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The Pre-modern Iranian Other: A Critique of Multi-culturalist Ideology

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It does not take much to realize that, concerning the topic of Iran, the lack of response and general confusion from the Left within liberal, Western democracies is deeply symptomatic. That the perplexed responses of liberals seem to be characterized by a fetishization of the Iranian Other, reducing them to an empty screen onto which the liberal ideological subject may project their fantasy, prevents the Left from acknowledging that Iranian ideology functions as an over-identification with many of the excesses which liberal ideology is so used to criticizing. The present work seeks to traverse this fantasy space, explicating the way Iran is considered to be the object-cause of liberal desire and the consequences this conception has for the Left's capacity to coherently respond to the present situation as it unfolds.

To begin, it should be noted that while liberal Western ideology is a term inclusive of several approaches, all of which possess different quilting points, we will concern ourselves with the expression of liberal ideology in multiculturalism. Like all ideologies, those of the liberal democratic West are structured around a particular object of enjoyment which may be located by interrogating their particular responses to the Other, who, in this case, is Iranian. A consideration of how this Other is related to the ideological subject's fantasy space should

expose the libidinal investment of Western ideology into the symbolic construction which they claim to compete against.

The multiculturalist response to the present situation in Iran is that the West has no place commenting on the Iranian condition, as any attempt to do so holds Iran to a Western standard. However, this attempt to establish an irreducible gap between one's particular position and that of Iranians is ultimately synonymous with a sort of

...patronizing Eurocentrist distance and/or respect for local cultures without roots in one's own particular culture. In other words, multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a 'racism with a distance' – it 'respects' the Other's identity, conceiving of the Other as a self-enclosed 'authentic' community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position. Multiculturalism is a racism which empties its own position of all positive content (the multiculturalist is not a direct racist, he doesn't oppose to the Other the *particular* values of his own culture), but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged *empty point of universality* from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures – the multiculturalist respect for the Other's specificity is the very form of asserting one's superiority. (Žižek, 2006: 171)

This multicultural assertion of distance ensures the liberal subject holds the position of the (empty) universal which is the only one capable of appreciating all cultures in their unique particularity, supposedly without asserting itself above and against them. This condescending refusal to apply any common standard of interpreting a given culture or society under the auspices of avoiding Eurocentricism secretly preserves a conception of the modern condition as unique to white, bourgeois males, while simultaneously insulating any and all acts of violence from judgment, culminating in their fetishization, as the ability to stomach the Other in their full radicality feeds into the self-righteous enjoyment derived from distancing oneself from particular cultural coordinates.

Here it is difficult not to recall Foucault's engagement with the Iranian revolution of 1979. The clearest expression of Foucault's continual assertion of a gap between the West and Iranian ideology can be seen in his referral to Iran as operating under a "regime of truth" which is wholly different from ours. (Afary and Anderson, 2005: 259) Having established this distance, Foucault can safely advise us to "admit that we Westerners would be in a poor position to give advice to the Iranians." (Ibid: 213) Ignoring the abuse of minorities in the 1979 revolution, Foucault instead characterized the revolt as spreading "without splits or internal conflicts." (Bolstering this contention, prior to Foucault's formal support of the Iranian revolution, when

Catherine von Bulow spoke of being “flabbergasted” by an Arab man who had told her to separate herself from the men at the demonstration... Foucault responded very forcefully. He shifted the issue from the treatment she had received to one of sympathy for a culture marked by an underlying homoeroticism.” (Ibid: 211) This response makes the fetishization clear, whereby the irreducible distance asserted by the liberal subject functions simultaneously as a mechanism to defend the projection of their fantasy onto the foreign Other. Returning to Foucault’s defense of Iranian chauvinism, von Bulow recalled Foucault as excusing this behavior, remarking, “they live among men. As men, they are made for men, with the fleeting bedazzlement, the brief reward of women... Those fraternal cells were based on a subtle mixture of friendship and sensuality. And sexuality... had its place there.” (Ibid) This misunderstanding was at least partially due to Foucault’s fetishist overemphasis of particular Islamic cultural practices, such as the acceptability of “kissing, hugging, and holding hands between men and between women” as social customs. (Ibid: 162) Of course, it did not help matters that Foucault’s first visits to Tunisia entailed an appreciation of sex tourism. (Macey, 1993: 184-5)

As Foucault would find out just two years later in an interview with Iranian journalist Ibrahim Nabavi, the reality of the situation was quite different, with many Iranians supporting the execution of homosexuals. (Afary and Anderson, 2005: 143) In fact, “soon after coming to power in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini established the death penalty for homosexuality. In February and March 1979 there were sixteen executions for crimes related to sexual violations.” (Ibid: 162) That Foucault had interest in bondage, domination, sadism and masochism makes his enjoyment in other particular cultural rituals, such as youths publicly flagellating themselves, (Ibid: 47) as well as his appreciation for martyrdom (Ibid: 134) and suicide (Ibid: 34) as expressions of subjectivity, all the more interesting.

The general point to be made with regard to Foucault, however, is that in his attempt to avoid committing the error of projecting Western standards onto Iran, even refusing considerations of minority rights, he nevertheless fetishized the Iranian revolution, falling prey to Orientalist logic up to the point of seeing in Iran “a place where one could look for sexual experience unattainable in Europe.” (Said, 1978: 190) For anyone familiar with Foucault’s work, especially with the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality*, it is clear that “Foucault’s ‘Orient’ seems to include the Greco-Roman world as well as the Eastern one, since the contrast he draws is primarily between tradition and modernity rather than East and West as such... In Foucault, a dualism emerges in which the pre-modern social order... is privileged over the modern Western one.” (Afary and Anderson, 2005: 18)

Again, similar to the multiculturalist's implicit claim that modernity is a condition unique to the white, bourgeois male, which is to say, similar to the multiculturalist's refusal to hold any particular culture to a universal norm of judgment,

...the image of Antiquity deployed in Foucault's last two books is *stricto sensu* phantasmic, the fantasy of a discipline which, even in its most ascetic version, needs no reference to the symbolic Law/Prohibition of pleasures without sexuality. In his attempt to break out of the vicious cycle of power and resistance, Foucault resorts to the myth of a state 'before the Fall' in which discipline was self-fashioned, not a procedure imposed by the culpabilizing universal moral order. (Žižek, 1999: 251-2)

In response to this theoretical pitfall, one should acknowledge this temptation to believe in a pre-modern order as "the necessary Romantic-naïve supplement to [Foucault's] cynical description of power relations after the Fall, where power and resistance overlap." (Ibid) In other words, Foucault's point regarding the productive and animating effects of power causes us to conclude that

...the very subject who resists these disciplinary measures and tries to elude their grasp is, in his heart of hearts, branded by them, formed by them. Foucault's ultimate example would have been the nineteenth-century workers' movement for the 'liberation of work.' As early libertarian criticisms... had already pointed out, the Worker who wanted himself liberated was the product of disciplinary ethics, that is, in his very attempt to get rid of the domination of Capital, he wanted to establish himself as the disciplined worker who works for himself, who is fully his own master (and thus loses the right to resist, since he cannot resist himself...). (Ibid)

With regard to Foucault and the liberal subject, this amounts to a recognition that the attempt access the enjoyment of the Other's (particular) culture, as well as the enjoyment of asserting oneself as the (empty) universal, requires the liberal subject to erase their own particular identity and to refuse the Other's ability to do so by blackmailing them with a particular remainder or stain which is fetishized.

Furthermore, this analysis holds true in the context of Islamic ideology insofar as particular political content is sacrificed in the attempt to identify with the (universal) Islamic movement. This was seen in the willingness of workers as well as women and other minorities to subordinate their interest to the empty signifier that is 'Islamic government' during the Khomeini revolution. That "there is no single hermeneutics of Islam as such" (Postel, 2006: 114) enables Iranian ideology to absorb a general malcontent, to the point of being "heralded as the

savior of the oppressed, the only state in the Middle East fighting colonialism, standing up to the United States and Israel.” (Baer, 2008: 40) Completing our juxtaposition, it is this same emptiness which also allows the regime to hold all individuals accountable for a particular remainder or stain which exposes their heretical and treacherous desire.

In both of these cases, that of the multiculturalist fearful of Eurocentricism and the nationalist fearful of foreign plots, there is a fixation on the Other as having access to a prohibited form of enjoyment, thereby marking a fantasy space.

What we gain by transposing the perception of inherent social antagonisms into the fascination with the Other (Jew, Japanese, etc.) is the fantasy-organization of desire. The Lacanian thesis that enjoyment is ultimately always enjoyment of the Other, i.e. enjoyment supposed, imputed to the Other, and that, conversely, the hatred of the Other's enjoyment is always the hatred of one's own enjoyment, is perfectly exemplified by this logic of the “theft of enjoyment.” What are fantasies about the Other's special, excessive enjoyment – about the black's superior sexual potency and appetite, about the Jew's or Japanese's special relationship toward money and work – if not precisely *so many ways, for us, to organize our own enjoyment?* Do we not find enjoyment precisely in fantasizing about the Other's enjoyment, in the ambivalent attitude toward it? Do we not obtain satisfaction by means of the very supposition that the Other enjoys in a way inaccessible to us? Does not the Other's enjoyment exert such a powerful fascination because in it we represent to ourselves our innermost relationship toward enjoyment? And, conversely, is the Anti-Semitic capitalist's hatred toward the Jew not hatred of the excess that pertains to capitalism itself[?] (Žižek, 1993: 206)

In our aforementioned examples, the logic of the “theft of enjoyment” can clearly be seen in the notion of the pre-modern Other still capable of directly and authentically relating to their closed community absent any sort of mediated self-consciousness, as well as in the notion of the imperialist foreign plots designed to upset the glorious destiny of the Persian empire, if not the destiny of all of Islam. The crucial thing to keep in mind here is that “the hatred of the Other's enjoyment is always the hatred of one's own enjoyment.” (Ibid) Or, to recapitulate, is not the multiculturalist attempt to purge the world of all traces of political incorrectness, unto the point of refusing to acknowledge universal standards of rights, an expression of the longing to return to an organic and enclosed community where one may be explicitly prejudiced? And what of Iranian ideology? Does not the continual purging of traitors convicted of foreign conspiracies express a longing for a legitimate voice in the international arena and a simultaneous hatred of Iran's need to exert foreign influence only by proxy warfare as carried out by Hamas, Hezbollah and other Shia guerilla groups?

This analysis can even be applied to the conservative ideology of the West. Does the anger inspired by Ahmadinejad's referencing "inalienable nuclear rights" not come from the enjoyment of experiencing the possession of nuclear arms as inalienable? (Ahmadinejad 2009: unpaginated) The same can also be said of criticizing the terrorist or 'proxy' tactics of Iran. Is the anger directed toward such actions not an expression of the conservative desire to return to a pre-liberal space in which 'anything goes,' where Western states may engage in terrorist activities while claiming there is no (international) Law, or 'rules of the game?' And what to make of the newly developed consciousness of Western conservatives' which suddenly inspires their hatred of women's rights abuses in Iran?

Liberal ideology may certainly be well aware of these clumsy inconsistencies within conservative ideology. Indeed, it is largely due to Ahmadinejad's ability to blackmail the Left with this conservative baggage that there is so little being said by the Left on the topic of Iran. Exemplary here is the question of how to respond to Ahmadinejad's method of criticizing policies by comparing them to those of the Bush administration. (Ahmadinejad 2009: unpaginated) In response to this blackmail by way of over-identifying with liberal ideology, the Left should remember that this attempt to return to a primordial, 'authentic' community already signifies the exposure of Iran to whatever modernity is. "It is a *reaction* to the universal dimension of the world market – as such, it occurs on its terrain, against its background. For that reason, what we are dealing with in these phenomena is not a 'regression' but rather the form of appearance of its exact opposite: a kind of 'negation of negation,' *this very reassertion of 'primordial' identification signals that the loss of organic-substantial unity is fully consummated.*" (Žižek, 2006: 169) Thus the threat to be avoided is that of placing Iran within a pre-modern field where the Iranian regime cannot be judged by the West. As has been seen, such a fantasy betrays a more insidious form of patronizing Eurocentric distance while also preventing any response to or judgment regarding Iran, thereby turning the depoliticizing nature of multiculturalism against the Western Left.

What's more, and perhaps most importantly, such a perspective is simply wrong. Jalal Al-Ahmad's *Plagued by the West*, one of the first and still one of the most influential commentaries on the use of militant Islam, obviously operated as a *response* to the West.

Al-Ahmad saw Islam as the only remaining barrier to Western capitalism and rampant consumerism. *Plagued by the West* blended a Nietzschean critique of modern technology with a Marxian one of alienated labor, also attacking the cultural hegemony of the West. The text was peppered with references to Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Franz Kafka. (Afary and Anderson, 2005: 59)

Another excellent example of a direct engagement with the modern condition on the part of Iranian ideologues can be seen in Ali Shariati, “one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of his generation... Shariati’s reinterpretation of jihad and martyrdom was influenced by his philosophical studies in France, though he also claimed to present an ‘authentic Islam.’” (Ibid) “Shariati introduced an existentialist reading of the Karbala narrative that was also informed by Heidegger’s work. He elevated the concept of martyrdom above all else and called it the defining moment of Shi’ism.” (Ibid: 60)

In light of the literature which is circulating amongst the Iranian Left, the notion of a pre-modern Iran becomes even more ridiculous. In an interview with Danny Postel, Iranian intellectual Ramin Jahanbegloo described the Iranian Left as concerned with the texts of Habermas and Kant, as well as Arendt and Marx. (Postel, 2006: 82-6) Jahanbegloo even points out a “group of young intellectuals who seem to be very much influenced by the works of Derrida, Foucault, Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek.” (Ibid: 90)

The first consequence of mitigating this supposedly irreducible gap between Iran and modernity is the opening of the possibility of solidarity between the Iranian and Western Left. This dialogical engagement between intellectuals and ideologues is not only inevitable, it is also definitively modern, as “modernity is fundamentally about the reflexive making of history, and in this process the struggle for mutual recognition occupies the most important place.” (Ibid: 96) The second consequence of mitigating this gap is the ability of the Left to reconsider the topic of Iran without being blackmailed by the depoliticizing multicultural distance which prevents judgment. As a result, instead of the Left experiencing Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric as ‘taking the words out of their mouths’ and leaving them speechless, the Western Left should over-identify with Ahmadinejad’s over-identification, tightly tying him to the letter of his overtly shallow and cynical ideological paradigm. The “raw anti-colonial message that barely disguises its quest for Iranian domination in the Middle East,” must be revealed to be an imperialist exporting of militant Islam carried out by guerilla organizations which receive support from Iran. (Baer, 2008: 43) Any and all references to ‘inalienable nuclear rights’ should be met with inquiries into the status of the inalienable rights of the individuals who function as foundational support for the current Iranian regime and supplemented with a refusal by Leftists to be blackmailed by their conservative counterparts as expressed in the acknowledgement that there is no ‘inalienable right’ to nuclear weapons or power. Also of critical importance is that the West attempt to undermine Ahmadinejad’s (paranoid) fantasy support as determined by the Other of foreign plots. To this end, attempts should be made to connect directly with the Iranian Left, as well as the Iranian people more generally. Furthermore, some willingness to make concessions should

be considered as a mechanism to oblige the current regime to explain why Iran experiences international isolation.

One of the easiest ways to traverse the fantasy space of a given ideology's conception of the Other is to notice how this Other is at once incapable of stealing the object-cause of desire – which can only be accessed by the ideology in question, of course – and to notice how this Other simultaneously always threatens to take this object from us. A prime example of this logic can be seen in the concern over immigration in the United States, where foreigners are at once over-productive, hard-working to the point of threatening all job security, and overly-lazy, to the point of functioning as parasites on the social body who contribute nothing back to it. Similarly, Iran can be said to function along the same axis if we replace the object with modernity itself: Iran seems incapable of entering into the sphere of modernity, as any multiculturalist will be sure to emphasize, and yet, as any conservative will claim, in light of Iran's control over such a huge percent of the world's oil supply, as well as their refusal to engage in secular politics and attempts to develop nuclear technology, Iran threatens to disintegrate modernity itself. Both of these alternatives should be rejected as falling prey to the same fantastic projection to be avoided. Instead, the Left should simply advocate dialogue with Iran in the broadest sense, acknowledging this (inevitable) dialogical exchange as being constitutive of the modern condition while also being weary of the way in which Leftist refusal to address Iran only leaves a culpable void to be filled by more conservative ideologies which, in turn, feed Ahmadinejad's paranoid ideology of anti-imperialism.

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