Between Worlds, among Stories:
A Cosmopolitan Approach to Iranian Political Culture

by

RICHIE NOJANG KHATAMI

Hon. B.A., The University of Toronto, 2008

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Political Science)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August 2013

Abstract

Literature on Iran's political culture and future democratic potentials has flourished in the past decade. How does one interpret this growing field and, more widely, a nation's distinct political identity? Any clear understanding of a distant culture like Iran's is bound to be influenced by one's subject position and familiarity with its past, its customs and the disclosure of its people's self-understandings. Interpretations that seek to go beyond ethnocentricity and Orientalism, therefore, are dependent on the expressions of those who know and breathe the culture.

The purpose of this paper is to put forward a method that all interpreters can use to approach Iran's political culture in order to gain a thorough, shared understanding of it. I argue that an interpretive, hermeneutic methodology is the best approach for such a purpose, with emphasis on the importance of narratology, or an examination of the diverse narratives associated with Iran, its political culture, and its identity. A multifaceted understanding of various narratives—whether political or artistic—serves to sustain a comprehensive grasp of Iran's political culture for all interpreters, entailing significant consequences for the persistent discussions of the nation's political future and democratic prospects. A cosmopolitan viewpoint reveals an open-ended political situation in Iran, whose civil society continues to display a capacity for democratic participation.

Preface

Portions of Chapter 6 are adapted from a co-authored journal article (Jahanbegloo and Khatami 2013), which has been cited accordingly. All other parts of this thesis are the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, R.N. Khatami.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

Dedication

To Raquel

1. Introduction

In April 2013, the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver opened, for the first time in the city's history, an exhibit featuring contemporary works by Arab, Iranian and Turkish artists. The aim of this exhibition is to open the minds of its viewers, particularly "Westerners" with pre-conceived ideas about the Middle East, its politics and its culture: "The works represented in *Safar/Voyage* disclose a nomadic aesthetic that, by questioning the dividing line that separates them from a supposed physically fixed reality, defies the Western imagination" (2013, 4). According to its curator, Fereshteh Daftari, "The exhibition does not succumb to the politics of representation or to any rigid theoretical position;" it is, instead, "a proposition, framed as an open-ended experience, enabled through encounters with fragments of itineraries and a choice of paths" (8).

As admirable as this cosmopolitan project seems, one is led to question its effects on its visitors, or the impression that "outsiders" have of distant "Others" based on the given representations. One of these examples is particularly striking: Mitra Tabrizian's *Tehran 2006*. This large photograph depicts a group of different individuals—young and old, men, women and children—standing in a desolate outskirt of Tehran. Several of them appear aimless, lost and dejected. Towering above them by a building at the side of the composition stands a billboard with the faces of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei, with the caption above reading:

> Rahe emam va shahidane enqelab ra edame khahim dad. Maghame moazame rahbari.

> We shall continue on the path of the Imam and the martyrs of the Revolution.
> The Supreme Leader.[1]

---

[1] My translation. For a reproduction of the photograph and the caption, see *Safar/Voyage* 74.

I include the original Persian in Romanized form to illustrate my concern: the initial confusion of any viewer who cannot read and understand the language. Of course, this is the most extreme example of an obstacle to interpretation, but beyond it is the ambiguity of the representation as a whole: what is it trying to depict, and how should a non-native understand it? One would think that *narrative* is crucial alongside any imagery if an interpreter is to reach a thorough grasp of its possible meanings. Otherwise, pictorial representations can remain indiscernible, impenetrable, or dangerously misinterpreted.

Yet any description that I give as one who has lived in the country and knows the culture is based on *my* interpretation, the narrative *I* construct to construe and explicate its meaning. Just as artistic works require clarification, so too do literary and political narratives: those who are removed from the surveyed culture, and want to go beyond an ethnocentric view to a dialogical one, will in many cases be reliant on the interpretations of those who can discern it for them. To most analysts of a country like Iran, therefore, the problem of impenetrability remains, unless they find a way to travel deeply into the culture.

The purpose of this paper is to put forward a method that all interpreters can use to approach Iran's political culture in order to gain a thorough, shared understanding of it. I argue that an interpretive, hermeneutic methodology is the best approach for such a purpose, with emphasis on the importance of narratology, or an examination of the diverse narratives associated with Iran, its political culture, and its identity. A multifaceted understanding of various narratives—whether political or artistic—serves to sustain a comprehensive grasp of Iran's political culture for all interpreters, entailing significant consequences for the persistent discussions of the nation's political future and

democratic prospects. A cosmopolitan viewpoint reveals an open-ended political situation in Iran, whose civil society continues to display a capacity for democratic participation.

In developing my argument, I begin by assessing past and present approaches to Iranian political culture and discussing the need to critically evaluate them. I then propound a different methodology that has yet to be applied holistically to Iran's socio-political history. The purpose of this hermeneutic and narratological method is to analyze previous understandings of Iranian political culture and evaluate the validity of recent narratives that characterize it as essentially democratic. In seeking to flesh out this complicated discourse, I emphasize the multifariousness of Iranian culture and the necessity to heed the variegated self-representations it has created, as well as the need to recognize that this culture has persistently been in dialogue with others. Finally, I return to my central questions of how Iranian political culture ought to be understood, and what basis the current discussions of democratization have, by examining the new narratives that Iranians are crafting day by day, demanding a deeper and more meaningful recognition from other interpreters.

2. Existing Approaches

Iranian political culture is a notoriously thick tangle of thorns. Its denseness, however, has not prevented countless scholars and commentators from producing an equally bewildering number of books and articles in seeking to understand it. As George Steiner puts it, "Commentary is without end. In the worlds of interpretative and critical discourse, book, as we have seen, engenders book, essay breeds essay, article spawns article. The mechanics of interminability are those of the locust. Monograph feeds on monograph, vision on revision" (1991, 39). In order to get a grip on the vast amount of work available on the subject at hand, it is helpful at first to define its scope and provide some classifications of discourses and methods used to analyze it throughout its development.

"The concept of 'political culture,'" Majid Tehranian reminds us, "is clearly narrower than cultural or national identity. It suggests manifest patterns of cultural behavior in the political arena rather than in cultural life in general" (2004, 185). Yet one of the points I hope to illustrate through my own work is that Iran's political culture is inextricably bound to much of its cultural productions, in that its political experiences throughout the past century have led its writers, artists, filmmakers and others to (consciously or unconsciously) create politicized works suffused with social commentary. As such, the scope of my analysis will be focused largely on texts and discourses that in one way or another try to define, demarcate and give shape to interpreters' understandings of Iranian identity as it relates to political culture. I aim to touch on numerous forms of expression rather than dwell on specific ones, surveying webs of meaning without claiming that any one of them explains the whole. As I will show later, recognizing all the myriad

expressions as narratives, and analyzing them accordingly, will leave interpreters better prepared to peer in for a deeper look.

Commentators on Iranian political culture and identity can be classified according to two categories. The first, broadly construed as anthropologists, dominated the discourses that began with Iran's "modern" period, or its encounter with European modernity, and lingered throughout the past century. As their writings advocated a set of problematic, reductive discourses, they became subjected to criticism and deconstruction by a wave of new intellectuals who constitute the second group of analysts. The recent work of these theorists, who are mostly political scientists, writers and activists, has challenged past practices that sought to ascribe particular "pure" identities to Iranians. Instead of representing and branding Iranian political culture as essentially rooted in ancient traditions or relations with the West, this contemporary group of analysts has endeavoured to rewrite the culture in such a way that it is geared toward *democracy*.

Through the rest of this chapter, I break down the abovementioned groups, highlight the discourses they have put forward, and finally problematize their accounts, discussing the urgency of critiquing their approaches to expose and overcome prejudices.

2.1 Early Accounts of Iranian Political Culture: Orientalism and Nationalist Anthropology

Iran's encounter with modernity in the nineteenth century was a defining moment in its efforts to articulate a distinct political identity. The country's modern period, which commenced during a series of prolonged interaction with European cultures, witnessed rapid changes in its socio-political structures and institutions. Here, Iranian rulers and intelligentsia began to purposefully "redefine their concept of Iranian identity and

society" (Fazeli 2006, 27) in order to counter what they saw as a superior modern European civilization. Against repressive rule that was supported by Shi'a Islamic principles, they opened the country up to many new ideas, most notably technological modernization, nationalism, constitutionalism and the rule of law. The first two of these ideas, aided by Orientalism, became the dominant ideological trends in the country until the eventual triumph of Islamism in the 1979 Revolution.

Orientalism had a seismic effect on Iranians' self-perceptions and the shaping of their political culture. After a series of embarrassing military defeats and invasions by Russia and England in the early 1800s, Iranian intellectuals and writers increasingly began to establish contacts with Europe to "counter the hegemony of the modern West" (Vahdat 2002, 27). Their efforts involved visiting and studying in European countries to learn military tactics and gain insight into their socio-political structures, which were ostensibly more advanced. Examining the accounts of these early travelers reveals an initial enchantment with the West, with enthusiastic students returning to Iran to relate the marvels of European culture, its inventions, political systems, rule of law and educational methods (Fazeli 2006, 28-32). Of course, these writers did not all advocate a complete appropriation of European customs and institutions (Amanat 2012, 137). However, there is little doubt that "Travel literature played a significant role for Iranians in constructing a Western Other, on the one hand, and a new image of the self on the other hand" (Fazeli 2006, 33). At the same time, the gaze of Europeans remained fixed on Iran, as it had been on other parts of the "Orient" around that time.

One of the earliest and best-known Oriental depictions of Iran and its culture was Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, first published in 1721. The epistolary novel follows

two Persian travelers on their voyage to Paris, and imaginatively represents their critical reflections on French society while at the same time portraying the chaos and corruption engulfing their homeland. Montesquieu's famous text is at once a fascinating creative exercise, which can be read as an exploration allowing many readers to enter into "alternating 'worlds' as if experiencing them from within," (Lloyd 2012, 491); and a typical European rendering of an exotic, romanticized "Other" imbued with erotic energy, passion, and, occasionally, cruelty.[2] Above all, from the European point of view, the book hinges on a single obsessive question uttered by Montesquieu through the mouth of some Parisians: "Oh! Oh! Monsieur is Persian? That's most extraordinary! How can someone be Persian?" (2008 [1721], 41). The burning European curiosity to understand the "Other" is, of course, very well-documented, but as pertains to Iran two other examples deserve mention. The first is James Morier's *Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, one of the most well-known and most scandalous Oriental tales produced by a European. In it, Morier portrays Persians in characteristically narrow and essentialist fashion, and far surpasses Montesquieu in representing them as depraved, immoral, and cowardly. Morier's novel was not only extremely popular in England, but also astonishingly well-received in Iran once translated into Persian, and viewed as "a self-image that begged for Westernizing remedies" (Amanat 2003).

The other side of this coin is George N. Curzon's *Persia and the Persian Question.* A travelogue in the same vein as Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* rather than a novel

---

[2] Fred Dallmayr praises "Montesquieu's cosmopolitan (or non-Eurocentric) outlook" (2007, 95-115) and points out that the Frenchman was critical of all kinds of intolerances, particularly those prevalent in his own nation. Yet to underline this point too strongly is to forget that Montesquieu did not have the resources to instantiate a deep cross-cultural dialogue with distant others; and that despite his benign and laudable intentions, he still reinforced certain negative stereotypes about Persians and, by extension, Oriental others. The Oriental was still *being represented*, not representing herself. See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 222.

like the abovementioned texts, Curzon's report scans the Persian landscape with motivations he spells out from the beginning: "I endeavour to trace the steps by which Persia has passed, and is still passing, from barbarism to civilisation, as she exchanges the slow beat of the Oriental pendulum for the whirr of western wheels" (Curzon 1892, 2). Curzon vacillates between ostensible appreciation of and condescension toward Iran's political culture. In one instance, following a discussion of the corrupt political system and the unfortunate despotism of the Shah, he makes the remarkable claim that "from one point of view, Persia is the most democratic country in the world. Lowness of birth or station is positively not the slightest bar to promotion or office of the most exalted nature" (44). At other points, mentioning Russia and England's interests in the country, he mellifluously claims that he prefers not to regard the matter "from the outside-nation point of view, conceiving that the true interests to be regarded are those of Persia, and that to whatever schemes can be devised for the amelioration of that country, both Russia and England should lend a helping hand" (490).

The irony of Curzon's assertions will not be lost on those familiar with these nations' continual occupation and sporadic interventions in Iranian politics throughout the decades that followed, stifling political agency and supporting military rulers and officials whenever it suited their purposes. Nevertheless, Curzon's account confirms two noteworthy facts that held significant consequences for the development of Iran's politico-cultural outlooks: on the one hand, the Western gaze projected onto Iranians a sense of inferiority and weakness, and on the other encouraged them to develop a new understanding of political culture, albeit one that has been recounted as in many ways anguished and repressed (Boroujerdi 1996; Gheissari 1998; Vahdat 2002).

Edward Said's indispensable account reminds us that Orientalism "can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (1979, 3). Said borrows the term *discourse* from Foucault to identify Orientalism, arguing that whenever it is used, power and knowledge are inevitably co-present.[3] Following Said's explanation and considering the above Orientalist accounts, one can maintain that Orientalism as a discourse was at its peak in Iran during the initial stages of its modern period: "Like nearly all peoples of the non-West, the Iranians too were seen as 'uncivilized' if not 'barbarian' by the standard narrative of Western supremacy" (Amanat 2012, 11). But as Said's book also stipulates, Orientalism is much more complex than a mere injurious tool or "expressive of some nefarious 'Western' imperialist plot to hold down the 'Oriental' world;" it is, rather, "an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction… but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains" (1979, 12). Said's insights allow us to see Orientalism at work in Iran not merely as a repressive discourse, but one that in fact empowered other discourses within the nation.

Iranian scholars have reiterated that nationalism, modernism and the whole discipline of anthropology were *imposed* on Iran: both through the "gun barrel" of military invasion and continual cultural interaction regulated by the discourse of Orientalism (Vahdat 2002, 27; Dabashi 2007, 46; Fazeli 2006, 93-98). Analyzing existing work on the relationship between Iranian nationalism and European studies of Iran, Nematollah Fazeli states that

---

[3] Throughout this thesis I will also continue to make use of this term to identify narratives and ideological constructions aimed at rigidifying particular conceptions of Iranian political culture and identity.

"European scholars classified and codified civilizations according to language categories, and accordingly they separated Iran from Arab and Semitic civilizations. In particular, they used philology as a basis for theorizing a racist ideology and for squeezing the complex historical fabric of the Orient into a narrow national context" (34).

This development was unsurprisingly concomitant with the "Aryan race" theories that propagated in Europe during the mid-1800s. Ernst Renan, the French scholar partly responsible for spreading these views, followed Joseph Gobineau in viewing "the Aryan race as ascendant and the Semitic race as decadent and declining" (Baum 2006, 129). It was convenient for the Iranian intelligentsia, now developing a sense of shame about the country's undeveloped state and blaming it on the "backward" religion of Islam that had been forced on them by the Arab conquests, to pick up on the existing Orientalist themes and begin to revitalize a sense of "Iranism," or a return to Iran's pre-Islamic past. The dominant discourse that was then engendered was a modernist-nationalist one that emphasized the pre-Islamic, national identity of the country over its religious culture (Fazeli 2006, 34-44; see also Soroush 2000, 156-170).

In order to solidify their idea of an imagined community (cf. Anderson 1983), Iranian intellectuals and Orientalists literally and metaphorically dug up the remains of the nation's ancient empire. Thus archaeology, mythology and folklore gave rise to anthropology and the construction of a new "authentic" Iranian identity. Following the turmoil of Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911, modernism and nationalism became established and epitomized in Iran's first Pahlavi monarch, Reza Shah. Appointed king in 1925, Reza Shah instituted a series of radical reforms and policies to reflect these dominant trends, including technological modernization, the forced

unveiling of women, and glorification of the nation's ancient heritage. The excavation of the ruins of Persepolis, first carried out by Ernst Hertzfeld in 1931 under the auspices of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and Reza Shah, was a momentous point in the development of the modernist-nationalist discourse. Though it had been "discovered," surveyed, defaced and reported by European travelers in previous centuries, Persepolis officially belonged to the Iranians and could be used by them in part to define themselves.[4]

At the same time, the revitalization of ancient mythology and folklore was another indication of attempts to fabricate an "authentic" Iranian identity, including nationalistic efforts to "write 'pure' Persian and to purge the language of 'alien,' primarily Arabic, words" (Gheissari 1998, 3). This movement continued throughout Reza Shah's reign and was perpetuated by a diverse group of individuals, including government officials, intellectuals and novelists, or collectively the "intelligentsia," who gave birth to the modern idea of anthropology in Iran (Fazeli 2006, 45-62). The cultural politics and purpose of anthropology, Fazeli explains, was to advocate a secular-modern nationalism; the entire enterprise was initially "*an official nationalist anthropology*, which stemmed from German nationalism in that its ultimate objective, was to justify the authoritarian, despotic and autocratic rule of Reza Shah, and to provide a political legitimacy for his dynasty" (47-48). Thus, as the scholars and analysts would have it, Orientalism had given birth to anthropology in Iran, which in turn was used by the tyrannical Reza Shah to suppress any meaningful political activity and dictate the terms of the political culture.

---

[4] For a history of the site's excavation and its significance, see *The Oriental Institute Photographic Archives*, <http://oi.uchicago.edu/museum/collections/pa/persepolis/persepolis.html>. Accessed June 25, 2013.

According to Ali Gheissari's analysis, "from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, several themes and preoccupations have remained at the core of Iranian political culture and ideological history," and the two that deserve to be highlighted boldly are "autocracy and attitudes toward the influence of the West" (1998, x). For Gheissari, the 1906-1911 Constitutional movement that tried to establish civil liberties and the rule of law "failed to institutionalize its basic conceptual premises (such as individual rights and representation) in the political culture. Instead, traditional patterns of submission to authority returned under the Pahlavi state" (4).

According to several other accounts, the authoritarian streak in Iranian politics continued well into the twentieth century, carried on by Reza Shah's son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (Abrahamian 1982a; Milani 2011; Katouzian 2013). The apogee of the latter monarch's rule—or the beginning of its end—has often been identified with the symbolic celebration of the monarchy's 2500th anniversary at Persepolis, "constructed from a fragmented historical memory to make him feel more secure in his power" (Dabashi 1993, 25). Instead of achieving this purpose, "the event became a rallying point for his enemies, who used the celebration's glitter and gaudiness—glamour, to some—to launch a widespread attack on him and his policies" (Afkhami 2009, 404). The modernist-nationalist discourse, which had been combined with a superficial adoption of Western cultural values while repressing political agency, was eventually undermined by various forces in Iranian society, to be discussed in the next section. Here, the story of Iran's initial attempts to forge a political culture nears a climactic point, as the many decades of repression and despotic rule awakened a nativist reaction, forging the discourse of Islamism.

2.2 The Nativist Response: Third World Anti-Imperialist Discourse and Islamic Revolution

"In its broadest sense," writes Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "nativism can be defined as the doctrine that calls for the resurgence, reinstatement or continuance of native or indigenous cultural customs, beliefs and values" (1996, 14). In a way, the concept was already alive in the Shahs' nationalist-modernist projects, but it was the *reactionary* nativist challenge that superseded their failed enterprises. In other words, the monarchs' fabricated discourse of reviving the nation's pre-Islamic glories no longer came to be seen as authentic; "real" Iranian identity, a new group of intellectuals would argue, was to be found elsewhere.

Nativism appeared as a distinct notion following the decolonization period of the 1950s and found perhaps its fullest expression in the writings of Frantz Fanon. As a former colonized subject, Fanon attempted to turn the Eurocentric gaze back on itself, condemning both the racist practices of colonists and the apparent acquiescence of the colonized. He began *The Wretched of the Earth* with a chapter on violence, claiming that "In its bare reality, decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives." A theme had developed in his writings by this time, and became widely influential: the idea of an *explosive* event. "To blow the colonial world to smithereens," he declared, "is henceforth a clear image within the grasp and imagination of every colonized subject" (2004 [1963], 3, 6).[5] Iranian intellectuals, in appropriating Fanon's Third World

---

[5] It is important to note that Fanon's acceptance of violence as a necessary means to achieve liberation for the Third World was not always a literal call to armed struggle, nor was it the only way he encouraged countering the forces of Eurocentrism and domination: "Fanon believed that the way to bring natives out of their sense of inferiority to the West was through the praxis of 'writing back' at it. The means toward regaining 'true identity' was first to reclaim it textually by acquiring the right of narrative voice" (Boroujerdi 1996, 16).

discourse, adopted both his language of violence and his encouragement of disclosing an "authentic" self.

The most well-known and influential Iranian thinker to disseminate Fanon's discourse through a distinctly Islamic and revolutionary anthropology was Ali Shariati. Later regarded as the "ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," (Abrahamian 1982b) Shariati believed that it was the responsibility of intellectuals to be aware of, and to make the Iranian public aware of, Iran's indigenous culture. He put forward the notion of *bazgasht be khishtan*, or "return to one's self," as a way to stimulate a desire in Iranians to rediscover their Islamic roots as the source of their "true" identity.

Shariati's version of the truth, which came to be widely accepted by thousands of revolutionaries, was that Iranian political culture was essentially Islamic and duty-bound to the *mostazafin*: the dispossessed masses, Iran's own "wretched of the Earth" who had been subjugated by a false Westernizing monarch. To put forward this critique of Westernization, Shariati attempted to form his own anthropological discourse of Islamism, taking up Fanon's language in his own writings as if Iran were a colony like Algeria was at the time. Fanning the flames of an uprising in several Iranian cities following Ayatollah Khomeini's arrest in June 1963, he wrote: "Yes! The epoch of non-violent struggle has come to an end and from now on in order to assure the vitality of the revolution and defend our nationalist slogans, the most important of which is the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah, we should respond to the enemy's flood of fire and steel with the expressive language of guns and the destructive force of war" (1963). Although he was very early in his forecast of an overthrow, Shariati did of course succeed in helping to bring about an immense political change in the ensuing decade.

Ayatollah Khomeini's ascendance to power following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 ensured the establishment of an Islamic government that began to dictate the terms of the nation's political culture in much the same way as thinkers like Shariati had envisioned. With the subsequent *Enqelab-e Farhangi*, or Cultural Revolution, Shi'a Islam became the nation's dominant discourse. Anthropological enterprises were initially banned, as there was no longer a need to make the Islamic discourse legitimate through intellectual activities (Fazeli 2006, 134-137). Preservation of the status quo was now to be achieved through the manipulation of symbolic representations, through words and imagery, to "enchant" the citizenry (Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999). Iran's political identity would from that point on be determined by state-sponsored activities and institutions entrenching a new "authentic" conception of an Islamic people.

2.3 Rewriting and Scripting a "Democratic" Identity

After years of political stagnation in the wake of the 1979 Revolution, Iranian civil society came to life in the 1990s and began to produce a new discourse aimed at democratic reforms. With this trend, a revived political culture has mobilized the citizenry to change the nation's institutional structures and secure the civil liberties that the Islamic regime has suppressed since its inception. This, at least, is the new story being told about Iran by its most recent wave of native intellectuals, or *rowshanfekran-e no*.

Many of the new scholars seeking to entrench the discourse of a democratic political culture are political theorists, all very well-versed in Iranian history and culture. The works they have produced throughout the last decade are multifaceted and plentiful, but similar in that almost all of them champion the same basic notion of going beyond an

essentialist conception of Iranian political culture and identity, toward a dialogical and tolerant interpretation that appreciates difference and pluralism. These include Dabashi (2010, 2012), Ganji (2008), Gheissari and Nasr (2006), Hashemi and Postel (2010), Jahanbegloo (2011, 2013), Mirsepassi (2010, 2011), and Soroush (2000), among others.

Several of the *rowshanfekran-e no*, who either experienced the Iranian Revolution or were affected by it through imprisonment and exile, unequivocally challenge the Islamic regime's domination and claims to authenticity. Akbar Ganji, one of Iran's best known political dissidents who spent years in the notorious Evin prison and suffered much physical torture, confronted the government on these terms: "Today my broken face is the true face of the system in the Islamic Republic of Iran. My ravaged body exposes the regime's oppressiveness" (2008, xx). In urging a more tolerant society where civil liberties are respected and institutionalized, others have looked to the historical trends in Iran's past to compose a narrative that leads to democratization. Ramin Jahanbegloo, who also spent time in solitary confinement in the same prison, begins his edited volume by asking, "Why is understanding the democratic process in Iran of such great interest to many of us? Perhaps because it allows for a shift in attention from a stereotypical consideration of the Iranian theocracy and Islamic fundamentalism… to a discussion of Iranian society and its sociological and political actors" (2011, ix). Following the outpouring of political activity in Iran's 2009 post-election protests, a significant series of events in the wider Green Movement, many native analysts of Iranian civil society and political culture have pursued the same line of argument by claiming that Iranian history has been consistently moving toward a democratic end.[6]

---

[6] In fact, even before the start of the Green Movement, other scholars noted trends within civil society—including student protests, women's movements and the establishment of grass-roots organizations—that

Yet a troubling concern remains. As Ali Gheissari mentions, throughout Iran's history, "Commitment to partisan ethics, as a major characteristic of intellectuals, has influenced their personal style and the objective spirit of their discourse" (1998, 118). This worry may apply to native Iranian intellectuals today, as has been pointed out by non-Iranians. In a review of some recent books on democracy in Iran, Paola Rivetti claims that "Iranian studies is often characterized by strong political fervour," as many scholars within the field are "engaged in promoting peace and democracy within the international community and Iran, thanks to their public visibility and intellectual discernment." The trouble for her is that "this mission has to some extent turned into a far more rigid, in some cases even ideological, posture informing scientific claims and analyses" (2013, 130). In examining the work of contemporary scholars discussing Iranian politics, Rivetti maintains that they accept certain ideas and terms uncritically and apply them to Iran. "Concepts such as 'democracy', 'civil society' and 'modernity,'" she says, "have often been used as one, bound together in a teleological, positivist relationship" (131-132). The teleological streak in Iranian studies ostensibly rests on the narrative of a "quest for democracy," an overarching discourse under which all of Iran's political history is made to fit. "Arguing that Iranian history is characterized by an unchanging pattern of 'democratic resilience,'" according to Rivetti, "seems either wishful thinking or an ideological statement" (132). Thus promulgating terms like *democracy* and *civil society* appear to be troubling tendencies among thinkers writing about Iranian political culture.

---

led them to see a historical trajectory aimed at democracy. Even the titles of their books alone hint at this: Gheissari and Nasr's *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (2006), Ganji's *The Road to Democracy in Iran* (2008), and Azimi's *The Quest for Democracy in Iran: a Century of Struggle against Authoritarian Rule* (2008).

Taking these concerns seriously, I aim to examine more closely the multifarious narratives associated with Iran's political identity to guard against the potential prejudices of all past interpreters. In the following chapters, I will show that it is possible for all interpreters today to reach a common ground by becoming aware of existing pre-understandings and overcoming them through a hermeneutic and narratological method.

3. A Different Methodology

As an approach for understanding other cultures, hermeneutics remains indispensable. Many theorists who rely on interpretive social science have already developed their work under this assumption, enumerating its various advantages and applying it to specific cultural contexts. The method, however, is not a preset universal tool that can be used the same way in all situations. Since I am interested in the question of how best to approach and understand Iran's political culture, I want to first reiterate the importance of attending to particular concerns in this context.

As I have shown in the previous chapter, past approaches to understanding Iran's political culture have been beset by numerous difficulties. Firstly, anthropology, together with its accompanying activities of ethnography, archaeology, mythology, and folklore studies, created a distorted image of Iranian identity. Weighed down by encumbering political motivations and the need to disseminate an ideology, anthropology in Iran only succeeded in producing a few problematic discourses to describe Iranians by turns as a "pure Aryan race" or an "Islamic people" with particular political inclinations. Orientalism muddied the waters further by forcing its own imprints on the culture, stimulating both an internalization of those descriptions and a reaction against them.

Hence, in approaching Iranian political culture today, interpreters have to be aware of the problem of ethnocentricity in its dual aspect: the dangers of generating another set of reductive depictions from a Western point of view, and the concern that a nativist perspective may also be reactionary and narrow. This worry carries over into present discourses put forward by scholars who advocate potentially simplified representations of Iranian political culture. What we want, to reiterate, is to go mitigate potential biases to

reach a deep understanding of this culture. Getting to this depth does not simply mean "adopting the native's point of view." It involves getting to what I will describe as a *liminal* space accessible to all interpreters, regardless of the lifeworld backgrounds and pre-understandings they carry with them. Here I devote a section to describing hermeneutics and its uses before going on to explain what that liminal space is and how it can be arrived at through the study of narratives.

3.1 Whose Hermeneutics? Which Ethnocentrism?

Ethnocentrism, Robert K. Merton reminds us, can be defined as "the technical name for [the] view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (1972, 17). It is possible for theorists to be "third world nativist" proponents of ethnocentrism, as in the examples of Fanon and some of the Iranian intellectuals I've discussed, or, broadly, "Western" practitioners of it. The latter group is composed of European or American anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists and the like, who consciously or unconsciously assume the superiority of their own methods and practices in comparison with the "non-Western" cultures they survey; and it is the prejudices of this "Western" group that, for some, is a greater cause for worry (Mantovani 2006). As I will argue, it is important to try to go beyond *both* kinds of ethnocentrism. First, however, I will detail how some theorists have tried to eliminate prejudices prevalent in the West through their own versions of hermeneutics.

Clifford Geertz's oeuvre constitutes a notable effort to overcome the obstacle of Western ethnocentrism by stressing deep immersion into other cultures and offering what he calls a "thick description" of their activities and symbols. Geertz claims that

ethnography itself is thick description in that it involves interpreting a multiplicity of structures and symbols so interwoven that they can only be grasped through direct contact and close observation of interactions, rituals and other quotidian minutiae (1973, 10). "Understanding a people's culture," he says, "exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity. (The more I manage to follow what the Moroccans are up to, the more logical, and the more singular, they seem.) It renders them accessible: setting them in the frame of their own banalities, it dissolves their opacity" (14). Using the interpretive, or *verstehen*, view, he approaches culture as "webs of significance" spun by humans, and he seeks to explicate the meaning of those webs by directly involving himself in the worldviews of others and not merely casting the scientific gaze of a European on them (5). This shift toward a *hermeneutic* anthropology seems to be a step in the right direction, bypassing the dilemma Lévi-Strauss brought on in his attempts to understand other cultures objectively (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 2013). Yet Geertz's injunction to "see things from the native's point of view" (1983, 56) is still not without its own set of problems. It brings with it a certain presumptuousness, a self-assured attitude that the Western interpreter can get to know what it is like to be a cultural other by immersing himself in her society and learning her language.

There are, then, two main complications a hermeneutic anthropology carries along with its obvious benefits: it requires deep interaction with the surveyed society, such that an interpreter has to physically live among its members and observe them close at hand; and, secondly, it is still essentially a Western science historically generated and perpetuated by European and Anglo-American scholars, clearly privileging its principal agent, the anthropologist, as one who possesses expert knowledge of supposedly

"exotic"[7] others. Edward Said has articulated this criticism pointedly, linking the anthropologist's gaze with empire and the legacy of colonialism; responding to a potential counter-point that he makes these connections too crudely, he demands to know "how—and I really mean *how*—and when they were separated" (1989, 214). Said unequivocally lays bare the quandary:

> In short what is now before us nationally, and in the full imperial panorama, is the deep, the profoundly perturbed and perturbing question of our relationship to others…. The difficulty with the question is that there is no vantage outside the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and nonimperial powers, between different Others, a vantage that might allow one the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting free of the encumbering interests, emotions, and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves (216-217).

As he goes on to say, the "native point of view" is not merely an ethnographic or hermeneutical fact for anthropologists to consider: it is the voice of "Others" themselves as a form of resistance *against* such Western disciplines (220). Hence, those who have been clamouring to have their voices heard must not be merely acknowledged and represented by anthropologists and other theorists; they must be able to tell their own stories (1984, 27-48).

But how can "outsiders" grasp the meanings of the natives' explanations and at the same time be able to criticize them? On the one hand, Said's uncompromising stance seems to leave interpreters without any epistemological grounding or methodology for understanding others. On the other, it seems we need good guides to get to know Iran's culture; and anthropologists, together with its new wave of intellectuals, seem to offer good accounts of how to go about doing this. Yet in order to rely on these as robust and

---

[7] This is a troubling term that Geertz does not shy away from, as he uses it several times in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (14, 125, 345) and *Local Knowledge* (36, 40, 44, 56, 69, and so on). Throughout my paper I will continue to attend to this term, which is ubiquitous in the writings of even the most well-intentioned Western thinkers, but which I contend will have to be dropped from our vocabulary if we are to live up to Kwame Anthony Appiah's demand to "make our civilization more cosmopolitan." See *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 174.

trustworthy methods, more will have to be said about how to avoid both nativist and Western ethnocentricity to reach an unbiased outlook on others. A different hermeneutic approach could offer a way to achieve this fine balance.

On this point, Charles Taylor offers a strong defence, as for him, "a hermeneutical science of man… can at least begin to explore fruitful avenues" in achieving intercultural understanding (1979, 62). What is especially attractive about his approach is the careful language with which he articulates the need to avoid any kind of ethnocentricity. Like Geertz, he takes up the *verstehen* view, which emphasizes cultural practices, as opposed to the natural science model, which tries to claim objective understanding of others through mere observation. But he distances himself from Geertz's claim to adopt another agent's point of view, which he calls the "incorrigibility thesis," and which he sees leading to a kind of cultural relativism that rules out any kind of critique (1985, 123-124). The *verstehen* view, for Taylor, avoids these pitfalls by using a language of perspicuous contrast, a way of formulating and comparing our language with those of others "as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both" (125). This language would allow us to show that either our own language, or those of others, might be distorted or confused. It would approach the notion of a "fusion of horizons," which Gadamer saw as preferable because it involves bringing *ourselves* into a situation rather than becoming another or sharing the exact experience of another (Gadamer 1975, 304).

Taylor, in taking up Gadamer's view, aims to minimize prejudices so that they do not hinder mutual understanding. However, his approach to other cultures remains somewhat unsettling. For instance, he states that he wants to explicate and critique the "exotic practices" of other societies, which in some cases are described as "primitive" (1985,

127). He insists that Western hermeneuticists need not be committed to ethnocentricity, and that the error of assuming this is "to hold that the language of cross-cultural understanding has to be either theirs or ours" (125). But so long as Taylor insists on these views, it is undeniable they still are "ours," by which he means those of "Westerners." Consider, for instance, his claim that "we can only convince an interlocutor if at some point he shares our understanding of the language concerned" (1979, 28). Said is particularly concerned about the word "interlocutor," as for him it retains a European search for an "*interlocuteur valable*"—an "Other" who is "*evolvé*" to the point of being able to carry on a conversation, or "someone who has perhaps been found clamoring on the doorstep, where from outside a discipline or field he or she has made so unseemly a disturbance as to be let in, guns or stones checked in with the porter, for further discussion" (1989, 209-210). This dynamic, for Said, is too controlled, too conditioned by Western agents.[8] He remains wary about "the constitutive role of the observer, the ethnographic 'I' or subject" (217). Taylor, meanwhile, clearly—and, in his mind, unproblematically—occupies a privileged subject position throughout his writings and dismisses the claims that there could be power involved in attempts to understand other societies (1994, 70).

Having noted the history of Orientalism in Iran, we would be remiss in looking past these troubling aspects of hermeneutics. It seems that hermeneutics leaves us with the same dilemma as anthropology: apparently very useful, but still clothed in Western garbs,

---

[8] Saba Mahmood makes a similar critique of Taylor regarding the privileged position he gives to Western Christianity in dialogue with Muslims and others. See "Can Secularism Be Other-wise?" in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 282-299.

steeped in Western understanding. Therefore the dilemma of Western ethnocentrism is not so easily dismissed.

Still, it would be inexpedient to dispense with hermeneutics altogether. A better solution would be to modify and adapt it to a cultural context like Iran's by acknowledging power relations, asserting more humility and, most importantly, articulating clearly *how* to understand others better—that is, through what modes of communication. Andrew Davison and Hamid Dabashi have each put forward illuminating approaches to point the way to this solution.

Davison defends the interpretive commitment in political science not as a "rigid methodological guide" but as inquiry that seeks explanation (1998, 52). Invoking Taylor, he champions the interpretive view against contentions of ethnocentricity by claiming that "It is ethnocentric only 'if we stick with' our 'provisional identifications.' The point of interpretation is to place our language out in front, opening it up to a dialogue with those we seek to understand" (68). Davison looks to apply the epistemic humility and insights of the hermeneutic approach to Turkish politics, seeking to give an account of the complexities of the nation's relationship to tradition and modernity. Still, in doing so, he limits his interpretive field to the writings and speeches of a few particular political actors like Ziya Gökalp and Mustafa Kemal (90-188). His point of view, after all, is only one way of looking at things. We still need a vindication of the self-expressions of natives themselves to consider what kinds of narratives they produce, why these narratives are important, and how all interpreters can attend to them to reach mutual understanding.

Dabashi's interpretive view is very much from the *inside*. In composing an account of the life and thoughts of ʿAyn al-Qudat al-Hamadhani, who was previously understood by Orientalists to be a "Sufi martyr-mystic," Dabashi seeks to counter the prejudices and interpretive errors of non-natives. "I am not an Orientalist," he avers. "I did not learn the mother tongue and textual language of ʿAyn al-Qudat as an adult in a university. His mother tongue is my mother tongue too" (1999, 3). Dabashi's use of hermeneutics is therefore a consciously (and inevitably) partial approach providing a counter-narrative against what he sees as dominant Western discourses. Yet he aims "to make the world, the thought, and the ideas of this remarkable counter-metaphysician speak in a language that all of us will understand" (20). To bring about a critical intimacy with the subject, Dabashi insists on speaking against hegemonic discourses of the past and pays tribute to Said by engaging in "another way of telling" (Said 1993, 334-335). In short, he launches his study against "the very substance of the Oriental discourse" (31).

Dabashi and Davison's accounts succeed brilliantly in their own ways; but I want to combine them and take their methods a step further. Taken together, they provide a pathway to mutual understanding among all interpreters, avoiding the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and remaining cognizant of the dangers of asymmetrical power relations. Dabashi in particular is mindful of Said's caveat that "Others" must be allowed to speak for themselves, and develops his hermeneutic approach with particular attention to narrativity.[9] He urges that we look to a multiplicity of narratives and, in a way, "become

---

[9] Dabashi also mentions another interesting approach without elaborating much on it. "All possibilities of interpretive imagination," he says, "rest on that singular event of a hermeneutic act that resignifies [social] realities into an *existential understanding*" (21; my emphasis). More recently, Farah Godrej has developed the idea of "existential understanding" as a methodology for engaging with the expressions of non-Western others. Hers is a very fascinating but also very demanding approach. In what is for her the first interpretive moment, Godrej prescribes "a praxis-oriented existential transformation in which the reader learns to live by the very ideas expressed in a text" (2011, 54). While I think this is a very worthy end to aim for, my

narrative archaeologists" (1999, 590). While Dabashi applies his method specifically to the writings of 'Ayn al-Qudat to grapple with different meanings and understandings of Islam, and Davison to Turkish understandings of secularism, I look to apply their hermeneutics to the wide contiguous field of Iranian political culture. Undertaking this task requires an emphasis on the thread of narratology within hermeneutics, which can make us more attuned to the variety of voices within another culture and better able to make sense of its perplexities. With attention to a wide array of narratives, it may be possible to occupy a liminal position, in which mutual understanding becomes possible.

3.2 Narrative and Liminality

Numerous theorists have iterated the significance of narratives for human life. Charles Taylor explains that it is "a basic condition of making sense of ourselves, that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*" as "our lives exist in [a] space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer" (1989, 47; original emphasis). Alasdair MacIntyre adds: "Man [sic] is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth" (1981, 212, 216). But it is Paul Ricoeur who more than any other thinker entrenches the value of narratives and the importance of reading the world to become better interpreters of ourselves and others. What emerges from Ricoeur's account is perhaps the most interesting aspect of his magnum opus: the way in which engagement with the narratives of others can allow readers to *refigure* their perspectives.

---

focus will be on texts and narratives rather than the "anthropological and ethnographic methodologies" which require deep physical immersion into another culture. Nevertheless, there seem to be significant convergences between Godrej's methodology and the one I develop here, which can be linked more widely to comparative political theory.

Ricoeur concurs with Gadamer and other hermeneuticists that what happens through all communicative activities is a fusion of horizons. However, his account goes beyond theirs by incorporating the idea of refiguration. This notion is mainly developed in his *Time and Narrative*, and is rooted in the notion of *mimesis*, which has three distinct phases: "a reference back to the familiar pre-understanding we have of the order of action; an entry into the realm of poetic composition; and finally a new configuration by means of this poetic refiguring of the pre-understood order of action" (1984, xi). The third moment of mimesis, refiguration, is the most significant in that it "marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader (1984, 71). Refiguration signals a transformation and enlargement of perspective in the mind of the reader or listener; it therefore does not merely refer to mirroring or the reproduction of the same ideas, but rather to the way in which another person's creative use of language increases the capacity of others to understand *differently*.[10] Ricoeur sees in this process a necessary "confrontation between two worlds" (1988, 159)—a productive confrontation in which, through reading and listening to the narratives of others, we are forced to expand and refashion our previous understandings. The concept of refiguration thus "expresses the capacity of [a work of art] to restructure the world of the reader in unsettling, challenging, remodelling the reader's expectations" (1998, 173).

Throughout the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur focuses most of his attention on fictional narratives in particular not only because "literary works, too, bring

---

[10] Though the concept of mimesis has been around for centuries and has been put to use in various ways by numerous theorists, Ricoeur's use of it is decidedly idiosyncratic. Mentioning that he chose the term both "seriously and playfully" (1984, 53), he goes to great lengths to explain its functions, which I only briefly summarize here. His point is that the transformative capacity of narratives lies not in their tendency to give readers a *perfect* understanding—as if such a thing existed—or the *exact same* interpretation as the speaker or writer, but rather in their ability to *expand* the reader or listener's reality, "augmenting it with meanings" (1984; 79-80; 1988, 99-103).

an experience to language and thus come into the world, just as all discourse does," (1984, 79) but also because "we owe a large part of the enlarging of our horizon of existence to poetic works" (80). "Poetic discourse," for Ricoeur, "brings to language aspects, qualities, and values of reality that lack access to language that is directly descriptive and that can be spoken only by means of the complex interplay between the metaphorical utterance and the rule-governed transgression of the usual meanings of our words" (xi). What he means by this is that artistic works, especially novels, allow us to communicate and share experiences in a way that is not merely rational or argumentative. Through them, we can persuade and be persuaded by one another, allowing our imaginations to go traveling and to consider the perspectives of others through their creative and idiosyncratic uses of language.

The notion of "an enlarged mentality" gained by "training the imagination to go visiting" brings to mind the work of several other theorists (Kant 1793; Arendt 1968; Benhabib and Dallmayr, 1990; Disch 1994; Young 2002). However, none of them articulates a clear description of the "space" in which the expansion of thought happens or the way it comes about. In order to clarify the process and show that it is not somehow mysterious or obscure, I find it helpful to employ the concept of a *liminal* position, which Ricoeur's work points toward but does not explicitly invoke. Moreover, by using an idea accordant with postcolonial theory, I hope to round off my methodological inquiry by making it particularly relevant for the cultural context I will apply it to.

The conception of liminality has its roots in anthropology, and essentially refers to a state of "in-betweenness." Originally observed as a part of ritual practices in non-Western societies, it is a stage through which one passes to go beyond one's previous status and

identity, to become something more through a rite of passage. In its early formulation, liminality already referred to a state of disorientation and uncertainty, a kind of threshold that takes individuals and groups beyond what they used to be, without knowing exactly what they will become (van Gennep 2010 [1909]; Turner 1967).

Edward Said played a major part in establishing the groundwork for the idea of liminality in literary theory and cultural studies. Situating himself in between the worlds of his upbringing in the Middle East and his intellectual life in the West, he described his own circumstance as either one of "perpetual self-invention or a constant restlessness" (1998). Furthermore, the condition of an exile in a median state held for him the advantage of bringing about Hannah Arendt's notion of an "enlarged mentality":

> Because the exile sees things in terms both of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, he or she has a double perspective, never seeing things in isolation. Every scene or situation in the new country necessarily draws on its counterpart in the old country. Intellectually this means that an idea or experience is always counterposed with another, sometimes making them both appear in a new and unpredictable light: from that juxtaposition one gets a better, perhaps even more universal idea of how to think. (1993b, 121-122).

There is a clear association to be drawn between Said's notion of liminality and the in-betweenness that narratives can draw us into. In *Orientalism*, Said makes a sharp distinction between vision and narrative, identifying the former with the "knowing" gaze of Westerners, which "presumes that the whole Orient can be seen panoptically," and the latter with a source of *instability* that challenges such static thinking, a "specific form taken by written history to counter the permanence of vision." Narrative exerts pressure against vision; it "introduces an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness to the unitary web of vision; it violates the serene Apollonian fictions asserted by vision" (240). Following this line of thought, Dabashi has maintained that *critical intimacy* with transcultural texts involves a "self-celebrative/self-destructive Dionysian moment when

cultures are stripped of their enchantments for potential re-definitions" (1999, 23; cf. Warren 1991). For Said, bringing about a Nietzschean/Dionysian instance of union is a vital function of narrative, as it familiarizes what is strange and allows others to speak for themselves.

In Said's view, then, there are two kinds of narratives: those imposed on others in order to essentialize them, and those thrown back by others as an act of defiance and self-assertion. Said makes it clear that in speaking for themselves, those who weave together counter-narratives are not putting together "new master discourses;" rather, they are participating in "another way of telling." This gets us thinking beyond grand narratives and essentialized identities, into a field of "hybrid counter-energies" where we hear many different voices but recognize in them a common, shared, humanity (1993a, 334-335). In short, Said ultimately wants to take us to an in-between space in which identities are not simplified and fixed: a point from which we can attend to all narratives as if they are all strange and yet strangely familiar.[11]

Combining Said's views with Ricoeur's helps reveal what a decentered, in-between space would look like, and how it is supposed to transform peoples' perspectives. In his later work, Ricoeur develops a dynamic notion of the self, suggesting that selfhood necessarily implies otherness "to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other" (1992, 3).[12] Narratives allow us

---

[11] To appreciate this seemingly paradoxical state, it is helpful to consider the "hauntingly beautiful passage" Said cites on p. 335. Part of it reads: "The person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place." Said endorses this view as suitable for anyone "wishing to transcend the restraints of imperial or national or provincial limits. Only through this attitude can a historian, for example, begin to grasp human experience and its written records in all their diversity and particularity."

[12] Ricoeur bases these claims on a double conception of identity: *idem-* and *ipse-* identity. The former is a constant, unchanging notion of selfhood: what I call "me" based on the narrative or story of my life I tell myself. *Ipse*-identity, on the other hand, is a fluid and open-ended notion of selfhood, the part of my self

to see ourselves as "agents and sufferers," (144) thereby rendering us closely intertwined. Through entering the world of a text and seeing "other ways of telling," we engage in a process of self-examination that is simultaneous with our effort to understand others. "The art of storytelling," Ricoeur repeats with Benjamin, "is the art of exchanging *experiences*" (164). Because we evaluate these experiences when exposed to the narratives of others, we are always already involved with them in an inevitable ethical and moral dialogue, constantly opening ourselves to other viewpoints. Ultimately, "What is suggested by the limiting cases produced by the narrative imagination is a dialectic of ownership and of dispossession, of care and of carefreeness, of self-affirmation and of self-effacement" (168). This temporary erasure of our privileged subject position entails a moment of becoming through which our thoughts coalesce with those of others; it leads us to see the ethical vitality of others, and the constitutive role they play in shaping who we are by compelling us to alter and expand our worldviews.

In summary, Said and Ricoeur's views build on the work of other hermeneuticists by demonstrating how, through attending to the stories of others, we can join them in a dialogue that disrupts what we thought we knew and share in their perspectives. In this process, we temporarily forfeit our subject position and lose ourselves in the vacillating terrain of self and other, the world of the text. Taylor's language of perspicuous contrast remains relevant here, but it is modified by an awareness that in narratives, "I" am not merely engaging with an "interlocutor"; in the world of a narrative, these become merged. Mutual understanding thus comes about through the mutual occupation of a shared world: the liminal space of the text.

---

that is always engaged with otherness and capable of initiating something new. For Ricoeur, *ipse*-identity is active when we are involved in reading narratives, which allows for liquefaction and reshaping of our self-conception.

3.3 Thinking of New Applications for the Hermeneutic Narratological Approach

In establishing a methodology for the study of Iran's political culture, I have been adamant that going beyond any monolithic conception of this culture requires attention to numerous narratives. Moreover, as I have shown with the concept of liminality, narratology also has the advantage of allowing readers to avoid asymmetrical power by submerging themselves in the narrators' texts. Lastly, through Ricoeur's insights, I have intimated that the kinds of narratives that allow for such intermingling do not necessarily have to be political, but can also be literary or otherwise creative.

All of the methodological points I have outlined are important in that they constitute a *particular* approach to a distinct context. As Farah Godrej has pointed out, approaches to the emerging field of comparative political theory are "characterized, above all, by a fluidity and rich diversity of motivating assumptions, methodologies and even disciplinary commitments" (2011, 6-7). This observation is helpful in emphasizing the point I made at the beginning of this chapter, namely that a hermeneutic approach is not an all-embracing mechanism used to analyze any given culture. Thus the delicate and difficult task of understanding a political culture like Iran's has called for the modifications I have outlined in this chapter. My concern is with the initial approach that any interpreter should have if she is to avoid essentializing the culture in the ways past surveyors have done. Unlike Godrej's method, which involves deep immersion in the culture being studied, mine will continue to rely on texts and the stories they tell.

In order to demonstrate the importance of attending to diverse stories and seeing what they have to offer, I will next examine Iranian political culture as a series of competing

narratives. Applying the hermeneutic narratological approach, I hope to show that monolithic conceptions of the political identities of Iranians are, much like the word "exotic," antiquated and useless baggage.

4. Applying the Method

All approaches to Iranian political identity have been reductive in one way or another. Every discourse that has tried to rigidify a particular conception of this identity, much like a territorial demarcation, *excludes* by virtue of inclusion. Every discourse of this kind is therefore suspect, whether it propounds neo-colonial resistance or democratization. My argument is that those seeking a thorough rather than reductive understanding of the nation's political culture need to start by critiquing all intellectuals to overcome their potential biases and simplifications. Here I will apply the method established in the previous chapter to carry out this task.

There are, as I intimated in the second chapter, numerous competing narratives aiming to delimit the way Iranians approach politics. Rather than scrutinize all the major discourses, which would be beyond the scope of this paper, I will limit my analysis to two of them. First, I will focus on Ali Shariati, whose influential ideas I have mentioned without subjecting them to a critical assessment. Examining Shariati in light of his prejudices, I will demonstrate the untenability of his distorted self-understanding, which he then tried to apply to Iranians in general. This critique of Shariati will serve as a model for the criticism of all similar totalizing discourses from the past. Turning to present circumstances, I will then examine the more complex group of discourses that I have identified as narratives of democratization and problematize their potential biases.

4.1 Ali Shariati's Monolithic Discourse

To reiterate Shariati's significance for understandings of "Islamic" political identity, it is worth recalling the ubiquity of his posthumous presence throughout Iran's

revolutionary period. "During the Islamic Revolution," Ervand Abrahamian states, "Shari'ati emerged unchallenged as the most popular writer of modern Iran…. In fact, his ideas were far better known than those of Ayatollah Khomeini" (1982b, 28). His influence, though diminished, continues to resonate today in the discourse propagated by the Islamic regime, most saliently through the perpetuation of an "authentic," revolutionary political culture. But what exactly *is* such a culture, how was it fashioned, and how did Shariati understand it?

Shariati was immersed in Islamic thought and practice throughout most of his life. Born in 1933, he was brought up by his father among the radical Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists, to which his later work would be greatly indebted (Rahnema 1998, 34). As their name suggests, members of this group were concerned with both religious and political matters. They wanted to put forward a revolutionary ideology which tried to combine its Marxist tones with "homespun" ideas (33). Shariati, therefore, was raised to believe in the importance of both "organic" Islam and Western communism, a double current that was to run through his thought for the rest of his life.

Following the overthrow of the nationalist Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, and the ascendancy of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's authoritarian monarchy, Shariati's nativist revolutionary rhetoric began to take shape. Shariati wrote numerous articles in which "he argued that even though today it seems as if the scientific analysis of historical events was initiated by contemporary European historians, it must be admitted that the first steps in this path were taken by Muslims." As Ali Rahnema suggests, there were perhaps private and psychological reasons underlying such claims: "Shariati probably felt that this provocative approach was necessary, especially after the *coup*, to break the

vicious circle of underachievement and political failure which led to a loss of faith in one's own identity and culture, subsequently giving way to blind faith in the ways of the Westerners and therefore their imitation" (62). Yet this insight provides only a partial understanding of Shariati's thought and guiding motivations. His immersion into European continental philosophy explains much more, especially by beginning to expose the inconsistencies of his discourse.

Emerging from a period of intense interaction with Islam and the attempts to put together an organic ideology—one that supposedly grew out of the soil of Iran and the seed of Islam—Shariati headed to France to pursue further studies and realized "that all which is Western was not necessarily 'bad.'" Therefore he went through a process of analysis and selection, rejecting and accepting new ideas, and "This lengthy and laborious process eventually gave birth to a synthesis and a new paradigm – the potent revolutionary tool that he took back home" (88). In France, Shariati familiarized himself with existentialism and the discourse of authenticity: principles that were in no way prevalent in previous understandings of Islam, but became so under Shariati's "reformation."

Shariati looked to the root of what he perceived as the true spirit of religion in general, and found revolt as a common feature (2010, 36). More importantly, he ascribed a revolutionary significance to Shi'ism, claiming that the murderer of Imam Ali[13] "strikes a blow at God's religion and the Prophet" (43). Part of Shariati's claim here is that Shi'ism, as a religion of revolt, contains social awareness and a desire for social justice.

---

[13] Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the cousin of Prophet Muhammad, whom Shi'a Muslims regard as the rightful successor to lead the faithful. His assassination, along with the elimination of many of his descendents, has long been regarded by Twelver Shi'ites as central to their beliefs, and is the source of much emotional upheaval among his devotees.

What Shariati proposed was a return to the spirit of Hussein and the paradigm of Karbala.[14] He held that Islam contains the same elements of social critique as Marxism, but in an improved form which also gives meaning to existence rather than reducing it to purely materialist terms: "Islam interprets and evaluates man on the basis of *tauhid* [monotheism], and Marxism does so on the basis of production [*taulid*][15]" (1980, 70). Yet Shariati never sufficiently showed Islam to be as strong a source of social justice as he claimed it was. He lacked not only a foundational basis to anchor his arguments in the text of the Quran, but even historical evidence to support them. Instead he relied mainly on myth-making.

Abdolkarim Soroush provides a trenchant critique of Shariati on this point, noting that in his works "there were very few references to the Koran… and to the ideas of Islamic thinkers as a whole." As Soroush further emphasizes, what Shariati did was to *produce* a revolutionary Islam without relying on much textual support; and though he did occasionally refer to actual texts, "the element of selectivity was very strong in Shariati's works; a ruinous selectivity" (Khojasteh-Rahimi, 2008). Examples of such selectivity abound in Shariati's works, particularly in his discussion of Imam Ali, which is pervaded by personal interpretation and emotionalism. He concludes the work *Ali is Alone* by claiming,

> Ali's pain is twofold: one pain which is caused by the sword of Ibn Muljam, which struck the top of his head, and another pain which is one that he alone felt in the quiet hours of the night… We only understand his physical pain, but this is not Ali's true pain. The pain which made his great soul groan was loneliness, which we do not know. We must inform everyone of this pain. (1976a, 24-25; my translation)

---

[14] Al-Hussein ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib was one of Imam Ali's sons, killed along with his family at the battle of Karbala. This event is particularly sensitive for Twelver adherents, commemorated annually on the holy day of Ashura and re-enacted in *ta'ziyeh* performances, or passion plays dramatizing his tragic fate.
[15] In the original Farsi, this is of course meant to be a play on words indicating what Shariati sees as the fundamental problem of Marxism, namely the absence of a "proper" monotheistic religion to guide revolutionary agents.

The way in which Shariati used such stories as fuel for his revolutionary stance is particularly notable in his *Ali, School of Thought, Unity, Justice,* where he wrote: "An Islamic society requires a fiery revolutionary ideology. The institution and community of Islam require unity in confronting imperialism, and Muslims living under an unjust regime must achieve justice. This is where Ali is needed" (1976b, 25; my translation). As Soroush further states,

> Shariati's master stroke was to bring to life the tale of Ashura and Imam Hussain, Zainab's captivity and the captivity of Imam Hussain's kith and kin, and the events of Karbala as a whole… Shariati made a blatant selection and he wrote the history of Shi'ism in a way that no neutral historian can possibly endorse. The history of Shi'ism mustn't be written from the perspective of Imam Hussain's movement alone; his movement was an exception in the history of Shi'ism, not the rule. Of course, Shariati knew what he was doing. In order to construct a revolutionary Islam or to reconcile Islam with revolution, he had the utmost need for the events of Karbala. (2008)

All of this amounts to showing that Shariati tried to attribute revolutionary ideas to Islam without situating them convincingly in a theo-political context. Instead, what he developed was a message of revolutionary ideology in the veil of Islam. At this point, I will conclude my critique of Shariati by demonstrating that his project was actually deeply indebted to Western thinkers. Illustrating this point has significant implications regarding not only the reception of his ideas, but also the very ideology upon which the Islamic Republic is built and the understandings of its political culture that follow.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger provocatively frames the way in which free-thinking people with a propensity for creativity have been restricted by others who impose expectations and rules on them: "With Dasein's lostness in the 'they,' that factical potentiality-for-Being which is closest to it… has already been decided upon. The 'they' has always kept Dasein from taking hold of these possibilities for being" (1962, 312). The individual, in other words, is always being influenced and inhibited by others to such

an extent that creative longing and the ability to carve out her own existence is suppressed. Heidegger stresses breaking away from others, finding one's own private space to let creativity flourish: "Dasein is *authentically itself* in the primordial individualization of the reticent resoluteness which exacts anxiety of itself. *As something that keeps silent*, authentic *Being*-one's-Self is just the sort of thing that does not keep on saying 'I'; but in its reticence it '*is*' that thrown entity as which it can authentically be" (369-370). Heidegger speaks to the angst-ridden individual living in Weber's disenchanted world, and promises that anxiety is a good sign, for it points to authenticity and self-creation. These all may seem like comforting and life-affirming principles to live by, but a double irony threatens their energetic play. Not only did Heidegger negate the very ideas he affirmed here by supporting the Nazi party, but many of those who picked up on his ideas took them to equally preposterous conclusions. Ali Shariati was among these followers.

Shariati learned about Heidegger during his period of study in France, where he wrote: "Heidegger, Sartre's intellectual lodestar, says, 'Man is a solitary being hurled into this desert-world.' Sartre designates this mode of apprehension *delaissement*, meaning being thrown back upon oneself. This resembles the concept of 'assignation' [*tafviz*] in our philosophy" (1980, 46). But again Shariati, even in critiquing existentialism, utilized it in such a way as to connect it to Islam and to give it a wider significance. In other words he wanted to go beyond the individual to the greater question of culture: the notion of *an authentic culture*. The way he did so appears like a blatant (mis)appropriation of Heidegger:

> The real or authentic existence is an existence which crystallized in the 'I' in the course of centuries of building history, culture, civilization, art…. It is my real existence that when I am before the French, the English, the American, or the Chinese, I can say 'I,' as

they can say 'I'… And this is an existence that has been created in the course of history…This authentic personality, my human personality, distinguishes me from the other. (Quoted in Vahdat 2002, 139)

Using a hermeneutic approach, we can see that Shariati derived the idea of a particular cultural identity from thinkers like Fanon and Heidegger to form a particular discourse of authenticity. Mehrzad Boroujerdi reminds us that Shariati translated several important texts of Western thinkers, and concludes, "Shariati was convinced that all these approaches could contribute to the reconstruction of the 'authentic existence' of the Oriental, a goal he eagerly pursued to the very end of his life" (1996, 108).

Shariati resorted to essentialist classifications chiefly in order to justify his claims of an "authentic" Islamic political culture. Having probed this tendency with reference to some of his influences, I would maintain that the self-understanding he projected onto the rest of the nation was a dubious and distorted representation. Recalling the importance of narratology, I would further stress that Shariati's conception of Iran's political culture is merely one story among others. Even if it took a particular hold in Iran through its dissemination following the establishment of Khomeini's regime, it does not necessarily characterize the potentials of its citizenry. What it does is to make people blind to other possibilities, to present a monolithic conception of religion and politics which in its rigidity rejects dialogue.

According to a new group of political thinkers, agitation against monological thinking and intolerance has been stirring for many years in Iran. Much of the population in Iran, they claim, is in fact experiencing an ideological disenchantment, mainly because they find it almost impossible to identify with Khomeini and his successor. The charisma of people like Shariati and Khomeini is no longer there, and all that remains is a ghostly shell that appeals to very few. Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr declared presciently before the

post-election protests of 2009 that "In recent years Iranians have sought to alter the balance of power between state and society, subjecting state power to the rule of law while empowering civil society. Less interest has been shown in accommodating the utopian ideals and values of the Islamic Republic" (2006, 6).

Yet, as I have been asking, are these not also potentially reductive statements about Iran's political culture? How do we know what the Iranian citizenry truly feels and how they have understood their own actions recently in the political sphere? I turn next to examine the new discourses that claim to provide answers to these questions.

4.2 Potential Problems with Advocating Democracy in Iran

Interpretations of a "democratic" Iranian culture typically pursue a familiar storyline. Many *rowshanfekran-e no* who make these claims start by referring back to the significant events of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911. The agents of this Revolution—mainly secular intellectuals, democratic activists and a variety of ordinary citizens—challenged the authoritarian rule of the Qajar kings and demanded a constitutional monarchy, creating a parliament that established political representation and popular sovereignty. Following the thread of this initial democratic experience, recent theorists envision a political culture that, despite its lapses into tyrannical rule and oppression, flourishes in the late twentieth century and continues into the present, insisting on greater civil liberties and government accountability through sustained resistance and struggle. Nader Hashemi, for instance, states that "The present conflict in Iran today… between conservatives and reformists, is rooted in this legacy of the unresolved ideological dispute over the proper location of political sovereignty that began

in the early 20th century" (2011, 50). Essential to this narrative is the development of an organic civil society to provide a foundation for democratic discourse. According to Peyman Vahabzadeh, the concept of civil society has re-emerged in recent years as "myriad of social movements, as well as the Green Movement, are about to take the country back on its century-long struggle for a democratic-participatory society and politics. In a way, today's Iran signifies a return to the spirit of the Constitutional Revolution" (2011, 3, 18).

As I have indicated earlier, the claims put forward by the *rowshanfekran-e no* are fairly problematic. Their discourse of democratization may sound overly optimistic or coloured by prejudices. Admittedly, as a hermeneutic outlook reveals, any perspective is inevitably going to be weighed down by some prejudice. Yet, as I've suggested, there is a way to move forward in spite of this fact by using a critical approach that brings about greater awareness and epistemic humility.

In order to better grasp Iranian political culture, it is crucial to ask how agents view their own actions and discourses before we determine how reliable or useful their narratives are. In short, we need to look at the culture itself to scan the multiplicity of narratives that emerge. Zooming in on one interpretation, we can easily lose sight of the bigger picture and become inattentive to others. Conversely, from a liminal position, we may gain a larger, clearer field of view. This task requires a final investigation: to examine the political culture as on the one hand dialogically constructed, and the other an expressive mode that projects its understanding through organic, creative narration. It is ultimately the narrative acts of Iranians themselves that we have to look to if we are to confirm the culture's democratic potential.

5. Cross-Cultural Convergences

In his seemingly comprehensive tome *On Politics*, Alan Ryan begins with a typical narrative of the West's special ownership of political thought. Explaining why he begins with the ancient Greeks, he affirms: "We have inherited from the Greeks of twenty-five hundred years ago the words they used to talk about their political arrangement: 'politics,' 'democracy'" and so on. Persia is immediately identified as the antipodal territory: "There was no politics in Persia because the great king was the master of slaves, not the ruler of citizens" (2012, 5-7). In making these claims, Ryan perpetuates the same discourse that has been related for centuries, setting up the old and tired binaries that identify the West with democracy and freedom, and the Orient with tyranny and repression. As John Keane states in his review of Ryan's book, "These opening slips tinge Ryan's global history of political thinking with shades of old-fashioned Orientalism" (2012). In this chapter, I want to begin by reiterating the need go beyond such a simplistic way of thinking, instead identifying mutual influences and dialogues among cultures.

The initial argument I make here is certainly not unique. The foundations of racist reductive treatments, which even the West's most prominent political thinkers used to justify countless imperial conquests and colonial enterprises, are continually being undermined by new generations today who look to those other realms for humanity and tolerance. More than ever, the distinctions and contributions of other civilizations are being appreciated in the West. Even a brief survey of these "distant others" reveals a mutual search for greater freedom, reciprocity and understanding.

David Levering-Lewis, in his account of the "making of Europe," describes Ibn Rushd and Maimonides' influence on Western philosophical thought as immense, imbued with a spirit of tolerance and a thirst for knowledge. He maintains that "Rationalism was born in Spain in the mind of an Arabian philosopher as a conscious reaction against the theologism of the Arabian divines" (2007, 374). The notion of *convivienca* (coexistence) thrived in Córdoba, spurring unprecedented intercultural exchange and innovations in thought. "East" and "West" continued to interact in spite of all constructed hierarchies and exertions of power. Roxanne Euben's *Journeys to the Other Shore* demonstrates the persistence with which Muslim travellers and their Western counterparts sought to understand one another through various stages, leading to renewed calls for intercultural dialogue and a cosmopolitan ethos. As Fred Dallmayr notes, "cross-cultural inquiry and exegesis today is no longer the monopoly of Europe or the West"; rather, the world is now more than ever open to other voices and *dialogical exchange*, which

> means an effort at bridge building across a vast abyss, an effort which does not erase the abyss nor domesticate the 'other shore.' In terms of self-other relation, dialogue means exposure to an otherness which lies far beyond the self (without being totally incommensurable)… as a corollary of self-exposure, it requires a willingness to 'risk oneself,' that is, to plunge headlong into a transformative learning process in which the status of self and other are continuously renegotiated. (1996, xviii).

Despite the demands of this process, Dallmayr concludes his book by stating that "there are reasons to believe that our age holds out the challenge of a new and different kind of maturity, one where freedom is willing to recognize and cultivate cultural diversity (without restoring invidious hierarchies)" (221). In applying these insights to Iran's political culture, my emphasis is on a liminal approach that allows interpreters to do precisely that: taking note of convergences to appreciate differences while stressing

commonality. A look at past and present narratives in Iran, I maintain, may allow all interpreters to arrive at a deeper understanding of its culture.

5.1 A Cosmopolitan Outlook

Centuries before Locke's treatises or the Magna Carta, in the 6th Century BCE, Cyrus the Great instituted the world's first known charter of human rights (Lauren 2003, 7). The Cyrus Cylinder declared the Persian king's sovereignty over the newly captured city of Babylon, but promoted the creation of a multicultural and pluralistic society, stressing "the political formulization of racial, linguistic, and religious equality; slaves and all deported peoples were to be allowed to return to home; and all destroyed temples were to be restored" (Farrokh 2007, 44). The existence of the cylinder intimates that the spirit of tolerance pervades many geographic and social contexts. Political ideas and attitudes travel across and through cultures, like wind through open windows; the much-maligned land of Persia is no exception to this rule.

Sufi poets have been some of the noblest carriers of a humanistic and cosmopolitan ethos in Iranian history. Their works, though grounded in a particular time and place, suggest a worldliness that takes us beyond simplistic binaries and chauvinistic self-pride. The principal themes they impart consist in self-effacement, broad-mindedness and love. Here I examine three authorities on these subjects, weaving in non-Iranian thinkers to show confluences in thought across time and space.

5.2 On Attar

Farid ud-Din Attar was born in the 12th Century in Nishapur, but is known to have travelled outside his native Iran to many distant places around the world (Attar 1984, 9). Attar was one of the first to articulate Sufi doctrines that defied orthodox Islamic beliefs (11). As Dabashi writes, Sufism during this period had gained a special political significance: "The Sufi preaching of the primacy of love and of individual existential experiences made their alternative particularly appealing to a wide range of ordinary or powerful Muslims." The new interpretations of Islam also had the further advantage of inciting political accountability: the Seljuq viziers, who were "significant conduits of active resignification of the political culture in this period" tended "to enter into political dialogue with both the jurists and the Sufis in legitimizing their authority" (1999, 121-2). Sufism thus helped incite active resistance and deliberation in the face of tyrannical rulers from the eleventh century onward (109-154).

Attar's major poem, *The Conference of the Birds*, is an allegorical treatment of this tradition; its plot consists in a journey through the phases of "Search, Love, mystic Apprehension, Detachment/Independence, Unity, Bewilderment and Fulfilment in Annihilation" (Attar 1984, 14). Not only do these ideas resemble those of other so-called "mystic" thinkers of the Western tradition, but they also display a tendency toward reason and political agency. According to Sufi philosophy, one's *nafs*, or individual personality, is dialogically constructed but remains autonomous and rational, in line with the Western *principium individuationis*. The process of love (*eshq*) and annihilation (*wusla*) refer to a loss of self, leading to a transmutation or *fana*: becoming something more. Attar

emphasizes the agency involved in this course of action by endowing Sufi doctrines with political significance.

The "birds" in Attar's poem, archetypes of ordinary people, commence their conference in search of a king. Before setting out to find this king, the "Simorgh," in a distant place, they deliberate for a long time about the difficulties of the journey and the doubts they have about finding a legitimate king. As the poem's numerous allegories show, monarchs are often capricious and unjust, subjugating the people's will and basking in it. "My word is law here," one of these kings says in surveying his kingdom; "I see obedience here… these poor captives sacrifice their will/ And bow to my commands through good and ill" (126). Against the repressive aims of such tyrants, the characters in the poem gradually discover their own sense of agency as a source of resistance and unity. At the end of the poem, they reach a startling realization: "There in the Simorgh's radiant face they saw/ Themselves, the Simorgh of the world – with awe/ They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend/ They were the Simorgh at the journey's end" (218-9).

Attar's play on words renders *Si-morgh* as both the mythical monarch and the thirty (*si*) birds (*morgh*) themselves. Through this revelation, they learn that the notion of sovereignty had been lying dormant within them all along: an idea hardly unfamiliar to Western proponents of the republican principles of governance. In addition to this thread, *The Conference of the Birds* accentuates the importance of love in bringing about political unity and breaking down the will of tyrannical rulers. Fittingly, the poem ends with the allegory of a king who ordered his beloved to be killed, only to be chastised by the communal compassion of the populace: "Love made him weak; this lion-hearted

king/ Became an ant, afraid of everything" (226). Consumed by grief and lament over the misuse of his powers, the king is eventually guided back toward just representation of the people, who embody the true source of sovereignty.

5.3 On Rumi

It is perhaps Jalal al-Din Rumi who illuminates the idea of unity and confluences among people and ideas better than any other Sufi thinker. Furthermore, there is a striking similarity between his concepts and those of Western hermeneuticists like Gadamer and Ricoeur, insofar as Rumi is advocating his own set of principles for understanding others. Building on Gadamer's notion of a fusion of horizons, Ricoeur's method sought "to break out of the enchanted enclosure" of prejudice (1967, 356). For this, he looked to the hermeneutic circle of mimesis as "an endless spiral that would carry the meditation past the same point a number of times, but at different altitudes" (1984, 72) to bring about a union and understanding between individuals. Parallel to this is the 13th Century Sufi thinker's injunction:

> Sit down in this circle…
> Why do you stay in prison
> when the door is so wide open?
> Move outside the tangle of fear-thinking.
> Live in silence.
> Flow down and down in always
> widening rings of being.

The concept of love runs abundantly through Rumi's works, and is essentially operant in all instances of mutual understanding. In his masterpiece, *Mathnawī-e Ma'navi*, Rumi equates love with communion and self-erasure: "Someone once asked, 'What is love?' 'Be lost in me,' I said. 'You'll know love when that happens'" (2004, 3, 274). "Love," Rumi scholars Safavi and Weightman say, "is the crux of the *Mathnawī*, as it is of the

spiritual path" (2009, 9). In this work, Rumi ties love to the inevitable human desire for connection with others through the figurative language of intoxication: "Love says, You cannot deny me. Try./ I say, Yes, you appear out of nowhere/ like the bubbles in wine, here, then not… I Say, This ecstasy is dangerous./ Love says, I sip the delicious day,/ until night takes the cup away" (Rumi 2004, 354). This conversation with love signifies Rumi's endless preoccupation with humility and tolerance.

Abdolkarim Soroush, in his "Treatise on Tolerance," writes that "One of the reasons why humility has been considered the greatest virtue and arrogance the greatest vice is that arrogance breeds violence and humility tolerance. Our Sufis held love in high esteem precisely because love makes the lover humble" (2004, 20). The resemblances between "Eastern" and "Western" thinkers further reveal that we can arrive at the same methods and conclusions from entirely different cultural contexts and vantage points. As Soroush admits,

> My first attempts at interpretation concerned the Qur'an and an important Sufi text, *Mathnavi*. Later on, when I combined these insights with my knowledge of the philosophy of science and philosophy of history, I arrived at a relatively comprehensive hermeneutical theory. To tell you the truth, up to the time that I composed the thesis of contraction and expansion I had not studied the hermeneutical theories of scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer. Indeed, I was struck by the affinity of my positions and those of Gadamer. (2000, 28)

Paul Ricoeur, too, engaged unabashedly with the notion of love, despite the threat of being perceived as "unscholarly" or platitudinous. Ricoeur avoided this pitfall by fusing the idea of love with justice and situating it "on a plane that is far removed from both banality and formalism." He held that "The lover's request addressed to the beloved— 'Love me'—gives love a dynamic power that enables it to evoke a broad spectrum of feelings and even to balance conflicting sentiments: 'pleasure and pain, fulfillment and disappointment, joy and sorrow, happiness and misery'" (quoted in Dallmayr 2007, 222-

6). Rumi would say the same thing in the following way: "There is an original inside me./ What's here is a mirror for that, for you./ If you are joyful, I am./ If you grieve, or if you're bitter, or graceful,/ I take on those qualities" (2004, 12).

Moving toward a theory that embraces a genuine notion of inclusiveness and dialogue among diverse cultures requires a more open acceptance of universal ideas that bind all of humanity. Rarely is the concept of love engaged in Western academic political thought, as if it remains the domain of poets, artists and the like. Explored in relation to the idea of empathy, love is in actuality a basic necessity in our political relations with others—that is, love understood as a willingness to be bound up with others, to refuse to live in pure isolation. The willingness to be another, to experience another closely, would provide for the most liberating and emancipatory form of inclusion and mutuality. Working in between the unstable categories of East and West, motivation to establish these norms can be found in myriad places, languages, and modes of thought.

5.4 On Sa'di, Humanity and Empathy

In looking to these other ways of thinking, Edward Said championed Herder, who helped "breach the doctrinal walls erected between the West and Islam," through *Einfühlung*. (1979, 118). Rendered in English as empathy, *Einfühlung* can be best defined as emotional contagion, communion, or the ability to sense another's feelings as though they were one's own (Eisenberg and Strayer 1990, 5; Decety and Jackson 2004, 71-100). As a physiological response, empathy is not only crucial in bringing about mutual understanding among members of a political community, but also necessary in allowing us to recognize a shared humanity with distant others, whether through proximity,

imagery, or narrative (Morrell 2010; Rosanvallon 2011). The writings of the Persian poet Sa'di constitute another notable effort in this regard.

Hamid Dabashi sees in the writings of Sa'di a move toward a decentered subject. In this reading, the poet's call to "abandon your knowing heart to a person you love" is seen as an invitation to lose oneself through figurative contact with others, "to constitute an entirely uncertain and wavering subject defining the horizons of its open-ended manners and modes of significations" (2012, 29). Sa'di, for him, is a humanist author in the truest sense of the word: "a peripatetic humanist—his worldliness literally embedded in the fact that he had seen the world." More than that, it was Sa'di's message that linked him to other Sufi poet-travellers, as seen in his humanist text: "Central and paramount in *Bustan* remains *insan*, human, and the best quality of this *insan* is *hamdardi*, sympathy…. Paramount in *Bustan* is love that is the glue holding all of humanity together" (156).

In his other celebrated work, *Golestan* (or *Rose Garden*), Sa'di penned the famous words that embody these principles, now inscribed in the entrance to the UN Hall of Nations building in New York:

> Human beings are members of a whole
> For in creation, they are of one essence.
> If time brings one of these members pain,
> Other members cannot avoid distress.
> If you lack sympathy for the pain of others,
> You are unworthy of the name human being.[16]

It could be said that, taken together, Sa'di's works constitute "a curriculum of learning, of *Bildung*, of cultivation of decency, humility [and] justice" (Dabashi 2012, 158).

---

[16] My translation. The poem has been rendered in many different ways, with many versions aiming to preserve the rhyming couplets but often reverting to flowery and archaic language. My intention has been to convey the original meaning and purpose of the lines. For the original Persian text, see http://ganjoor.net/saadi/golestan/gbab1/sh10/. Accessed July 10, 2013.

Sa'di's sense of justice comes across most clearly in his condemnation of the arbitrary rule of kings. Like Attar, he rebukes kings for their cruelty, but goes even further than his predecessor: "The first book of *Golestan* is composed of forty-one short parables and stories. Of these, at least twenty-seven are unambiguously critical of kings." According to Abbas Milani, these denunciations reveal a "democratic bent" in Sa'di, further evidenced by his championing of common people and their daily lives (2004, 46-49). Milani finds in Sa'di several early expressions of modernity, including individualism, critical thinking and agency (42-45). For instance, in *Golestan*, Sa'di alludes to the freedom of the cypress tree, a symbol of will-power and upstanding morality. In Ferdowsi's epic *Shahnameh*, the character of Fereydun is one of the first and most famous figures to challenge an unjust king, and he is described as "cypress-tall" like a "fruitful tree" (Ferdowsi 2006, 16). Sa'di uses this imagery to argue that the moral superiority of the cypress lies in its capacity for *freedom*: it "is always fresh, and this is the quality of those who are free."[17] Though Sa'di wrote in allegorical and poetical language, he was dealing with overtly political themes. It is not unreasonable to see him pointing to the same critical spirit as a political thinker like Hannah Arendt would. For Arendt, the notion of natality, or beginning something new, played a central role in asserting freedom and agency: "Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom" (1973, 479). As such, freedom had to be constantly sustained through action: "Men *are* free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom—so long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same" (1968, 153). In Sa'di's words, the people are not merely subjects in the sense that they serve a king; rather, they have the

---

[17] My translation. Original at http://ganjoor.net/saadi/golestan/gbab8/sh98/. Accessed July 10, 2013.

subjectivity needed to question his rule. Sa'di suggests that the king's power is "dependent on the support of the people—a king must be just in order to attract the support of the people." More pointedly, he writes, "the king needs his subjects more than the subjects need the king, for whether there is a king or not, the subject remains the subject, while it is impossible to imagine a king without the existence of his subjects" (quoted in Milani 2004, 49).

All the Sufi poets mentioned so far allude in one way or another to supposedly "Western" concepts of modernity, subjectivity, and perspective-taking. Much of their discourse was aimed at resisting arbitrary rule and suppression through the exercise of agency. Dabashi, coalescing all Persian literary humanists like Attar, Rumi and Sa'di, notes how they allow for a "resuscitation of that human agency, by way of casting the necessity of a humanist look at a literary history that has been overtly (and violently) theocentricized" (2012, 149). Therefore, their poetic and political feats need not be confined merely to a single time and geographical setting. Along with Hafez, these poets have also been recognized and immortalized in the West.

As with Herder, who "famously proposes that the way to bridge radical difference when interpreting is through *Einfühlung*" (Herder 2004, xvii), Western thinkers like Goethe, Nietzsche, Thoreau and Emerson were well known to have read and been stimulated by Sufi poetry. Goethe's *West-östlicher Diwan* is perhaps the best and most inspired example of a striving for unity, modeled on Hafez's ghazal form. "North and West and South are breaking," Goethe wrote, "Thrones are bursting, kingdoms shaking:/ Flee, then, to the essential East,/ Where on patriarch's air you'll feast!" (2000 [1814], 1111). The point I want to highlight, however, is not that we as interpreters should look

only to "flee to the East." Rather, what I have been trying to show is that all the interpretations drawn out so far impart a global, cosmopolitan spirit, which can be discerned more clearly from a liminal point of view. Without resorting to the distorting binaries of East and West, we can find a middle ground in a liminal space that allows us to envision a *global* yearning for human rights and freedom.

5.5 The Modern Dialogical Ethos in Iran

In 2001, former Iranian president Seyed Mohammad Khatami famously inaugurated the United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. Looking back to the idea recently, he continues to believe that "a common objective must be defined for dialogue: namely, fighting extremism and dangerous prejudices that may be found in any religion, culture and civilization in the East or the West" (2012). Noting the democratic movements throughout the Middle East in the past few years, he optimistically affirms that peaceful methods for mutual understanding are once again emerging against past violence and misrecognition.

Khatami's discourse further exemplifies what many inside and outside Iran have been saying about prospects for democratic thinking and the pursuit of human rights without merely regarding them as "Western imports." Clearly, having engaged with Habermas's ideas on the same subject, Khatami has constructed the paradigm of the dialogue among civilizations as with a *bricolage*, calling for "American foreign policy [to] abandon its instrumental rationality and stop considering others as objects [and instead] respect the rights of others and adopt an approach based on communicative rationality" (quoted in Lynch 2000, 307; cf. Habermas 1981). At the same time, however, his narrative draws on

the products of a home-grown political culture with deep roots in the past. As such, despite his political shortcomings and failure to deliver on many of his promises of liberalization, Khatami has helped stimulate political resistance and agency among a new generation of Iranian citizens with whom the language of accommodation and recognition resonates. A bridge between the "Western" philosophical principles of democratic legitimacy and an already ingrained Iranian spirit of agency is hardly a forced or hollow structure.

For Habermas, democratic legitimacy is largely dependent on law. As a system of coercive rules, law can either be accepted or questioned agents in the political sphere, and how much say they have in the process of law-making essentially determines the validity of the structures and institutions under which they live. Old forms of social organization, says Habermas, are no longer applicable in the modern context. Whereas in older societies "archaic institutions" and "mythical narratives" once bounded behavioural expectations (1996, 23-24), the modern situation no longer allows us to take these forms of authority for granted. With the fading away of religious authority and the convergence of different cultures through globalization, lifeworld certainties—or the background assumptions of our various societies—are no longer reliable or sufficient to establish facts and norms. Instead, "the burden of social integration shifts more and more onto the communicative achievements of actors." Establishing legal and social norms "is possible only on the basis of intersubjectively recognized normative validity claims" (26-27). Taking the place of crumbling archaic institutions, law serves as a medium for collective action, (168-193), while civil society provides a space in which political actors can

deliberate, stirring spontaneity and political expression to hold representatives accountable for their actions (329-387).

Habermas's views are, *prima facie*, quite demanding for political agents. Not only does he emphasize a "democratic *Sittlichkeit* [ethical life]" for any society aiming for the standards he outlines, but he also presupposes that the given society has reached the rationalized lifeworld of a decentered society (1998, 251-252). A social system, he shows in his earlier work, has to remain reflexive and able to respond to human subjectivity (1976, 2-8). How, then, would any of these ideas apply in a political culture like Iran's, in which subjectivity and reflexivity seem stifled?

Civil society requires a foundation, namely a cultural basis or *ethos*. As Farzin Vahdat argues, "the two human foundations of civil society, that is, the autonomous individual and the universalizing community, are prior to the institutional features of civil society" (2011, 29). Thus, Vahdat refers to the Habermasian notion of "discourse ethics or communicative rationality as the foundation of civil society." In order to apply these ideas to Iranian political culture, Vahdat follows many other theorists of Iranian democratization by locating subjectivity, agency and deliberation as raw potentials within the country. "Iranian society in the past 150 years," he claims "has acquired a significant sense of subjectivity and is now in transition toward universalization of that subjectivity, to intersubjectivity, which is the foundation of a viable civil society and therefore democracy" (31). Ali Mirsepassi further notes that the promotion of civil society and democracy in Iran can be just as "nativist" as the nation's indigenous literature, as modernity has long been present there; the question for him is "how we may produce a narrative of modernity that can at once critique Iran's traditional concepts and institutions

and take account of the shortcomings in the received paradigm of modernity" (2010, 180). As Mirsepassi proposes, "The interpretation of the experience of modernity in Iran involving the building of a democratic mode of social life" includes the two aspects of *cultural values* and *deliberation based on minimal consensus*. This understanding of modernity, for him and other theorists, would allow for discussions of human rights, democracy and gender equality to take place and "adequately ascertain the position of Iran in relation to modernity grounded in a public consensus." It rests simply on "pragmatic considerations rather than on an ideological, all-encompassing notion of society. For example, everyone agrees that democracy is better than dictatorship" (188-9). In sum, the central point that these theorists stress is that Iranian political culture has continually demonstrated signs of subjectivity, agency, and the capacity for deliberation, such that it is ready for a democratic transition.

Interestingly, when Habermas himself visited Iran to deliver a lecture at the University of Tehran in 2002, "the event drew an enormous crowd – the auditorium was overwhelmed. His visit left Iranian intellectual circles abuzz…. Reflecting on the experience, Habermas has spoken of his 'encounters with intellectuals and citizens of an uninhibited, spontaneous and self-confident urban population' laboring under the weight of authoritarian rule" (Postel 2009). Ramin Jahanbegloo, who invited numerous other political thinkers like Richard Rorty and Antonio Negri to Iran, stated in an interview with Danny Postel that "the chief task of Iranian liberalism is to establish the proper balance between critical rationality and political decency." Moreover, "The insistence of Iranian liberals on the concept of 'civil society' as a space which stands in necessary opposition to the state is a check on the arbitrary and authoritarian tendencies in Iranian

society" (Postel 2006). Jahanbegloo has since gone on to write prolifically about the nation's democratic potentialities and the strength of its civil society. Punctuating the Gandhian principle of nonviolent political resistance and action, he also follows a Habermasian strain by arguing that "The recent unrest in Iran is about a much deeper crisis taking place in the Iranian power structure" in which "a whole series of ideological beliefs and political institutions inherited from the revolution of 1979 are now put into question" (2013, 4). We know that in existing liberal democratic societies, formal political institutions do not necessarily offer the most fruitful terrain for citizen participation and reflexivity. It may then be best to look to society itself as an arena for democratic participation (Warren 2002, 688-689). For a final interpretation of how a repressed civil society like Iran's demonstrates signs of this capacity for participation, I turn in the final section to manifestations in the political culture and the disclosure of its agents' self-understandings.

6. New Narratives

As I have shown in the previous chapter, modernity, reflexivity and agency are not essentially "Western" ideas, though that is often presupposed. According to Amyn Sajoo, "modernity has come to be distinguished by its *plurality*, that is, the multiple sites where it is produced, the diversity of those who produce it and the variant processes that are involved" (2008, 9). Plural modernities may "partake of the 'founding' narratives that are Eurocentric," but they insist on their own distinctness and the fact that they grow organically in various geographical settings (11). Iran's political culture, though it has been dominated by Islamist discourse, is one such setting. Past narratives reaching as far back as Sufi writings through the Constitutional Revolution have already been cited as instances of subjectivity and agency. As mentioned elsewhere, other movements like the 1979 Revolution have witnessed mass-scale political participation, demonstrating what Hannah Arendt would have called natality, plurality and publicity (Jahanbegloo and Khatami 2013, 328-330). Those manifestations, however, can be said to have languished through past decades, given that the demands of agents were never entrenched in a constitution to secure rights and freedoms. What is crucial now, if we are to confirm the current democratic potential of the political culture, is a hermeneutic examination of contemporary narratives in Iran's public sphere.

6.1 Civic actors

Following the introduction of the terms *jame'ye madani* (civil society) and *mardomsalari* (democracy) in the 1990s, Iranian political culture was irrevocably transformed. This claim can be validated through an analysis of three strains: the efforts

and expressions of intellectuals, civic actors, and the artistic community. The first group has already been examined at great length, and it is clear that we want to go beyond the discourse of what Alasdair MacIntyre would call "the expert," who is privy to knowledge not available to ordinary agents (1972, 339). Hence we can now turn to the other two groups.

The most obvious materializations of political agency and democratic discourse in Iranian society have been the student protest movement (*jonbesh-e daneshjui*), the women's movement (*jonbesh-e zanan*) and the Green Movement (*jonbesh-e sabz*). The fact that each of these groups has been identified under a particular nomenclature intimates a cohesiveness that can be substantiated through their activities and self-expressions.

The student movement, which gathered force in the late 1990s, consisted of a series of mass protests on university campuses and public spaces in cities like Mashhad, Tehran and Tabriz, reaching a climax on 18th day of the month of Tir. The movement, which came to be known as 18 Tir, sank into widespread disorder that left numerous protestors dead or injured; but it left an indelible mark on civil society and the state, as it was the biggest political upheaval to have occurred in Iran since the 1979 Revolution (Ebadi 2006, 149). As an opposition movement, *jonbesh-e daneshjui* was by turns suppressed and resurgent, surfacing again in new forms. In May 2003, a new series of protests broke out, leading to the arrests of over four thousand people. The student protesters and their representative unions were openly demanding free expression and justice for unlawfully detained and murdered dissidents. To communicate these demands, they wrote to the UN General Secretary, a gesture that "symbolized their claim to rights as free individuals

with standing before an international community framed by the Declaration [of Human Rights]" (Boroumand 2007, 73-4).[18] Their dissent, however, would be largely subdued until it merged with the later Green Movement. Moreover, despite its strength of mobilization, it pales in comparison to the women's movement.

The women's movement has been arguably the most active, durable and effective democratic struggle in post-revolutionary Iran. Shirin Ebadi, a prominent activist and winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize, is one of the campaign's most ardent proponents. "The women's movement has resided for the past thirty-one years in every Iranian household that cares about human rights," she maintains, leading her to conclude that "it will be women who will bring democracy to Iran" (2010). Similarly, Victoria Tahmasebi affirms that the women's movement "is the main contributor to a move towards the democratization of the social, cultural and political life in Iran," by which she means aspirations to civil and political rights, free and fair elections, rational governance, and the right to be equal under the law (2010, 79). Women's activities in civil society have led to the creation of numerous NGOs and publications.[19] As Tahmasebi further argues, "Through years of struggle, Iranian women have learned how to build alliances across difference—a truly democratic practice." But "democratic" need not be interpreted as a foreign or imported concept, as she states: "the Iranian women's movement and the Green uprising in general is neither strictly Islamic-traditional nor a flight towards a Western-style liberalism," for it contains elements of various global political experiences (80).

---

[18] For their letter, see http://www.iranrights.org/english/document-87-404.php. Accessed July 11, 2013.

[19] Most notably the One Million Signatures Campaign, which has gathered widespread support to end gender discrimination in Iran's legal system and, more broadly, its cultural ethos. For its history and recent activities, see http://www.campaignforequality.info/english/. Accessed July 12, 2013. Another important group, the Mourning Mothers, came to prominence following the post-election demonstrations of 2009, in which numerous protestors were killed or disappeared. This group, much like Argentina's Mothers of the Plaza Mayo, gathered weekly in a park in Tehran to demand justice for the dead and the release of political prisoners.

Given its successes in bringing about socio-political changes and the many objectives it still pursues, *jonbesh-e zanan* can be interpreted as a dynamic movement that has grown naturally among the citizenry in reaction to repression and inequality.

Encompassing and coexisting with the two aforementioned movements, the Green Movement is often identified as a pivotal set of events for locating the discourse of agonism and democracy in Iran's political culture. Though it reached its apex in a series of protests against the allegedly fraudulent presidential election of 2009, it has persisted into the present through various activities within civil society. Employing different tactics, including but not limited to marches, rallies, sit-ins, strikes and campaigns to collect signatures for political change, the Green Movement has also used imagery and new narratives to convey its message. The symbolic imagery consisted of green armbands, scarves and other clothing, as well as photographs and videos shared on social media to serve as evidence for a democratic struggle inside the country. As the movement progressed, Michael M.J. Fischer noted "the decentralized capacities of civil society, recognized in the slogan *resane shomaiid* ('you are the new media'), articulating the subjectivity of a new informational flow" (2010, 357). More importantly, the Green Movement allowed for several existing narratives to gain prominence, allowing both those inside and outside the country to interpret its political culture in a new way. These narratives have emerged through multiple channels, such as the self-expressions of political actors in protests and social media. These include well-known slogans and banners such as *raye man koo?* (where is my vote?) and *ma bishomarim*! (we are countless!). Yet these forms of communication only tell part of the story of Iran's political culture. Here, we can finally turn to writers and filmmakers, who have carried on

and further developed the new narratives uncovered in Iran, exploring them in their own creative way and giving a more defined shape to them.

6.2 Writers

Numerous academics addressing a Western audience begin their commentaries by pointing out the significance of literature on the nation's historical, cultural and political landscape (Amanat and Vejdani 2012; Milani 2011; Katouzian 2013). To a native Iranian, this fact is usually taken for granted. For all interpreters, however, its political significance cannot be overstated.

As Farzaneh Milani relates, female Iranian writers have been particularly influential in the political sphere, especially as throughout the past century they have served as extraordinary embodiments of "defiance against the age-old patterns of gender apartheid" (2011, 24). Perhaps, in this, no one surpasses Forough Farrokhzad. Farrokhzad's poetry, like that of the Sufis, is very well-known among the Iranian population, and has inspired many to fight for individual freedom and self-expression, including numerous artists. For Milani, her twin themes of flight and captivity exemplify a desire to go beyond the traditional strictures faced by women, "from an early aversion to walls, bars closed doors, shuttered windows, and cages to a perennial desire to fly and flow" (129). Personifying herself through her poetry, Farrokhzad wrote: "The bird flew through the air/ above the red lights/ unaware in the heights/ and deliriously living/ moments of blue" (in 1981, 81). This, among her many other poems, captures the spirit of her work and her own life. "Believing in risky ideals and bold dreams," Milani goes on, "she pursued danger almost in a trance, throwing herself headfirst in harm's way." As careless as this tendency

sounds, there was in fact a strong sense of *responsibility* in Farrokhzad's writings. Though she wrote mainly of herself, it was clear that she was carving a path for others to follow in search of freedom and a space of their own: "the relentless search for the open road, freedom, speed, and incessant motion was clearly fundamental to her work" (2011. 130-1). Fully aware of the social condemnation and isolation that her openly exuberant and often sexual poetry would bring her, she continued to challenge the existing gender roles and social conflicts of pre-revolutionary Iranian society in the 1950s and 60s.[20]

Farrokhzad's provocative lines disputed the entire historical framework within which they were uttered and contested the symbols guiding prejudices through open confessions of what was forbidden to women: "I sinned,/ it was a most lustful sin beside a tremulous, intoxicated body/ do I know, O Lord, what I have done/ in that dark retreat of silence?" (quoted in Milani 2011, 138). Understandably, "Sin" and many of the poems that followed it created a social uproar, as it was "a rupture from all that had preceded it." Despite the strong reactions against her, however, Farrokhzad has been celebrated by one generation after another as a cultural hero, since "she has come to symbolize eternal youth for Iranians, always defiant, always rebellious, always in love" (153). As Milani concludes, she is among Iran's most important icons, having led the way toward freedom by "remapping the country's cultural, visual, literary, and political geography" (244).

---

[20] For non-Iranian interpreters to appreciate the significance of Farrokhzad's work, it may be helpful to use Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" as a point of reference. Much has been said about this seminal poem and its role in extensively reshaping perceptions of homosexuality in the United States and elsewhere (Shinder 2006). "Howl" is above all an expression of both freedom and dissatisfaction: a celebration of selfhood and idiosyncrasy as well as a lament against a society that stifles such exuberance. In its labyrinthine lines it shocks and invites readers into its own world, exposing them to other ways of being and seeing, challenging their preconceptions and forcing them to acknowledge what they would rather ignore: an underworld of what is supposed to be sinful, depraved and improper, but one that is celebrated as a perfectly acceptable way of living.

A contemporary writer who has carried forward Farrokhzad's spirit, albeit in a very different way, is Mahmoud Dowlatabadi. A prolific author who has chosen to remain in Iran despite its strict censorship laws, Dowlatabadi has written numerous novels and short stories representing the trials and difficulties faced by ordinary Iranians, often engaging in subtle social critique. His works clearly outline several themes that can be seen as criticisms of the existing regime: the effects of poverty and unemployment, isolation and loneliness, the trauma of post-revolutionary terror, and the loss of identity under political repression (Dowlatabadi 2011; Mozaffari 2005 4-8; Jahanbegloo and Khatami 2013, 332-333). As such, he can be identified as a pariah insofar as he challenges the political system and is consequently marginalized and censored.[21] As a pariah, Dowlatabadi has been responsible for reminding many readers inside and outside of the country of the need to participate in a process of self-creation against the stifling weight of political repression. Following in the tradition of Kafka, whose stories "force the reader to the fringe by building a fictional world in which the familiar is represented in strange, dreamlike, and even nightmarish terms," Dowlatabadi has joined a long list of writers and civic actors who elucidate and fight against marginalization in Iran. According to Lisa Jane Disch, such people who comprise a "community of resisters" have the capacity "to imagine alternatives to its conventions" (1994, 189-190). In a sense, this community occupies a liminal position in Iranian society, and through its creative output seeks to draw in all interpreters into that space.

---

[21] His novel *The Colonel*, though widely available in other countries, has yet to be published in Iran, as its manuscript is still in the possession of censors. See Dowlatabadi 2011, 232.

6.3 Filmmakers

I conclude my examination of Iranian political culture with filmmakers for two reasons. Firstly, given the international recognition Iranian filmmakers have received throughout the past decades, they have rightly come to be perceived as essential conveyors of their native culture to the rest of the world. Secondly, and more importantly, they are also known to frequently operate in a liminal situation, using their lenses and their stories to give viewers a sense of the in-betweenness they experience. As in the case of writers, numerous directors deserve mention, but given the existing expositions done on several of them (Dabashi 2001, 2008), I will limit my discussion to the two who have more recently risen to prominence. The point these filmmakers accentuate is a key claim I have made all throughout this paper, namely the importance of being able to tell one's story in order to be understood.

Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation* has been lauded by many for the facility with which it provides a window into a different and largely unknown world. It is a film that, more than anything else, presents the moral complexities of competing narratives. Farhadi depicts multiple perspectives and intertwining stories all revolving around the central storyline of a husband and wife who are separating, but more than that he invites the spectator into its engrossing scenes to face the same moral dilemmas of the characters and, as far as possible, to see things from each character's point of view. Through witnessing the difficulties and the suffering of each of these characters, the audience's judgment is forced into suspension and disorientation. Furthermore, through participating in the storyline and getting lost in the narrative, one forgets that these scenes are happening inside the foreign setting of Iran. As one reviewer summarizes what many others have

echoed, it is "an art form that speaks to all humanity."[22] The film's complicated narratives are rendered in such a way that any viewer can relate to them; and it is through this that its supposedly distant cultural others are humanized and shown to have a kind of depth that foreign audiences may not have known about. Conversely, native Iranians may experience through it a process of defamiliarization, whereby they come to question the cultural practices and political frameworks that bring about injustice and suffering. *A Separation* is, above all, an invitation into a liminal space for all interpreters, allowing manifold narratives to come to light.

Alongside Farhadi, it is perhaps Jafar Panahi who best exemplifies the liminal point of view in Iranian cinema. Though his earlier films have left him banned from making movies and confined to house arrest, he has persevered in trying to share his impressions. His documentary-style feature, ironically called *This Is Not a Film*, was clandestinely transported outside of Iran and screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011 to great acclaim. Mostly shot by the director himself inside his apartment, *This Is Not a Film* details the mundane aspects of his life under house arrest, but more importantly speaks of his desire to tell his story and share his experience. Through its sequences, Panahi tries to imaginatively recreate the scenes he would have shot for his next movie had it not been prohibited by censors. He places strips of tape on the floor to delineate a space in which the invisible actors are supposed to move. He attempts to narrate their actions and lines. He's soon dismayed, though, lamenting that a story cannot be properly told this way. As a remedy, he goes back to his previous films and highlights the spontaneity and humanity of the actors in rendering a meaningful, coherent narrative. The narrative, he stresses, has

---

[22] See Alan A. Stone, "Never So Free," *The Boston Review*, (May/June 2012); available at http://www.bostonreview.net/BR37.3/alan_stone_asghar_farhadi_separation.php. Accessed Apr. 20, 2013.

to feel *real*—it has to be grounded in reality in order to be understood. The remarkable self-reflexive moments when he relates this back to his own all-too-real situation lead to the most poignant scenes in the film. "I feel like what we are doing here is a lie," he says. Yet the irony is that his is the most honest and personal account that could be given in the face of censorship and repression. In his own way, from the in-between space of his apartment—where he is and is not in Iran, is and is not a director—Panahi relates his story in such a way that interpreters become a part of it. Then and only then, he shows, can we reach a better understanding of his circumstances and those of his compatriots.

7. Conclusion: Cultural Exchange and the Recognition of the Other

The central question I have pursued throughout this paper is how any interpreter can approach and grasp Iranian political culture. My contention has been that a thorough understanding is available to insiders and outsiders alike through a hermeneutic and narratological approach that examines a variety of discourses, past and present, and discerns how agents have expressed themselves through historically situated contexts. Such an approach reduces the role of the "experts" who may have hidden prejudices and agendas, and instead privileges the people themselves—those who constitute the culture in all its multifariousness—by tending to the stories they have to tell. Thus the totalizing, monolithic discourses of the past can be identified as inadequate and misleading.

The liminal view I have emphasized is also imperative for adopting a cosmopolitan attitude. This stance does not merely erase or look past cultural difference, but rather recognizes the importance that the assertion of difference has for agents and seeks to reconcile serious conflicts by stressing dialogue and openness. Iranian political culture itself can be located in a liminal situation, not being levelled down to one tendency and not knowing exactly what it will become. Part of the demand for understanding this culture is that we merge with its liminal state, from which differences and similarities among various cultures become clear: seeing convergences, we recognize our shared humanity, and noting distinctness, we respect the wishes of others to be given consideration.

This final exhortation recalls Fanon's powerful demand for recognition through empathy and solidarity, going beyond the hostile and divisive rhetoric his previous interpreters have used: "I ask that I be taken into consideration on the basis of my

desire…. I demand that an account be taken of my contradictory activity insofar as I pursue something other than life, insofar as I am fighting for the birth of a human world, in other words, a world of reciprocal recognitions" (2008 [1952], 193). Alongside the hermeneutic approach, empathic understanding enables dialogue and mutual appreciation, allowing interpreters to feel "the open dimension of every consciousness" (206). In this way, even a distant other inhabiting Iran's political culture can be discovered and recognized. Ultimately, though we all occupy different subjective points of view, we can always see ourselves in others if we approach them with a sense of wonder, a thirst for understanding.

References

Abrahamian, Ervand. 1982a. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Abrahamian, Ervand. 1982b. "Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," *MERIP Reports* no.102: 24-28.

Afkhami, Gholam Reza. 2009. *The Life and Times of the Shah*. Bekeley: University of California Press.

Amanat, Abbas. 2003. "Hajji Baba of Ispahan," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hajji-baba-of-ispahan. Accessed June 25, 2013.

Amanat, Abbas and Farzin Vejdani. 2012. *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton.

Arendt, Hannah. 1968. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought.* New York: Penguin Books.

Arendt, Hannah. 1973. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Attar, Farid ud-Din. 1984. *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. A. Darbandi and D. Davis. London: Penguin Books.

Azimi, Fakhreddin. 2008. *The Quest for Democracy in Iran: A Century of Struggle against Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Baum, Bruce. 2006. *The Rise and Fall of the Caucasian Race: A Political History of Racial Identity*. New York: New York University Press.

Benhabib, Seyla and Fred Dallmayr, eds. 1990. *The Communicative Ethics Controversy.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Boroujerdi, Mehrzad. 1996. *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Boroumand, Ladan. 2007. "The Untold Story of the Fight for Human Rights," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (4): 64-79.

Chelkowski, Peter and Hamid Dabashi. 1999. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. New York: New York University Press.

Curzon, George N. 1892 (1966). *Persia and the Persian Question Vol.1*. London: Frank Cass & Co.

Dabashi, Hamid. 1993. *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New York: New York University Press.

Dabashi, Hamid. 1999. *Truth and Narrative: The Untimely Thoughts of 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadhani.* Richmond, U.K.: Curzon.

Dabashi, Hamid. 2001. *Close Up: Iranian Cinema Past, Present, and Future*. London: Verso.

Dabashi, Hamid. 2007. *Iran: A People Interrupted.* New York: The New Press.

Dabashi, Hamid. 2008. *Makhmalbaf at Large: The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Dabashi, Hamid. 2010. *Iran, the Green Movement and the USA: The Fox and the Paradox.* London: Zed Books.

Dabashi, Hamid. 2012. *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Daftari, Fereshteh and Jill Baird. 2013. *Safar/Voyage: Contemporary Works by Arab, Iranian, and Turkish Artists*. Vancouver: D&M Publishers.

Dallmayr, Fred. 1996. *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter*. New York: SUNY Press.

Davison, Andrew. 1998. *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: A Hermeneutic Reconsideration.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Decety, Jean and P.L. Jackson. 2004. "The Functional Architecture of Human Empathy," *Behavioural and Cognitive Neuroscience Reviews* 3: 71-100.

Disch, Lisa Jane. 1994. *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Dowlatabadi, Mahmoud. 2011. *The Colonel*, trans. Tom Patterdale. London: Haus Publishing.

Ebadi, Shirin. 2006. *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope*. New York: Random House.

Ebadi, Shirin. 2010. "The Harsher the Repression, the Stronger the Movement Grows." In *The People Reloaded*, eds. N. Hashemi and D. Postel. New York: Melville House.

Eisenberg, Nancy and Janet Strayer. 1990. "Critical Issues in the Study of Empathy" in *Empathy and its Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Euben, Roxanne. 2006. *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 2004 (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 2008 (1952). *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.

Farrokh, Kaveh. 2007. *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing.

Farrokhzad, Forugh. 1981. *Bride of Acacias*, trans. J. Kessler and A. Banani. New York: Caravan Books.

Fazeli, Nematollah. 2006. *Politics of Culture in Iran: Anthropology, Politics, and Society in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Routledge.

Ferdowsi, Abolqasem. 2006. *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis. New York: Penguin.

Fischer, Michael M.J. 2010. "The Rhythmic Beat of the Revolution in Iran." In *The People Reloaded*, eds. N. Hashemi and D. Postel. New York: Melville House.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1975. *Truth and Method*. London: Continuum.

Ganji, Akbar. 2008. *The Road to Democracy in Iran*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures.* New York: Basic Books.

Geertz, Clifford. 1983. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology.* New York: Basic Books.

Gheissari, Ali. 1998. *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Gheissari, Ali and Vali Nasr. 2006. *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Godrej, Farah. 2011. *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goethe, J.W. von. 2000 (1814). *Selected Works*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1976. *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. T. McCarthy. London: Heinemann.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1981. *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol.1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1996. *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1998. *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, ed. C. Cronin and P. de Greiff. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Hashemi, Nader and Danny Postel. 2010. *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future*. New York: Melville House.

Hashemi, Nader. 2011. "Religious Disputation and Democratic Constitutionalism: The Enduring Legacy of the Constitutional Revolution on the Struggle for Democracy in Iran," *Constellations* 17 (10): 50-60.

Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

Herder, Johann Gottfried von. 2004. *Philosophical Writings*, ed. M.N. Forster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jahanbegloo, Ramin. 2004. *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*. Lanham: Lexington Press.

Jahanbegloo, Ramin. 2011. *Civil Society and Democracy in Iran*. Lanham: Lexington Press.

Jahanbegloo, Ramin. 2013. *Democracy in Iran*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jahanbegloo, Ramin and Nojang Khatami. 2013. "Acting under Tyranny: Hannah Arendt and the Foundations of Democracy in Iran." *Constellations* 20 (2): 328-346.

Kant, Immanuel. 1793 (2001). "Critique of Judgment" in *Basic Writings of Kant*. New York: Modern Library.

Katouzian, Homa. 2013. *Iran: Politics, History and Literature*. New York: Routledge.

Keane, John. 2012. "By the People." http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/adfc52a6-438f-11e2-a48c00144feabdc0.html#axzz2ZkXdkmHl. Accessed July 8, 2013.

Khatami, Seyed Mohammad. 2012. "Dialogue among Civilizations: Contexts and Perspectives." http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/chronicle/home/archive/issues2012/dialogueamongcivilizations/dialogueamongcivilizationscontextsandperspectives. Accessed July 16, 2013.

Khojasteh-Rahimi, Reza. 2008. "We Should Pursue Shariati's Path but We Shouldn't be Mere Followers: An Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush." http://www.drsoroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-Shariati_June2008.html. Accessed July 15, 2013.

Lauren, Paul Gordon. 2003. *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Levering-Lewis, David. 2007. *God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570-1215*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 2013. *Anthropology Confronts the Problems of the Modern World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Lloyd, Genevieve. 2012. "Imagining Difference: Cosmopolitanism in Montesquieu's Persian Letters," *Constellations* 19 (3): 480-493.

Lynch, Marc. 2000. "The Dialogue of Civilisations and International Public Spheres," *Journal of International Studies* 29 (2): 307-330.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1972. "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" in *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, ed. P. Laslett, W.G. Runciman and Q. Skinner. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1981. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Mantovani, Giuseppe. 2006. "Ethnocentrism." http://www.resetdoc.org/story /00000000218. Accessed July 6, 2013.

Merton, Robert K. 1972. "Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge," *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1): 9-46.

Milani, Abbas. 2004. *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran*. Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers.

Milani, Abbas. 2011. *The Shah*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Milani, Farzaneh. 2011. *Words not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Mirsepassi, Ali. 2010. *Democracy in Modern Iran: Islam, Culture and Political Change*. New York: New York University Press.

Mirsepassi, Ali. 2011. *Political Islam, Iran and the Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Montesquieu, 2008 (1721). *Persian Letters*, trans. Margaret Mauldon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Morrell, Michael E. 2010. *Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking and Deliberation*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Mozaffari, Nahid and Ahmad Karimi Hakkak. 2005. *Strange Times, My Dear: The PEN Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature*. New York: Arcade Publishing.

Postel, Danny. 2006. "An Interview with Iranian Philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo," *Logos* Vol. 5, No. 2.

Postel, Danny. 2009. "Iran and the Future of Liberalism," *The Liberal* Vol. 12

Rahnema, Ali. 1998. *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1967. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1984. *Time and Narrative Vol.1*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1985. *Time and Narrative Vol.2*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1988. *Time and Narrative Vol.3*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1991. *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1998. *Critique and Conviction*, trans. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Rivetti, Paola. 2013. "Democracy and Secularism in Iran: Lessons for the Arab Spring?" *Mediterranean Politics* 18 (1): 125-132.

Rosanvallon, Pierre. 2011. *Democratic Legitimacy: Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rumi, Jalal al-Din. 2004. *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks. San Francisco: HarperCollins.

Ryan, Alan. 2012. *On Politics*. New York: Liveright.

Safavi, Seyed Ghahreman and Simon Weightman. 2009. *Rumi's Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawi, Book One*. New York: SUNY Press.

Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Said, Edward. 1984. "Permission to Narrate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13 (3): 27-48.

Said, Edward. 1989. "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (2): 205-225.

Said, Edward. 1993a. *Culture and Imperialism.* New York: Vintage Books.

Said, Edward. 1993b. "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals," *Grand Street* No. 47.

Said, Edward. 1998. "Between Worlds," *London Review of Books* Vol. 20, No. 9.

Sajoo, Amyn. 2008. *Muslim Modernities: Expressions of the Civil Imagination*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Shariati, Ali. 1963 (1342). *Iran-e Azad,* no. 10, Tir 1342.

Shariati, Ali. 1976a (1355). *Ali tanha ast* [Ali is Alone]. Tehrān: Ḥusayniyah-i Irshād.

Shariati, Ali. 1976b (1355) *Ali: maktab, vahdat, edalat* [Ali: School of Thought, Unity, Justice]. Tehrān: Ḥusayniyah-i Irshād.

Shariati, Ali. 1980. *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*. North Haledon, N.J.: Mizan Press.

Shariati, Ali. 2010. *Religion vs. Religion*, trans. L. Bakhtiar. Chicago: Kazi Publications.

Shinder, Jason. 2006. *The Poem that Changed America: "Howl" Fifty Years Later*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Soroush, Abdolkarim. 2000. *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, trans. and ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Soroush, Abdolkarim. 2004. *Treatise on Tolerance, Praemium Erasmianum Essay 2004*. Amsterdam: Foundation Horizon.

Steiner, George. 1991. *Real Presences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tahmasebi-Birgani, Victoria. 2010. "Green Women of Iran: The Role of the Women's Movement During and After Iran's Presidential Election of 2009." *Constellations* 17 (1): 78-86.

Taylor, Charles. 1979. "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man." In Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Taylor, Charles. 1985. *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers Vol.2.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Taylor, Charles. 1994. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tehranian, Majid. 2004. "Power and Purity: Iranian Political Culture, Communication, and Identity." In Ramin Jahanbegloo, ed., *Iran Between Tradition and Modernity*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Turner, Victor. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Vahabzadeh, Peyman. 2011. "The Story of a Century-Long Struggle." In Ramin Jahanbegloo, ed., *Civil Society and Democracy in Iran*. Lanham: Lexington Press.

Vahdat, Farzin. 2002. *God and Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Vahdat, Farzin. 2011. "Theorizing Civil Society in Contemporary Iran." In Ramin Jahanbegloo, ed., *Civil Society and Democracy in Iran*. Lanham: Lexington Press.

van Gennep, Arnold. 2010 (1909). *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge.

Warren, Mark. 1991. *Nietzsche and Political Thought*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Warren, Mark. 2002. "What can Democratic Participation Mean Today?" *Political Theory* 30 (5): 677-701.

Young, Iris Marion. 2002. *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.