

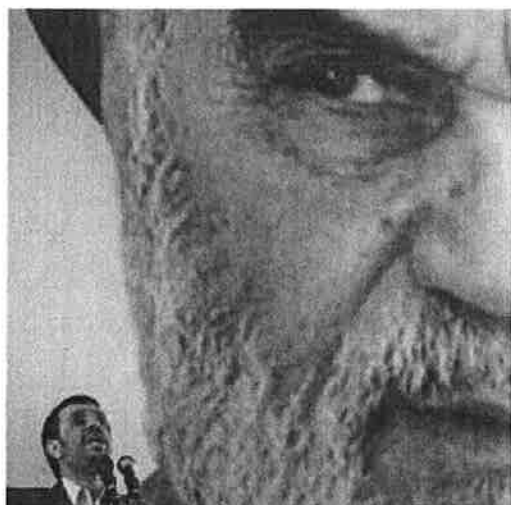
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Desperate Dictatorship

The slow crack-up of the Islamic Republic.

Abbas Milani September 14, 2011 | 10:37 pm



Then They Came For Me: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity and Survival

By Maziar Bahari with Aimee Molloy

(Random House, 356 pp., \$27)

Let the Swords Encircle Me: Iran - A Journey Behind the Headlines

By Scott Peterson

(Simon & Schuster, 732 pp., \$32)

After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successor

By Saïd Amir Arjomand

(Oxford University Press, 268 pp., \$24.95)

Political Islam, Iran, And the Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair

By Ali Mirsepassi

(Cambridge University Press, 230 pp., \$85)

I.

For the regime in Iran, opacity in politics, dissimulation in discourse, and the obfuscation of the structure and the intent of power, is at once an existential necessity and a cunning strategy. It is partially intended to trick and to confuse the “enemy,” and partially the inevitable result of the complicated and hazy web of overlapping institutions, committees, bureaucratic and clerical fiefdoms, and broken promises that have, since the regime’s inception in 1979, defined its organization and its behavior.

When a regime calls itself a republic— and thus by implication accepts Machiavelli’s notion of the necessity of acquired legitimacy, Montesquieu’s ideas about separation of powers, and Rousseau’s theory of social contract—but is in fact a *Velayat-e Faqih*, or a form of governance based on the medieval notion of divine legitimacy, which includes the idea that this regime accepts

only the absolute and unimpeachable guardianship of a religious jurist, or spiritual leader, allegedly anointed by God, and considers the people as “minors” in need of guardianship, then this “republic” must make itself opaque, so as to hide its stark philosophical contradictions and historical anachronisms.

When a regime clumsily rigs a presidential election, as this regime did in 2009 in favor of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was in those days Ayatollah Khamenei’s favorite candidate, and hours before the polls are closed declares him a winner, and then kills dozens and imprisons thousands and exiles hundreds for the “sin” of questioning the legitimacy of that election—and then less than two years later accuses that same president of the “black arts” and devil worship, financial and sexual corruption (one of Ahmadinejad’s advisers stands accused of raping 340 virgins during the last year!), and rigging the election by buying nine million votes using government funds—when, in other words, the “favorite son” of the Leader is pushed to the brink of impeachment only months after his “election” had been celebrated by the same Leader as divinely ordained, then opacity and a politics of Orwellian doublespeak is inevitable.

When a regime calls itself the Islamic Republic of Iran, but the Leader actually claims to be *Amir-al Momenin*, the Ruler of All Believers, and makes this audacious claim in spite of the fact that Shiites, the majority in Iran, are but a small minority in the Sunni-majority world of Islam, then opacity in discourse and demeanor, coupled with a certain brazenness, must follow. The self-righteous grandiosity and the expansionist vision implicit in Khamenei’s claimed leadership of the entire Islamic world is equally evident in the name chosen for the regime’s praetorians: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Absent from the title is any mention of Iran.

When a regime makes a concentrated effort to take up the banner of anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli rhetoric, yet is more than willing to accept Israel’s help in procuring arms for its beleaguered army during its long war with Iraq in the 1980s, then the opacity becomes grotesque. And when a regime spends billions of dollars on its nuclear program, and proves willing to forgo tens of billions more in lost economic opportunities for the sake of this program, and in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary claims that nuclear energy is the sole purpose of that program, and when after years of promises and threats it has been unable to fully operate the reactor, then opacity—and a sophisticated game of lies and obfuscations—likewise becomes a tactical necessity, almost a cognitive habit.

What further complicates the already daunting task of unraveling the mysteries of today’s Iran, particularly for books that rely primarily on interviews, are two self-serving theological concepts that allow—indeed, demand—that the pious Shiite lie, cheat, and deceive in the service of the faith and the faithful. The first is *tagiyeh*, a concept unique to Shiism that is similar to the idea of equivocation, and the second is *khodee*, or tricks of war. More than once, Ayatollah Khomeini himself used these concepts to “explain” broken promises and ignored contracts with the people of Iran.

The most important of those broken promises was about the domestic politics of Iran. In the critical months before the revolution of 1979, Khomeini had taken on the posture of a Gandhi-like figure, spiritual in attitude, otherworldly in goals. With the intellectual discipline of someone with a monomaniacal, Lenin-like thirst for power, Khomeini in those early days never even once referred to his real goal of creating a *Velayat-e Faqih*. Instead he promised never to take a position in power, or to allow the clergy to take direct political roles. But today, more than thirty years later, virtually every key political position in the country is occupied by the clergy. The rudiments of a new kind of apartheid are put in place, wherein the clergy and their cohorts battle for shares of power but the majority of the society is denied any real role in determining the future of the country.

When we further take into account the geostrategic significance of Iran, it is not hard to understand why “explaining” Iran and Shiism has become something of a cottage industry in the West. For centuries, the study of Shiism was a minor, often ignored footnote to Oriental studies of Islam in the Western academy. Since the revolution of 1979 in Iran, however, explicating the mysteries of power in Islamic Iran and the characteristics of Iranian Shiism—called the Twelvers, or *Ithna Ashari*, for their belief in twelve Imams who are direct descendants of the prophet and are the sole legitimate rulers, and for their belief that, the twelfth Imam having gone into occultation, the clergy are his sole representative and should rule in his name—has become a major preoccupation of Western journalists and academicians.

And now four books from four different perspectives—two by journalists and two by scholars—attempt to lay bare the labyrinth of politics in Iran, to decode and decipher the nature of power in the country, to offer theoretical models or carefully culled anecdotes for understanding the tempo of Iranian life and the character of Iranian politics. Saïd Amir Arjomand is a respected scholar who has been writing about politics in Islamic Iran for as long as the regime has existed, and his approach is rooted in Weberian sociology. Ali Mirsepassi is of a younger generation of scholars, steeped in the language of postmodern criticism and theory, trying to discuss the “darker side of Iran’s encounter” with modernity. Scott Peterson is a seasoned journalist and war correspondent, here attempting to record the discourse and the demeanor of some of the regime’s most stalwart supporters, what he calls “true believers.” And Maziar Bahari is a young and talented Iranian-born journalist who has written for *Newsweek*. He spent 118 days in prisons of the Islamic regime, some of it in solitary confinement.

II.

A JOURNALIST IN JAIL might be an anomaly in the civilized world, but Iran imprisons journalists regularly and with apparent impunity. Bahari was fortunate. His plight became a *cause célèbre*, with the media bringing attention to his travails and to the egregious behavior of the regime that incarcerated him. *Then They Came For Me*, an important and elegant book, is Bahari’s story, a prison memoir enlarged into a family history—an Iranian family that is middle-class in income, traditionally leftist in politics, with more than their fair share of defiantly determined and erudite women.

Careful readers of Bahari’s story will uncover behind the facts of his family history an important generational change. This change lies at the root of the Iranian democratic movement’s remarkable tenacity, its aversion to violence and utopia, its desire to reform Iran rather than make it into a “perfect” model of Marxist, Islamic, or liberal ideals. Bahari made his name as a journalist covering the Green Movement—the democratic movement that came into existence to protest the election fraud in June 2009—and himself embodies the change that he was sent to Tehran to write about. His father and his grandfather had served terms in prison as communists. His father had been a member of the dogmatically Stalinist Tudeh Party, while his sister spent six years in prison after the revolution for membership in the same party—a party that was, until its decimation by the regime, a stalwart supporter of the regime.

But Maziar Bahari rejected the political legacy of his family and never fell into the trap of utopian or totalitarian ideology. He admired his sister, who later died of cancer, but refused to follow in her political footsteps. He became a cosmopolitan young man, as much at home in the world of “Six Feet Under” and Leonard Cohen as with the poetry of Rumi and Hafez. His youth in Iran, before leaving for England, is a case study of the generation that made history in June 2009 by coming out in the streets in millions, demanding their democratic rights. What is now called an Arab Spring arguably saw its first blossoms in Tehran two years earlier.

The book’s atmosphere is captured in its opening words: “I could smell him before I saw him.” The “him” whose “scent was a mixture of sweat and rosewater” was a thirty-one-year-old man whom we come to know only as Mr. Rosewater. In Iran, rosewater was once a sign of piety, of poor men and women who had gone to mosques and shrines and received a whiff of rosewater to overwhelm bodily odors found in those cramped compounds. Like many other signs and symbols of piety disfigured by this regime, even rosewater has become a menacing olfactory signature of the regime’s thugs and militia. Mr. Rosewater claimed that he had “earned a master’s degree in political science from Tehran University,” once Iran’s top academic institution, reserved for the country’s best and brightest, who earned a place only if they scored among the very highest on the national college entrance exam. Today, Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) and Basij commanders and members have a quota set aside for them at every university, including Tehran University. They need not score high on the exam to attend one of the country’s universities; they need not even take an exam. The IRGC has even set up a university of its own, where doctorates in “strategic studies” are given to commanders craving a title to accompany their power.

Mr. Rosewater was “at least six foot two and fat, with thick glasses,” and he was Bahari’s torturer and interrogator. In the inferno of Iranian jails, those two words—torturer and interrogator—have become synonymous. Torture is given not just a theological veneration and legitimacy—often called *taazir*—but it is deemed to be even an act of worship, rewarded by the good Lord. Maybe that is why all torturers and guards call each other “Seyyed,” usually a coveted title in Islamic societies reserved for those claiming

direct descent from the prophet. In prison, the title was a security tool, a way of concealing the identities of the guards and the torturers, but also a way of conferring a kind of sanctity upon the infamy that they committed on a daily basis. During the Shah's years, the interrogators of SAVAK, the secret police, called each other "doctor." What torturers call themselves in prisons can tell us much about the claimed values of the despotic societies they serve.

In the prisons of the Islamic regime, even a journalist with the prestige of Newsweek behind him is made to feel helpless. And ironically, in spite of the regime's anti-colonial braggadocio, Bahari was helpless not because he was a journalist—though Iran has the infamy of being the country with the highest number of journalists in prison—but because he was an Iranian-born journalist. This regime that is increasingly controlled and run by foul-mouthed bullies—Bahari provides a litany of the foul language they used during his jailing—understands only the language of power. If Bahari were not an Iranian-born journalist, Mr. Rosewater and the regime he represents would either not have jailed him or not kept him in prison for so long.

They kept Bahari in prison because he was Iranian. By the time of the last presidential elections in Iran, there were around five hundred journalists working for the international press in Iran. They included Maziar Bahari, and Nazila Fathi of *The New York Times*, and Babak Dehghanpisheh of *Newsweek*, and Farnaz Fassihi of *The Wall Street Journal*: Iranian born world-class journalists who knew the local language and did not need "translators" and minders—many of whom are members of the Intelligence Ministry, who keep a close eye on the journalists' every move. They could easily mix in crowds, and they understood the cultural and linguistic nuances of every move the regime made.

Western journalists were bullied by having their visas rescinded or their entry visas refused. Even when they were allowed into Iran, regime handlers knew the mettle of each journalist and, according to Bahari, "carefully chose" those who were "allowed to ask questions" from regime leaders. Refusing an entry visa, or refusing the chance to interview anyone of import, has been one of the regime's methods for intimidating foreign journalists.

But the regime needed to frighten native-born international journalists as well. As Bahari indicates, the decision to arrest him was part of an elaborate plan to intimidate such journalists and sully the reputation of Iran's democratic movement by alleging that it was in cahoots with these subversives. In the regime's paranoid view, the leaders of the Iranian democracy movement, like the media outlets of the West, were lackeys of the CIA, the Mossad, or British intelligence. In implementing this scenario, the regime had initially toyed with the idea of arresting Fathi of *The New York Times*, but eventually Bahari emerged as a more suitable candidate for the sordid scenario. His arrest was a shot across the bow for all Iranian-born journalists working for international media outlets. The message was simple enough: in Iran, we can punish and torture you the same way we punish and torture ordinary Iranian citizens. Iran does not recognize dual citizenship, and so Iranian-born journalists working in Iran were considered Iranian, regardless of their passports, and therefore bereft of the normal protections enjoyed by foreign-born journalists. Not long after Bahari's ordeal, nearly all other Iranian-born journalists working for outlets such as *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times* left Iran.

Bahari's story also illustrates another point. His release was a decision made by Khamenei himself, and only after international pressure began to build and the Leader calculated that the "benefits" of freeing Bahari outweighed the costs of keeping him. Bahari's reporting on this aspect of his experience shows the degree to which Khamenei micromanages the country's affairs—and also demonstrates incontrovertibly that the regime does respond to international pressure, but only when the pressure is serious and unrelenting.

They arrested Bahari on June 21, 2009. Mr. Rosewater and three others had a warrant signed by "Judge" Saeed Mortazavi, who is now as infamous as Sadegh Khalkhali, the "Hanging Judge," a cleric from the revolution's murderous early days and a close disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini, who appointed Khalkhali to head the first Islamic Revolutionary Courts. He sent thousands to their death after summary trials. In replacing the infamous Khalkhali in a regime known for its bloody kangaroo courts, Mortazavi had big shoes to fill, but fill them he did. He came to be called "the executioner of the press." He "once closed down a newspaper for promoting moral corruption after it had published a photograph of an old man dancing in a park": melancholy, Shiite clerics have declared, is a sign of Godliness, and mirth is the way of the devil. And Mortazavi's jurisdiction was not limited to journalists. He has been responsible for the torture and death of hundreds of dissidents.

Bahari has an acute eye for details. He notes that the notorious Evin prison—where he was held, where thousands have been killed and tortured—“buys secondhand chairs from the Ministry of Education” to furnish its interrogation rooms. That strange practice is driven not by economic considerations, but by Khomeini’s pledge that “prisons would be transformed into schools in the Islamic government.... [A]uthorities in Evin seemed to take their leader’s advice quite literally.” Bahari also reports that the deed to his elderly mother’s house was used as bail for his release, and since he left Iran and began to write about what had befallen him in prison, his mother has been “to this day ... periodically” threatened with the immediate confiscation of her house. He writes of how, in spite of having lost her husband, her eldest son, and her daughter in short order, his mother did not panic or relent when threatened with eviction, but instead continued to encourage her son to continue his campaign against “the *ashghal*” —“this garbage,” her term for the regime.

III.

SCOTT PETERSON’S BOOK is a congeries of anecdotes and interviews about contemporary Iran, each intended to shed light on some aspect of the many paradoxes that define the troubled country. His title refers to the legends about the battle of Karbala in 680 C.E., the founding event in Shiism’s history, when Hussein, the third Imam of Shiism, was killed, and before being martyred declared that if Islam would “only endure with my death, then oh, let the swords encircle me.” There followed from this pronouncement the cult of martyrdom that has always been a part of Shiism and its proclivity for violence.

Peterson seems to have taken to heart the methodological advice of Clifford Geertz, the most astute American observer of the Muslim world, who warned against the perils of using a priori concepts and models, derived from observations of the West, to describe the different and shifting realities of societies such as Iran. The corollary of this methodology is not to usurp the right of others to speak for or represent themselves; and the range of people whom Peterson has interviewed is impressively wide and varied—from the “servant of Khomeini who saw him several times a day” to “the black American convert to Islam who was born David Belfield” but now lives in Tehran and was recruited in the early 1980s by the regime “to kill a Shah-era diplomat in Bethesda, Maryland.” (Peterson reminds us that the regime has killed hundreds of its opponents abroad.) Peterson also interviewed a number of powerful politicians in Iran, and Iran experts living inside and outside the country.

From the kaleidoscope of these characters and the events they describe, Peterson offers an image of a society beset with structural problems and political paradoxes. Iranian society today is a predominantly youthful, cosmopolitan, Internet-savvy population of men and (increasingly assertive) women who are ruled by a dour generation of septuagenarian men perfectly personified by Khomeini, who famously declared that “Allah did not create man so that he could have fun. The aim of creation was for mankind to be put to the test through hardship and prayer.... There are no jokes in Islam. There is no humor in Islam. There is no fun in Islam.” While Tehran is the scene of a vibrant musical underground—somewhat reminiscent of Prague before the Velvet Revolution, with its rock and jazz expressions of dissent—Khamenei has more than once expressed his opposition to music. Peterson recounts how during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, from 1997 to 2005, his Ministry of Intelligence was often a safe haven for these rock bands. Under Ahmadinejad, needless to say, this is no longer the case.

One of the premises of Peterson’s book is that “to understand the forces that drive revolutionary Iran requires entering the world of the True Believer.” This is both true and false. On the one hand, the current regime in Iran is akin to the Brezhnev-era Soviet Union. The profession of the faith was then in Moscow, and is today in Tehran, more a key to power than an accurate picture of what is actually believed. Even the Iranian revolution of 1979 cannot be entirely explained in terms of “true believers”: a political explanation is also necessary, one that reveals the genealogy and the morphology of the unwieldy coalition that came together to overthrow the Shah—the strange union of the advocates and the enemies of modernity, fervent feminists and pious patriarchs, Stalinist advocates of state domination and merchants of the bazaar unrelenting in their support for merchant capital.

But thirty-two years after the seizure of power by the clergy, that coalition is badly broken. Much of it is united in the democratic movement against the brute power of the IRGC and Khamenei. But in a time when duplicity is institutionalized as it is in Iran today—when what Milosz, describing Stalinist Poland, referred to as *Ketman* has become a fact of daily life, and professed piety, feigned or real but submissive to the will of the Leader, is a precondition for power and its perks—discerning the “true believers” from phony ones is difficult. When someone has to rely on the services of a translator, as Peterson did, the difficulty of this

discernment is increased. Today hundreds of thousands of Iranians claim to have joined the regime's coercive institutions such as the Basij and the IRGC. Leaders of the Basij have claimed more than twelve million members! But how many of those are "true believers," and how many have joined only for the practical benefits of their acquiescence, from admission to university for themselves or their children to guaranteed income and the parasitical entrepreneurship of the IRGC? It is hard to say. Peterson is himself aware of this difficulty. Many Iranians, he writes, are masters of "deception" who know "how to manipulate the system to get" what they want. Bahari and Peterson provide fascinating examples of the cracks in the façade of this camp of "true believers." We read about members of the IRGC who use their privileged position to get their children out of the country.

And as developments in Iran in the last few months have shown, today's "true believer" can become tomorrow's "devil conjurer" and imprisoned "deviationist." When Peterson's book went to print, what he calls "the right-wing cabal of Ahmadinejad's neocon allies, the hard-line commanders of the Revolutionary Guard" and Khamenei were on the same side, and considered by the people as "illegitimate usurpers." Today they are furious political adversaries. Ahmadinejad has fallen from grace, and attacks on him and his cohorts by some of the "true believers" quoted in the book—people such as Alireza Zakani, a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war and now a powerful voice in the conservative camp, whose views are described at some length and portrayed as allied with Ahmadinejad—shows the unpredictable ebb and flow of Iranian politics. Finally, it is something of a truism that what an Iranian will tell a foreign journalist working with a translator—as Peterson was—is not necessarily what they really think. This is, after all, a religion that considers *tagiyeh*, or dissimulation, a "pillar of faith."

In mapping out the world of these "true believers," Peterson has succeeded in producing an often-frightening image of a group of self-deluded men, brutal in their use of force to stay in power, busy concocting versions of history and "reality" that confirm their dogmas. In anecdotes reminiscent of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, Peterson shows how newspapers close to the "true believers" have developed a whole new history of the world. A poignant example is the regime's version of what happened during the Muslim conquest of Spain. While virtually every historian has praised the Andalusian experience as the "Ornament of the World," and described the glories of its *convivencia*, and (in the words of María Rosa Menocal, the author of a brilliant study of the Andalusian dispensation) the ability of Jews, Christians, and Muslims to live "side by side and despite their intractable differences and enduring hostilities, [nourish] a complex culture of tolerance," the diehards of the regime in Tehran teach that Muslim rule in Spain ended precisely because of that tolerance. They claim that talk of democracy by Iranian democrats is today part of a "cultural invasion" masterminded by the West and designed as a "policy of Andalusiazation of Iran."

SAÏD ARJOMAND provides a sociological analysis of the political and intellectual developments that Peterson and Bahari describe. Arjomand studies Iran with the help of Weber, Brinton, and Pareto. He picks up the history of the Islamic republic after Khomeini's death, where there was a system of "dual power" shared by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khamenei, the former as the president and the latter as the Leader. Despite phrases such as "conciliar institutionalization of the legislative authority," Arjomand skillfully describes how Khamenei succeeded Khomeini and how, bereft of charisma, he began to institutionalize his power—even to the detriment of Rafsanjani, who had engineered his rise to the pinnacle of power. Arjomand follows the rise of the reformist Khatami and his failed attempt at changing the tenor of power, even when unwilling to change its structure.

What the book lacks in vibrancy of narrative it makes up for in the detailed rigor of its account. This is a closely observed, carefully sifted, and reliable account of what has happened in Iran over the last twenty years. Arjomand wishes to shift the focus of our attention "from the causes to the consequences of the revolution"—how the process changed the nature of power in Iran. Aside from a few unsubstantiated claims (such as the notion that Khamenei's "swift election" after Khomeini "proved the most remarkably smooth succession in the history of world revolutions," which is obviously untrue), the book offers a detailed account of how Khamenei seized power and used the institutions of the regime, particularly the judiciary and the Guardian Council, to thwart reform. His conclusion is that Khamenei's backing of the June 2009 putsch has changed "the apparently robust post-revolutionary developmental course of the first and only theocracy in modern history into his fragile personal rule over an inharmonious amalgam of clerical conciliarism and brute post-revolutionary military-intelligence domination." Put in plain English, what began as the modern world's first theocracy has now been transformed into a brutal military dictatorship that works in concert with sycophantic clerics who are still devoted to the regime.

Arjomand ends his book by reminding us that the Shah's "neo-patrimonial regime" has been replaced by a new neo-patrimonial regime dominated by Khamenei, and thus it is that the word "revolution" has reverted to its "original astronomical meaning ... as the movement of stars back to their original positions." Such a cute conclusion is unworthy of a seasoned sociologist. The Iran of today—as Arjomand himself has deftly described it—is sociologically different, more democratically inclined, and more educated than the Iran of 1979. The stars—whether the Shah or Khamenei—might want to go back to their "original positions," but the galaxy of Iranian politics has shifted. Stars are not welcome as the centers of a democratic universe.

IN A WAY, such a shift in the position of the "stars" is at least partially at the heart of Ali Mirsepassi's book. It is by now a platitude that modernity has been the defining challenge of Iran since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. The question of modernity—what it is, whether it is desirable, whether it is Western in nature and origin, and what constitutes Iran's own "tradition" and its hospitability to modernity—have been central issues in the modern political and intellectual history of Iran. Mirsepassi's dense volume addresses the "darker side" of Iran's encounter with modernity.

Mirsepassi's book is a study of philosophical ideas, not of political realities. It seems to have been written for two different audiences. The first half of the book is designed for students of Iranian politics, with many insights about the philosophical foundations of anti-Western sentiments in the country's troubled collision with modernity. The second half of the book is almost entirely given to following in the footsteps of Gertrude Himmelfarb's book on the British, French, and American roads to modernity. There is also a lengthy discussion of the views of John Dewey and the American pragmatists on democracy and religion. There is little that is new in these chapters, and even less effort made to connect them to the earlier half of the book. These chapters may be intended for readers in Iran who might read a translation of Mirsepassi's book and have no access to Himmelfarb's important book.

The basic premise of Mirsepassi's book is that the concept of the "West" as construed in Iran is as problematic, and as "dangerously reductive," as the concept of the "Orient" construed in some Western minds. It is, he argues, these misconstrued "Others" that have barred "genuine communication" between the two sides. The argument, at least so far as Iran is concerned, is only partially true. For many in the country's power structure, it is hard to say whether their "reductive" view of the West, or of America, is based on ignorance and intellectual misconception or on pure political expediency.

Mirsepassi usefully argues that too many intellectuals in the Muslim world confuse "the violent colonial legacy of Western modernity with its democratic narrative." Too many intellectuals have spent "too much time and energy demonizing Western modernity." Despite their anti-Western rhetoric and disposition, moreover, most of the intellectual and philosophical arguments against the West also come from the West. Heidegger, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Jünger became, in Mirsepassi's reckoning, the main arsenals for Iran's "anti-Western argument."

Mirsepassi wants to map out the dialectics of intellectual hope and despair in modern Iran. On the one hand, there is what he calls "narratives of hope"—a "sociological approach or vision of social change with particular emphasis on the here and now, the category of the everyday, the framework of pragmatic ethics, and a guiding commitment to the democratic possibility of modernity." But counterpoised to these perspectives are the "narratives of despair featuring broad philosophical and ontologically grounded critiques of modernity, disregard for the everyday, and hostility toward the supposed mediocrity of liberal institutions and democratic forms of social organization in the name of an allegedly higher and elitist order of social being that is often imagined to have been lost somewhere and somehow." German metaphysics is weirdly said to be the main source of Iran's narrative of despair, while American pragmatism can, according to Mirsepassi, offer a map for an Iranian narrative of hope.

While he is right about the overemphasis on the French roots of Enlightenment and about the pernicious influence of German metaphysics, Mirsepassi is wrong in his assumption that American pragmatism has played almost no role in Iran's troubled encounter with modernity. Richard Rorty's visit to Iran and the hero's welcome he received there—"I had never in my life had such an enthusiastic and large audience," he told me after his return to Stanford—and the oft-repeated references to his essays and books, and even the recent denunciations of Rorty by regime ideologues as one of the masterminds of Iran's recent

democratic upsurge, are clear indications of this new awareness of American pragmatism as a source of modernity and liberal democracy.

Mirsepasi also uses Dewey to rightly point out the dangers of totalitarian utopian models of revolution—but here, too, the intellectual landscape in Iran has not been as barren as Mirsepasi's account suggests. In literature as well as in intellectual debates, much has been written inside Iran about the dangers of utopian social engineering. The novels of Houshang Golshiri, one of Iran's most influential novelists, are powerful warnings about the dangers of redemption. His *King of the Benighted*, which has been translated into English, is a poignant reminder of the dangers of idealistic radicalism, as well as of the brutality of the regime in suppressing any and all narratives of hope.

MIRSEPASSI breaks new ground when he looks into the roots of the paranoid anti-Semitic and anti-Western rants made popular in the discourse and demeanor of Ahmadinejad. In the 1960s and 1970s, he explains, there emerged in Iran a “radical chic” reminiscent of Tom Wolfe's scathing portrait of New York's Maoist millionaires. In Iran, they trafficked in ideas borrowed from Fanon and Heidegger, Sartre and Césaire, to demand a “return to the authentic.” Some began to develop a romantic attachment to “the spiritual East” as opposed to the alienating, materialistic West. Dariush Shayegan, whose ideas are discussed at some length by Mirsepasi, was a cultural adviser to Queen Farah. Another key adviser to the Queen, and a rector of one of Iran's most important universities, mentioned only once in passing in Mirsepasi's book, was Seyyed Hossein Nasr. In those years, he developed a sophisticated theory that dismissed Western rationalism and science and advocated a return to a theocentric world of Islam. The confusion—what Shayegan himself would later describe as the schizophrenia—of the Shah modernizing frantically on a Western and Westernizing model, and his Queen supporting intellectuals who constantly disparaged and dismissed the West, opened a philosophical gap. Into that gap walked Khomeini and the many secular intellectuals who paved the way for his ascent.

The “heart of darkness” in this journey is a man named Ahmad Fardid, small of stature and even smaller of moral fiber. He was a wordsmith, enamored of neologisms and beguilingly aware of the intellectual appeal of convoluted ideas that make a believable pretense of depth and novelty. He was willing to use his convoluted ideas to serve any master or intellectual fashion. Mirsepasi chronicles at some length how after the revolution, Fardid used his rhetorical alchemy to justify clerical despotism as the “authentic” salvation of an otherwise marred Iranian identity sullied by “the Zionist-Masonic” conspiracy. What Mirsepasi fails to note is that in the waning days of the Shah's regime, Fardid was just as avid in his attempt to use Heideggerian jargon to legitimize the Shah's authoritarianism. When the Shah declared the country a one-party system, and demanded that an ideology “based on dialectics” be developed for the new party, Fardid was more than happy to use his Germanic dialectics to justify the party and to praise the Shah as history's promised messiah. In the years after the revolution, he used the same argument, this time peppering it with even more anti-Semitic and anti-Holocaust rhetoric, to justify Khomeini as the same savior. Among Fardid's students in the early days of the revolution was an impressionable and pious young man named Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

What is fascinating in Mirsepasi's discussion is that he shows, in some detail, that Fardid was not the only Iranian intellectual to use Western ideas against democracy and modernity. Indeed, according to Mirsepasi, “Western ideas are at the very heart of the so-called Islamist ideology.” He writes of Heidegger as the most influential champion of the “narrative of despair” in Iran, a narrative opposed to democracy and prone to the espousal of “violent excesses and intolerance of a totalitarian state structure.” He is wrong when he claims that in spite of intense debate about the nature of Islamism and some discussions on the politics of Heidegger's philosophy, “there has been no space whatsoever devoted to the profound entanglement of these two deeply timely and problematic issues.” In fact, there have been several discussions of this “entanglement” in English, and even more in Persian.

Mirsepasi deftly demonstrates the debt of the anti-Western narrative to the West. But it must be pointed out that his own theoretical framework is doubly indebted to the West—not only his views on the alternative paths to modernity, but also his implicit axiom that the ideas of democracy and modernity are both Western in origin. That is too simplistic. In recent years there have been many in Iran and elsewhere who have argued differently. They have shown that many progressive ideas generally assumed to be uniquely Western have a more diverse and complicated provenance. In the eleventh century, many key ideas and

concepts that later came to characterize a secular social order—from historiography to astronomy, from empirical science to rationalism—were beginning to germinate in Iran and some other parts of the Islamic world. These ideas obviously did not grow into modernity in Iran and other parts of the Islamic world, and it is more or less clear “what went wrong.”

The advent of fundamentalist Islam, the Mongolian invasion, and the sudden rise of Sufi mysticism helped to abort these early hints of rationalism. I have argued (in my book *Lost Wisdom*) that many of these ideas re-entered Iran’s aborted modern intellectual discourse beginning in the nineteenth century. But, as I have shown in that book, over the last 150 years it has been the enemies of modernity and democracy, namely the conservative clergy and their intellectual allies—what Mirsepassi calls the purveyors of a dialect of despair—who have wrongly argued that democracy and modernity are exclusively Western in origin and nature, and thus ill-suited to Iran’s culture and tradition; and that they are part of the dreaded legacy of colonialism. Many advocates of democracy and humanism have insisted to the contrary, and correctly, that these are universal ideas, with no unique cultural conditions or geographical limitations.

So reality in Iran—before or after the Islamic revolution of 1979—is far more complicated than the common shibboleths of the right or the left. There emerges from these books a picture of an increasingly isolated, brutal, and illegitimate regime, with the IRGC taking over a bigger and bigger share of the economic and political pie. Whether described in the circumspect language of scholarship, as in Arjomand, or in the unabashedly defiant language of Bahari, the essential contours of the portrait of despotism that they all draw are the same. It would be folly to predict a precise time or trigger for this nasty and untenable status quo to change—as much folly as to predict that it never will change, that terror and fear will sustain the regime in power forever. And what does it matter, finally, if democracy is Western or Eastern? It is human, and Iran deserves it.

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