

# *Reading Legitimation Crisis in Tehran*

by Danny Postel, Prickly Paradigm Press and University of Chicago Press,  
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## Ladan Boroumand

### Leaving the Bastille Circle

It was a May Day, sometime in the early 1980s in Paris. The Islamic revolution in Iran was only a few years old but had long since violently silenced all dissent. Hundreds of the regime's opponents were being executed, terror was the order of the day, and the Islamic regime – at war with both its own civil society and Iraq – had isolated Iran from the outside world. Scores of refugees had fled and Paris was now the capital of political activism against the Iranian regime. I was a young student of political sociology who had spent a few months in revolutionary Iran where I had joined the ranks of Dr. Shapur Bakhtiar's followers. [1] In Paris I convinced my comrades at the National Movement of the Iranian Resistance (led by Bakhtiar) that we social democrats in exile were the true supporters of workers' rights, that communist regimes had set up a shameful system of exploitation of the workers, and that we should join the May Day parade.

In those days there were two May Day parades in Paris. One was organised by the CGT, the labor union close to the French Communist party. The other, in which we took our place, was organised by the CFDT, the labour union associated with the French socialist party. But as we started to march and distribute our leaflets, a number of Iranian Stalinist militants started beating us, accusing us of being agents of the former regime. And why were Iranian Stalinist militants demonstrating alongside French socialists? The French communists had invited *the Iranian Hezbollah* onto their parade.

This tragi-comic experience – French communist complicity with Iranian Islamists putting us in danger from Iranian communists – was not the only obstacle we Iranian social democrats faced. Although they shared the same values, the French socialists were not comfortable with supporting the social democrat Bakhtiar. He may have been a socialist militant who had joined the anti-Franco movement during the Spanish civil war, had helped the French resistance during WW2, and had been a supporter of the international socialist movement, but the French socialists dismissed him as 'too westernised' a figure – not in tune with the culture of his

country and the aspirations of its people. (The irony was that Bakhtiar was the only political intellectual who used traditional concepts such as 'Fitnah' in his analysis of the Islamic Revolution, while all those 'authentic'-looking revolutionary clerics were using Marx, Lenin and Jacobin concepts and categories in their revolutionary discourse.)

That day, we left the Bastille circle with bleeding noses and bruised faces, but a new political maturity. From then on, as pro-democracy and human rights activists, we understood that we were invisible in the West. We continued our struggle in a different fashion, knowing well that we could expect nothing from those Western democrats who considered us 'too Westernised,' perhaps too much their equals, and not 'native' enough.

### **The curious selectivity of the Left**

Postel's pamphlet asks exactly the right question: why are Iranian democrats invisible in the West in general and among leftists in particular? The first chapter is a passionate critique of the *selectivity* of the left, comparing its enthusiastic support for Latin American human rights activism in the 1980s to its apathy toward (not to say passive hostility against) Iran's human rights movement. In Postel's view, the main reason for the left's selectivity is that US imperialism is not the primary factor or cause of human rights abuses in Iran. He argues that it remains the 'serious blind spot (of the left)' that 'our solidarity with struggles around the world is determined by George Bush, rather than by our principles.' Postel also points out that the traditional anti-American rhetoric of the left has an affinity with the official discourse of the oppressors in Iran, creating empathy with the theocrats.

Postel's indictment reminds us that universal human rights and democratic values are not as strongly entrenched in the West as one might think, and that the totalitarian temptation remains with us. He reaffirms the validity of democratic and liberal values, and the moral superiority of human rights, echoing Paul Berman and George Packer, among others, who have also written about the necessity for liberals to take a more active part in the international struggle for human rights.

### **Reading Habermas in Tehran**

What distinguishes Postel's pamphlet is the manner in which he gives the floor to Iranian dissidents to make the case for democracy. His inspiration here is Azar Nafisi's book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. It was the experience of Nafisi and her

## BOROUMAND | Reading Habermas in Tehran

students, as they met to read classical literature together, that recurrent assaults by totalitarian forces on their individual freedoms informed their approach to and understanding of the works they were reading. In the words of Nafisi, '*Lolita* gave a different color to Tehran and ... Tehran helped redefine Nabokov's novel, turning it into this *Lolita*, our *Lolita*.' What Postel knows is that not only Nabokov, but Locke, Kant, Berlin, Arendt, Mill, Camus, and Popper are also read and debated avidly in Iran. And so he calls upon dissidents, human rights activists, students and scholars to tell of how their reading of the classical texts on democracy and liberty has 'given a different color' to their life and activism under totalitarian rule, and how their activism has influenced their reading of the texts. Thus, an account of an attack against a student dormitory in 1999 is followed by the testimony of a student who explains how his political action was inspired by his reading of Habermas. And we learn of how a reading of the classical texts of democracy and liberty helped change the Revolutionary Guard Akbar Ganji into a determined dissident who challenged the regime. As he reports on this joining together of antitotalitarian text and action, and on the utility of liberal values for individuals facing the extreme, Postel no doubt hopes to rehabilitate the corpus of democratic ideas in the eyes of his American comrades.

The example of the Iranian dissidents also illuminates the moral failure of the western left. Postel examines the support extended to the Islamic Revolution by the French social theorist Michel Foucault. He leans on *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (reviewed in *Democratija* 1), a scholarly work by Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, published in 2005, in order to demonstrate how in the mirror of the Iranian revolution many Western intellectuals and activists have applauded the defeat of the free individual of the social contract and the resuscitation of a new (and post-communist) brand of selfless individual who is attached to a sacred community through sacrificial bonds. In the mirror of the Islamic revolution, many in the West have seen something to approve of in the revival of a new form of totalitarianism.

The last chapter of Postel's important pamphlet takes the form of an electronic epistolary exchange with the scholar Ramin Jahanbeglou. Since his childhood Jahanbeglou has been involved in Iran's intellectual life but unlike many in his generation he never embraced Marxism-Leninism. Instead, Jahanbeglou has interviewed the outstanding liberal thinkers and philosophers of our time – Berlin, Ricoeur, Habermas, Rorty and many others – making them available to Iranian scholars and students. In his conversation with Postel, Jahanbeglou reports on

the centrality of democratic ideas in Iranian debates, confirming what human rights and civil society activists have long said, and what the western left refuses to understand. Jahanbeglou makes the case for the creation of international human rights structures able to act independently of states and their national agendas.

### Out of the malaise

As I turned the last page of Postel's pamphlet, I had two competing reactions. The first was that of the invisible Iranian human rights and pro-democracy advocate who was grateful to Postel, and moved by the judicious way he rendered visible that which has been invisible. The second was the historian who had some more critical comments. First, there are a couple of inaccuracies that should be corrected in a second printing. The attack against the students' dormitory was in 1999 – the 2003 mass arrest was organised to prevent demonstrations for the anniversary of the 1999 attack. And though Mohammad Mossadeq is referred to as the President, he was in fact the Prime Minister in a constitutional monarchy.

I have two more substantial concerns. First, I was not persuaded by the manner in which Postel intertwined his indictment of the left with an attack on the neo-conservatives. I cannot but find ironic the vilifying rhetoric Postel uses against the neo-conservatives, many of whom started their political career on the left and owe their new political identity first and foremost to *the refusal of the liberals and the left to pay heed to their moral and political demand to combat totalitarianism*.

Second, Iraq's catastrophic experience is perhaps less the result of a cynical conspiracy by the members of a diabolic club than the tragic consequence of a mutating world where politics is no longer, and can never again be, the simple outcome of the traditional Westphalian order; but it is not yet, and cannot yet be, the outcome of a non-existent democratic international order. Historians have told many tales of the strange events that happened in the long transitional epoch during which the feudal order slowly disappeared and the world of sovereign nation-states gradually emerged. In transitional eras there is a malaise among decision-makers and ordinary people alike, who realise that their actions engender unexpected consequences, while the reality surrounding them does not fit their customary patterns of understanding. Danny Postel's pamphlet is a passionate expression of this historic malaise, which also finds its echo in Francis Fukuyama's recent introspection about neo-conservatism. [2] Both stress the urgent need for new forms of action and new international institutions. The human rights community can only welcome these

## BOROUMAND | Reading Habermas in Tehran

thought-provoking essays that will contribute to the making of a new world order that will not tolerate genocides and systematic human rights abuses.

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Ladan Boroumand is Research Director of The Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation for the Promotion of Human Rights and Democracy in Iran.

### Notes

[1] Bakhtiar had fled to Paris in the summer of 1979, warning the Iranian people against the danger of a new form of tyranny under the clerics. A social democrat who was one of the leaders of the pro-Mossadeq National Front, Bakhtiar was an opponent of the Shah who spent many years in his prisons before becoming his last Prime Minister, with the goal of helping an orderly transition to democracy. Iranian Marxist-Leninists hated him as their worst enemy precisely because he was a social democrat and had been very active in Iran's emerging labour movement after World War Two. As a junior cadre at the newly established Ministry of Labor, Bakhtiar had tried to help with setting up independent labour unions in cities such as Isphahan and Abadan. Both the Iranian communists and the British government were outraged by his audacity and had joined forces in a campaign of calumination against him. When he was sacked, over 5000 workers of the British Oil company went on strike in protest against his dismissal. Later in Dr. Mossadeq's government he was appointed as deputy Minister of Labor and had worked on the creation of social security in Iran.

[2] Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power and the Neoconservative Legacy*, Yale University Press, 2006.