

Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran

A spectre is haunting the Iranian Left—the assembled ghosts of orthodox Communism, Maoism and populism. Together these had converged, on the eve of the Revolution, to construct a Third Worldist discourse and practice that stressed the evils of dependent capitalism and imperialism. Agribusiness, transnational corporations, military expenditures, the oil companies, the corrupt royal court, SAVAK, the comprador bourgeoisie, consumerism—in short, imperialism and its internal base—were the targets of the propaganda and agitation of all left opposition groups. The trouble was that they were high on the list of the religious opposition as well. Eventually, sometime after the collapse of the Pahlavi state and in the course of the Left's struggle for its rightful place in the political arena of the new Republic, it became clear that two strategic mistakes had been committed: namely, neglect of the question of democracy, and underestimation of the power of the Islamic clergy. It is now widely accepted that this blindspot was due to an inordinate emphasis on the anti-imperialist struggle and an almost mechanical application

of the dependency paradigm. The all-too-general model left little scope for considering the highly uneven development of class and production relations, the power of the pre-capitalist classes or the political-cultural project of the clerics (which, contrary to what some foreign observers thought, was decidedly not the same as liberation theology). Above all, it led to a downgrading of the importance of a democratic-socialist (not merely 'national') alternative to the Shah's regime.

The outcome of the Iranian Revolution recalls Marx's observation that we make our own history but never under conditions of our own choosing. It recalls also, only too painfully, his comment about the 'dead weight' of the past. Finally, it demonstrates that not every anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist action is an advance towards socialism. But these lessons have been learnt at enormous cost: the stunning defeat of the Left in the mini-civil war of 1981–83, its displacement from the arenas of political and cultural struggle, extreme disillusionment, retrenchment, a wave of depoliticization—and, of course, the deaths of many, many worthy comrades.¹ Must Iranian leftists today be extremely—one might say, excessively—critical of the whole period from 1970 to 1978, often bordering on self-cancellation and repudiation of the efforts of an entire generation. But it should be pointed out that the general theoretical problems which they faced were shared by left organizations, particularly 'M-L' Maoist groups, everywhere. The focus on guerrilla activity was not the sole reason for the marginalization of the Left in Iran—after all, a guerrilla strategy was used with great success by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. More importantly, the Left was not isolated after the overthrow of the Shah in February 1979: on the contrary, it had a huge following. The Fedaii, for instance, had some 150 offices throughout the country and one of their rallies was attended by five hundred thousand people. But if the numerical strength of the Fedaii, Tudeh, Mojahedin and Peykar added up to considerable political potential, unity was sadly never near the top of their priorities.

In placing the problems and mistakes of the Iranian Left in proper perspective, we should also bear in mind that the Revolution—and clerical rule—came as a complete surprise to many observers, including those who made a profession out of studying Iran; and that many foreign scholars and activists on the Left were supportive of the new Islamic Republic precisely for its anti-imperialism and its defiance of the US government and capital.² Nevertheless, an examination of seven-

¹ This type of disenchantment is similar to what Perry Anderson has described with regard to the French, Spanish and Italian Communist Parties (though spared the deaths suffered by the Iranian Left). See *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, Verso, London 1983.

² On the first point, a good example is Fred Halliday's *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*. The book's essential thesis and problematic do not anticipate a mass uprising or political Islam and leave out the possibility of an Islamic Republic. Regarding the second point, among the foreign Left scholars who sympathized not just with the Iranian Revolution but with Islamic discourse and the anti-imperialist, anti-systemic or post-modernist character of the new regime were Michel Foucault, Ernest Mandel, Immanuel Wallerstein, Nikki Keddie, Eqbal Ahmad, and Anouar Abdel-Malek. In mainstream academia, a number of scholars constructed new theories about Islamic resurgence; while the works of John Esposito, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and James Piscatori are a welcome departure from the oeuvre of those termed 'Orientalist' by Edward Said, their enthusiastic and uncritical renditions are problematic. A number of Iranians who today are vociferous critics in exile initially defended clerical

ties Third Worldism—of its assumptions, aims, language, methods and consequences—is an imperative task in any analysis of the Iranian Left and of its praxis during and after the Revolution.³ Such, at any event, is one of the main purposes of this essay, together with an assessment of prospects for regroupment around a new emancipatory vision. Let us begin by tracing the link between the Mossadegh experience and the origins of the Iranian New Left.

Mossadegh, Communism and the New Left

After a period of genesis and growth between 1906 and 1929, when it developed as a revolutionary communist movement with strong ties to the emergent working class, the Iranian Left was driven underground and subjected to severe repression. The ending of dictatorship in 1941 was followed by a new period of Communist reorganization and growth around the newly formed pro-USSR Tudeh Party, until the Shah–CIA coup of 1953 against the nationalist government of Dr Mohammad Mossadegh ushered in a second round of dictatorial rule. For the New Left, especially students abroad, Mossadegh was a genuine hero, while the Tudeh Party was held to have betrayed Iran by prioritizing Soviet interests.⁴ The reality was somewhat more complex.

In 1951 Mossadegh was elected prime minister with a mandate to implement the oil nationalization law that had been passed under his predecessor. As this remained his primary concern, overriding other issues such as workers' rights and land reform, he incurred the disdain of the trade unions, many of which were linked to the Tudeh Party. To make matters worse, the Ministry of Labour ceased to register labour unions after May 1952, presumably in an effort to limit the growth of communism. Mossadegh remained firm in opposing Soviet requests for an oil concession, and the Tudeh Party's animosity towards him grew in proportion to the links that Washington established with the police and military under the auspices of the Truman Administration's Four Point Program. But Mossadegh's government also came under attack from the Shah and an increasing number of religious figures. The British too, incapable of graciously accepting the nationalization of 'their' oil companies, took to fomenting dissent, as did the Americans (though in their case Mossadegh appeared quite oblivious). When Tudeh supporters demonstrated against monarchy and for a republic, they were attacked by the police. Finally, in August 1953 when Mossadegh rejected the Shah's dismissal of him as illegal, the

rule and took government posts. I would like to stress that the militant Left, such as the Fedaii and Peykar, never expressed support for clerical rule or political Islam.

³ For a good discussion of Third Worldism, see Giuseppe Morosini, 'The European Left and the Third World', *Contemporary Marxism*, no. 2, Winter 1980. I regard Third Worldism as the mirror image of Eurocentrism, an equally misguided and wrong-headed point of departure. The latter tendency is the more pronounced, however, and altogether too many left journals exhibit a peculiar predilection for Europe. Some socialists have to confront the Eurocentrism within them; others would do well to avoid the romanticism, cultural relativism or other illusions that lead them to support, as in Afghanistan, rebels who are resisting not merely a foreign presence but an 'ungodly government' and any meaningful social change.

⁴ Bizhan Jazani, a founder of the Fedaii organization and theorist of armed struggle and the mass movement, in his *Thirty Year History of Iran*, sharply attacks the Tudeh Party. In contrast, his criticism of Mossadegh is mild.

government was overthrown in a coup. In one fell swoop, the nationalist government, the Tudeh Party and the trade union movement were defeated and suppressed by the combined forces of the Shah and his conniving twin sister Ashraf Pahlavi, the pimps, prostitutes and thugs of downtown Tehran, a two-bit general, and the CIA. At least two major ayatollahs, Kashani and Behbehani, gave their religious blessings.⁵

The 1954 oil agreement with an international consortium was correctly seen as maintaining profits and foreign control that essentially lasted until the early 1970s. But opposition was barely heard in the 1950s, as the military and police worked overtime to ferret out dissident workers, Tudeh activists and militant nationalists. They were soon assisted by a secret policy agency, SAVAK, whose task was to ensure workplace discipline and general subordination to the new authority. In December 1953, Tehran University students—members of the Tudeh youth club and the National Front Students' Association—protested at the visit of US Vice-President Nixon. Three were killed. Subsequently many National Front and Tudeh sympathizers moved to Europe and the United States—following the flight of Tudeh leaders and top cadres to the USSR and Eastern Europe—and both political groups became active in exile. From 1959 numerous opponents and critics of the Shah's regime were able to tune avidly if surreptitiously into a Tudeh radio station, Peyk-e Iran, and the National Front also beamed broadcasts that could be picked up in Iran. In the early 1960s the Tudeh Party and the National Front were among the founders of the European-based Confederation of Iranian Students, a 'democratic' (that is, pluralist and non-ideological) organization devoted to continuing the national and anti-imperialist struggles of the Iranian people. In 1961 this Confederation and the US-based Iranian Students Association held their first joint congress in Paris, and formed the CISNU or Confederation of Iranian Students (National Union). At the next annual congress, convened in Lausanne, a delegation from the University of Tehran Students Association (affiliated with the National Front) presented a slogan 'Unity–Struggle–Victory' that was officially adopted by CISNU.⁶

The year 1960 saw a challenge to the Shah and the government. Elections had been underway for the 20th session of Parliament, but people in the provinces protested at attempts to rig the elections. A discredited election and failing economy triggered demonstrations by ten thousand Tehran students, led by the National Front. In May 1961 teachers across the country went on strike to protest their low salaries. In January 1962, prodded by the Kennedy Administration, the Shah signed a land reform bill crafted by the populist Minister of Agriculture in the liberal-leaning Amini cabinet. This was followed by strikes and protests on the part of students and teachers demanding that the Parliament, which had been closed for months, should convene. Instead,

⁵ The Tudeh Party's role in the last days of the Mossadegh government is hotly debated. According to Fereidun Keshavarz, a former CC member, Kianuri deliberately withheld crucial Tudeh support for Mossadegh when word of the impending coup arrived. See his famous 'j'accuse' essay, *Man Motabam Mikonam*.

⁶ Someday a history of the Confederation, a truly remarkable organization, will be written. The information contained above is derived from former Confederation secretaries/activists and from personal recollection.

the Shah announced a six-point reform package and put it to a referendum in January 1963. This White Revolution, as he called it, provided for the vote for women, profit-sharing for workers, privatization of forests, and electoral reform. This was the beginning of the capitalist reorganization of Iran.⁷

The 'Dress Rehearsal'

Before this project could be properly launched, however, popular strata manifested their hostility to the 'coup d'état regime' in a bloody confrontation in June 1963. A populist coalition of students, civil servants, intellectuals, bazaaris, and clerics took part in what Ervand Abrahamian has called the 'dress rehearsal' for the 1978–79 Revolution.⁸ The Left slogan was: 'Yes to Reform, No to Dictatorship'. The Right (clerics, Bazaaris) opposed land reform and female suffrage; they were also concerned that the new state would encroach on their independent activities and property rights. Among the religious participants in this uprising was Ayatollah Khomeini, who was subsequently exiled to Iraq. The suppression of this movement forced the student organizations to go underground, where they reoriented and eventually reorganized themselves. While still underground, and composed of small, tightly-knit groups, they analysed the reasons for the movement's defeat and studied, among other things, the implications of the Bandung Conference, the situation in Indochina, events in China, the Algerian struggle for independence, and the Cuban Revolution. These underground study circles also read Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Régis Debray, Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy and Samir Amin, and, at a later stage, translations of André Gunder Frank and the Latin American *dependencistas*. A Third Worldist perspective was in the making.⁹

In 1966 the Tudeh Party in exile underwent a split, out of which emerged an extremely pro-Chinese group, the so-called Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh. Some RO activists spent time in China, from where they broadcast political programmes, including instruction in the fundamentals of Mao Tse-tung Thought. In this and other ways, Maoism influenced the new generation of left militants, who appropriated such concepts as 'dictatorship of the people' and 'anti-imperialist struggle' as well as the Chinese theory of the Three Worlds. This deepened the already existing hostility toward the Tudeh Party, and prevented any serious moves toward the unity of Left forces when the Revolution broke out in 1978–79. Moreover, like Maoists, anti-imperialists and New Leftists elsewhere, the new Iranian Left developed a distaste for theorizing, an impatience at intellectual and analytical work, and a preference for a rather narrowly defined 'practice'.

⁷ Not all Iranian scholars agree that the White Revolution was about the capitalist restructuring of Iran. For Homa Katouzian, it was a sham any imposition, the quintessential pseudo-modernist strategy. See his *Political Economy of Modern Iran*, New York 1981.

⁸ See Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton 1981.

⁹ An analysis similar to mine is provided by M. Arman: 'Marxism in Iran: From the Constitutional Revolution to the February Revolution' (in Persian), in *Nazm-e Novin*, no. 7, September 1985. He argues that the ideology of the Iranian Left was an eclectic combination of Third Worldism, nationalism and Islamic culture. (I do not agree with his emphasis on the latter.)

By the late 1960s, the Third World was the site of a number of radical and militant struggles, all defined (and self-defined) as anti-imperialist and popular liberation movements. The target was US Imperialism (and, in the case of Maoist-led movements, Soviet ‘social-imperialism’). These movements, led by guerrilla organizations, rejected the old communist orthodoxy of a three-stage, gradualist sequence: (1) industrialization, (2) formation of the working class, (3) proletarian revolution. In Latin America, *foquismo* had been adopted instead. It was to be adopted in Iran as well, along with a military model of action, a hasty and economic reading of Iranian capitalist development, and schematic class analysis.

The Anti-Imperialist Problematic

In 1970 the Organization of the Iranian People’s Fedaii Guerrillas was formed from a merger of two smaller groups identified by the names of their principal leaders: Bizhan Jazani and Hassan Zarifi on the one hand, and Massoud Ahmadzadeh and Amir-Parviz Pouyan on the other hand. The former group had pro-Soviet leanings and most of its founding members had been involved with the National Front’s student organization. Bizhan Jazani himself had once been in the youth section of the Tudeh Party. Amir-Parviz Pouyan had been a student at the Institute for Social Studies and Research, a centre for anthropological and sociological work at Tehran University. All four were extremely talented and dedicated people—and much influenced by Latin American revolutionary literature, the Cuban experience, Maoist writings, the Vietnamese struggle and the Palestinian resistance. Indeed, one of the groups that later joined the Fedaii was known as the ‘Palestine Group’. The same tendencies were shared by the Organization of the People’s Mojahedin, formed in 1970 around an Islamic–Marxist philosophy. The discourse of both organizations—the one, avowedly Marxist-Leninist, the other, revolutionary Islamic with a Marxist orientation—was very similar to revolutionary discourse in Latin America, Africa and elsewhere in Asia: it was the discourse of anti-imperialism, dependent capitalism, neo-colonialism, and revolutionary struggle. Their slogan, ‘The Only Road to Liberation Is Armed Struggle’, was also accepted by their supporters abroad, who worked tirelessly to publicize human rights violations in Iran, to recruit students to the Confederation and ISA–US, and to familiarize international friends with the revolutionary struggle inside the country.¹⁰ Now, in order to assess the strategic framework within which they operated, we need to examine the changes that were taking place in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Pahlavi White Revolution essentially advanced the simultaneous goals of primitive accumulation and capitalist accumulation proper. The process was very rapid, was carried out in a heavy-handed manner, and

¹⁰ As almost everyone recalls, the Iranian student movement abroad was large, disciplined and well organized. In those highly politicized days, annual congresses were major events attended by up to 2,000 people. It is estimated that the ISA–US (pro-Fedaii) had at least 5,000 dues-paying members—and many more supporters. These students returned en masse to Iran between November 1978 and March 1979. The Confederation (though not the ISA–US) was dismantled following the return of its secretariat and membership to Iran.

emphasized economic growth over social needs and redistribution. In its initial stage the agrarian reform offered land distribution to those peasants who had been sharecroppers (*sabeb-nasagh*). Indeed, the dominant form of rural production came to be small-scale and petty-bourgeois, although this was not recognized until the early 1980s. In the later stages, however, small farmers were neglected and large capitalist enterprises, including a number of agribusinesses, were promoted in highly publicized government campaigns to ‘modernize’ agricultural production. Many landholding peasants consequently migrated to the cities in search of a better livelihood, while those who had not received any land were transformed into rural and urban wage-labourers. Simultaneously the regime used the tremendous oil revenues at its disposal to finance industrialization, and a policy of import-substitution resulted in rapid expansion of the manufacturing sector and the growth of an urban industrial labour force. State policy came to favour large-scale, capital-intensive industry, at the same time that its urban bias and neglect of the countryside were displacing large numbers of peasants. Both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors—as well as a veritable population explosion—thus contributed to the massive rural–urban migration of the 1960s and 1970s, and to the creation of a pool of immiserated semi-proletarians in the major cities, notably Tehran.¹¹

As part of its accumulation project, the Pahlavi state sought to take control of previously autonomous commercial, financial and industrial operations, many of which were ‘traditional’, small or medium-sized, and concentrated in and around the Bazaar. Among other things, the government set out to extend labour legislation to the Bazaar and regulate foreign exchange transactions, interfered with Bazaar control over handicrafts by opening its own, highly elegant, stores, attempted to recruit Bazaaris to the Shah’s Rastakhiz Party, and put the blame on the Bazaar for the spiralling inflation of the mid 1970s. This set the stage for opposition by the Bazaar.

The Shah’s autocratic rule, his military adventures in the Gulf as regional gendarme of the United States, and the conspicuous consumption of the upper class created enormous resentment among many Iranians—including clerics, whose Friday sermons became increasingly, if obliquely, critical of the regime. Opposition from both the Left and the Religious Right thus came to speak a similar language, focusing on the regime’s ties to US imperialism, its ‘pro-imperialist’ and ‘anti-national’ economic policies, the dominance of the ‘comprador bourgeoisie’ (i.e., the stratum of big industrialists and their foreign partners) at the expense of the ‘national bourgeoisie’ (principally the Bazaar), and the consumer

¹¹ The motivation and consequences of land reform are a matter of debate. An early study is that of the Fedâii, *Land Reform and its Direct Effects in Iran* (English translation, 1972). See Katouzian (op. cit.) for a thorough critique of the reform. See also Eric Hooglund, *Land and Revolution in Iran 1960–1980* (Austin 1982) for a more detailed study. The edited volume *Massael-e Arzi va Debghani* [Questions of Land and Peasantry] (Tehran, Agah Press, 1982) provides a very different assessment which emphasizes the reality of agricultural growth and the essentially petty-bourgeois/small farming nature of most of the Iranian countryside on the eve of the Revolution.

culture or 'Westoxication' that capitalist development had fostered.¹²

The variant of dependency theory that was adopted in Iran stressed the high degree of political dependence on the United States. It did not recognize the measure of autonomy—expressed, for instance, in friendly relations with the USSR and China—that was possible for a regime such as the Shah's, especially as a result of oil wealth. Nor could it adequately explain the complex economic processes unfolding in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s. A revealing source is the influential work *A Socio-Economic Analysis of a Dependent Capitalist State*, written by the late Fedaii theoretician Bizhan Jazani. The chapter titles set out the problematic: 'Development and Rule of the Comprador Bourgeoisie', 'Increasing Foreign Exploitation in a Neo-Colonialist Form', 'The Special Position of the Peasants during the Transition Period', 'Formation of the Minority Consumer Society'. Perhaps the only original piece in the book is the chapter on monarchic dictatorship which considers the specificities of the Iranian political economy. The chapter entitled 'The Revolutionary Forces in Iran' describes 'the people' as 'the working classes, the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie'. Jazani further explains that the clergy (excluding its 'upper crust' and leadership) is located within the petty bourgeoisie.

Analyses of the Economy

The word *melli*—meaning 'national'—figured prominently in Left discourse. For the Maoist Peykar group, the primary objection to the Shah's regime was that the system of dependent capitalism tied to imperialism had impeded the formation of *melli* and independent industries, where oil revenues might have been used to build a domestic capital goods sector rather than to assist the proliferation of consumer goods. Another Maoist group, Ranjbaran (formerly the RO), sought an independent 'national' Iran aligned to neither the USA nor the USSR, in which a major objective would be the creation of 'national technology'. Bizhan Jazani had written of the 'national democratic revolution' and the establishment of 'national' political rule. In Left agitation in factories, the focus was on severing economic ties with imperialism, throwing off imperialist domination, and constructing an independent 'national economy'. And for the Tudeh Party, the fundamental objective was a national democratic revolution based on anti-imperialism and the breaking of bonds of dependency. Little did these groups know that a clerical regime, guided by a vague philosophy of Islamic populism, could accomplish all this and be profoundly anti-socialist and repressive as well.

By the late 1970s the various Left groups had different analyses of the Iranian economy. For some, capitalist relations were omnipresent: the

¹² 'Westoxication' (or 'West-struck') is a translation of *gharbzadegi*, from an essay of the same name by the late writer Jalal Al-e Ahmad. See Brad Hanson, 'The "Westoxication" of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behranghi, Al-e Ahmad and Shariati', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. vol. 15, no. 1, 1983, pp. 1–23. See also *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trs. R. Campbell, edited by Hamid Algar. Berkeley 1984. Al-e Ahmad, the son of a cleric, was briefly a Communist in the 1940s. Later he returned to Islam. He was not popular with Iranian Marxists, who view his critique as imbued with traditionalism, romanticism and nostalgia. The late Amir-Parviz Pouyan called his analysis 'social-feudalist'.

monopoly-capitalist market had eclipsed the Bazaar, the clergy was under the control of the state, and multinational corporations had taken over the country's industry and agriculture. For others, Iran was semi-feudal/semi-colonial, politically tied to the United States, socially and economically backward, and in need of a peasant-based revolution against the landlords and the regime. For all, however, the principal contradiction was Iran's dependence upon the United States and the dictatorship of the Shah.

In reality, capitalist development had proceeded in a more complex manner than allowed for in Left analyses. Three primary trends may be enumerated: (1) growth of the productive forces and modern social classes, including new relations of exploitation; (2) undermining of pre-capitalist social strata (especially landlords and tribal chieftains); (3) restructuring and articulation of other classes around the new sphere of production and distribution (Bazaari merchants, petty-bourgeois capitalists, clergy). It is important to point out that both the Shiite clergy and the Bazaaris—historically allies—prospered during the period of capitalist development.¹³ The clergy in fact expanded during the Shah's time, as did the number of mosques and religious students; nor was there any real erosion of the clergy's financial base. As for the Bazaaris, far from being marginal to capitalism, they enjoyed a major share of the market and still largely controlled retail trade on the eve of the Revolution.¹⁴ Indeed, their antipathy toward the state was based more than anything else on competition with the state and monopoly capital.

The Left's focus on dependency and anti-imperialism blinded it to the exploitative nature of the Bazaar, and the politicization of a clerical caste that was beginning to talk of Islamic government.¹⁵ It also obscured the significance of the fact that an industrial proletariat had emerged, together with a salaried middle class and a radical intelligentsia. Women had achieved some rights and progress—the vote, growing literacy, education, employment, and increasing visibility in high-level government posts. Objective conditions thus existed for an alliance of progressive and modern strata against the dictatorship and for a democratic-socialist alternative. Yet even the more positive features of development—principally, land reform and women's rights—were denounced *tout court* as a sham and a fraud.¹⁶ In place of a social liberation model, the Left borrowed an analysis and strategy of national

¹³ Shahrugh Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran*, New York 1980. See also Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, Harvard 1980.

¹⁴ Robert Graham, *Iran: The Illusion of Power*, New York 1979.

¹⁵ See *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trs. & annotated by Hamid Algar, Berkeley 1981, especially Part I, on Islamic Government, from lectures delivered by Ayatollah Khomeini in Najaf, Iraq, in 1970. As mentioned above, it was not only the Left that was oblivious to clerical presence and growth, but nearly all scholars of Iran. The latter, whether of the Left or the Right, focused on capitalist development, modernization, the growth of modern social classes, Iran's military strength, growing GNP, bureaucratization, etc. In a variation on yesterday's theme, today's focus is Islamicization—often without consideration of contradictions, tensions and countervailing tendencies.

¹⁶ As late as 1981, pre-revolutionary legislation regarding women was attacked as a sham by left *women* writers. An article which denounced the new Islamic legislation as well as the Pahlavi reforms, was Az, 'The Women's Struggle in Iran', *Monthly Review*, March 1981.

liberation that called for unity of 'the people' against the regime in one large anti-imperialist front—industrial workers, urban poor, radical students, the Left, the national bourgeoisie, the clergy. This rested upon a simple equation: capitalism = monopoly capitalism = Shah + big industrialists, agribusinesses and transnationals. Everyone else was the 'popular masses', oppressed and exploited by foreign capital, US imperialism and its local puppets.

The shared language of opposition had a further negative effect in that it obfuscated very real differences between the socio-political projects of the Left and the Religious Right ('national-popular government' versus political Islam/theocratic rule). Moreover, most of the Left seemed unaware in the 1970s that the religious forces were weaving a radical-populist Islamic discourse that would prove very compelling—a discourse which appropriated some concepts from the Left (exploitation, imperialism, world capitalism), made use of Third Worldist categories (dependency, the people) and populist terms (the toiling masses), and imbued certain religious concepts with new and radical meaning. For instance, *mostazafin*—meaning the wretched or dispossessed—now connoted and privileged the urban poor in much the same way that liberation theology refers to the poor. But in an original departure, the authors of the revolutionary Islamic texts, and especially Ayatollah Khomeini, declaimed that the *mostazafin* would rise against their oppressors and, led by the *ulama* or religious leaders, would establish the *ommat* (community of believers) founded on *towhid* (the profession of divine unity) and Islamic justice.¹⁷

Some of the revolutionary Islamic concepts may have been borrowed directly from Ali Shariati, a French-trained sociologist who was inspired by Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, the Algerian Revolution, and Third World anti-imperialist struggles. In such texts as *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, Shariati sought to radicalize Islam (or elaborate its radical essence) and demonstrate its superiority over Marxism, humanism, Christianity and existentialism. Certainly the Mojahedin borrowed freely from Shariati. And there is evidence that Hojatoleslam Khameneh'i (the current president) and Shariati knew each other from the days when they would deliver sermons at the Hosseinieh Ershad, a religious forum in northern Tehran. Mention should also be made of Jalal Al-e Ahmad's influence in the emerging religiously-based critique of capitalism, imperialism and the West. The term *gharbzadegi*—variously translated as westoxication, occidentosis, or Euromania—found a permanent place in the political discourse. Before his death in 1969, Al-e Ahmad twice met Shariati, with whom he shared

¹⁷ The concept of *towhid* was used by Abolhassan Bani-Sadr in his economic treatise, *Eghtesad-e Towhid*. Earlier, the concept had been elaborated by Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, perhaps the most erudite of the theoreticians of the Islamic Republic, who counterposed *towhid* to plurality. See his *Social and Historical Change: An Islamic Perspective*, trs. R. Campbell, Berkeley 1986. Motahhari (op. cit.) and Yahya Nouri explicated the Islamic Revolution and Islamic Government in their many writings. In the process, they took on (and often misrepresented) not only historical materialism and Christianity but the Mojahedin's version of Islam, which Motahhari called 'revolutionary Islam' as opposed to the clerical vision of 'Islamic revolution'. See M. Motahhari, *Discourse on the Islamic Republic* (Tehran, Islamic Propagation Organization, 1985) and Yahya Nouri, *Islamic Government and Revolution in Iran*, Glasgow 1985. Motahhari was assassinated in May 1979.

a fundamental critique of the West and an interest in a revitalized Islamic order.¹⁸

The Left and Culture

The Left never matched this level of discursive development. For the most part, the secular Left tended, when it wrote about Islam at all during this period, to point to the progressive aspects of Islam and its compatibility with socialism or Marxism. There was no discussion of the cultural realm; no analysis of the heterogeneity of Iranian society (national minorities, religious minorities, ethnic groups, social classes, Shiite, Sunni, gender differences) and what this might imply culturally. That capitalism and bourgeois culture might have some positive impact and features was inconceivable—and indeed, not even seriously considered. Rather, capitalism and imperialism were excoriated for having distorted the economy, exploited the people, transferred the surplus, and supported a hateful monarchy. Of course, all of this was true—but only part of the story.

Those who did write about culture and religion—Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati—postulated resistance to deculturation and Westernization; they advanced a critique of Europe and the United States from a radical, populist, Islamic and Third Worldist perspective—not a socialist one. Unfortunately, this emerging revolutionary-Islamic culture did not become a terrain of contestation. The Fedaii seemed to be ignorant of it; the Tudeh Party may have consciously decided not to take it on; and the Mojahedin borrowed freely from its discourse.

The neglect by the secular Left of such issues as social psychology, cultural forms and religion allowed the Rightists and religious contributors to the journals *Maktab-e Islam* and *Maktab-e Tashayo*¹⁹ to dominate the cultural realm and imbue the anti-imperialist discourse with denunciations of the West, of Marxism, of Christianity, and of secularism. In a kind of populist patriotism that eventually proved their downfall, the secular Left did not maximize differences in order not to appear divisive or to splinter the opposition to the Shah. By contrast, the religious forces had only open disdain for the Marxists. In prison in the mid-1970s, certain clerics who later took power in the Islamic Republic would refuse to eat with the communist prisoners.

An examination of Left literature of the 1970s reveals not only econo-

¹⁸ Recently, the Islamic worldview has received an elegant interpretation in the form of Roy Mottahedeh's *The Mantle of the Prophet*, New York 1985. As a historical novel, constructed like Wilson's *To the Finland Station*, it is highly readable and very intelligent, the narrative alternating between the perspective of the protagonist, a clerical student, and the author's discourses on Persian and Islamic philosophical thought and historical trajectory. The sub-text is disturbing. For one thing, Mottahedeh's is pure masculine history; his account of modern literature leaves out the famous woman poet Forough Farrokhzad, an egregious oversight. He then waxes enthusiastic over Ali Shariati and especially Jalal Al-e Ahmad, never mentioning the latter's rude references to women in his writings. Moreover, the author refers twice to Al-e Ahmad's wife without identifying her. For the record, Al-e Ahmad was married to the novelist Simin Daneshvar. Finally, it must be said that perhaps only one who has never resided in Iran and had to face the challenges of anti-modernists and traditionalists could so uncritically embrace an essay like *Gharbzadegi*.

¹⁹ I am indebted to Ahmad Ahraf for pointing this out to me.

mism and a neglect of culture, but also a failure to consider political–juridical structures beyond a general call for the overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of ‘popular rule’. Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done* was widely read, but his *State and Revolution* not well understood—particularly the comment that socialism is senseless without democracy (recently reiterated by Mikhail Gorbachev). Left writings, if anything, reveal a contempt for democracy as bourgeois and as inferior to socialism. A two-part Fedaii text of late 1978, entitled ‘The Principal Tasks of Marxist-Leninists at the Present Stage of the Development of the Communist Movement in Iran’, well illustrates this and other theoretical shortcomings. The essay is ostensibly an attempt to define their socialist and democratic tasks in the context of a mass, anti-imperialist revolutionary struggle. However, they never define ‘socialist’ and ‘democratic’ but rather equate them with ‘working class movement’ and ‘liberation movement’, respectively.²⁰ This suggests the two-stage model of revolution. Presumably, the first stage was the mass, popular, democratic, anti-imperialist revolution, while the second would be the socialist, proletarian revolution. Thus ‘democracy’ was equated with a stage of revolution (and the less important one at that), not with the inalienable rights of citizens. Other documents reveal the dominant Left perception of the time that bourgeois democracy essentially meant freedom for the capitalist. The failure to understand democracy and to wage an ideological and political struggle around it contributed further to the blurring of the distinction between the Left and Islamicist projects.

As Through A Glass Darkly: Face to Face with the Islamic Republic

When the anti-Shah struggle broke out, the Iranian Left was as divided as its counterparts in Europe and North America and less securely rooted than the religious opposition in Iran. Because of sustained and systematic repression during the 1960s and 1970s, none of the Left groups was in a position to play a leadership role in the mass movement, or to define or influence the discourse and strategy of the struggle against the dictatorship. The Fedaii and Mojahedin had suffered particularly severely. Nearly all the founding members and top cadres of the Fedaii—some two hundred people—had been killed in prison executions, under torture or in shoot-outs with the police. These included Bizhan Jazani, Massoud Ahmadzadeh, Amir-Parviz Pouyan, Behrouz Dehghani, Marzieh Ahmadi Oskooi and Hamid Ashraf—talented, dedicated and experienced women and men whose deaths deprived the communist movement of effective leadership and continuity. Other Fedaii cadres were in prison during most of the 1970s, and were only released following the liberation of the prisons in early 1979.²¹ In the intervening years, some of these activists had been drawn to Tudeh thinking in the course of discussion with other prisoners, and after the Revolution their opposition to more militant anti-regime policies eventually led to a split

²⁰ As I was involved in the translation of the essay, this is as much auto-critique as criticism of others.

²¹ Much of what happened in the weeks just before and after the Revolution remains unclear or contested. It has been said that Shahpour Bakhtiar, briefly prime minister, released all political prisoners. Others have claimed that ‘the people’ and/or the guerrilla groups liberated the prisons.

in the Fedaii organization. Others, upon release, formed smaller groups (such as Rah-e Kargar), which were sympathetic to the Fedaii organization but diverged on some issues. Thus the Fedaii organization entered the political arena in late 1978 and early 1979 with certain distinct disadvantages: (1) a lack of strong links with, and bases among, key social forces, such as urban industrial workers and the semi-proletariat, due to both the regime's repression and their own guerrilla strategy; (2) a lack of the continuity, sustained leadership, size and unity that could have provided a firmer basis for action; (3) a communist orientation and Marxist-Leninist tendency in a context marked by radical-populist Islamic fervour and extremely uneven socio-economic development.

That the Iranian Left played a significant role in the Revolution is undisputed—that is, by all but the revisionist historians and mendacious apologists of the Islamic regime who deny a role to anyone other than 'the Muslim masses', the clergy and the 'revolutionary Islamic Bazaar'. In fact, it was the Left guerrilla groups—principally, the Fedaii—who broke into police stations and army posts, distributed weapons, and joined the NCO rebels (the famous *homafar*) at the Doshan Tappeh Air Force base to confront and defeat the Shah's Imperial Guard (the so-called Immortals) on 9–11 February. The day before the armed uprising, tens of thousands of Fedaii supporters—including numerous student activists and Confederation members who had returned to Iran in the weeks before—had held a public rally commemorating Siahkal, Iran's Moncada. Their slogan was, 'We shall turn all of Iran into a Siahkal'. And they did. But in another cruel and ironic twist, the Fedaii's one major strength and advantage over the clerics—their military expertise—facilitated not so much their integration into the political terrain as the assumption of stake power by clerics and their collaborator-rials, the so-called liberals.

As a result of their role in the armed uprising, and because of their reputation as heroic guerrillas with many martyrs, the Fedaii enjoyed a large following and a positive image at the start of the Islamic Republic. Yet their leadership discontinuity was an acutely felt weakness that did not affect the Mojahedin and the Tudeh Party in the same way.²² Although a number of Mojahedin cadres had fallen victim to the Shah's police, Massoud Rajavi had been spared execution and emerged from prison in early 1979 to create a personality cult. As for the Tudeh Party, it entered the political arena in 1978–79 with all its major figures and leadership intact—as they had spent the years of dictatorship in exile in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.²³ Unfortunately, these three major organizations lacked the will to coalesce, and no one of them was capable of presenting a viable programme that would appeal to

²² In an essay entitled 'A Balance-Sheet of the Left' (*Kankash*, vol. 1, no. 1, summer 1987, in Persian). Ali Ashtiani presents a socio-psychological analysis of the problems of the Left in post-revolutionary Iran. He argues that despite the numerical strength of, for example, the Fedaii, they remained marginal because of the déclassé nature of their social base (students), and because of a fear of unity derived from a preoccupation with political and ideological purity.

²³ The Tudeh Party in exile was led by General Secretary Eskandari. After the Revolution, he was replaced by Kianuri, who was more favourably inclined toward clerical rule.

different social strata and provide an alternative to the new political authority of mullahs and the 'liberal bourgeoisie'.²⁴

Following the February uprising, a classic revolutionary situation of dual sovereignty developed between, on the one hand, the Provisional Government of Mehdi Bazargan of the Freedom Movement and a cabinet composed chiefly of leading members of the National Front, and on the other hand, the Revolutionary Council of Ayatollahs and other Islamicists. The charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini, who had returned from exile in Paris in January 1979, enjoyed mass support through the main stages of revolution: the Referendum on the Islamic Republic in March 1979, the August elections for a Council of Experts to draft a new Constitution, the November plebiscite on the Constitution, the presidential elections of January 1980, and the parliamentary elections of March and May. These fifteen months posed major challenges to the Left. The Fedaii, for example, struggled with the problem of maintaining political and ideological purity over expediency and pragmatism, particularly regarding electoral participation. But this was also a heady period which saw the expansion of the Left and the establishment of new groups, organizations and parties. (On one occasion, a group of highly educated and affluent individuals held a press conference to announce their formation as a Trotskyist party—at the swank Intercontinental Hotel in north Tehran.²⁵)

During 1979 the principal Left groups, roughly in order of membership and following, were: the Fedaii, increasingly popular and very highly regarded; the Mojahedin, hierarchically organized, with devoted followers and their own militia; Peykar, formerly the Marxist wing of the Mojahedin, now strictly opposed to the new regime and considered 'ultra-left' by others; the Tudeh Party, with many supporters among the older generation and within the bureaucracy;²⁶ Koumaleh and the Kurdish Democratic Party, both based in the province of Kurdistan; Rah-e Kargar (now including the Palestine Group), whose members had formed a collective during their long years in prison and now stood out for having read Althusser and Poulantzas; the National Democratic Front, led by a nephew of Dr Mossadegh, which sought to underscore the need for democracy in the new order, but which was ignored by

²⁴ The Fedaii's analysis at this time was that the new regime was an 'organ of compromise' constituted primarily by clerics, other petty-bourgeois elements, and the liberal bourgeoisie.

²⁵ One of the accusations levelled against the Left is that it was composed exclusively of affluent and highly educated persons who could neither understand the people nor speak their language. This is quite false. The Left groups attracted Iranians of all ethnic groups and social classes. It is true that the principal social group was students, but many of these were from working-class, lower petty-bourgeois, and even urban poor families.

²⁶ One way that many Iranians were attracted to, for example, the Fedaii organization, was through the medium of the major newspapers, which by January 1979 were under workers' control, operated by councils of employees. The councils activists were long-time reporters who had always harboured opposition to the Shah and support for the Left. They came out of the woodwork during the Revolution and devoted a great deal of newsprint to articles about Left organizations and the armed struggle against the Shah, as well as interviews with released political prisoners or with relatives of fallen guerrillas (for example, the mother of Bizhan Jazani). One of these longtime left-wing reporters was a Mr Atefi. In 1970 he was an editor at *Kayhan*. During the Revolution he surfaced as a Tudeh party supporter. He was executed by the Islamic Republic following the crackdown on the Tudeh Party in 1983.

the other Left groups for its lack of interest in workers and its overall bourgeois character; a number of Fourth International Trotskyist parties, which generally regarded the new regime as anti-imperialist and progressive. There were also some smaller Maoist groups such as Ranjbaran, formerly RO, and the Workers and Peasants Party, formerly Toufan. All these groups (with the exception of the NDF) were highly doctrinaire, as the Left everywhere tended to be in those days. In retrospect their writings and analyses appear simplistic. Only Rah-e Kargar were distinctive: in trying to understand the character of the new political elite, they drew from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* and applied Poulantzas's concept of power bloc.

Coexistence or Confrontation?

Throughout 1979 and 1980, the Left was faced with the difficulty of coming to grips with the nature of the new regime and formulating a policy of coexistence or confrontation. Most Left organizations adopted a position of either qualified support or total defence. Only two (the Maoist Peykar and the group led by Ashraf Dehghani, former Fedaii guerrilla and sister of the communist martyr Behrouz) were absolutely opposed to the new political authority, not so much because of its Islamic character or non-democratic tendencies as because of what they saw as a continuation of capitalist or comprador rule. Peykar, staunchly rejecting any alternative to a people's democratic republic, regarded the Mojahedin and the Tudeh Party as hopelessly compromised with 'populist' or 'revisionist' notions of popular sovereignty. It therefore reserved most of its criticisms and debates for the Fedaii, ridiculing their conceptualization of the new regime as 'petty bourgeois' and referring to the Bazargan administration as a 'traitorous government' that served the interests of 'comprador capitalists' and enjoyed a 'direct link with imperialism'. In contrast, 'the clerical faction in power and the Revolutionary Council (even though it has clearly proved its counter-revolutionary role in these nine months) does not have a *direct* interest in ensuring US imperialist rule in Iran.'²⁷

In fact most of the Iranian Left at this time expended more energy attacking the liberals in government than the clerical wing. Of course it was easy to denounce Bazargan, who made such openly anti-Left statements as the following one from September 1979: 'You Westerners don't understand our Left. Our so-called leftists are the most dangerous enemies of the revolution. They did nothing in the struggle against the Shah. Now they incite workers to strike, gullible citizens to demonstrate, and provincial groups to rebel. They are SAVAK agents.'²⁸ Naturally the mutual antipathy between the Left and the liberals worked to the advantage of the clerics.

For its part, the Fedaii newspaper *Kar* (Labour) offered differing and

²⁷ *Peykar* no. 30, November 1979. Peykar had its origins within the Mojahedin and once constituted the Marxist wing of the organization. At one point in the mid-1970s it attempted an internal 'coup' to transform the organization into a Marxist-Leninist formation.

²⁸ Quoted in E. Abrahamian, 'The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963-1977', MERIP Reports, no. 86, March-April 1980, p. 9.

contradictory analyses of the new regime. Thus it first called the Provisional Government 'legitimate' and 'national', contrasting Bazargan's respect for democratic freedoms (particularly of assembly and the press) with the position of the 'reactionary fundamentalists'; but shortly afterwards denounced individuals in Bazargan's cabinet as 'comprador', criticized Bazargan for opposing executions of the Shah's ministers, and counterposed the 'anti-imperialist Khomeini' to the 'liberal bourgeoisie'. An article in *Kar* charged the National Front with 'conspiracy' in relation to the fighting in Khorramshahr, a port city in the southern province of Khuzestan with an ethnically Arab population.²⁹ But there was no direct criticism of Ayatollah Khomeini, or the power he wielded, and the Fedaii's attitude to the Islamic Republican Party, the Revolutionary Council and the Imam Committees was very mild in comparison with the invective hurled at the 'liberals', the government and the National Front.

The OCU, generally considered to be more advanced theoretically, was also caught up in the problem of whether the new order was thoroughly capitalist—and therefore indefensible—or petty-bourgeois, and consequently deserving of support. In an article entitled 'Class Rule: Iran One Year after the Uprising', it distinguished between the new 'Islamic regime' and the 'capitalist state', which 'cannot and does not differ fundamentally from the state of two or even ten years ago.' But in countering the Tudeh Party position that a non-capitalist path and a non-aligned foreign policy were possible within the new state of the clergy and petty bourgeoisie, the OCU overstated its case. For how could it seriously be argued that the Islamic regime's economic policies—some populist, some statist, some anachronistic (e.g., the ban on loan interest)—reflected 'capitalist laws of accumulation'? And how could the OCU overlook the absence of a 'capitalist programme' within the regime—a situation that has persisted to this day? It was, quite simply, not a capitalist, and still less a bourgeois, government. It was indeed petty-bourgeois, but of a kind that would force the Left to attach new meaning to the term and to realize that a petty-bourgeois, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist regime could also be wildly at odds with a socialist project. Nor, as women had already learned with the enforcement of *hejab*, was it necessarily progressive.

The fundamental problem, then, was not that the regime was capitalist but that it was incapable of organizing a viable and just political economy based upon democratic rights and the socio-economic needs of the population. This was so despite the fact that in summer 1979, following the provisions of the Islamic Constitution, the government began to nationalize all major industries, banks, insurance companies, and foreign trade. Other industries and services were to be run cooperatively, while a private sector, consisting principally of the Bazaar and peasant farms, was also recognized. The Left welcomed nationalization as part of the process of de-compradorization, although the Fedaii sought to instruct workers about how it differed from socialization and workers' control. Unfortunately, the regime's statist economic strategy stole the thunder from the Left's platform, and undermined the factory

²⁹ 'The Role of Imperialism and Reaction in the Bloody Events of Khorramshahr', *Kar*, 24 May 1979.

councils and workers' self-management by controlling and manipulating the finance system, the supply of inputs, and distribution. Moreover, nationalization without a development strategy did not lead to a healthy and growing economy: the major industries became a financial liability which, particularly as the state was also responsible for social services and the war, would eventually lead to calls for privatization.³⁰ As the economic situation unfolded, however, Left groups appeared unwilling or unable to do more than point to the obviously ad hoc nature of government planning and to offer some general propositions about crisis that were far from constituting an alternative economic strategy.

Undercutting the Left

The Islamic regime managed to undercut the Left in many more ways than through its populist–radical economic and social practices. One was the resort to anti-imperialist political actions such as the seizure of the American Embassy in November 1979, which met with the approval of Ayatollah Khomeini and was widely popular among Iranians in general. Another was sheer intimidation and brutality, which began fairly early on. Self-styled 'partisans of God' (*bezbollahi*) regularly harassed leftists, and in August 1979 eleven Fedaii were executed in Kurdistan by Revolutionary Guards. Early in 1980, in the northwestern region of Turkaman Sahra bordering the Caspian Sea, the regime ruthlessly put down a cultural–political movement of the ethnically Turkic population who were supportive of the Fedaii and had received assistance from them in the organization of numerous peasant cooperatives. Four Fedaii leaders—all Turkamans—were kidnapped and murdered. In April the 'liberal' President Bani-Sadr endorsed the initiation of the 'Islamic cultural revolution'—an invidious twist of the Maoist formulation.³¹ This led to confrontations with university councils and especially with radical students affiliated to various Left groups. For the next two years, all the universities and some high schools were shut down while the curriculum was duly islamicized and left-wing faculties purged.

These developments took their toll on the Left movement. In June the Fedaii organization split over the nature of the regime into a Minority and a Majority, the latter also containing the so-called Left-Wing (*Jenab-e Chap*). This was followed by the split and eventual dissolution of the large women's organization affiliated to the Fedaii, and the gradual disintegration of the workers' councils movement. In September, Iraqi troops invaded the southern province of Khuzestan, wreaking devastation on the area. Eventually it became clear that Saddam Hussein, who thought that the regime would collapse immediately, had made a

³⁰ In 1984, when the incumbent President, Ali Khameneh'i, was running for re-election, he presented his views on the need for de-nationalization of certain sectors of the economy and the society, which, at any rate, exceeded the provisions of the Constitution, according to his interpretation.

³¹ It should be noted that there is some disagreement over Bani-Sadr's role in the Islamic cultural revolution, the confrontation with the university student councils, and the closing of the universities. In an essay in *Sossialism va Enghelab*, Homa Nateq argues that while Bani-Sadr made provocative statements, he was not in favour, much less in control, of the affair. She claims that the persons behind the Islamic cultural revolution were Ayatollah Beheshti (later killed in the spectacular Mojahedin bombing) and Dr Ayat.

monumental mistake. For the invasion raised patriotic fervour and millions of Iranians, including those who had become disaffected, now rallied around the regime in defence of the homeland. Again, the Left was faced with the problem of how to respond to yet another pressing development. Peykar advocated a Bolshevik-style policy of 'turning the guns around' on the regime. The Tudeh, Fedaii–Majority, Mojahedin, Trotskyists and Ranjabaran—who still supported the regime as essentially progressive, on account of its anti-imperialism—condemned the Iraqis and supported the defence of Iran. The Fedaii–Minority did the same, but also characterized the war as one between two reactionary regimes in which the people of both societies bore the costs. Like the other Left organizations, the Fedaii–Minority sent volunteers to the south at the beginning of the war, and many died.

The war proved to be a boon to the Islamicists in another important way, for it allowed the dominant Islamic Republican Party (IRP) to eliminate its Liberal rival-collaborators (Bani-Sadr and his associates) and the Left. The Spring of 1981 was particularly tense, and events were unfolding with such rapidity as constantly to overtake the Left. The following passage poignantly addresses the Fedaii's dilemma: 'Owing to the rapidity of daily events, we do not have sufficient time for periods of rigorous theoretical work and all-round ideological struggle to come up with thorough answers to each and every question. Today, while a pile of undone tasks weighs on our shoulders and new events face us every day, we are forced to find, in a short time, concrete, clear and explicit answers. Postponing these tasks for a long period of theoretical work and ideological struggle is equivalent to inaction, to falling behind the mass movement and to metamorphosis into an appendage of petty-bourgeois crusaders.'

The Fedaii's initial theoretical weakness was thus compounded by the compelling demands of the moment. Moreover, the 'petty-bourgeois crusaders', the Mojahedin, were behaving like *cavaliers seuls* and complicating the problem facing the Left as a whole. As tensions rose between the IRP and Bani-Sadr, the Mojahedin decided to cast their lot in with the President—which was galling to those leftists who recalled his role in the Islamic cultural revolution. The secular Left and the Mojahedin began to move apart, as the latter were exhibiting commandist tendencies and a noticeable lack of interest in unity with the secular Left. Their alliance with Bani-Sadr and the formation of the National Resistance Council (NRC) reflected this. For the Left first learned about these developments through leaflets and newspapers, and the door was merely left 'half-open' if they wished to join a 'government for the reconstruction of the Islamic Republic'. As the OCU paper *Raha'i* predicted: 'No doubt some will still enter and only then realize that they must sit on the floor, by the door, as second-class citizens—their presence merely contributing to the legitimacy of the assembly and nothing more.' Those who did join—well-known left intellectuals and the Kurdish Democratic Party—eventually distanced themselves from the NRC when it became clear that the Mojahedin were the virtual masters and Massoud Rajavi the authoritarian leader. By 1985 even Bani-Sadr had left the NRC, following Rajavi's meeting in Paris with the Iraqi foreign minister. After all, whatever one thought of the Khomeini regime, it did not

justify fraternization with those responsible for invading Iran, deploying chemical weapons, and bombing civilian sites.

Meanwhile, of course, in June 1981 the Islamic regime arrested leftists (including the much-loved Fedaii poet and playwright Saeed Soltanpour), denounced the Mojahedin as traitors and called for the impeachment of Bani-Sadr. Mojahedin cadres demonstrated in the streets—and the regime cracked down hard. When the Mojahedin planted a bomb in IRP headquarters that took a hundred or so lives, including those of the entire leadership, the regime declared war. Soltanpour was executed, numerous Mojahedin were arrested, and Bani-Sadr and Massoud Rajavi fled to Paris. What followed was a two-year reign of terror characterized by Mojahedin bombings and regime reprisals. Scores of Mojahedin activists and sympathizers were rounded up and sent to prison, where many underwent torture and execution. Communist groups such as the Fedaii, Rah-e Kargar and OCU variously described the Mojahedin activities as putschist or Blanquist, whose effect was to provoke the regime into a battle that the opposition clearly could not win. Nonetheless, they felt that the solidaristic thing to do was to join the mini-civil war underway. In the process, numerous leftists lost their lives, their livelihoods, or their morale. Others fled Iran to escape the terror. Defeated and fragmented, many of the Left organizations underwent further splits, or dissolved. Ranjbaran (the pro-regime Maoists) and Peykar (the anti-regime Maoists) are no more; the Trotskyist organizations (which supported the regime as anti-imperialist for a long time) also disappeared; a faction within the Minority calling itself the Tendency for Socialist Revolution broke off and tried to form journal collectives in Europe and the United States, but eventually dissipated amid acrimony; the Fedaii–Minority split once again in 1986; the OCU is reduced to study groups although it does now produce intelligent analyses of developments in Iran.

The Tudeh Fiasco

And what of the Tudeh Party and Fedaii–Majority? From the beginning the Tudeh had tried to entrench itself within the new political elite, propagating the theory of the non-capitalist path of development and the role of the petty bourgeoisie in the national democratic revolution. Almost single-handedly, the Tudeh Party was responsible for the spread of the notions of a ‘progressive clergy’ and ‘revolutionary Islam’; the prophets were dutifully invoked and sprinkled throughout Tudeh documents. The Party’s main theoretician, the well-known writer Ehsan Tabari, wrote extensively on the subject and probably authored a widely circulated booklet *The Progressive Clergy and Us*. A brief quotation will suffice to give an idea of its argument: ‘The programme of social development posed by scientific socialism has some affinities with social demands and principles of Islam and Shiism . . . and this fact makes cooperation between supporters of socialism and the progressive clergy and its supporters not only possible but imperative.’ *World Marxist Review* carried an article by Tabari in 1982 (after the repression of the militant Left had been launched!) entitled ‘The Role of Religion in Our Revolution’. Here he claims that Islam ‘is the ideology of the anti-imperialist revolution’ and sings the praises of Imam Khomeini while

attacking ‘liberals’ such as Bazargan and National Front members. He refers to anti-communism and ‘fascist-type groups in Islamic guise’ (*bezbollahi*) but does not link these to the Islamic state. He further draws a distinction between ‘revolutionary Islam’ and ‘traditional Islam’, and dissociates the Party from ‘extreme leftist groupings’ who are opposed to Islam and the Islamic Republic; unlike them, ‘our Party supports the Revolution’. It must be said that, whatever its mistakes, the militant Left did at least make a political distinction between the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic regime; whereas the Tudeh Party proceeded to enact a new version of *la trahison des clercs*.

On at least one occasion Ehsan Tabari engaged the ‘progressive clergy’ in a televised philosophical debate. Here he noted that the Islamic preoccupation with the problem of free will and determination was similar to the Marxist concern with social/human agency and lawfulness. He also sought to defend historical and dialectical materialism by finding parallels in Islamic philosophical and political thought.³² However, while Tudeh literature advocated a Marxist–Muslim dialogue and waxed eloquent on the virtues of Islam and the Shiite clergy, the Islamic ideologues themselves never wavered in their denunciation of materialism, secularism, Marxism and communism.

In another article published in *World Marxist Review* in 1983, the Tudeh secretary of the time, Kianuri, motivated the Party’s political stance by referring to the ‘sustained struggle’ proceeding on four main fronts: (1) against external plots, the political, economic and military pressure of world imperialism headed by the USA, and regional reaction; (2) against the intrigues of domestic counter-revolutionaries, who wanted to stage a coup, and against political terrorism; (3) against the ‘economic terrorism’ of the big capitalists and landowners and for social justice; and (4) for guaranteed civil rights and freedoms. The priorities are interesting, as is the deflection of criticism away from the regime to external contradictions and the role of US imperialism. Elsewhere in the article Washington is branded as the ‘main initiator of the Iranian–Iraqi war’. Kianuri also denounces the conspiracy and plot that Bani-Sadr had supposedly attempted, and lambasts the ‘divisive activity of “leftists”, Maoist-type extremists and their like’. No reference is made to the numerous communists, socialists and other dissidents who were then being persecuted, jailed, tortured or killed by the regime. The only complaint concerns harassment of the Tudeh Party itself, and of its associate, the Fedaii–Majority.

Mindful of the 1983 crackdown on the Party and the arrest of its entire leadership, one can only shake one’s head in bewilderment that such an experienced and established party could have been so wrong. Truly these were the ‘graduated lackies of clericalism’ that Lenin had criticized—whatever sympathy one might have for Tudeh members in prison. As

³² The criticism of Ehsan Tabari has been difficult to undertake because of his notable achievements as literary critic, interpreter of the Marxist classics, and translator of Malraux, Eluard and Rimbaud, among other European writers. Many anti-Tudeh leftists distinguish Tabari the Marxist writer from Tabari the party hack. It has also been difficult to write what I have because he has been in prison, an elderly man reduced to a Bukharin-like self-repudiation and conversion to Islam.

for the charge that the Party was simply following the line and analysis of its comrades to the north, Shahrouh Akhavi's study of Russian-language writings on the Iranian Revolution, the clergy and the Islamic Republic conclusively shows that Soviet perspectives were more varied, more sophisticated, and more critical of the mullahs and theocracy than the Tudeh theoreticians ever were.³³ Only now does the Party—what remains of it—and its new leadership concede that it was at best 'naive' and at worst misled by leaders such as Kianuri. Let us hope that the lessons will be learnt by other Communist parties, especially in the Middle East and parts of Africa, which have displayed a tendency to compromise democratic and socialist principles and to subordinate themselves to nationalist and anti-imperialist movements and regimes.³⁴

Prospects

While the Islamic Republic has displayed surprising strength and resilience, it is also beset by deep socio-economic contradictions and political conflicts. Serious cleavages could surface after Ayatollah Khomeini's death or the end of the war. The task facing the Left—which has been totally outside mainstream Iranian politics since 1981 (1983 for the Tudeh Party)—is to identify those areas in which it could make a new intervention with a view to social change and the transformation of the Islamic Republic.

One area is of course the continuing war with Iraq, which offers the Left an opportunity to present a strategy for peace, reconstruction and development. It goes without saying that this does not require alignment with the enemy, a principle not well understood by the Mojahedin, who have relocated from Paris to Baghdad. Another area is women's personal rights and economic status, which could be the springboard of a broad social movement against authoritarianism and for democratization. Yet another is the continuing revolt by Iranian Kurds: if the Left were to revive discussion of federalism, it could make a significant and original contribution to the long-standing question of the rights of Iran's national minorities. The organization, or reorganization, of the economy and a proper development strategy are also questions that require attention. However, a clarification and elaboration of democracy—within a socialist framework—is the most urgent and important item on the agenda. Secularism should not be taken for granted but must be carefully worked out—and analyses are necessary to show why it is requisite in a heterogeneous and modern society.

Some of the many Left journals in exile have begun to devote themselves

³³ Shahrouh Akhavi, 'Soviet Perceptions of the Iranian Revolution', *Iranian Studies*, vol. 19 no. 1, Winter 1986.

³⁴ I also have in mind the Egyptian Left today, and the recent alignment of the Socialist Party with the Muslim Brotherhood.

to these questions.³⁵ In particular, Rah-e Kargar—which was recently joined by three former members of the Tudeh Central Committee—as well as Rah-e Fedaii and individuals from other groups, appear to have a policy orientation that includes articles on trade unions and a sophisticated analysis of the housing crisis in Tehran and a socialist solution to it. Other journals tend to concentrate on translations of articles by European socialists and feminists, interviews with political activists and theorists, and literary analysis and cultural critique. This is a strong trend in part because so many of Iran's intellectuals—always an active social category including well-known poets, playwrights and writers—are in exile. Interestingly, cultural studies and activities are also a major focus inside Iran, as secular intellectuals attempt to use whatever means are available to confront the cultural crusaders (or the anti-cultural functionaries) of the Islamic Republic.³⁶

The Left, then, is down but not out. Its activity is nothing like it was in the heady days of 1979 and 1980: there are no offices, no open meetings, no rallies, forums or seminars. The organizations that remain intact—Fedaii–Minority, Fedaii–Majority, Kurdish Democratic Party, Koumaleh, Communist Party, etc.—have offices in what is called 'Daray-e Ahzab' (the valley of the parties), a liberated zone near Kirkuk, Iraq. Here they are the uneasy 'guests' of the anti-Saddam Kurdish nationalist front led by Jalal Talebani. That Talebani has also played host to Iranian Pasdaran—as part of a rapprochement with Tehran in the common struggle against Saddam Hussein—makes the situation in the valley at times quite tense. But although fighting has broken out, almost predictably, between Pasdaran and leftists, Talebani insists upon 'peace' in his territory.

In Tehran, it is possible to discern a Left presence through such signs as slogans sprayed on walls, stickers put on public telephone booths, and newspapers and flyers left on automobile windshields. But most of the activity comes in novel forms of counter-cultural expression. Some circles are composed entirely of socialists, who assemble to discuss aesthetics and political culture. Singing—Iranian folk, classical, European, American, Latin American music—is a major activity, as is the screening of films and videos. There is also a fairly consistent practice of holding parties to celebrate Iranian and international holidays. The point is to reject mourning, grieving, black flags, white shrouds, and the interminable and oppressive language of martyrdom, holy war, self-sacrifice, death. Nor is the remembrance of dead comrades conducted in the traditional manner, as the following story poignantly illustrates.

³⁵ A partial listing of Left journals published in Europe and the United States: *Aksariat* (organ of the Fedaii–Majority abroad), *Andisbeh va Enghelab* ('Thought and Revolution', Washington, D.C.), *Dowlat va Enghelab* ('State and Revolution', London), *Jaban* ('World', New York), *Kankasb* ('Inquiry', Washington, D.C.), *Kommunist* (organ of the Communist Party of Iran, re-formed in 1981 and based in Kurdistan), *Nameh-e Mardom* (Tudeh Party), *Nazm-e Novin* ('New Order', New York), *Nimeh-e Digar* ('The Other Half', a feminist journal, London), *Raba'i* ('Liberation', organ of the OCU, Berlin), *Sossialism va Enghelab* ('Socialism and Revolution', Paris), *Women in Struggle* (Chicago), *Zaman-e Now* ('New Times', Paris).

³⁶ The state of intellectual activity in Iran today is of great interest—and very important to follow. Several publishers are playing a significant role in intellectual production, particularly Agah Press, which has published several anthologies on social research and literary analysis, and *Mofid*, a new and decidedly non-Islamic magazine on the arts.

Ever since Mina {not her real name} was killed, her mother has maintained her room in exactly the same manner and condition. No one knows quite how the practice began, but whenever friends and relatives of Mina visit, they write a message on one of the walls in her room. The wall is now replete with inscriptions—from prayers to irreverent jokes, including militant socialist slogans and lines of poetry. As one recent visitor from Iran recounts the story, Mina's mother wonders what has happened to her daughter's organization. For she would like some reassurance that her daughter's efforts retain meaning and purpose, and she finds herself strangely attached to the political group that her daughter belonged to and struggled for. Mothers of dead militants and *desaparecidos* are also to be found in Tehran, and they may yet appear on the city's squares.

Some Leftists in Iran who travel abroad express dismay at the disillusionment, depoliticization and anti-socialist sentiment they encounter among many exiles. They are at pains to dispel unwarranted fears and myths (most notably, that there is no longer a Left in Iran, that no cultural-political activity is possible, or that the fate of all leftists is imprisonment, torture and death) while also providing a sober (and disturbing) picture of economic hardships in the country. As for new recruits to the Left cause, there is, apparently, a steady supply of young women and men who hear, through word of mouth, about gatherings, film showings, etc., that will be attended by Leftists, gradually becoming part of ever-growing circles. This infusion is encouraging and hopeful, but it has its negative side—at least as far as the veterans and seasoned cadres of the old organizations are concerned. For the previous generation, critical and self-critical discussion of the past and a concomitant emphasis on democracy are absolutely imperative if the old mistakes and tendencies are not to be repeated. For the novices, however, all this is new and strange; those who were thirteen in 1979 were too young for the Confederation, for underground anti-Shah activity, for revolutionary activism, for participation in the vicissitudes of the early 1980s. The young recruits do not want to discuss the past or decipher socialist democracy; they want to *act now*. This presents a problem to the older comrades, who must try to harness the energies of the young.³⁷

The spirit of some of the visitors from Iran can only be described as extraordinary, in striking contrast to the dark mood of leftists abroad. The latter is perhaps understandable: with the exception of those from elite families or with Western-tape upbringing, most find it difficult to adjust to exile and to American or English or Swedish cultures. They want to go home but are fearful—of being unable to cope or of being jailed. And so they remain abroad—in limbo.

And yet, even abroad all is not lost. The political organizations of the past have ex-members scattered throughout North America and Europe. Groups of former comrades now meet as friends in weekly or bi-weekly discussion groups; social gatherings and cultural events continue. Collectives are organized around journals which, in addition to the

³⁷ In the new journal *Kankash* (vol. 1 no. 1, summer 1987), an interview with two recent visitors from Iran describes the situation of the internal Left and the general conditions of life in the country.

themes mentioned above, always include essays on the past, the rigidity of the former political organizations, their tactical and strategic errors, the absence of democracy whether in society or in the organization, and the consequences of the neglect of Islam and culture in favour of anti-imperialism and economic dependence.

Various Iranian leftists are working on different projects: the working class, intellectual history, modernism and anti-modernism in Iran, deconstruction of the populist discourse, the history of Islam, urban and regional planning during the transition. Written by engaged intellectuals, these studies differ from the detached and straightforward accounts of most available secondary sources on Iran. There is an urgency, a commitment, a purposive bent to these works, written, as they are, by insiders who have experienced—personally and politically—the consequences of incomplete, schematic and superficial knowledge of their society. And so there is a conscious attempt to fill in the gaps, to refine existing understanding, to advance new perspectives and interpretations. Slowly, what is emerging is an emancipatory vision of genuine modernization, democratization, and the construction of a new cultural identity (or identities).

The socialist tradition in Iran has been turbulent, and marked with mistakes, tragedies and setbacks. But it has been tenacious and enduring. It is thus a major accomplishment that despite the ruptures, repression, and persistent difficulty of passing along experience and knowledge from one generation of activists to the next, Marxist and Left discourse is extensive in Iranian society. Nor is socialism associated with failed policies in power (or authoritarian politics and corruption), as it is in many other societies. Iranian socialists are as yet untested; they have still to prove themselves. For all of these reasons, it will be possible for the Left to re-enter the political arena and to define an Iranian practice, an Iranian idiom, an Iranian road to socialism.