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Statement of Purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–2,500 words, but longer pieces will also be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: [review\\_editor@platypus1917.org](mailto:review_editor@platypus1917.org). All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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30 YEARS OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IN IRAN

*Given the recent election crisis and continuing protests in Iran and in light of the 30th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, The Platypus Affiliated Society on November 5, 2009 hosted a panel discussion at the University of Chicago entitled 30 Years of the Islamic Revolution: The Tragedy of the Left. Panel participants included Danny Postel, journalist and author of Reading Legitimation Crisis in Tehran: Iran and the Future of Liberalism; Kaveh Ehsani, editor of The Middle East Report (MERIP); Maziar Behrooz, historian and author of Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran; and Chris Cutrone of Platypus. This supplement to issue #20 of the Platypus Review consists of an edited transcript of the discussion, beginning with the panelists’ prepared remarks, followed by their responses to each other, and ending with a series of questions and answers.*



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straightforward. It meant independence from imperial As for the slogans of 1979, “Independence” was fairly Islamic Left, as is Ahmadinejad.

Movement Mir-Hosseini Mousavi is a product of the principles. Opposition candidate and leader of the Green sought to engineer society in accordance with abstract of history, both sought to capture state power, and both and the Islamic Left believed in violence as a midwife Islamism but with the Islamic Left. Both the Marxists Marxist Left was in competition not only with right-wing stand today? For all practical purposes, in 1979 the and, if so, where did it stand in 1979 and where does instead we ought to be asking, Was there an Islamic Left “Was this a revolution or not?” and “Was it leftist or not?” history if we insist upon simplistic questions such as So we risk losing sight of the complexity of Iranian to the comprador state. This opened the road to 1979.

and landlords into an urban bourgeoisie deeply beholden peasant proprietors, and transformed the old aristocracy rural landowner class, turned their tenants into small Iranian society. Through them, the state eliminated the tion programs nevertheless profoundly transformed rural United States. A revolution from above, the White Revolu- in the 1960s by the monarchy with the support of the tory was brought about by the White Revolution instituted perhaps the biggest social transformation of Iran’s his- been other imperial social transformations. Indeed, tion or the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, there have Beyond those that came as a result of the 1979 Revo- power of the state and render it accountable to society, situational Revolution of 1906, still fighting to limit the a profound way, Iranian society is still fighting the Con- now woven into the fabric of modern Iranian society. In public protest, challenging the authority of the state is 1953, and again in 1979. As with the French tradition of the developing world, if you will—first in 1906, then in major social transformations in that part of the world— Time and again Iran has been in the vanguard of What do these slogans actually mean?

consider “left.” But, beyond that, the question remains, they evidently have a little to do with anything we might 1979—“Independence! Freedom! Islamic Republic!”— reexamine the slogans of the revolutionaries in 1978 to forces expected or wanted, but it was a revolution. If we was not the kind of revolution the Left and the secular Revolution merely a political, or was it a real social revolu- on the Left debated at the time was this: Is the Iranian By any standard this was revolutionary, but the question region was brought down and another one put in its place. fused the fabric of Iranian society. A major regime in the lasting more than a year and a half, mass revolution in the political event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After a mass strike formed, and how. The Iranian Revolution was the largest

tionary and, if so, what aspects of society were trans- Kaveh Ehsani: Another question we are here to debate is whether the creation of the Islamic Republic was revolu- fundamentally misunderstands Iran today.

our agenda constitutes a disfigured left imperialism that Western Left. Such an attempt to fit that movement into represents a species of left imperialism. To decline to gram the complex and fluctuating on-the-ground reality do not speak the language of socialist revolution is to sign on and support the Green Movement because they Left and lacks a developed critique of neoliberalism. it simply because it is articulated within the logic and is a mistake to blind oneself to this promise or to reject emancipatory program, granted, but the clear emanci- the emancipatory potential—not the fully articulated I think there is a real danger in failing to recognize form or agenda, the broad ideological outlines are clear. work-in-progress, and is even now still forming its plat- tory was brought about by the White Revolution instituted already articulated by the Green Movement. Though it is is a hostility to the pluralistic, democratic liberalism but what he shares with the defenders of Ahmadinejad reasons of his own for rejecting the Green Movement, jad and rejects the Green Movement. No doubt, he has anti-imperialism of the Left that supports Ahmadine- have heard so far from him, he shares the tunnel-vision now on the Green Movement in Iran. But from what I So, I hope to hear an argument about where he stands our respective angles on what is happening in Iran today, Where my perspective diverges from Platypus’s is in tutionary comrades that deserves the Left’s support.

were wholly legitimate, and that Ahmadinejad is a revo- are tools for imperial intervention, that the elections Chavez and his position that the demonstrations in Iran Republic of Iran in June here in Chicago, defending Hugo those like Mrzine, the online organ of Monthly Review magazine, or an organization like international ANSWER, pus’s perspective and my own is in our shared critique Where there has been some affinity between Play- voice their demands.

if not millions of Iranians have taken to the streets to similarly being that, once again, hundreds of thousands, nities between 1978–79 and today, the most obvious we should discuss some of the parallels and disconti-

Clearly, we are again living in a historic moment, and so witnessed the largest protests since the fall of the Shah. streets of Tehran? After all, less than 24 hours ago, we can this teach us today, as we watch the protests in the shared with the Khomeinies was reactionary. But what The anti-liberal “radicalism” the Iranian Marxists sary—to the project of socialism and liberation. insufficient—or, better, insufficient but bloody neces- viewing it, as Marx himself did, as being necessary but as part of a toxic, global, colonial project rather than anti-liberalism. The Left mistakenly viewed liberalism constituted a catastrophic turn down the dark ally of Such actions, justified in the name of anti-imperialism, nationalistic newspapers were neo-colonial and bourgeois. down! Here again the logic was the same: Liberal and but the regime’s supposed responsibility to close them Marxists defended not their right to publish their views, early, when newspapers were shut down, many Iranian beating women and suppressing their demands. Simi- the new Islamic government as they repressed feminism, Marxists sided with extreme reactionary forces within geois colonial ideology. Because of this many Iranian on the Left in Iran in 1979 regarded feminism as a bour- sympathizing with and advancing their demands, many nists, democratic liberals, and nationalists. Rather than of the demands for human rights advanced by femi- progressive”? As mentioned earlier, it led to a rejection American rhetoric of the Khomeinies was “objectively Marxist Left’s view that the anti-imperialist, anti- What were some of the consequences of the Iranian amounted to no more than an anti-imperialism of fools. President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad’s anti-imperialism today. Whether Khomeini’s rhetoric was truly anti-im- rialist is open to debate—but to the extent it was, it ism. It was authoritarian and regressive, as is [Iranian was nothing progressive about Khomeini’s anti-imperial- lethal consequences for those who propounded it. There figured, ultimately catastrophic argument, one that had We now know that the Left’s was a demented, dis- ies were “objectively progressive.”

were anti-American and anti-imperialist, the Khomein- but on the Left the argument went that, because they have disdained professedly secular, rational socialists, anti-imperialism most essential. Khomeini’s gang may factors. Of these, he considers the Left’s tunnel-vision tant, but Behrooz’s book rightly zeroes in on the internal the U.S. and USSR. These factors are certainly impor- Iran’s strategic position in the Cold War rivalry between obviously the brutality of the Islamists who took over and destruction of the Iranian Left. The external factors are There are both external and internal factors in the what are the lessons to be learned?

tragic but also, and more accurately, catastrophic. But Revolution and has ruled Iran ever since is certainly ary, and proto-fascist regime that emerged out of the tion, the the profoundly authoritarian, repressive, reaction- leftist project of internationalism and human emancipa- edy for the project of the Left *per se*. For the genuinely Iranian Marxist “Left” then in existence, as it was a trag- of this, I would argue that what followed in the wake of 1960s and 1970s were either Stalinist or Maoist. In light take power? After all, virtually all Iranian leftists of the majority of the left in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s did not that the Stalinists and Maoists who made up the great This raises another question: Is it in fact a tragedy and are not responsible for, the fate that awaits them, innocence; they happened to people who have no idea of in Iran was not a *tragedy* for the Left, for tragedies befall instead in the negative. No, the 1979 Islamic Revolution Iranian Left’s usual answer to the question and answer it ings of the Iranian Left. I would say we must revise the On the basis of Behrooz’s analysis of the critical fail- “bourgeois” ideology.

described interchangeable as “western,” “colonial,” or women’s rights as no more than elements of what they Iranian Left viewed democratic rights, civil liberties, and al-Musavi] Khomeini’s followers, dominant trends on the a profound hostility toward liberalism. Like [Ruhollah their differences with the Islamists, shared with them ity, and many other Iranian Marxist parties, whatever part because the Tudeh party, the Fadaïyan Major- Behrooz, the Khomeinies were able to do this in large certain key fractions of it, helped fashion the noose of the pre-revolutionary Iranian Left, or at least of the pre-revolutionary Iranian Left.

tary and, indeed, definitive reconsideration of the history *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*, a salu- this self-defeat can be found in Maziar Behrooz’s book, Iranian Left played in its own immolation. An account of story. It is largely self-exculpatory and elides the role the of truth to its leftist narrative, but it is only part of the and drive into exile its erstwhile comrades. There is a lot trol, proceeded to decimate, destroy, murder, imprison, lamist or Khomeinist faction, which, once it gained con- revolutionary Left. The faction in question was the is- faction of a broader coalition that included the Iranian Revolution was a failure insofar as it was hijacked by one answer to our question has long been, “Yes.” The 1979 in Iran was a tragedy for the Left.

Danny Postel: The central question, which I will ap- proch indirectly, is whether the 1979 Islamic Revolution

Opening Remarks



# Panelists’ Responses

**Postel:** I would like to address something Chris said about Foucault. What you are saying is that the Left itself, in embracing Islamism, was making an objectively right-wing move. That is what I want to take issue with. Foucault’s particular relation to Islamism and the Iranian Revolution was quite different from most contemporary leftists.

Most leftists supported the Iranian Revolution writ large, but not specifically the Islamic fraction. They made a variety of arguments about needing to support the regime once the Islamists solidified their hegemony, and there was a lot of pretzel logic on the Left about how to relate to the new Islamic Republic. But during the Revolution itself most international leftists did not specifically support the Islamists. They either supported the Marxists, or they simply held some vague notion of the Iranian Revolution as a blow to the American Empire. Foucault is distinctive in this respect. He not only supported the Islamists but *he was hostile to the secular forces in the Iranian Revolution*. When Foucault was writing about the Iranian Revolution he was writing against the secular Western Left. What he loved about the Iranian Revolution is that it was no mere national liberation movement cum Marxist-Leninist revolution, but that it had a religious dimension. In one of his more poetic flights of fancy, he wrote that what the Iranian Revolution promised was not a new regime or new set of constitutional arrangements but a “new regime of truth.” Precisely because the Western Left was so secular, according to Foucault, it was blind to the Iranian Revolution’s emancipatory potential.

Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson have dissected what was wrong with Foucault’s arguments. But it does bear repeating here that, in supporting the Islamist wing of the Revolution against the secular forces, Foucault was not in fact emblematic of the international Left, the Western Left. He got into all sorts of hissing matches with French Marxists like Simone de Beauvoir and Maxime Rodinson on account of his bizarre and problematic position. This is not to exculpate in any way the majority of the international Left, which did indeed get all sorts of things wrong about the Iranian Revolution, but not the way Foucault did. The international Left saw it purely through the prism of anti-imperialism and, for this reason, it failed to identify the Revolution’s reactionary, authoritarian elements, as expressed in its hostility to liberalism, feminism, human rights, and democratic values.

Chris, you still have not laid out an argument against the Green Movement in Iran today. You hint at it, but I would like us to get into this matter in greater detail. To the extent you make an argument, you shut Mousavi up into an ahistorical time warp as Khomeini’s Prime Minister and a reactionary Islamist in the 1980s. But we are now in 2009. Mousavi today is not the same Mousavi of the 1980s. This is not to say that I am an uncritical supporter of Mousavi, but I think we must also be clear as to what we are talking about. The Mousavi of 2009, particularly post-June 12, 2009, is a very different creature. Anyway, the Green Movement itself is not all about Mousavi. It may have been generated through his presidential campaign, but it has now transcended Mousavi the individual. In many ways Mousavi is following rather than leading the Green Movement.

**Ehsani:** Let me say, first, that I really welcome this unexpected gathering. For many of us on the Iranian Left, both inside and outside Iran—and for the past decade I have mostly worked in Iran—contact, interaction, and dialogue with the American and global Left has not been part of our experience. Nobody cares about Iran. Nobody pays any attention to the Left there, to the extent that there is a Left. The Left internationally has been uninterested, uninvolved in issues having to do with Iran. Conversely, the Iranian intellectual community inside and outside Iran has been uninterested in what is going on globally, except to the extent that it involves its own interest. So I welcome this important dialogue.

On the other hand, if we want to be serious and lay claim to being of the Left, we need to take our subject seriously. Iran is a complex place. My main criticism of the majority of the Iranian Left is they have no idea of Iranian society. They start from a set of metaphysical ideas and ideological-theoretical criteria, and then see if reality fits it or not. You mentioned Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson. They are good friends of mine, but only one of them has been there, has been to Iran, in the past 30 years, and I do not think they have an adequate grasp of the complexities of that society. Let me give you an example.

We keep speaking of it but never ask ourselves, what is Islamism? Islamism is not Stalinism. Stalinism was a totalitarian ideology with the machinery of the Party controlling the state and society, engineering it according to a set of teleological formulas. It left no room for debate. Soviet planning set out to shape and mold society. Eventually, it collapsed in the face of reality and realpolitik. But Islamism is different. In terms of economic, social, and cultural policies, the Iranian regime is a spectrum spanning from arch-left to arch-right. It has been constantly changing over time. Look at the issue of the *hijab* for women. It is rather more complex than what Cutrone said. When, in 1979, the arch-right faction of the coalition that had brought Khomeini to power wanted to ban women from public life, Khomeini himself said, “Look, they are already there.”

The entire population was in the streets in 1979. It was never a matter of Islamism simply imposing its will. Khomeini rode atop a very cacophonous, anarchic situation in Iran. The takeover of the American Embassy and, later, the Iran-Iraq War came to his rescue, but still Khomeini was never completely able to impose his own agenda, to take control over state and society. And things have stayed in flux ever since. If you look at the range

of debate over and within Islam in Iran, you will find it is quite remarkable. One must see how far the Islamists have come, how they are changing.

Now to return to the issue of women: When I was doing my fieldwork, I lived in rural Iran in 1988 for two years in a war zone, right by the Iraqi border. It transformed me. Before that, I thought a little bit like Cutrone. But this village did not fit any of my criteria. It was a small village of 300 people, quite poor. All women were either working in the market or traveling to the city. They were completely present in public life. When they traveled to the city, where the black *chador* was obligatory, for them it was great, because they did not seem like bumpkins. As a uniform, it made them look like urban people so they did not stand out. They could go to school in an Islamic society, high school, and some to university. Women are second-class citizens, but they are very much present in public life. What does this mean for a Left project? I am not certain, but I am trying to say it is a complex society. We need to understand Iran’s sociology before judging its ideology.

**Behrooz:** I would like to mention that Iran’s nuclear program is not weaponized, and so there is no evidence that it is a nuclear weapons program. As far as we know, it is a civilian nuclear program, as was the Shah’s. When the Shah ruled, Iran was a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as it remains to this day. There is accusation but there is no proof.

Regarding Mousavi, I spent three months in Tehran last spring and did an interview on him for a major daily newspaper. I do not know where even to begin if the question is, Is the group around him leftist? What does that mean? These are people who are living in Iran who are confused. In what sense is it “Left?” Everything depends on what you mean by “Left.” I do not want to debate what “is” is, but you have to define “Left” in order to ask, “Is Mousavi leftist or not?”

What I told the interviewer in Tehran is this: In terms of his economic program, Mousavi has changed from a statist, state-capitalist, latter-day Nasserite in the 1980s to a kind of European-style social democrat today. Instead of the state owning the means of production, Mousavi would tax the owner to provide for society. That is the major change. Politically, he has actually turned away from being a Shariati type, a Shia-Bolshevik if you will, into somebody who believes that there is much greater scope for individual and artistic freedom within the framework of the Islamic Republic than what the people enjoy today. Of course, he does not speak of exceeding the confines of the Islamic Republic and it would be foolish for him to do so.

Because Mousavi stays within the context of the Islamic Republic, he cannot be considered a democrat *per se*, by any international definition of the word. Still, he is pulling that way. This guy is not a democrat such as one might find in Sweden, but he is much more of a democrat than the current president. So, being a democrat is relative.

**Cutrone:** I need to respond to Postel since he has addressed me directly twice now: I do not have an argument against the Green Movement. What I have is a critique of the perception that it is all right that the Green Movement is in flux and inchoate, that this is good because being inchoate is a kind of pluralism. I also emphasize the ideological impoverishment of having to pose discontents within the framework of the Islamic Republic, just as I would challenge how the issue has been framed by commentators outside Iran like Žižek. So, I am interested in highlighting the issue of confusion. I am sympathetic to the protests, but I am critical of what I take to be their ideological problems.

As regards to what Ehsani and Behrooz just put forth in terms of complexity and ideological criteria, it is not a matter of ideological criteria being imposed on a complex reality. Rather, I do not think anyone either in 1979 or in the present is thinking about the problems in Iranian society that a Left could articulate. If we are talking about democratization in the Islamic Republic, we are already breaking with Left politics to accept something much more impoverished. Finally, to say, “Mousavi has moved” and, at the same time, “Mousavi is not leading but following the movement,” is simply to restate the question. Mousavi will move the degree to which he is trying to take advantage of discontents and articulate them through the framework of the Islamic Republic. I am concerned that the discontents remain within the restraints of the Islamic Republic. I think that the Islamic Republic, especially in this crisis, needs to be seen as an obstacle, not as a framework.

# Q & A

1) *I’m affiliated with the Spartacist League. To say that the international Left uncritically supported those seeking to overthrow the Shah is not true. We said at the time, “Down with the Shah, and no support for the Mullahs!” and “No to the Veil! For Worker’s Revolution!” We understood that only the proletariat could break the chains of reactionary traditionalism in the Middle East. But the workers were led into the arms of the Ayatollah as the Left cheered. So today the Spartacist League defends Iran’s right to nuclear weapons, especially given the threats made by imperialist armies like the US and Israel. So, my question is, do you believe Iran should have nuclear weapons to defend itself?*

2) *My question is more a request for clarification. Professor Ehsani, you mentioned that you thought the events of this past June were in fact a repetition of the 1905–1906 flare up. Could you explain further what the issue was in 1905, and how you see 2009 as a continuation of that Revolution?*

**Ehsani:** Yes. I meant the following: The 1906 Constitutional Revolution did not seek to overthrow the Qajar monarchy, but to subject it to the rule of law. It was a liberal-democratic revolution. Though initially defeated, it eventually succeeded in winning its aims. But these were again lost when the country collapsed around the time of World War I. A new autocratic dynasty, the Pahlavis, emerged to replace the Qajars in the 1920s.

What the Green Movement is demanding is an end to public space being colonized by the state. At present, it is very difficult to organize and mobilize. The movement’s success so far has been due to its fragmentary nature. It is a movement based on a rejection of the elections. Many people in the movement do not accept the legitimacy of this government, and some may even seek to go beyond the regime of the Islamic Republic itself. But, apparently, many in the movement do not want to go beyond this regime. Some are religious, and others are not. We have no way of knowing the precise anatomy of the movement because the numbers are not there. There is no way to determine who is in the majority, who is in the minority, or even to hold sustained democratic debate under present conditions. The only common denominator of the movement—and this has been its greatest strength and the most palpable sign of its tremendous political maturity—is that it is a minimalist movement. Despite all the differences of opinion, it coalesced around this issue of demanding that votes be counted.

The reason I compare this to the Constitutional Revolution is because it is a demand for rule of law. It says, “Look, we have this Islamic Constitution that many of us reject. Still, we came out and voted under it and this is not being respected.” In this sense the Green Movement is constitutionalist.

**Postel:** I would also like to address this question. As Ehsani just mentioned, the Constitutional Revolution was principally liberal, democratic, constitutionalist, and therefore, in some Marxian sense, “bourgeois.”

But it also contained strong elements of feminism and social democracy. The aforementioned historian Janet Afary has written an entire book on this subject, entitled *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism*. I think this connection between liberal democracy and feminism remains relevant today. And this gets to part of the problem I have with Cutrone’s analysis.

It is true that the Green Movement at present situates itself within the parameters of the Islamic Republic. This is all that what you are calling the Green Movement’s “ideological limitations” actually amount to. But the fact is simply that, as Ehsani mentioned, we do not know. We do not know exactly what the full-blown ideological spectrum within the Green Movement really is. What we do know is that one of the most recent slogans coming out of this movement is “Iranian republic, not Islamic Republic.” Now, how can you argue against a slogan like that? Is this constrained or trapped by the logic of the Islamic Republic? How can leftists around the world not see millions of Iranians taking to the streets—trade unionists, women’s rights activists, dissident intellectuals, and civil society actors, particularly the trade union movement, which is at the core of left internationalism and has been for over 150 years—how can we as leftists see trade unionists in the streets of Iran participating in the Green Movement and not support them?

1) *I take issue with both the trivializing and romanticizing view of the chador, and also with the notion that liberalism can ever deliver the liberation of women. I think the greatest advancement of women’s liberation occurred during the Communist revolutions, particularly in China under Chairman Mao. How can you speak of the emancipation of women, in the past or the present, without talking about the history of these revolutions?*

2) *Might not the situation be like the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine, where a mass movement was exploited by pro-Western politicians to achieve a shuffle at the top, without very much actually changing? In Iran there are people who want to get rid of the more theocratic elements of the regime. But others are upset that Ahmadinejad subsidizes fuel and runs social programs in the countryside. So Mousavi might pull back.*

3) *How does one have a vibrant public sphere that, at the same time, does not respect individual autonomy of thought? The Islamists first demanded the expansion of debate within the public sphere, only to clamp down, in many respects even more brutally than the Shah, after they came into power.*

**Cutrone:** First of all, I want to respond to Postel’s claim that the Green Movement is already stepping outside the framework of the Islamic Republic, or is somehow only superficially Islamist. I do not oppose the Green Movement. Rather, I’m pointing to the necessity for ideological clarification. The role of the Left should be provocation to clarification, to move the conversation forward and more fully politicize it.

The second question brings up the issue of different interests and how those might play out in the Movement. To state my concern polemically: There is every likelihood of a replay of the 1979 moment. While Foucault is an extreme example of the Western Left on the Iranian Revolution, he condensed the idea that what is happening is outside the framework of the Left, and that this, in itself, is good. What I have heard here is that, if the Left brings any criteria of judgment to bear or provokes any issue of clarification, then ideology is being imposed on a complex reality and we have a case of “left imperialism.” It is not true that, if you paint things in a negative light or raise issues, the movement will scatter to the winds. I take for granted that there are discontents in the Islamic Republic and that there is a movement that has broken out against the election result. The question for me is whether there is a need for ideological clarification, not from a set of prescriptive criteria, but rather are there issues the Left can raise in light of this movement?

**Postel:** As to female liberation, the on-the-ground reality is that the main expression of the struggle for gender equality in Iran is a campaign called the Million Signatures Campaign. If you want to be a Marxist feminist and say that this campaign is only presenting liberal demands, and is therefore insufficient, you can do so. But this vibrant, promising, and profoundly emancipatory movement is the only game in town right now. Although they do not describe themselves in this way, it is a liberal campaign, in that they want to reform the legal architecture of the Islamic Republic so as to allow for greater gender equality and women’s rights. Is this enough? Will it lead to full emancipation and the end of capitalist exploitation and alienation? No. But to *oppose* it is reactionary.

This gets back to the question of liberalism more generally. I do not believe that liberalism is sufficient. However, I do believe it is necessary, and that anti-liberalism is reactionary. We do not need to struggle against liberalism, but against oppression and exploitation. We need to struggle for liberal-democratic, “bourgeois” rights, and, at the same time, go beyond them. But going beyond them does not mean struggling against them. I am what would be called here in America a “democratic socialist.”

**Ehsani:** The Million Signatures Campaign is *not* the only game in town. There are Islamic feminists who are quite active and in some ways more effective. It is a very rich scene. Some 70 different feminist groups mobilized women’s votes during the election.

In terms of women’s rights more generally, I was not romanticizing anything, but am talking about an experienced reality. Many women in Iran view the matter with reference to this question: Is the imposition of the *hijab* on women by the state the best way for women to fully interact with the rest of society, or not? What I was trying to get across is that, in at least some rural areas, the Islamicization of the state actually opens up a public space for women outside of family and community. Indeed, in some cases the state actually stepped in and made universal education for women obligatory. So what do we say about this? After all, this is the same state that imposes the *hijab*. So we cannot approach this complex reality with simplistic formulae. Women are being oppressed by the state while, at the same time, they are being empowered in unexpected ways. We need to be flexible in our understanding, in order to grasp how both are possible.

I welcome the question raised about what, if any, are the grounds for emancipation in the Islamic Republic. So, regarding the possibility of a Left, and being someone of the Left working in Iran under conditions of oppression and censorship, I still think the possibilities for opening up the political imaginary in a country like Iran are far greater than in a place like Egypt. For example, one main argument of the reformists in Iran has been to privatize public assets, in response to the nationalization that occurred in the wake of the 1979 Revolution. The issue is how to privatize. The reformers think the only way is to accept the neoliberal prescription and reduce the power of the state. In Iran, we on the Left have had the opportunity to say, this is not the way to go. We had an opportunity to say, privatizing all public assets is not the way to diminish the power of the state. If you want a private sector, fine, but the public sector is public and should remain so. This argument, which is essentially putting forward a socialist project, is possible in Iran. It can become part of the political agenda because the process of neoliberalization is still in its early stages. Neoliberalism is not an accepted dogma in Iran at this point, but remains an open question. The fact that the Islamic Republic remains an unfinished political, economic, ideological project opens up possibilities for debating what its content should be.

1) *It was interesting to hear that the Left was marginalized at the beginning of the 1979 Revolution, but then grew exponentially after it. This occurs often historically, I believe. But what I would like to hear more about is what the panelists think the role of leftists outside of Iran should be today. How must the Left outside Iran change? What should we be doing, in light of the situation in Iran?*



2) *You guys are leading the working class into a dead end once again. What you all agree is that you reject the political independence of the working class and the socialist revolution.*

**Behrooz:** Regarding the socialist revolution, I am not for it. I am not a political activist, but an academic. The best I can do is attempt to understand what is going on from my point of view. I am content to leave the revolution to the revolutionaries. I am halfway through my life, so I am not sure I would do it much good anyway.

Regarding what the role of the Left outside of Iran *should* be, I think we must first understand what the Left outside of Iran is. It seems to me that the Iranian Left in exile is divided into two camps: There are the ones who stick to their guns, saying, “Not much has changed, there has been a bump in the road, but it can be overcome, the working class can do it.” We might call this the classical approach. This camp is strong in Europe and America. The other group is the Left that, kind of like the reformers in the Islamic Republic, have come to conclusions similar to some expressed here. This portion of the Iranian Left has come to realize that they must be looking for other ways, that the old ways are not working.

About the Green Movement, what Ehsani said is true: It formed around minimalist demands. What Chris said is also true: It has divergent interests. Which is to say the movement remains inchoate at this stage. There is a Green mishmash in front of us, which we are trying to understand. One of its salient features is that it is here and it has resilience. We do not know if it is a majority, but we do know that it is a determined, angry movement. Mousavi is trying to provide this movement with leadership, in order to prevent it from committing suicide, and to help it build structure, leadership, and a programme. Mousavi is planning for the long term.

So when the Movement, either spontaneously or deliberately, says, “We want an *Iranian* Republic,” this means they are asking, whether they know it or not, for the toppling of the Islamic Republic. But you cannot topple the Islamic Republic without organization, leadership, and structure. Otherwise you are simply committing suicide. The same is true of the fledgling labor unions.

In the face of oppression, one needs to rein in and give the movement some direction, because right now it can easily destroy itself. This has happened again and again. On the one hand, the resilience of the supporters of the Green Movement is certainly very impressive, as is the coordination among Mousavi, Khatami, Karroubi, and even Rafsanjani. Without going for a head-on confrontation, they are trying to open up space. This would allow for the development of leadership, which would in turn allow for structure, and structure would mean endurance to fight to another round. This is all about the next round. This round is pretty much finished.

**Postel:** In response to the man who thought that the Green Movement was selling short the working class, I would ask why are there thousands of Iranian trade unionists in the streets supporting the democratic movement? The Iranian working class does not quite fit the ossified fantasy world that so many Marxist-Leninists inhabit. The Iranian trade movement sees itself and its interests as being intricately intertwined with the interests of other democratic struggles in Iran. So, for example, Iranian Trade-Unionists have very much embraced the slogan, “Workers’ rights are human rights.” When Iranian Trade Unions are organizing and articulating their demands, they often frame them in the language of rights: the right to organize trade unions independent of state sponsorship or supervision; freedom of assembly; the right to publish independent magazines, newspapers, websites, etc.; the right not to be abducted in the middle of the night, tortured, and subjected to mock show trials. These are democratic rights, and it is no accident that the Iranian Labor Movement has found common cause with other democratic struggles in Iran.

Now I want to respond to something Cutrone said earlier. It is not because the Green Movement is inchoate that I support it, but because the Green Movement has mobilized millions of Iranians, including trade unions, feminists, democratic intellectuals and writers, and student activists. It has brought them into the streets in order to set the stage, as Behrooz suggested, for a new democratic, secular Iran that I, personally, would very much like to see. We do not know where it is leading, but I resist the notion that somehow my solidarity with the Green Movement is uncritical. As you know, Fred Haliday has this notion of critical solidarity, of engaging in a dialogue with struggles around the world, by which one sees the need to support and participate, but also to engage in a critical dialogue. So, for example, when the Iranian dissident Akbar Ganji was in Chicago in 2006, one of the things I made a point of doing was to bring him to Loyola University to sit down for a three-and-a-half hour conversation with the Marxist political philosopher Prof. David Schweickart, who has written a series of books on the future of capitalism. The point of this dialogue was to get the Iranian dissident movement thinking about what kind of Iran might come next. Ehsani nailed it: If there is going to be socialism in Iran, it is going to have to come about as a result of democratic struggle in an open political space, which is the first step. Socialists in Iran have to be part of the democratic war of position that we see unfolding now. They have to argue for their positions in a democratic and pluralistic polity, and I hope they win: I would like to see a democratic socialist Iran. I think that is part of the role of the International Left, to engage in critical solidarity, not to accept the Green Movement as it is, nor to fetishize it, but to see the potential there and try to harness it.

1) *Mousavi once said to the protesters, “The Basiji are your brothers.” This is not good. As long as that movement remains cast within, as Cutrone said, the framework of the Islamic Republic, it will only continue to come up against the same repression.*

2) *I would like the panelists to comment specifically on the diversity of the Green Movement, considering that it is led*

*by three people: Khatami, Mousavi, and Karroubi. There are differences, ideologically, in terms of economic and social programs, among these three. We have people who come from more of a developmentalist wing, and others who represent more of a pro-privatization, neoliberal agenda. How are we to understand these differences?*

**Behrooz:** If I understand Iran correctly, the country wants no more violence. Certainly, the Green Movement is not violent. Nor is it revolutionary. The young generation in Iran rarely talks about revolution. Vague as it may sound, their goal is to make the Islamic Republic more liberal by providing a breathing space for politics. This breathing space is necessary, because, although the supporters of Khomeini and Ahmadinejad are in the minority, and have been shown to be a minority consistently in elections, they are a consistently potent minority. They are 10–15 percent of the population, but they are armed, committed, and organized. They are willing to fight and die. The other side lacks all of these characteristics. If the Shah had 15 percent in 1979, we would not have had the Revolution, but by 1979 he barely had 15 *people* supporting him. The current regime has a small yet very powerful minority propping it up.

There are two ways to deal with this powerful minority. We could remove them through a massive civil war, a revolution. This would remove the tumor. But in order to treat surgically the cancer now afflicting Iranian society, you may also have to remove part of the liver, the heart, and the lung. If this occurs, the patient may not survive.

The other way to deal with the current regime is to open space so that there can be a dialogue among the 15 percent of the ruling regime, the 75 percent of the general public, and the 10 percent who simply do not care. This space could also include many Iranian exiles, people who are outside of Iran. These people all should talk to each other and do a lot of convincing. When Mousavi says that the Basiji are our brothers, he is addressing them, saying, “I am not your enemy, and you are not my enemy. I do not want to overthrow the Islamic Republic, but to make it more livable for us all.” Of course, he could say the Basiji are his enemy. Then he would be abducted and taken to prison, where they would beat him. Eventually, he would be forced to go on TV and say it was all part of a Stalinist or Zionist plot. I do not blame Mousavi for declining to adopt this course. The Green Movement is trying to be prudent, soberly navigating this hostile, mine-riddled terrain. The very attempt to do this, though it may not seem as radical as other political movements, is nonetheless a historic new stage in Iranian politics.

**Ehsani:** Is the Islamic Republic a theocracy? No—it is a theocracy *and* a republic. Moreover, it is a functioning republic, for political power is distributed among a political elite that has organic roots in the society, though this is only a small sector of the population. Power has been circulating among this elite for the last 30 years. These elites hold different political beliefs, and the way that power circulates among them depends on popular vote, which decides the presidency, the parliament, as well as local councils. Compare this to a country like Egypt, where you have a leader who is “President for Life,” and has been for the last 30 years. In Iran you have circulation of power among elites, a division of power that is generally determined by a rational voting process. This game has been undermined now by Khamenei and the military, who have stepped in and said, “Enough of this. We see where things are going. If we continue with this popular merry-go-round, this republican cycling of people through various positions of executive and legislative power, eventually a society that has been really empowered, that is becoming more diverse, and that has so far been putting up with this game, will start demanding more.” It is a matter of political survival. What has happened is that the theocratic element, which had been like a monarch standing above the fray of the political process, supposedly the neutral father of the nation, has now stepped overtly into the political process, saying, “I want all the power.” This has shattered his image. Part of what the Green Movement is about, then, is the demand that the Constitution, which is a very contradictory document, be implemented in full. Particularly, people want freedom of assembly and freedom of the press. There are both democratic and theocratic elements of the Constitution overlapping uneasily in many places. It is not a matter of people suddenly believing in the Constitution, but a question of along what lines and in what way does one support this Constitution?

The Green Movement is about mobilizing and changing the balance of actual political power. This is no more legalistic tussle, but a fight in the streets over rival interpretations of the Constitution. Ultimately, the movement aspires for the Supreme Leader, who happens to be a theocrat because of the system he heads, to cease holding executive power and instead become a figurehead, like the Queen of England or Sweden—someone irrelevant to politics.

Are these demands paltry? I do not think so. Iran was the place where political Islam won, bringing down a keystone regime in the Middle East and putting another in its place. It basically opened a chapter in history, which has, from Afghanistan to Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria, transformed the face of politics. What happens if, through a popular movement, that system shifts to a post-Islamist, democratic polity, which is what the population is increasingly demanding? I think this opens a range of possibilities, certainly in the realm of politics which, as I see it, is what Cutrone was asking for. Even 30 years ago, we did not have in Iran this range of discourse about equality for women and minorities—among leftists, among the religious, among anyone, really—the way we do now. In some ways, this discourse of equality is more advanced among the Islamists than among the secularists. This is because the secularists have been occupied with the fact that we were victims of history—and we were. But, on the other hand, these people have been engaged in this battle, and there are a lot of important debates and arguments about religion, God, politics, Islam, and what the future is going to be. Even in the recent past, this was not so. This is why the political situation is now open, not closed.

**Cutrone:** I wanted to say something about the issue of ideology and imposing ideological formulae. I do not think politics is a matter of formulae, or strict criteria, but a matter of judgment. Judging possibilities and pushing the envelope of possibilities is the work of the Left. There is a dangerous situation unfolding in the Islamic Republic that could escalate to the point of civil war. The Revolutionary Guards and Basiji are not simply the state power; they are not a group of people that can be neutralized by putting flowers in their rifle muzzles. Rather, they are an ideological-political movement, and have a vested interest in maintaining certain aspects of the status quo in the Islamic Republic. I am not sure it is possible to imagine a thoroughgoing crisis of the Islamic Republic that does not potentially lead to civil war. The question is, What is the role of Mousavi in terms of reining in the movement? I think what is necessary is precisely *not* to hold back the movement, but to prepare it and push it forward. This will necessarily entail risk, but the argument I have been hearing here tonight is that the risk is too great. Well, what if the risk is posed, regardless? What if the state loses legitimacy and unravels completely, anyway? The Left cannot be in a position arguing against *any* danger or risk that is posed. If Ahmadinejad and Khamenei have pushed the envelope too far in the other direction, what will result? The Basiji and Revolutionary Guards could get their way without the pretense of “parliamentary” mediation. We have to face that reality.

## Closing Remarks

**Postel:** I appreciate the opportunity to explore these issues tonight; it has opened some fertile ground for further debate. Although there are some serious differences among us, we share an opposition to the hegemonic, majority position of the international Left, particularly in the anti-war movement. There are a lot of people on the international Left who openly sympathize with Ahmadinejad, and thus with the most reactionary, authoritarian elements of the Islamic Republic. This is what we are up against. Our differences and disagreements are important, but we should not allow this to occlude the fact that all of us here actually represent a minority on the international Left, in terms of looking at the dynamics in the Islamic Republic in the way we have done tonight.

**Ehsani:** We on the Iranian Left who have been engaged deeply with what has been going on in Iran face a serious challenge. We must explain a lot of things, but also listen to criticism and consider the legitimate questions that have been raised tonight. We have been doing much of our work in isolation. But you also have your work cut out for you, if you want to be interlocutors. We are all involved in a political struggle that we may lose. But given what I have seen, even in the past 10 or 12 years in Iran, what makes me hopeful is how engaged people have become in this movement right now. I think this bodes very well for the future of politics in Iran, and in the Middle East generally.

**Behrooz:** I am assuming that we are looking at the Iranian case to better understand issues of revolution and social change in a very important part of the world. This audience tonight, as intellectuals, students, and political activists, should have interest in Iran. Rather than talking about Iran, though, in closing I would like to talk more broadly about the Left. We who care about the concept of the Left—in terms of social justice, accessibility, better division of wealth, standing up for people who are otherwise in misery—we need to have a serious dialogue over the meaning of the Left after the Bolshevik experience. It does us no good to stick to our guns and say, “We were right,” or “Trotsky was right.” We need to open up discussion over what it mean to be “Left” today, especially in a mega-capitalist country like the United States. How do we relate to a country like Rwanda, Iran, or South Africa? Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, everything was set, to the point that even those who cursed the Soviet Union are now ambivalent about its collapse. For, in the presence of the Soviet Union, everything seemed clear in terms of who one liked and did not like. At least the lines were clearly drawn. Now all that is gone. The Titanic has gone down, and it is unclear what to like or dislike. The Left needs to be redefined, or else it is in danger of becoming irrelevant. Because of this I have been trying to urge the younger generation in Iran to look to the successful examples of the Left, to moments the Left made a positive difference in the lives of people. I urge them to build on that, rather than looking at the unsuccessful examples of the Left, and romanticizing its failures. This is a more general discussion that I would like to see take place.

**Cutrone:** Regarding the question of the successful history of the Left versus the romanticization of failure, it is true that either poses a danger. On the other hand, to go back to the question of the inchoate character of political events, there is the matter of street protests as a model for political action. As the election protests unfolded, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets, but this may actually be a sign of weakness rather than strength. In the absence of the possibility of organization, you instead have this broad discontent being expressed in a way that is certainly impressive at the level of spectacle, but that may not have much political content or staying power. The year 1979 saw street protests and huge demonstrations, as did Europe in

**Postel:** I think, of all the statements Chris has made tonight, those are the ones I most agree with. They are keen observations I find myself in broad sympathy with. The scenario you just conjured, of a very dark turn in which there is a theocratic structure without a republic, is a very real danger. But I think it would not last long in Iran, for reasons to do with the characteristics of Iranian civil society and history that Ehsani has invoked tonight regarding, for instance, the Constitutional Revolution in the early 1900s. Take the example of the Parliament. This institution predates the Islamic Republic. It was constituted more than one hundred years ago, precisely through the Constitutional Revolution, and it survived the Islamic Revolution, albeit in a tattered, besieged form. Iranian civil society always seems to find a way to reassert itself. On the Left, one argument that has been articulated against our position goes, “Why are you so worked up about the stolen elections in Iran, when there are so many places around the world, such as Egypt, where there are no elections to steal in the first place?” The difference is that with Iran, as Ehsani has pointed out, there is such a vibrant democratic history and civil society that millions of people took to the streets over the appearance of a fraudulent election.

1989, but they had in common a fundamentally inchoate political imagination, which opens itself up to opportunism, such that people like Khomeini come in and take advantage of the situation in order to cement themselves in a position of power. So my point is not to romanticize failure, but to consider the history of the Left in terms of when, in that history, there were moments of coherence—that is, a coherent view of social and political reality in a global context, a view that was not provincialized by geography or social sector. Speaking of the failure of the Left in 1979, the Tudeh Party in the 1950s was much better on the question of women’s emancipation than it was in the context of the Islamic Revolution. In the 1950s they had women’s organizations that posed politics very differently than in 1979. What does it mean that the political imagination of one moment may actually fall below that of a moment that came before? While we should not be deterred by failure, the history of the Left should be understood not in terms of “success,” but in terms of clarity of vision. **IP**

*Transcribed by Watson Ladd and Nathan L. Smith*



powers that had long interfered in Iranian affairs. More particularly, it meant independence from the United States whose influence had grown steadily since the 1950s. But what did “Freedom” mean? Did it mean individual freedom, or something else? I think, more than anything, it meant freedom from censorship, freedom from the police state then controlling and stifling civic and public life. Of course, this is not the same thing as political freedom in the sense we mean today. In that sense, the Left was not being hypocritical by calling for freedom. Nor were the Islamists when they denied individual freedom, because that was never what they intended either.

Comparing Islamism in Iran and in Egypt, Asaf Bayat has recently shown how, in Iran, what one finds is really a revolution with an Islamic movement. In 1979, for the first time in Iran’s history, more than 50 percent of the population became urbanized, literate, and integrated into the market economy, that is, they became “modernized” in the Weberian sense of the word. But there was no Islamic movement to speak of. The Revolution resulted from a confluence of various forces, of which Khomeini’s uniquely charismatic leadership is only one. The Left participated in the movement together with nationalists, the urban working class, and provincial populations. This was not a particularly “Islamic” movement. In Egypt, by contrast, there has long been an Islamic movement with deep roots in society, yet no revolution ever came of it.

Prior to the Revolution, Iranian society was a typical case of uneven development, which was then subject to what Ervand Abrahamian has described as a kind of hyper-modernization. There was rapid capitalist development, but without the political freedoms accompanying it. Because the Shah choked off the political articulation of demands arising from society, politics gravitated toward violence. That is the reason for the guerrilla warfare that occurred during the lead-up to the Revolution.

The old Iranian Left was basically a spin-off of the old nationalists. But with so many of them in exile or underground, the younger generation took a new course in the 1960s, adopting Guevarist and Maoist tactics. This came back to haunt us in the post-revolutionary period, by which time violence was accepted as a way to obtain political goals.

A revolution is a bizarre process. You feel completely empowered and powerless at the same time. No doubt, few of you have had this experience, but some of us on this platform have. We have become exiles, our lives have been in danger, and we have felt very empowered by it. It is a unique experience and allows for a sense that history is being made. Michel Foucault was accurate about this aspect of what he saw going on in Iran. A profound transformation was taking place, history was changing, and nobody held the reins.

My analysis is that 1979 was a revolution of the periphery. It was a provincial revolution, not an Islamic Revolution, because if you look at the new elite, the new population that eventually captured and refashioned the state, these were people coming out of what had been the periphery of the society: provincial, uneducated migrants who had been left out of the uneven modernization that took place under the monarchy. This is not the social revolution that the Left might have wanted, but it was nonetheless a social revolution in that it socially integrated the majority of Iranians who, since the 1940s, had been on the receiving end of authoritarian social engineering. The 1979 Revolution gave them a voice, and that voice proved deafening. In the economic sphere, a vast amount of public land and public housing was privatized. People simply squatted, took over public land, and constructed their homes on it. After the Revolution, the stock of housing doubled from what it had been before. Millions captured some private property in the process. So, to revert to the old terms, underlying 1979 was a petit-bourgeois process, one that empowered a large swath of the population. That is why the regime has its own legitimacy, rooted in its own claim to social justice. It has been tremendously successful in bringing about certain social welfare and developmental changes.

So what is happening in Iran now? Since the end of the war with Iraq in 1988, the leaders of the Islamic Republic have had to face an exhausted economy and population. The regime has not realized the revolutionary ideals of justice for all, equality, and the Islamic Republic as a godly community on Earth. The leaders had to improvise an alternative model. The one they came up with has two pillars: First, create a middle class that, being the product of the regime, will be loyal to it. Expand the university system, shape the curriculum, and create a professional class that will comprise our experts, run our economy, and allow us to rebuild. Second, allow the existing propertied class to accumulate wealth in the cities unmolested. This was the strategy pursued under [Akbar Hashemi] Rafsanjani in the 1990s and by [Seyed Mohammad] Khatami and the reformers until 2005.

What we are seeing now is the byproduct of provincial people, rural people, sending their kids to school in the post-Revolution period; or, if they had a small house, suddenly gaining the right to break the zoning laws, build multiple stories, and, with the money they make, send the next generation to university. In other words, what we are witnessing is an emerging middle class demanding a voice in politics through the Green Movement. This is one of the reasons why the international Left criticizes it. But these people are not middle class in the American, global sense of the world. They come together to make a very different sort of animal. The result is very much more organic than, for instance, a movement of American university students would be.

Let me conclude by saying that if the Left wants to assemble any sort of project in Iran, if it wants to challenge the hegemony of the market and allow working class people a way to envision their future, it can do so only in a more democratic space. It cannot do so by monopolizing political power, because the society is too diverse and complex for that. Right now, there is a predominantly middle class popular movement. At some point soon, it will come to incorporate elements of the commercial and working classes as well. But to have a chance it needs greater freedom of movement. Without an expansion of democratic space, a space that is lacking under the existing police state, the movement cannot grow.

**Maziar Behrooz:** Before addressing the issue of the Left in Iran today, I would like to add just a bit to what Ehsani said about the 1979 Revolution.

The Revolution of 1979 was not a revolution in the sense that the ruling class was completely displaced.

The ruling class moved to Los Angeles. It left the country and its property was confiscated. In that sense the Revolution witnessed a major displacement of the haute bourgeoisie. The highly educated accents of the pre-revolutionary period are gone. Nowadays there is not a single member of the Parliament of Iran who does not speak with some slight rural accent. This is because, as Ehsani pointed out, a movement of villagers from the countryside to the city accompanied the expulsion of the haute bourgeoisie. The population of Iran has doubled in the past 30 years, and the vast majority of this population growth has taken place in the cities. This brings me to another point that bears stressing: 1979 was definitely a cultural revolution. The Islamists, the leaders of the Revolution, more than anything else point to this aspect of the Revolution, because they were intent on preserving a culture they thought to be under assault from the Shah. So religion comes back; the ceremonies, get-togethers, associated values, and other aspects of cultural life closely linked with religion all make a major comeback after 1979.

Regarding the Iranian Left, in my assessment it was the largest in the Middle East. It had both the deepest roots and the widest appeal. Also, rather than being rooted mainly in the peasantry, in Iran the Left was composed primarily of workers, the urban poor, and the middle class. Taken together and compared to Communist movements in Arab countries or in neighboring Pakistan, the Iranian Left can only be described as enormous.

But this movement was effectively uprooted three times. First in 1920, then in the repression of the early 1950s, and then for a third time in the early 1980s. The first two times, the movement suffered very considerable and violent repression, yet it still managed to recover. But the last time it did not. So one question we must ask is, Why was the Left not able to recover a third time? But before I go into that, let me say a few words about the Left’s impact on the Iranian Revolution.

The Left in Iran had only a modest influence on the Revolution as it unfolded in 1978–1979. Of all the Marxist and revolutionary groups in Iran, only one can be said to have been effectively functioning at that time, and it had only a small number of guerrillas. These Fadaian were active, but their impact was modest. However, in the period between the collapse of the regime and 11 February 1979, the Left certainly grew.

The rest of the leftist groups in Iran, from the pro-Soviet Tudeh party to Maoist groups to Trotskyites, were really groups in exile, whether in Western or Eastern Europe. They made an impact by working against the Shah in news and propaganda, highlighting the dictatorship’s abuse of human rights. In fact, they were quite effective in doing this and thus formed a crucial voice for the Iranian opposition. But, as I say, inside Iran there was little in the way of real organization. Only the most hardcore, underground organizations were capable of evading the political police. The Fadaian were the only such group and they had been largely contained by 1979.

So the impact of the Left was not just in street battles, but also in maintaining steady pressure on the Shah from the outside. In that sense, it was very important. The Tudeh Party, or Iranian Communist Party, succeeded in mobilizing the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc resources against the Shah. Such propaganda helped to sustain the Iranian opposition’s morale. Resistance needs morale, and the Left kept it from flagging. When we were teenagers growing up, and the Shah claimed to be the all-powerful, benevolent ruler, guiding Iran to its civilizational destiny, we knew, “This is not the whole truth.” We also knew that the people resisting his rule were not what he said they were. They were not saboteurs, but were Robin Hood-type figures who gave up their lives and livelihood to struggle against the Shah.

The most famous of these figures was, of course, Khosrow Golesorkhi, who was put on trial on national television. Golesorkhi, alongside Karamat Daneshian, was defiant, and used the occasion to put the regime on trial, accusing it of torture and human rights violations. He said, “You animals, you have tortured me, I accuse you” of this and that. So, here was this character on live television. Seeing him when I was fourteen or fifteen years old shook me to my foundation. Before that time, I did not believe such a person could exist in Iran. I thought nobody could challenge the Shah. Thus, as I say, the Left kept up morale. At the same time, it set the terms of what would become the debate inside the Revolution. In crucial respects, it provided the vocabulary and set the agenda, though not the outcome, of that debate.

As Postel has noted, one discursive element the Left supplied was anti-liberalism: “These liberals need to be isolated, we cannot work with them. They are crooks. If they are democrats, they are at best bourgeois democrats.” Such rhetoric was invented by the Left and picked up by the Islamists. The same is true of women’s rights, the loss of which was the most palpable consequence of the Revolution. After 1979 the veil was increasingly mandated, before finally becoming law in 1982. Though, of course, the Left opposed the forced veiling of women, here again the issue was marginalized as being, at best, liberal and therefore secondary. The Left was unwilling to break with the Islamists over what they took to be merely a women’s issue.

So, what are some of the lasting social and political consequences of the 1979 Revolution for the Left today? As has been noted already, in the 1980s the Left paid a very steep price for its alliance with the Islamists, as thousands of comrades were killed or forced into exile. This crushing defeat of the Iranian Left was followed by another historical event, one that crucially shapes the future not just of an Iranian Left, but of the international Left as a whole. I mean, of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union, marking the failure of the Bolshevik project. Once the Bolshevik Revolution failed, revolutions that saw themselves as rooted in that Revolution—the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Cuban Revolutions—collapsed like dominoes. Today, there is nothing of Marxism left in China—a lot of Leninism, but no Marxism. So by the end of the 1980s the whole thing collapses. The collapse of the Iranian Left and its failure to regroup are, therefore, rooted both in the repressive character of the Islamic Republic and in a much wider history.

To my mind, this raises the question of the definition of “Left” today. What are you talking about when you say “Left”? Are you talking about a Marxist Left or a Marxian Left? A Marxian Left takes Marx, applies it selectively, and tries to understand where it has utility. A Marxist Left makes out of Marx a totalizing ideology. Whatever else it was, the collapse of Bolshevism was the collapse of the Marxist Left, at least in the second sense.

**Chris Cutrone:** I would like to pose the question: What can the history of the Islamic Revolution in Iran teach the Left?

The 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the toppling of the Shah of Iran witnesses the controversy over the election results in the Islamic Republic, in which the incumbent Ahmadinejad claimed victory over his opponent Mir-Hossein Mousavi, and mass protests against this result were subject to brutal, violent repression.

These two historic moments, those of the birth and of the potentially fatal crisis of the Islamic Republic, communicate over time, and can tell us a great deal about the nature and trajectory of the contemporary world, and the role of the demise of the Left in it.

We in Platypus approach the history of the Islamic Revolution in Iran as a specific story in the overall history of the death of the Left—its historical decline and disappearance. The self-destruction of the Left in Iran is a good entry into an investigation of the death of the Left internationally, over the course of at least the past generation.

It is instructive that, where once the Left in Iran was the most vital and potentially significant in the Middle East or Muslim world, today the Left has been completely eradicated in Iran. Whereas the Shah simultaneously sought to repress and co-opt the Left, the Islamic Republic has brought about its entire elimination in Iran (and has sought to do so elsewhere, for instance in the Lebanese civil war, through proxies like Hezbollah). It is in this sense that one can meaningfully talk about the reactionary, right-wing character of the Islamic Republic, relative to what came before it under the Pahlavi dynasty. There are fewer possibilities for Iranian society today than there were 30 years ago. This bitter fact is something most try to avoid confronting, but is where I want to focus attention in my presentation.

The Left is defined by potential and possibility, the right by its foreclosure. The Left expresses and reveals potential possibilities, while the right represses and obscures these.

For this reason, the role of the Iranian and international Left in repressing and obscuring the true character of social possibilities in Iran, during the period leading up to the Islamic Revolution, is crucial for grasping, not only how the Left destroyed itself, but also, and more importantly, how it destroyed itself *as a Left*, and thus contributed to the construction of a *new Right*. Only justice for past crimes committed by the Left can recover old and open new possibilities in the present. Only by confronting its problematic historical legacy can the Left today be a Left at all. But this is something virtually no one wants to do.

Slavoj Žižek, in his recent book *In Defense of Lost Causes*, cites Heidegger’s embrace of Nazism and Foucault’s embrace of the Islamic Revolution in Iran to demonstrate the importance and necessity of what Žižek calls “taking the right step in the wrong direction.” Žižek is eager, as he expressed in his writing on the recent election crisis in Iran, to find the “emancipatory potential” of “good Islam.” He thinks that a more radical emancipatory potential was grasped, however uncertainly, by Foucault in 1979 (and by Heidegger in 1933!) I wish to argue the contrary, that Foucault’s—and the rest of the “Left’s”—embrace of Islamism was and continues to be a conservative move, thinly veiled by claims to more radical *bona fides*. They have lied.

This phenomenon of seeking the “emancipatory potential” of “good Islam” can be traced all the way through the recent election crisis in Iran, if we examine the trajectory of supposedly “Left” Islamist discontents and opposition to the Shah’s regime leading up to the Islamic Revolution, and how this plays out for the continuers of such politics in the Islamic Republic in the present.

The New Left Islamist figure Ali Shariati is key to understanding the relation of the Left to Islamism, both around the 1979 toppling of the Shah and the political divisions in the Islamic Republic today. For instance, opposition presidential candidate Mousavi, and especially his wife Zahra Rahnavard, were students of Shariati who worked closely with him politically in the 1960s and 1970s. The largest political organization on the Left in the 1979 Revolution was the MEK [Mujahedin-e-Khalq, or People’s Mujahedin of Iran], who found inspiration in Shariati’s approach to Islam.

The fact that Mousavi and Rahnavard eventually joined the Khomeini faction, and that there is a significant likelihood that Khomeini’s agents were responsible for Shariati’s untimely death in 1977 at age 44, should not obscure the New Left Islamist roots of the Khomeinite Islamic Republic, of which Mousavi was Prime Minister from 1981–89, under Khomeini’s “supreme” leadership. The present controversy in the Islamic Republic establishment is not to be understood in terms of new wine in old bottles, but rather the old in the new. The Islamist politics on both sides is a right-wing phenomenon, now as before. Mousavi as standard-bearer for discontents in the Islamic Republic is a phenomenon of political confusion, to which any Left must attend. There are significant problems to be addressed in the relation of ideology to social and political reality. The point is that Khomeini’s supremacy in the Islamic Revolution is not to be explained by his superior insight and grasp of realities, but rather his successful navigation of them, which is a different matter. The present dispute between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi amounts to this.

Khomeini did not lead a revolutionary transformation of Iranian society, but rather the reconsolidation of Iran after the crisis and fall of the Shah. The phenomenon of the so-called “Left,” for the most part, calling black white, does not change the fact that Khomeini represented a right-wing response to the discontents and crisis of Iranian society in the 1970s. The Left’s support of Khomeini expresses its disorientation and confusion theoretically, and its right-wing role practically. There is no mystery here: Telling women to cover themselves is not an emancipatory act!

The collapse of the Shah’s regime did not increase but ultimately decreased the possibilities for Iranian society. The Khomeinite Islamic Republic was not the expression but the repression of potential, in the context of diminished possibilities. To understand how this was so, it is useful to consider the historical trajectory of Iran in global context. The developmental states of the post-colonial world underwent a severe crisis starting with the global downturn of the 1970s. The 1970s were the period in which so-called “Third World debt” manifested itself as a serious problem for these states. This also manifested in the so-called “Second World,” as the IMF called in its loans to countries such as Poland and

Yugoslavia, setting the ground for the long-term crisis and disintegration of these states.

Oil revenues could provide no remedy in the case of Iran, because what was encountered throughout the world in the 1970s was the crisis of the transformations that went on under the mantle of “modernization.” In Iran, this was carried out through the Shah’s White Revolution, in which he had been goaded, beginning in the early 1960s, by the U.S. Kennedy Administration, and continued to be by those subsequent. Khomeini’s rise as a politician originated in protest against the policies of modernization—and liberalization—implemented by the Shah, under pressure from the United States. Khomeini was always clear about this in ways the “Left” has not been. The Left abdicated from providing an emancipatory response to the changes in Iranian society. The Shah stood between right- and left-wing discontents, but the Left steadily liquidated its own concerns.

Indeed, despite the fact that discontents with the Shah were channeled into New Left “anti-imperialist” politics, the Shah indeed was bucking the “Great Satan” on his own accord. Not only was the Shah’s regime prompted to transform Iranian society through the White Revolution reforms of the 1960s–70s, exacerbating social and political discontents, but indeed responsibility for the ultimate demise of the Shah can also be laid at the door of U.S. policy, for President Carter refused to support the Shah against the tumult of protests that broke out in 1978. The U.S. not only supported the Shah’s regime but significantly undermined it as well. This was not a mistake on the part of the U.S., but expressed the differing interests of U.S. policy as against the Shah. A salient example of this was the U.S. attitude towards the Shah’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, which he pursued. The U.S. firmly opposed this—as it opposes the IR’s pursuit of nuclear weapons technology today.

So much for “anti-imperialism.” So, what happened in Iran? Certainly, the close if not always happy relationship between the Shah’s regime and the U.S. became symbolic for discontents in Iran. But symbolic in what sense? The New Left conception of “imperialism” got in the way of a sober perception of the problems facing Iranian society in the 1970s. Iran was not suffering from U.S. imperial oppression. Rather, Iran faced a crossroads in its development in which an insurgent Islamist politics found purchase. The nature of this Islamist politics was obscured by the Left’s conceptions of the potential social-political divisions in Iranian society and in its greater global context.

Iran was the site for the most significant political Left in the Middle East and Muslim world. Many thousands of Iranian students with leftist inclinations studied abroad in Europe and North America. In their encounter with the metropolitan New Left, they were encouraged to embrace the supposed Muslim roots of Iranian society and find potential there for emancipatory politics. But emancipation from what, for whom?

The issue of Islamist politics looms. Already in 1965, the Communist Party of Indonesia was completely wiped out, with hundreds of thousands of its members and those associated with it (such as ethnic Chinese) butchered, by Islamist political groups in a popular movement. Communists were hacked to death by enraged masses, in numbers sufficient to clog rivers. In the 1970s, Pakistan under Bhutto charted a so-called socialist Islamism that paved the way for the U.S.-supported Islamist military dictatorship of Zia and Pakistan’s sponsorship of the Mujahedin in Afghanistan and cultivation of the Taliban to the present. What all of these phenomena have in common is the repression—the slaughter—of the Left. This is the political significance of Islamism, and nothing other than this.

The New Left Islamist Shariati considered himself a follower of Frantz Fanon. Others, including Khomeini, also found resonance with Fanon’s writings (on Algeria and Africa), on what they considered to be the problem of “cultural imperialism.” So, according to this view, Iran suffered, not from structural and political problems in modern historical context, so much as from cultural problems, of so-called “Westernization,” which was pathologized. The problems of modernization became the problem of Westernization, which thus needed to be eradicated. Islamist politics was the means by which the cure for this “disease” has been attempted, all the way to banning kite flying in Afghanistan.

To this day, the Islamic Republic is premised on a culturalist conception of politics. Ahmadinejad and others speak of Iran’s “political frontiers” as if they were just lines on a map. Their “Islamic Revolution” is civilizational and global in reach. It is not about Iran. Ahmadinejad wrote an “open letter” to President Bush chastising the failure of “liberal democracy” and urging the embrace of the principles of Islamist politics instead.

Khomeini’s Islamic Republic, whose legitimate mantle was in dispute between Mousavi and Ahmadinejad in the recent election, is premised on the idea that the entire Iranian population, suffering from the illness of “cultural imperialism” by the West, needed to be held as minority wards of the mullahs. This is why there is a Guardian Council and a Supreme Leader above all elected officials. When Ahmadinejad referred to the election protesters as “shit,” this was the social imagination behind it: he considered them to be religiously fallen, culturally corrupted, and hence evil, in a disqualifying, dehumanizing sense. The powers-that-be of the Islamic Republic, still pursuing the Islamic Revolution, have moral contempt for the people of Iran—as any right-wingers do for their subalterns.

This is why it is worse than tragic, indeed, I would argue, criminal, for the Left to continue to embrace today, in whatever form, the presuppositions of such right-wing politics of Islamism—as the Left did in the Islamic Revolution 30 years ago. It was worse than a mistake then, and it continues to be so today. It is part of the deliberate obscuring of social realities behind bad ideology and worse politics. The history of the past 30 years proves that when European and North American political activists and professors on the so-called “Left” in the 1970s encouraged their Iranian students that Islamism was a way to address their discontents and ameliorate the problems of Iranian and indeed Muslim society, this was not only a lie, but a crime. It remains so today.