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An Iranian Capitalism and the Search for Islam

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It was with observations on 9/11 that Slavoj Žižek made his formal introduction into the English-speaking world of politics proper - quietly forgetting for the time being his presidential campaign in the Republic of Slovenia back in the 1990. Never, however, has he been able to drop the grinding academic axe; surprised as many commentators were that someone could come along and talk about Hegel and coca-cola in the same breath, Žižek of late takes to marrying tenets of Lacanian psychoanalysis with Donald Rumsfeld quotations. But something different, some new sea-change, seems to have occurred again with Žižek's piece on Iran, 'Berlusconi in Tehran', published in the *London Review of Books*, that it is pure politics, that the mode of language is no longer wry but serious. Before, looking closely at Žižek's texts, one knew that behind the comic references to popular culture there was a serious kernel, of which to use in critically dismantling areas of unseen terror in the usual functioning of the economy, now the wry guard has been shelved, and the comic subterfuge is the preserve of the enemy itself – "Berlusconi's capitalism with 'Italian values' (comical posturing)".

Žižek's piece expounds two subjects that I am interested here, namely that today in Iran the Revolutionary Guard is not a working class militia but a mega-corporation, and that a genuinely liberatory Islam exists, not in the tenth century, or lost within the ether, but here and now, and it is this which should undercut both explicitly prejudiced opinions on Islam, and vile Islamofascism which seeks to dominate typical perceptions of what the message of Islam is. The contradictory

feelings towards democracy (Mafie, 2003) maintained until his death by Ayatollah Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini is the trajectory with which Iranian politics currently takes now. Khomeini had at one stage, in a meeting that took place in Qom with Iranian students and educators in 1979, opined that Muslims not “listen to those who speak of democracy. They all are against Islam. They want to take the nation away from its mission. We will break all the poison pens of those who speak of nationalism, democracy, and such things.” While before 1979, and before the revolution, Khomeini expressed that in “Iran's Islamic government the media have the freedom to express all Iran's realities and events, and people have the freedom to form any form of political parties and gatherings that they like.” Democracy seems to be(ne)fit Iran only when it suits the outcome, this outcome levelling the theocracy and crony-capitalism that has seemed to characterise Iran since Ahmadinejad (and presumably while the world has had Putin and Berlusconi to benchmark him with). But if either theocracy or crony-capitalism characterise what is *not* democratic, then many of the most powerful nations across the world, some of whom we would without fuss regard as democratic, are undemocratic – and this surely cannot be true.

Luckily we are not naïve. Democracy has the ability to carry extraordinarily undemocratic elements within its capacity (democracy is democratic, so institutions and governments don't have to be) without putting into jeopardy its legitimate status. What the western world finds disconcerting about Iran – one such example of a democracy with an undemocratic government – is Iran's so-called “Islamic” character. As Žižek's comparison of Ahmadinejad with Berlusconi makes explicit, the character of contemporary Iran is not Islamic, but corrupt. But when we remove the Orientalist glasses, what is revealed by today's Iran is something a little more familiar: that it operates in much the same way as our very own enlightened capitalist democracies, with one key difference, which I shall reveal shortly.

Iran, for example, is pressing hard for privatisation measures, “[w]e have privatised \$63-billion worth of government assets since 2005,” uttered head of the state-run Privatisation Organisation Gholam Reza Heydari Kord-Zanganehsaid, adding that the aim is to dispose of at least R889-billion worth of assets (AFP, 2009). Iran has a ruling elite who are said to be “market-oriented capitalists,” (Rahnema, 2009) there are also striking workers at the Iran Khodro car plant, failed economic policies, inflation, unemployment and suppression of trade unions. Sound familiar? The Iranian progressive and the urban poor should not hold Ahmadinejad in any sort of esteem for building of Iran a pocket of resistance against “US and UK tyranny,” but rather should be holding him in contempt for operating with the ethic “business as usual”.

Another point of interest with regards to Iran Khodro, and something I have mentioned before (Packman, 2009), is the convergence of ideas on what constitutes the female car. It is this example, which truly makes explicit the way in which Iranian capitalism is unashamed of its own logic, and western capitalism tries to disavow its operation. The specially designed car for women

by Iran Khodro has tailored features such as an automatic gearbox, electronic parking aids, a navigation system and a jack designed to make it easier to change a wheel. Extra functions can be added like the alarm to warn the driver she has flat tyres, and “soft feminine” colours to please the female eye. According to *Haaretz*, a company executive opined that “women’s needs are different from men’s” and that “the most important thing for them is that the car will be comfortable and easy to use”. A better example of compassionate conservatism – phrase of the moment in the contemporary British political establishment – could not be found, paying close observation to its real meaning; the conservative individual himself believes he acting according to compassion, when in fact he embodies merely an acceptance of the reactionary logic that mediates genders in their “correct” places, or *hugs a hoodie* on the understanding that neither class status has been disturbed, or rather, more severely, that that class status has most curiously been reinforced. What is clearly at work with the female car is not that Iran’s cronyism is being projected through the nuts and bolts of an automobile, in opposition to enlightened western post-feminist values, but rather how explicit Iran is about its ideological sexism. To rephrase, it *is* the sexism that offends our western sensibilities in this instance, but the offence that we take is testament to the fact that western liberal democratic, politically correct means with which to sell and tailor cars to women has become so disavowed in its sexism, we simply don’t recognise the sexist mode of operation at play anymore.

Taken as an example of this mode of sexism, the female car as a lifestyle choice (the carefully disguised way of asserting the so-called “post-political” *modus operandi* in contradistinction to Iran’s explicitly political form) in the UK (as shown by the now defunct, once popular free London tube newspaper *The London Paper*). The report begins “[m]en fuss over mechanical things and big engines, while many women care more about comfort and pretty colours – or that’s what manufacturers assume, anyway.” These aren’t manufacturers in backward countries; these are the UK Motor Manufacturers and Traders. And what is the difference between their assertions and those put by Iran Khodro? Nothing. The difference here is not between distinguished, liberal democratic capitalism and weird Islamic sexist capitalism, but rather they are two sides of the same coin, though neither one can really claim to be characterised Islamic, nor liberal for that matter (it might be reasonable at this stage to point out that Iran’s most noteworthy racing car driver is a female, Laleh Seddigh, who has “even outperformed the best male racing drivers in the country”. She was banned from racing for tampering with her car’s engine, though some, including herself, see this as a government conspiracy, embarrassed because she was a successful woman).

This brings me to my next point of interest in Žižek’s article; namely, how to characterise Islam, and why such a characterisation will not entail appeals to Iran’s current political agenda. I have already discussed why we cannot characterise in Iran an Islamic economic trajectory, for it is clearly centred on cruelly explicit capitalism. Now I shall discuss why Iran has succeeded only in

employing a self-fulfilling prophecy of Islam, rather than any true core of Islam's message. Writer John Gray observed in his pivotal book *Black Mass*, "[the] notion that Islam lies outside 'the world' neglects Islam's positive contributions" (Gray 2008: 99-100). As Žižek has said, that very notion of "good Islam" can be found today in Iran, but he cites it as formulating out of the protests taking place around the time of the Ahmadinejad re-election. Saeed Rahnema takes issue with Žižek on this notion, uttering that what Žižek misses out is that Moussavi – to whom many of the protesters offer their support to – is a conservative Islamist. "Good Islam", as such, is elsewhere. But where? Allow me to explore the answer to this question.

Žižek elsewhere (Mollins, 2009), on the topic of the economic shift taking place from out of the financial crisis, suggests that those in power should be "undermined via "patient ideologico-critical work" rather than direct confrontation." How, I ask, could Islam itself take patient ideologico-critical work in order to restore its own "positive contributions", as opposed to direct confrontation? Many commentators, who are far too willing to accept alternative versions of Islam providing they sound nice, look forward to an Islamic reformation (a charge born out of a snub towards Islam, asserting that its civilisation be outdated by other monotheistic religions, this most notably carried forth by Pope Benedict XVI in his speech on Islam, in which he used the words of Byzantine who was in critical dialogue with Manuel II Paleologus, an Iranian scholar), but other more historically aware writers, such as Ali Eteraz, have shown Islamic reformation to have been and gone. Eteraz notes that "The Muslim equivalent of nailing the 95 theses (writings by Martin Luther thought to be the catalyst for protestant reformation) was the desecration of a graveyard and the stoning of a woman for adultery." What the appeals to an Islamic reformation is usually shorthand for, especially for those on the liberal left seeking an *acceptable face* of Islam, is Islam without fatwa's on writers, stoning and aeroplanes through buildings. But we don't have to look very far for the history of Islam that provides this – the counter-hegemonic history we might now call it – and it is not even necessary to seek Muslim apostasy for it.

So how do we conduct the search for this counter-hegemonic Islam? It may seem at first an odd place to start but our solution here can be found with Freud. At a time of massive vulnerability for European Jews, it would have been easy for many to resign themselves to victim-hood and group together under the pretext of their hitherto shared history. However in 1939, between being robbed and forced to emigrate from occupied Vienna by the Nazi's for being Jewish and partaking in one of the disciplines they referred to as "Jewish science" (psychoanalysis), Freud decided to pursue the subject of the historical arrival of monotheism (which he attributes to Moses' being an Egyptian priest of Akhenaten, and not, as is commonly assumed, his being originally Hebrew). As such, in a letter he told Arnold Zweig "Moses created the Jews" and, in his last substantial book *Moses and Monotheism* stated that "it was not God who chose the Jews ... but Moses". Matthew Sharpe, author of the book *Slavoj Žižek: a little piece of the real* noted that "Freud did not attempt to restore or reassert the 'purity' of Judaism against its detractors. He offered a demonstration that

Moses, Judaism's law-giving Father, was already impure: an Egyptian stranger" (Sharpe 2004: 246). By doing this, Freud observed that everything we thought we knew about Jewish history was grounded inaccurately. Freud enjoyed the benefit of achieving two things, firstly producing a philosophically adept justification for the mental utility and historical genesis of monotheism (for Freud, monotheism revealed the end of object worship, and the beginning of belief in the absent, an astonishing mental accomplishment), and secondly undercutting everything the Nazi's thought they knew about Judaism, even if this was to undercut the knowledge of the Jews themselves. And after all there is no better tool for defeating critics than to show that everything they know is wrong. The way in which to utilise this tool for Islam is clear. In order to undercut criticism of Islam from the unpalatable voices, while maintaining an opposition to existing Islamic forms of fascism, one must champion Islam's alternative, forgotten or disavowed history, and then ask questions as to why this has been disavowed, and by whom.

Professor Ali A. Allawi in his LSE seminar *In Search of Islam's Civilisation* noted that political Islam post-1976 (a time of relative freedom in Iraq he states) disavowed its ethical dimension, preferring to appease the status-quo by being rules based and not ethics based. A compulsion for corruption soon crept in to fill the gap, attempting to predicate itself on purely Islamic measures. The relationship between Islam and capitalism, for example, had to overcome some treacherous boundaries with regards to what was ethically sound in the religious system. The result being that Islam dressed elements usually frowned upon – the banking system for example – into palatable products (halal banking). Ironic, really, that what Allawi situates as the genesis of Islamism - rules based Islam and not an ethics based Islam - was the attempt to forge an Islamic version of a model many would attribute to US-styled capitalism. Strange to think that the Middle Eastern anti-Imperialist movement might have been grounded by a sly attempt to create capitalism with an Islamic face.

The events of the 1970's in the Middle East changed Islam in a way that has not been significantly altered ever since (which is rather hard to accept given the severity of events that have since taken place, but what I mean is simply Islam has continuously been on the defensive since the seventies – after Iraq/Afghanistan nothing has changed, only maintained), and it is worth remembering this point when promoting a counter-hegemonic version of Islam, though this merely satisfies the political body of Islam. Where are we to address Koranic issues? Crucial information should be sought from Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, Sudanese liberal reform figure and believer in a version of progressive Islam, expressed in his book "The Second Message of Islam". For Taha, we should be reminded that the Koran had been revealed in two locations, firstly in Mecca where Muhammad and his followers were minorities, and in Medina where the city was brimming with Jews and Pagans. During his verses in Mecca, Muhammad promulgated a "peaceful persuasion," whereas in Medina the verses are filled with rules and intimidations. The Medinan verses, the first message(s) of Islam, were directed to a whole community of early believers and not Muhammad

alone, according to Taha. These messages were a sort of “historical postponement” as George Packer puts it in his *New Yorker* article on Taha. It was the Meccan verses, the second message of Islam that would represent, for Taha in his revisionism, the perfect religion, an acceptance of equality and freedom that, in seventh-century Arabia, Muslims were ready for. This provided his grounds for a progressive Islam, or at least a return to Islam in its truest form, since disavowed in its Medinian emphasis on rules based Islam.

Examples of Taha’s revisionist spirit can be found in today’s Iran; one particular person held in high regard is Grand Ayatollah Sanei who recently called Ahmadinejad’s presidency ‘illegitimate’ and ‘against Islam’. He is outspoken on matters such as the prohibition of nuclear weaponry in Islam, equal status for women (which, surely, must include not banning them for being too good at motor car racing), equality for non-Muslims and well known for issuing a fatwa against suicide bombing. Another well known example is Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montarezi, recently described in the *New York Times* as “an adversary the state has been unable to silence or jail because of his religious credentials and seminal role in the founding of the republic.” He too questions use of the term Islamic government when it is referred to the one in his homeland. What might initially be problematic about this counter-hegemonic revision is that it seeks to find the best in Islam and disavow the bad bits. The question remains; are the bad bits Islam’s problem? The answer is of course yes, but the way around it is not to simply bracket what is good and bad Islam, but, rather, what is and is not Islam. What has been said about Freud’s work on Moses is that it is largely speculative. Where the Islamic counter-hegemonic history does not fall short to this problem is that it has legitimacy both in its textual revision, and in its ethical methodology (that is to say both historically and practically).

Why might this be helpful for critics of Islamism? Simple, what Freud did show with his work on Moses is that the enemy cannot have reasonable grounds of criticism without a reasonable understanding of their enemy. By restoring a lost history for the Jews, Freud was able to throw off course Nazi criticism of Judaism. Equally, the way in which we are legitimately allowed to criticise Islamism is by taking a fuller understanding of what Islam actually is. This is where cohorts of New Atheism, particularly Sam Harris in his book *The End of Faith*, fall short. His argument tends to perceive the true expression of Islam to be in Islamism, and very often purposefully conflates the two, describing good Muslims as not practising their religion to its proper end. Another example in Michel Onfray’s book *The Atheist Manifesto*, he waxes that “Islam is *fundamentally* incompatible with societies that arose from the Enlightenment”. How do these criticisms stand up with the ideas printed above? They describe an Islam that is rules based, which itself has erroneous groundwork, and so are by no means prepared for the counter-hegemonic history of Islam, which is not merely equal in its legitimacy to fundamentalist Islam, but rather destroys any legitimacy fundamentalist Islam claims to hold.

“Good Islam” does have existing and historical referents in Iran. This contingent recognises

that Ahmadinejad is not the voice of progression in the world (it needn't be spelt out which odious sources he appeals to when denying the Holocaust) and that Islam has a progressive core, which an in-depth look at Islam's history will testify to. Reformation is over for Islam, but a (futile) return to it will not be necessary in reconfiguring the real legacy of Islam in the world.

Notes

This works in precisely the way Žižek explained it in, among many other places, another piece he has written for the LRB entitled "You May!", when he says 'The superego works in a different way from the symbolic law. The parental figure who is simply 'repressive' in the mode of symbolic authority tells a child: 'You must go to grandma's birthday party and behave nicely, even if you are bored to death – I don't care whether you want to, just do it!' The superego figure, in contrast, says to the child: 'Although you know how much grandma would like to see you, you should go to her party only if you really want to – if you don't, you should stay at home.' The trick performed by the superego is to seem to offer the child a free choice, when, as every child knows, he is not being given any choice at all. Worse than that, he is being given an order and told to smile at the same time. Not only: 'You must visit your grandma, whatever you feel,' but: 'You must visit your grandma, and you must be glad to do it!' The superego orders you to enjoy doing what you have to do. What happens, after all, if the child takes it that he has a genuinely free choice and says 'no'? The parent will make him feel terrible. 'How can you say that!' his mother will say: 'How can you be so cruel! What did your poor grandma do to make you not want to see her?'

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