WHAT ARE IRANIAN DEMONSTRATORS SAYING?

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Recent reporting of student demonstrations in Iran show the changed propaganda-form of TV-news. Rather than a pro-government rendering of what has happened, the media provide fragments for a story-board and plot so that whatever does happen in Iran, viewers know in advance from the pre-fabricated story-line what it all means.

Images accompanied by sound-bites are of “students demonstrating” on the streets of Tehran, calling for “democracy and pluralism” and an end to the “repressive regime” that unleashes its “special forces” violently against them. Who could doubt, whatever the outcome, the meaning of this well-seasoned scenario? Who could mistake the good guys from the bad? Not President Bush who loves the good-guys/bad-guys plot (so long as demonstrations aren’t happening in his capital city), and who steps without irony into the pre-scripted good-guy role. (Just how much of what we are seeing was plotted by his own special forces remains a matter of speculation.) Bush declares: “America supports the demonstrators”; their “struggle for freedom” is “shared with all of humanity.”

Of course we support democratization in Iran. But we need to resist, unlike Bush’s rhetoric, the media’s shortcut to understanding. Seeing the Iranian demonstrators as just like us is a narcissistic misrecognition that like all mirror-projections, quite literally gets things backwards. The political consequences are predictably disastrous: Bush takes credit for democratization in Iran (as he did for the liberation of women in Afghanistan), while the mainstream liberal Left in this country is effectively silenced.

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What is missing from the picture is history, about which the media images tell us nothing. Nor does repetition of the statement that the vast majority of the population in Iran is under thirty, a mere fact of demography implying that we are witnessing the sixties all over again (don’t trust anyone over thirty!). Despite their youth, and beyond their immediate demands to keep higher education financially accessible, the demonstrators have historical images in their minds when they take to the streets. This is not the first time that Iranian students have urged reform and the transformation of power-as-usual in their country. Each time the fate of democracy domestically has depended on global politics; at no time did the United States play an exemplary role – the kind that would convince the Iranians that they would want to be just like us.

Popular political movements peaked in Iran on three occasions during the last century: the Iranian Constitutionalist (Mashruteh) movement of 1906-11; the National Front that brought Mosaddeq to power in 1951-53; and the 1979 Revolution establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran. At stake in all of these events was the degree to which modernization and Westernization were synonymous. The former was desired; the latter threatened political autonomy. For if the West was the modern model to be emulated, it was also the imperial oppressor to be overcome. This was and remains the dilemma of Iranian politics. No one demonstrating in the streets of Iran today is innocent of the fact that to accept the Bush regime as an ally in their fight for freedom is to risk having stolen away from them exactly what they are struggling to achieve. The desire to modernize without becoming just like us resonates on every level of debate among Iran’s reformers: political, cultural, and economic. It stands in the way of an easy translation from the progressive Iranian position to that of the American Left.

Media images have a difficult time with time. We cannot see the lesson learned by the Iranian Constitutionalists of the early twentieth century - long before the West invented postmodernism or gave its blessings to post-colonial theory - that modernizers, even if inspired by the West, need to avoid “Westoxication,” Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s word for unconditional
surrender to European civilization. We view today’s events with no memory-image of the shock felt by Western powers when the National Front leader Mohammad Mosaddeq nationalized the Iranian oil industry in 1944, a move against both Soviet and Western imperial designs that made him a hero in the eyes of many in the Third World – and led to a CIA-backed coup against him.

Even our short-term memory is impaired, forgetting the enormous support of students and intellectuals for the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that rid the country of the brutally repressive shahs of the Pahlavi dynasty – whose heir-apparent is the man being promoted by the California TV station now urging Iranians to overthrow the Islamic regime. But if the fundamentalist clerics gained control of this Revolution, credit must go to the Shah himself, who, with U.S. backing, demolished the secular Left, while mistakenly presuming that from the clerics he had nothing to fear.

We are unenlightened regarding the Shi’ite Islamic renaissance of non-clerical writers in the decades before the Revolution. I have already mentioned Jalal Al-e Ahmad, writer and translator of French Literature, who learned his criticism from the West’s internal critics: Sartre, Heidegger, Kafka, Beckett, and Jünger. It was, ironically, the success of the Israel state that convinced Al-e Ahmad that theological politics was a source of strength, leading him to support a political coalition with the mass-based Shi’ite clergy, including al-Khomeini.

Few of us know the name Ali Shariati, whose lectures at Mashad University in the 1970s urged crowds of enthusiastic students to be proud of those Islamic values that the Pahlavi court dismissed. But before we conclude that Shariati was a conservative defending an alien and clashing civilization, we need to consider that his mentor was Frantz Fanon, whose revolutionary text, *Wretched of the Earth*, he translated into Persian. Shariati was influenced as well by Latin American politics, particularly the religious socialism of Liberation Theology, and
he undertook a dialogue with Western critical theory (in Paris he attended the lectures of Foucault, Aron, and Garaudy).

The books of both Al-e Ahmad and Shariati have been available in English for some time, but the Left here remains ignorant, even though they would feel at home with many of these writers’ ideas, and there would be mutual benefit from debate on issues that divide them. If, as Gramsci argued, hegemony is maintained not by the lack of opposing ideas, but by the disorganization of dissent, then one of the most pressing political tasks facing a global Left today is to disable the mute button we ourselves have engaged, and insist that those images on television be given a voice.

Knowledge of history since the advent of photography has come down to the public in the form of media images. But within the collective unconscious, they tend to detach themselves from spatial and temporal order. They are in history, but history is not in them – no option, then, but to listen to what Iranians are themselves saying, reading and debating. What TV news show will help us with this task?