

The Iranian Political Language

The Iranian Political Language
From the Late Nineteenth
Century to the Present

Yadullah Shahibzadeh

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THE IRANIAN POLITICAL LANGUAGE
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Preface

For a long time, the Soviet Union was criticized for politicizing aspects of life that were not political by nature. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decay of Marxism, *politics* as such began to get a bad reputation. Islamism was severely criticized because it represented the synthesis of Islam and politics. Because of politics' bad reputation, many intellectuals of Muslim origin advocated a politics-free Islam or minimized its association with politics. Contrary to these Muslim intellectuals, many scholars of Islam argued that Islam's politics is inseparable from its historical formation. They argue that Islam built a state and succeeded in expanding it as a powerful world empire. Here, the state and power are confused with politics. The claim of this book is that politics is not about power but democracy. Politics is the activity of individuals and social groups that address the unjust nature of their situation and demand equal rights with those who govern the situation. The rights that these people demand may or may not be inscribed in the legal and constitutional documents supposed to supervise the situation. As a result, the people may demand the rights that are already inscribed in the legal documents or may demand that such documents be written. Every expression of politics begins with a critique of the situation within which a group of people is entrapped and from which its members intend to be liberated. Immanuel Kant defined critique as the condition of possibility of human emancipation from ignorance. Later reflections on critique have argued that emancipation from ignorance is the precondition for social and political emancipation. The Kantian conception of critique became the foundation of human and social sciences because it reveals the truth about the social and political domination in a given situation. Critique is supposed to generate valid knowledge, intellectual enlightenment, or social and political consciousness toward political liberty and social equality. Human and social sciences differ from one another concerning the ways they classify particular situations

of domination as their own territory and the way they employ critique to produce knowledge or consciousness of the situation. Valid knowledge and consciousness are the names of the truths of the situations within which human beings are supposed to have been entrapped. These truths, if revealed, are considered to be the precondition for the emancipation of man from various situations of domination. For a long time, a critique of the situations of domination has included a critique of the ideology that masked the reality of the situations beneath their appearance. The practical consequence of *the critique of ideology* was a *universal ethics of consciousness*. Whereas the critique of ideology enabled social and human sciences to theorize the universal aspects of the local social and political struggles throughout the world, the ethics of consciousness encouraged a *politics of universal commonality*. The politics of universal commonality represented these struggles as episodes of the human emancipation in the drama of human history. The critique of ideology reached its peak in the early 1960s. From the 1960s on, a new form of critique emerged. This new critique made the critique of ideology the object of its critique. It reminded the critique of ideology that the truth of a situation was a part of the ideology from which no social subject could escape. It argued that since the ideology functions at the level of the subject's unconsciousness, it protects the continuity of the situation. The new critique resulted in an *ethics of unconsciousness* that considered the political struggles around the world as the war between different *politics of identities*. It was not by accident that former advocates of the extreme left in France such as Bernard Henri-Lévy began to promote an ethics of human rights as a new universal commonality (*La Barbarie à Visage Humain*, 1977). Lévy argued that not only revolutionary politics, but politics in its entirety was a threat to human rights. Thus, he defended the liberal state as the only guarantor of human rights. Henri-Lévy's argument indicates that there is no violation of human rights if politics does not exist. This ethics of human rights was inspired by and explained through Michel Foucault and many others' critique of the critique of ideology and the ethics of unconsciousness it disseminated. Henri-Lévy and several other young French intellectuals who defended the ethics of human rights against politics became known as the neo-philosophers or media-philosophers in France in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The French neo-philosophers can be viewed as the chief authors of the current neo-conservative ideological order that dominates not only the public spheres of European countries but also their academic preoccupation with the Middle East. These intellectual, theoretical, or discursive changes provided the intellectual foundation of Andre Gulcksmann's *Les Maître Penseurs* (1977) as

well as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Glucksmann was a significant figure among the French neo-philosophers. Said's critique of the neo-philosophers' political stance in the 1980s and 1990s does not change the fact he shared their epistemological foundations and their ethics of unconsciousness. What we are witnessing since the late 1970s is no more than different twists within the critique of the critique of ideology and its ethics of unconsciousness.

Slavoj Žižek expresses the ironic nature of the new ventures within the discourse of the critique of ideology. Žižek argues that ideology inscribed in the unconsciousness controls not only the social subjects' actions but also their fantasies and political imaginations. However, he refuses to infer an ethics of unconsciousness from his conception of ideology and mocks the discourse of human rights and tolerance. Žižek has become, according to his presenters, the Elvis of Philosophy or Cultural Theory. What is the function of Žižek's critique of ideology in the contemporary world? Žižek's discourse is about the vicious circle of ideology that does not allow social subjects to take part even in an imaginary freedom because they lack the required political imagination. The dominant ideology shapes their imagination. The portrayal of Žižek as the Elvis of human or social sciences is an indication of a profound truth regarding the status of critique in the contemporary world: it is a form of entertainment.

The critique of ideology inscribed in the unconsciousness has made decisive impacts on Middle Eastern studies. It enabled the scholars of the Middle East to hold a critical posture toward orientalism while approving the concept of political culture through their extensive use of the concept in the study of history and politics of the region. Neoorientalism is, in fact, an expression of the epistemological and pragmatic consequences of the critique of orientalism. It assumes that ideology is inscribed in the unconsciousness of the Middle Eastern social subjects expressed in their political culture. The ethics of the critique of ideology inscribed in the unconsciousness promotes human rights and tolerance. The ethics of human rights is in opposition to democracy as the expression of politics.

In this book I have tried to refrain from the critique of ideology in its various forms. The critiques of ideology represent the people of the region in general, and the Iranian people in particular, as the creatures of need and suffering, unable to think and say anything meaningful about the world we share. This book refrains from using the concept of political culture because it has no intention of locating the corrupt and repressive nature of particular governments or making the local people's yearning for

“democratic transitions” public. The problem with the concept of democratic transition is that it presupposes the intervention of a third party in the Middle Eastern situation. The third party is supposed to educate the local people and their rulers in understanding the meaning of democracy and the value of human rights. It is supposed that this political education furnishes the local people with the ability to build their own democracy and enjoy their human rights protected by a good government. The third party is described either as a disinterested agent or the one whose concerns and interests correspond to the concerns and interests of the local people. The disinterested party includes many Western scholars of the Middle East, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and journalists who well-meaningly promote democracy in the region. The disinterested party knows very well that the political education it gives to the local people and the “democratic discourse” it offers cannot guarantee the building of democracy in the region. Thus, the political education and the democratic discourse should address the concerns and interests of a superior guarantor of democracy in the region. The need for a superior guarantor of democracy leads the authors of the democratic discourse on the Middle East to convince the Western governments that it is in their interests to promote democracy in the region. In a very peculiar manner, these advocates of democracy distinguish between good and bad politics, and good and bad democracies. Whereas the bad politics and democracies contradict the concerns and interests of the Western governments, the good politics and democracies converge with those concerns and interests. During the Arab uprisings, the advocates of the “demoralization process” in the region constructed dichotomies between the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the post-revolutionary politics, and the Egyptian uprisings and the post-Mubarak politics. The former was supposed to represent bad politics and democracy; the latter signified good politics and democracy. Before, or rather during, the preparation for the 2013 coup d’état in Egypt, the scholars of the Middle East were divided between the advocates of the secular Egyptians and the Islamist ones. As many scholars were trying hard to convince their governments to support their favorite political factions, the military coup supported by one faction overthrew the only democratically elected government in Egypt’s history. While the Western governments remained totally silent, a great number of scholars defending the “secular Egyptians” either described the military coup as a necessary move in the “democratization process” or became noiseless. One did not need to be a specialist in Egyptian politics to have understood the anti-democratic nature of the coup that was forming. One had to know a little about the 1953 coup in Iran. The

main problem with the interpretation of the Egyptian popular uprising was that even its well-intended interpreters were unable to detect cases of universality in the uprising. Of course, they came with many compliments about how inspiring the Egyptian uprising was for a number of popular protests around the world. However, they failed to discover any trace of universality or elements of commonality in the Iranian and Egyptian experiences of politics, revolution, and democracy. Those who tried to connect the Egyptian uprising to Iran through the green movement ignored the fact that the green movement was an expression of fidelity to the ideals of the 1979 Revolution and the democratic promises of its constitution.

The contention of this book is that democracy is neither a way of life nor a form of government, but the expression of politics. As a result, no one can be educated in democracy and its values. This book is the study of democracy as the expression of politics in a historical perspective. It examines various moments and events of Iranian politics regardless of their happening to individuals or collectivities. The significant moments of politics in Iran constitute a repertoire of political signs, or a political language. The history of this political language demonstrates the inseparability of politics and critique. This history shows that the Iranian people have remained faithful to critique as the condition of possibility of their emancipation as well as the emancipation of anyone and everyone from the situations of social and political domination.

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