.

ACT V: THE INSTANT OF REVOLUTION

This is witnessed in the co-optation by the revolutionaries of the Azadi Tower, in particular, and placing this within the Shari'atian framework. That is to say that there is a clear linkage of the revolutionary action and Shari'ati's theorization, in injecting a uniquely Islamic flavor into a repudiation of the state. By establishing a necessary link between Islam and Iranian state formation, one can view this revolution as a performance of democratic spirit, in the framework of Parkinson, as well as a performance of specifically Islamic, post-secular values. This is best gleaned in looking at the "stage" of the Shahyad/Azadi Tower and constructing a sort of performance history of what occurred there in 1978-79.

The Azadi Tower is an incredibly exciting stage on which to focus. This derives in its intendedness as a symbol of the Shah's installed modernity in Iran, and the reimagination of it as a tower of *azadi* (freedom). From an American perspective, many might be troubled by the shared name of this Freedom Tower, and that which stands in New York's World Trade Center, colloquially known by the same name, standing 1,776 feet tall, and a direct symbol in the eyes of many Americans of resilience in moving past radical Islamic theology and rejection of the hatred ubiquitously paired with it. But perhaps it is important to consider what freedom means in these particular contexts. In the U.S. context, it means a guarantee of liberty from tyranny of all kinds—the despotic monarchy and oppressive theocracy of King George in particular. However, what might the renaming of the Shahyad Tower to Azadi mean in the revolutionary context? It was, after all, renamed in 1979 as a subversion of the monarchic past connoted with the original name. In a very real sense, the term freedom in the Iranian context is easily translated into the post-secular language of the revolution—freedom from oppressive monarchy, of course, and the character of the Shah, but additionally freedom from the Westernization that Shari'ati is so resistant of. Freedom from the structures of power which have attempted to label Islam as unequivocally and innately bad, wrong, and premodern. Freedom in this context denotes the freedom of Iranians to choose for themselves the order of their society, whether it be thoroughly Westernized, secular democracy, or an Islamist order, a sort of radical freedom that guarantees no natural liberties idealistically assumed by the U.S. definition, other than the right of a people to establish their own collective will. A post-secular freedom. This stands in stark contrast to the irony of the colloquial name of the building in New York—while there is no discount of the tragedy of 9/11 in any sense to be found

here,[1] there is almost a comic aspect in a tower symbolizing globalized capital and the fetishization of consumption being known as the Freedom Tower, especially in light of theories like Shari'ati's. In a very real sense, the freedom denoted by Azadi Tower is far freer in its revolutionary respect than that denoted by One World Trade, despite the vast difference in the realized freedoms that each of those societies enjoy.

But what is most interesting in this particular location is the fact that Azadi Tower and Plaza were sponsored by a Westernized ruler, attempting to implement a Westernized state, and thus imitable of Westernized memorial architecture. From its inception, the Shahyad Tower was always already primed for an anti-Western revolution as much as the secular order always already contained its undoing. Memorials in the West, like the notable Lincoln Memorial which has a history saturated with radical movements, are so situated as the ideal places for these protests to happen—they stand as large, open facilities, often near the physical seats of power, enabling members of a society to directly voice their dissenting opinions to their rulers per Parkinson. Perhaps the Shah assumed it unthinkable that such a structure and plaza were ideal locations for revolutionary action, or perhaps he thought that the oppressive SAVAK[2] would be able to quash any such activity before it reached the point of all- out revolution, bringing millions into the streets. But what is unques-

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1 I want to stress that there is no implicit or explicit support of the 9/11 attacks to be found in the logic of this paper. Though one could argue that my reading of the Islamic Revolution could be applied to those attacks as acts of radical reimagination of the global order in line with the thinking of George Galloway amongst others, the Islamic Revolution was a discrete, specific, and targeted overthrow of the oppressive Pahlavi government, not a random act of terror for its own sake.

2 The Iranian National Organization for Security and Intelligence, the contemporary secret police force.

tionable is the role of the Azadi Tower in the revolutionary moment as a symbol of the oppressive secularization of Iran, much like the Bastille prison was an ideal symbol of kingly despotism in Paris two hundred years earlier—though rather irrelevant in terms of what the revolutionaries were protesting against as a useless jail and impotent memorial structure, both of these were symbolized structures of oppression. As such, there is a necessity to look at the ways in which Iranian revolutionaries centered their action upon this plaza, and the ways in which the remarkable tower played directly into the post-secular nature of the revolution as it was appropriated, as well as the ways in which it allowed for a picturesque backdrop for revolutionary activity which bolstered its exportation to the world over the Western-dominated forms of mass media.

A rudimentary online search of the term "Iranian Revolution" illustrates the centrality of the Azadi Tower to the revolutionary moment. Many of the top results of both image and video portray the dramatic tower and the surrounding plaza filled with protesters as far as one can see. It can be called extremely strategic by the revolutionary organizers to center their action upon this photogenic square, but it is more exciting, and more fitting with the thesis of post-secularity,

to explain briefly that the Shah's own vision of a secularized Tehran was imbricated with the location of this tower. Glancing at a map of Tehran, the Azadi Plaza is particularly striking—in roughly the center of the city, there is an immense green space, marking the position of the tower. But its neighbor to the southwest—Mehrabad International Airport, less than two kilometers away—illustrates the Shah's *hubris*. By placing the dramatic symbol of Iran's proud monarchic history next to the airport, the Shah invited international visitors to gaze upon it as the first landmark on entering the city. But

this would prove also to be the Shah's *nemesis* because it too would be the first crowded public square seen by the international press as they arrived to cover the revolution, to say nothing of the fact that it was directly appropriated in the moments immediately following the revolution as Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile via Mehrabad and was met by millions in the street, the square becoming so crowded that his vehicle was literally unable to reach its destination (*Middle East Observer*). This acts as another illustration of the religious fervor of the revolution, as well as its inherent contemporaneity as it was packaged and transported via popular cultural mores. Much like the scenes when the Pope makes a foreign visit or addresses the faithful in St. Peter's Square, there was in Tehran at the return of the Ayatollah a distinct papal-esque fervor. This is supported by some of the propagandistic art of the era, which sought to portray the Ayatollah in a distinctly Christian and saintly light. There is, for instance, a provocative rendering of Khomeini in the style of Murillo's 17th century representation of Mother Mary, as juxtaposed by Chelkowski and Dabashi, such that the Ayatollah is clearly elevated to a central character in the development not only of post-secular Iran, but of Islam itself, placing the rise of Khomeini in direct conversation with the Western religious figures (173). There is something to be said, as well, for the embrace of popular culture in appropriating the old-meets-new, commercial expression of mid-century visual art.

What is perhaps most interesting in this is the response the West had to Khomeini's return and its religiosity, as if they had never witnessed such a religiously-devout group of people take to the streets. This was not innovative nor necessarily in line with the theory of the post-secular. What makes the return of the Ayatollah anti-Western and post-secular, though,

is the fact that Khomeini was arche-democratically selected as both religious leader and political leader. Unbeknownst to the Shah, he had designed a nearly perfect urban setup for such a revolution, and for the dramatic reception for his direct political adversary. Add to this context the power of mass media and television, and revolution becomes inevitable.

But, given the grassroots nature of the uprising and the traditional and religious modes of communication which allowed it to occur, it is unlikely that one will find evidence to support the claim that there was a multilateral conspiracy to fill the plaza with protestors as the best location in terms of politics, media optics, and global reception. No such dubious claim is being made here. Rather, what is engaging is how this appropriated symbol of Westernized modernity (Azadi Tower) played directly into the hands of the Western global media, thereby constituting another important aspect of the attendant appropriation. The co-optation of the plaza and tower is itself a radically imaginative act, but what is more is the fact that the tower is being discussed at all is owed to the Western press, which too was essentially hijacked, accidentally or not, by the revolutionaries as a means of illustrating their metaphorical replacement of a secular state with an Islamist one. The most important part of this revolution in a sense of modern political power rests not with its ideological origins in Shari'ati, Khomeini, Marx, or Lilburne (Islamic, socialist, and liberal-democratic, respectively), but rather in its staying power as something performed, and performed on television, no doubt in the name of those various ideologies, but as a unilateral, performative, revolutionary manifestation of Iran's collective will against the Shah.

Upon viewing various videos of the moments of revolution, from the overthrow itself to the dramatic return of Khomei-

ni, one can see the revolutionaries putting on a show for the camera, so to speak—posing, signaling, speaking to those not present to alert them to what is happening and variously why, as "What had been a well-planned arrival ceremony soon turned into chaos," in the words of one *NBC* anchor (*Middle East Observer*; *NBC Universal Archives*). It is clear that the political aspect of the revolution itself was inspiration for the flooding of the streets, but there is most certainly a performative aspect, propped up by the presence of Western media, and the treatment of this as a new-fangled form of collective uprising—perhaps the only manner in which this revolution was properly analyzed by Westerners.

This itself is a departure from the standard Western revolutionary model. As opposed to revolution as a single-faceted, solely political act and manifestation of the will of the masses, the rise of mass media in the 20th century allowed for a theatrical aspect to become thoroughly essential to the act of revolution. Not only was the symbolic seizure of Azadi Plaza (and that of the earlier Bastille prison in Paris) central to the performance of revolution but the simple presence of millions of bodies in the streets, calling for a particular path for which Iran to take, broadcast the world over was doubtless a significant draw which exponentially brought Iranians to the streets and public squares as the revolution unfolded. After all, the Islamic Revolution was one of the first acts of such mass revolution to occur in the era of mass media, only adding to the drama associated with the time because of the inherently electric (in a both literal and figurative sense) Western perspective of the anti-Western ideological underpinnings. This was without a doubt a revolutionary revolution.

ACT VI: THE GLOBAL (IR-)RESOLUTION

The interaction between the Islamic Revolution and the mass media is certainly interesting on its own; after all, though the press allowed Iranians to speak for themselves in one sense, in another, it was always already undone by the immediate analysis by Westerners, such as the *NBC* anchor immediately calling it chaos—one wonders what word would've been chosen instead of chaos had the protestors been white Westerners (read: Christians) participating in such a scene (*NBC Universal Archives*). For instance, watching the *Middle East Observer*'s video, one hears the Iranians' words in the background, rarely with subtitles, beneath the Transatlantic accent of whichever American news anchor is providing his own analysis of the events. This immediately compromises and subverts the Iranian version of events—regardless of what they are revolting against, the Westerners watching hear "Death to America" as the summative chant of the revolution as opposed to the much more relevant and ubiquitous "Death to the Shah." The Western analysis too misses the intended sentiment of "Death to America"; a straw poll of my own family who witnessed the events contemporaneously via television indicates that they were fearful of what was to happen in Iran, despite being in no real danger in the U.S. except for the resultant long lines at the gas station, because of the "Death to America" chant, a translative choice on the part of U.S. media in the interest, in all likelihood, of gaining viewers and selling advertising blocks. This perspective of the inherent danger perceived by Americans upon hearing "Death to America" persists. It is buttressed by members of the U.S. Congress; current Sen. Cotton, for instance: "When someone chants, 'Yes, certainly, death to America,' we should take him at his word, and we shouldn't put him on the path to a nuclear bomb" (Erlich).

Read: we should silence the actual meaning of non-Western, backwards, religious fanatics and instead take their words at face value, without appreciating any nuance or use of metonym; after all, one can ascertain that Sen. Cotton likely assumes that any fanatic Muslim is incapable of such linguistic subtleties. Such reductive analysis of this single chant as emblematic of the revolution is a framework easily applied to the Islamic Revolution as a whole—appreciation for nuance was clearly not the goal of Western analyses.

Sen. Cotton's remarks are directly contrasted by the view of a Professor Foad Izadi of the University of Tehran. In fact, "America" here stands not for the state occupying land between Canada and Mexico in the sense that U.S. citizens typically think, but rather what America metaphorically stood for—oppressive Westernization, secularization, and capitalization (Erlich). Admittedly, "Death to the oppressive statist, Western-normative, anti-Islamic foreign policy of the American administration!" cannot be said to exude the same fervor as "Death to America." Nonetheless, this is symbolic of the larger problem facing analyses of the revolution: while millions of Iranians voiced their collective wills, they were instantly spoken for (represented) in the Spivakian sense by Westerners.

One only need glance at *TIME* magazine's "Man of the Year" (since renamed "Person of the Year") from 1979 to gather the immense impact that the Islamic Revolution had upon the media, and their perversion of events. *TIME* says that their person of the year is not a positive or negative award; rather, "Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini met *TIME*'s definition of Man of the Year: he was the one who 'has done the most to change the news, for better or for worse'" over the course of 1979. For context, despite *TIME*'s decidedly negative cover-

age of President Trump, he was the recipient of the award for 2016. Khomeini's depiction in the accompanying article to this "award" is one which focuses upon his unrelenting desire to violently subvert Western culture in favor of one distinctly and solely Islamic and anti-Western. As the authors write,

> the flames of anti-Western fanaticism that Khomeini fanned in Iran threaten to spread through the volatile crescent of crisis that stretches across the southern flank of the Soviet Union, from the Indian subcontinent to Turkey and southward through the Arabian Peninsula to the Horn of Africa. Most, particularly, the revolution that turned Iran into an Islamic republic whose supreme law is the Koran is undermining the stability of the Middle East, a region that supplies more than half of the Western world's imported oil, a region that stands at the strategic crossroads of superpower competition (*TIME*).

While this certainly illustrates the importance of Islam in this revolution as discussed by Farhi and the means of Islamic networking, and presupposes the oppressive regime instituted by Khomeini, it disappointingly dichotomizes the religious against the West, and only serves to further blur the reality of Iran and Islam in general in the late 1970s. The article focuses mostly upon the impact that the revolution would have on other revolutionary movements in former colonies and the so-called Third World, and upon the economic and political impact felt by the US and other Western(-ized) powers. It fails wholly to analyze the revolution in any meaningful, non-fearmongering manner. In failing to realize the fact that Khomeini was not the only, if even the primary, ideological

mover in mobilizing the Iranian populace, TIME and many like-minded readings of the events would disregard the televised post-secularity of the revolution at the core of the revolution. In a sense, this is what makes the stage of Azadi Plaza so important in my formulation: the Pahlavi regime did not allow for a Western version of democracy to be instituted via ballots cast in a voting booth. Because this was considered the normative manifestation of democracy in the Westernized world, the act of taking to the streets armed with Islamic theology as an underpinning logic fits into Casanova's formulation of the post-secular, while also directly contradicting the formulations of popular democracy in the West. In simple terms, it scared Westerners. However, it constitutes not a return to the pre-Westernized order of Iran as many imply. Rather, it was an attempt to move Iran into a post-Western order, one which had a taste of Western capitalization and realized its flavor was suspect—one which hoped to reconcile the will of the Iranian people with the nobler aspects of Western, secular modernity, manifest in the dialectic architecture of Azadi Tower which appreciated the architecture of times bygone and reconciled modern trends with Islamic ones, symbolizing the compromising nature of idealistic democracy, and the people's natural right to give consent to their governance. At its core, the Islamic Revolution was a means of exploring various manifestations of a post-Western, post-secular, Islamic-inspired state in a method of radical reimagination—a reimagining of the relationship between state, people, and religion; a reimagining of the nature of democracy; a reimagining of the relationship between Islam and the processes of Western secularization; and a reimagining of the mass cultural means of western communication.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this essay, the various ideological underpinnings of the Islamic Revolution in Iran have been parsed out, and how those underpinnings played directly into the performance of the revolution itself. But more than that, these ideologies have been fit both in the performance and with the larger theory of the post-secular. This is necessary for two main reasons:

(1) In order to stem the tide of the continually growing disdain between Islam and the West which has only become increasingly tenacious since the events of the Islamic Revolution. While it is imprudent to suggest as some have that this cultural warfare is the inevitable result of civilizational clashes, it should still be taken into account that there certainly is a culture of fear surrounding Islam in the West that is too often the result of ignorant or malicious fearmongering that does nothing to reverse the harmful view of West-as-Self and non-West-as-Other that has caused unthinkable damage in the modern global order. Though I resist bringing current political discourse into scholarship because of its often-fickle nature, one can clearly see that the actions and words employed every day in the West do nothing to bridge the mostly imagined gap between these cultures by those who know not of the other. One can only hope this will reverse.

(2) To recognize the importantly post-secular nature of the Islamic Revolution. Without appreciation for this perspective of the events in Iran in 1978-79, one is guaranteed to succumb to the view of religion, and Islam in particular, as something backwards, anti-secular, and incompatible with modernity. But this is not the case. As implicitly argued in Casanova's formulation of the post-secular, nothing is necessarily and innately incompatible with what we think of as

modernity—except, perhaps, modernity as it has manifested over the course of the past several centuries. What is necessary is not an abolition of religion, but rather a reconciliation between the various religions of the world and the modernizing processes, such that, to once again paraphrase Casanova, each state can decide for itself how the various public spheres interact with each other and the various citizenries.

The post-secularness of the revolution is clear. But there is one particular aspect of the revolution most importantly influenced by this perspective that is often ignored: the literal performance of revolution, particularly in Tehran, transmitted across mass media. What was most exciting about this particular revolutionary moment is that, like all revolutionary moments, it was a physical display of the collective will of a population. But the revolutionary aspects of this revolution—the innovativeness, the newness, the disruption of precedence amongst revolutions—lies in the fact that it was a revolution in the standardized, Western sense that was literally against the very West that invented an uprising of this nature, as well as the veritable hijacking of the Western-dominated media which gave this particular revolution so much dramatic flair. This was a revolution that fundamentally changed the nature of revolutions because of both of these respects, which one would likely miss if they focus only on the Shari'atian and Khomeinian ideologies which influenced these actions, and not at all on the media coverage and the actions of the revolutionaries themselves. This was a revolution not strictly about ideology, but one that was so important in its performance, a performance that requires a more in-depth analysis by those who were there and/or have the capacity and resources to delve into the specific performative aspects of the revolution. This was a revolution in which the ideological underpinnings were more thoroughly imbricated

with the actual performative aspect than any that has come before—partly because of the interaction with the Western(-ized) news media, and partly because of its innately post- (and not anti-) Westerness. This was a revolution which saw the non-West in a critical, dialectic relationship with the West. It is (but not should be) historicized as a xenophobic, anti-American, fanatic illustration of a non-Western country's hatred of the West. It is not (but should be) historicized instead as a moment of religiously-inspired radical reinvention of the spheres of state, religion, and media. It should be thought of alongside the contemporary liberation theologies which try to reconcile religion and modernity, a first attempt which has unfortunately allowed an oppressive theocracy to be instituted in Iran, but a revolutionary aspect which will likely be expanded and improved upon as the wheels of history continue to turn, and the oppression concomitant with the Western institutions of capitalism and secularism—and the over-corrective response to this oppression within the Ayatollah's Iran—continues.

As supported by language from Foucault, a hope for a utopic confluence of Westernization and religion is not wholly unrealizable, though it certainly presumes an outsider's idealism. Per Foucault:

> This [revolutionary] drama caused a surprising superimposition to appear in the middle of the twentieth century: a movement strong enough to bring down a seemingly well-armed regime, all the while remaining in touch with the old dreams that were once familiar to the West, when it too wanted to inscribe the figures of spirituality on the ground of politics. (264-5)

Before the rise of modernization, secularization, globalization, and Westernization was a time when the West too had similar goals to those which were central to the Islamic Revolution. This indicates that it is not only the non-West which fits into Casanova's formulation of the post-secular, but that the West itself needs to reevaluate the various spheres it has demarcated and how they are to interact, particularly the unexamined nature of how the very underpinning of their own secularism is rooted in Christianity. Only then can states of all regions and religious persuasions be truly freed from the oppressive realities supportive of and supported by the rise of Western modernization and its forceful, violent, and—above all—unnecessary subversion and marginalization of religions.

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