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### **Ethnographic Research on Iranian Activists, Intellectuals, and Secularism**

The Theoretical and the Practical : a Para-Site Report, 1/24/2009

Approximately one year in the planning, passing through several hesitant iterations before finding some stability in its final form, on Saturday January 24th with the sponsorship of the Center for Ethnography I convened a para-site in order to discuss the concept of "secularism" with a group of my research interlocutors, broadly defined as "Iranian intellectuals", as well as with various interested faculty and graduate students from UCI. The event lasted a full morning, and indeed although it was necessary to draw a close to the discussion soon after 12.30, many present felt that fruitful avenues for conversation had just opened up and that the conversation would ideally be pursued much longer.

The general premise of the para-site was that Iranian intellectuals have an interest in elaborating concepts of the secular and secularism that are both informed by instances of these concepts in non-Iranian settings, and that emerge from and have practical results in terms of the contemporary Iranian world. At the same time, there has recently been a marked upsurge in interest in questions of the secular, secularism, the relationship of religion and the state, and what is sometimes termed "political theology" among academics in a variety of disciplines—including anthropology, comparative literature, philosophy, history—in the USA and elsewhere. In the wake of the rise to prominence of religiously-based political movements across the globe, the 9/11 attacks and the "war on terror", and ongoing controversies about the relations of religion and the state in places as varied as France, Turkey, Canada, India, and Burma, the current global situation is thus a fruitful place for renewed academic interest in secularism, often from a critical perspective. Yet neither the context nor the stakes involved in either the promotion or the rethinking of the secular are the same for academics based in, say, the United States, as they are for Iranian intellectuals and activists engaged in projects of social reform across the Iranian world.

My own doctoral research is an inquiry into the potential emergence of both a secular sensibility and secularist political projects among post-revolutionary Iranian intellectuals, in which I am asking, among other things, how the secular emerges indirectly through the practices of groups involved in long-term projects of social transformation, how this particularly Iranian secular sensibility might be characterized, and what its relationship is with other versions of the secular or secularist projects elsewhere in the world. Although my interest in this subject, and in the role of intellectuals and activists in post-revolutionary Iranian society was first aroused when I was in Iran in 2005/6, my current research focuses more on the activities of Iranians resident in the two largest Iranian population centers outside Iran, Toronto and southern California. My interlocutors are therefore people who grew up in Iran, mainly coming of age after the 78/9 revolution, and who emigrated in recent years in order to seek professional opportunities or study in North America. While here they either continued or became involved for the first time in critical reflection and activism on the social situation in Iran. While aware of their situation living outside the country, they are nonetheless mainly focused on bringing about change inside Iran.

To this end I invited two separate sets of interlocutors to participate in the para-site. One was an individual, a political philosopher now based in Toronto where a few years ago he had organized a discussion group at the University of Toronto for Iranian students to discuss philosophical, political, and social issues. This thinker is an avowed liberal with a strong interest in dialogue among intellectuals of different traditions and who has recently himself been working on the problem of the secular. The second set of interlocutors consisted of activists from the Iranian women's movement, themselves based in southern California but with strong ties to activists inside the country. Following discussion with the participants, it was decided that the political philosopher would first present a paper on secularism, before I as moderator enabled a conversation between the various other participants.

This posed a challenge for the successful operation of the para-site. The danger was that the event would come to resemble an academic conference or seminar after all, precisely because one of the main participants was an academic accustomed to giving papers and taking charge of seminars. Even if his activities as a public intellectual certainly exceed a purely academic remit—he spent several years in Tehran hosting meetings and dialogues with a series of well-known Western thinkers—his characteristic mode of self-presentation is as a scholar and intellectual offering his opinions in a reasoned and rigorous fashion to a public seeking edification in the service of social reform and improvement. Yet the para-site is precisely designed so as not to be a conventional academic event, but an enterprise of shared conceptual labor in the form of, to borrow David Westbrook's phrase, "a staged conversation" between the different collaborators in an ethnographic project. The usual modes of theorizing and conceptual elaboration are supposed to be disrupted in the search for common ground between epistemic partners, resulting in a conceptualization that is above all valuable to the development of the ethnographic project being undertaken—in this case my dissertation research.

Thus while permitting the political philosopher to present his paper on secularism—a form of intellectual labor in any case deeply relevant to my dissertation project's interest in the practices of Iranian intellectuals—and whose content was itself highly stimulating—my role as moderator was to enable other participants, especially my interlocutors from the Iranian women's movement, to productively disrupt any movement towards the routinization of the event into an academic conference, while simultaneously allowing us all to derive some important insights from our discussions. To this end, one week prior to the para-site, I gave a presentation of my own to some of my interlocutors, outlining the major themes and arguments of my research, their relevance to my interlocutors as women's activists, and explaining the nature and purpose of the para-site—without, however, attempting to translate the expression itself into the Persian in which I gave my presentation. This turned out to be an extremely useful discussion, both in terms of explaining to my interlocutors some of the key concepts in which I was interested as part of my research, and in terms of generating questions which both inflected my approach to my research and which could be used as important starting-points for a conversation between the political philosopher and the women's activists at the time of the para-site.

In addition to my two sets of interlocutors, a number of the other para-site attendees—UCI faculty and graduate students—had also been briefed on the organization and aims of the event. These UCI attendees came from inside and outside the anthropology department, and included a variety of people whose own work related to secularism and political theology, and for some also to Iran. My understanding was that these UCI attendees could serve as interlocutors both for the political philosopher and for the activists, with a view to generating a conversation that would have at least three directions to it.

As it turned out, it was not possible to realize fully this original design. Following the political philosopher's presentation of a paper entitled "The Two Concepts of Secularism", I attempted to relate some of the themes of the paper to one of the flashpoints of the discussion I had had the previous weekend with my activist friends, raising the issue of translation—another central theme of my research—in this case of the translation of terms like "secular" and "laïc" into the Persian language and Iranian debates and struggles around religion and the state. However my intervention was insufficient to bring the activists present into the conversation. For most of the morning the form of the conversation was a question and answer session between the political philosopher and the attendees, with me and one or two others of those present aware of what was at stake trying to maneuver the discussion towards a more open and multi-directional format. That said, both the content and the form of the debate were fascinating and highly pertinent to my research, as well as to many of the attendees with their various divergent stakes in the discussion.

Content-wise the paper drew on the Indian and French examples in particular as being two separate and opposed concepts of secularism, the latter dependent on an exclusive, sovereign exercise of power, the former on an inclusive pluralism allowing for the spiritualization of politics through the re-injection of ethics into the political sphere. It then recommended the Indian model as more suitable as a solution to the aporias of contemporary Iranian politics. The current Iranian state might therefore be understood as operating more on the French model, with the Islamic Republic of Iran exercising a sovereign power that defines what is acceptable religiously and determines how this interpretation of religion should shape the public sphere and the practices of Iranian citizens.

Now while as a framework for thinking about secularism in Iran and elsewhere this was highly stimulating, the theses advanced were questioned from a variety of perspectives. Firstly, as being insufficiently attentive to the complications of the Indian case, to the perpetual crisis Indian secularism has experienced since the foundation of the Indian state, and to the aporias of Gandhian ethics; secondly, as being unable to give concrete content either to the terms "ethics" or "spiritualization", which were nonetheless key terms of the argument; thirdly, as insufficiently explaining how the Indian model could be made relevant to a very different Iranian context, and what resources existed in Iranian traditions that could be drawn on in order to construct an appropriate model for secularism in the country; and finally and most importantly, as paying insufficient attention to the practical modalities of bringing about a pluralist public sphere in the Iranian setting.

The final criticism is the most relevant from the point of view of my research, and provides an important link between the content of the discussion and its form. The activists have above all practical concerns; a political philosopher giving a paper considering secularism from a comparative perspective has first and foremost a theoretical concern. This is not to say that there is a stark divide between theory and practice, or that one set of interlocutors are only concerned with practice, the other only with theory. On the contrary: what the form of the para-site demonstrated was both the importance of the nexus of the two for any successful project of social transformation, and the failure of the discussion to articulate the two in any novel way. For the activists, as my session with them the previous week had demonstrated, a rigorous critical reflection on the situation in which their activism takes place is vital to the future development of their project. To this end, comparing Iran with India and seeking for alternative models of ethical and civic engagement is potentially of great value to them. At the same time, for the political philosopher, presenting his ideas on secularism is itself a practice, a practice which is part of an

ongoing dialogue with thinkers and traditions of thought in diverse places, including India, Iran, Europe, and North America. From his perspective it might be argued that these practices are a vital part of bringing about social change and the realization of a more civil and pluralist public sphere, a project he is very much invested in. To this end, a dialogue between him as public intellectual, his fellow scholars and intellectuals as represented by the other academics in the room, and between Iranian citizens eager to hear his views on possible frameworks for future social change, is precisely the practical expression of his own theoretical convictions. Yet while the activists themselves took notes enthusiastically, asked some questions of their own, and engaged with his material in conversations between themselves and with me subsequent to the para-site, it was clear from these questions and their reactions afterward that the question-and-answer format was not best suited to the articulation of theorizing about the appropriate form of secularism for Iran and the implications and limitations of secularism for activists seeking to persuade their fellow citizens that their vision of social change was a valuable one. More practically-oriented questions, of the sort: How is secularism to come about? What will have to be done so that we live in a secular Iran?—were met not with responses that indicated, however broadly, what concrete responses to what situations might lead to the pluralization of the public sphere, but with responses prolonging the argumentation of the philosophical comparison of different secularisms and laicisms undertaken so deftly and provocatively in the paper.

The aim of this review of the experience of the para-site is not to opt for one form of intellectual activity over another. Since, however, the para-site format is designed to help with conceptual elaboration, undertaken as a joint enterprise with ethnographic interlocutors, it is important to note that the great value of this failure to establish a nexus between theory and practice, or between two forms of intellectual practice, lies in the contribution it makes towards the articulation of concept and practice not simply in the context of post-revolutionary Iran, but in ethnographic terms too. The conclusion that I drew above all from the para-site was that any ethnographic inquiry into the conditions of possibility and the dynamics of emergence of an Iranian secularism must privilege the activities of the large numbers of civil society activists not for the most part engaged in sophisticated, professional theorizing, and not in fact explicitly devoted to bringing about a secular state or public sphere. It is through their practices—through the orientation of their action to worldly goals, justified in terms of ideas of human dignity and equality that are eclectic in their sources—that new ethical forms are coming into being. To this end, the political philosopher's references to Iranian civil society movements, especially the women's movement, as being signs of new pluralist political-ethical practices were helpful, even as it was not clear from his discourse how these could be articulated to his own theoretical vision. In a way, here where the more austere forms of theorizing reach their limits—unable to specify what sort of practical content politics as ethics or a spiritualized politics might have, or how politics can be transformed in this way—that ethnographic inquiry in collaboration with activists and intellectuals involved in bringing about this transformation begins, even as many of these activists in the Iranian context deliberately eschew the label "political", arguing for a non-oppositional, non-ideological civic or social activism instead. This does not rule out theorizing; on the contrary, it demands that theorizing be deeply rooted in and in dialogue with changing practices, a form of critical reflection upon them but just as importantly a reflection back upon them, a theory that both cognizes and acts upon the situation and is transformed by it, organically and synthetically.

While the para-site might be characterized as a failure given the difficulty of generating the multi-directional conversational form necessary to the articulation of theoretical-practical

links, it was nonetheless invaluable from the point of view of learning how better to conceptualize the collection of emergent phenomena across the contemporary Iranian world to which I am tentatively giving the name "secularism". It also had many ancillary benefits, such as providing important insights into the staging of the role of the Iranian public intellectual, highly relevant to my dissertation's examination of Iranian intellectuals' practices. One sign of its success was the energy the participants still had at the end of the session, an appetite for discussion that spilled over into more informal discussions after the end of the formal meeting. Some of these discussions, both on the content and the form of the para-site, have been continued over e-mail, both among UCI anthropology and non-anthropology faculty and graduate students, and between the ethnographer and a number of the activists. At the present time I am seeking ways to i) continue this momentum through further informal conversations and e-mail exchanges; ii) use the questions raised by the para-site and by my talk the previous week as a starting-point for the deepening of para-ethnographic collaboration with the activists, possibly resulting in a further para-site or related event, involving them only, later on in my dissertation research.

### **Commentary**

The Center for Ethnography at UCI has envisioned the para-site as a means by which to overcome the individualistic approach to ethnography that has been the tradition within anthropology since Malinowski set up his tent among the Trobrianders by promoting notions of collaboration and multi-sitedness, as well as questioning the arbitrary binary between the "there" of the field and the "here" of the university. The para-site is a staged encounter moderated by the researcher between her/his interlocutors and colleagues. The premise is that such an encounter could be an important, designed part of the fieldwork experience. Crucially, the para-site attempts to "blur the boundaries between the field site and the academic conference or seminar room."

Phil staged a conversation between the activists he works with in Southern California from the 1 Million Signatures campaign, Iranian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo, and colleagues from UCI (anthropologists, philosophers, and Persian studies students). The 1 million Signatures Campaign is a non-ideological, non-political grassroots movement for gender equality in Iran. It is not associated with any religious or political group and is not trying to overthrow the government of Iran (which is something its detractors have accused it of). Dr. Jahanbegloo is one of the most famous contemporary Iranian intellectuals who currently works in Toronto. He has written extensively on the question of secularism. Phil explicitly stated that the point of this encounter was to encourage a conversation about secularism and intellectual activism in Iran and elsewhere.

Dr. Jahanbegloo discussed his work on secularism, particularly in his book "Two Concepts of Secularism" (a direct reference to Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty"). As he explained, his project is not to promote an ideology of secularism, but rather a critique of the theological-political, i.e. the theological foundation of republican political formations. Also important is the recognition and investigation of the conjuncture between secularism and sovereignty. He raised the question, "How can secularity be understood in an empathetic relationship to religion without being exclusive?"

India, according to Dr. Jahanbegloo, provides a useful model for the cohabitation of domains of faith and reason, based in mutual respect and reciprocity, in negotiation, not assimilation. Secularism in the context of the Indian political sphere refers to the ability to carry

on the affairs of the state without religious interference, keeping religious and political life separate. However, this is not to say that religious life is not recognized and respected by the state. It is a fundamentally different conception of secularism than the French notion of *laïcité*, which some might regard as a model of radical secularism. In India, secularism is not simply a disregard for religion, but rather a celebration of diversity. The role of the state is to protect religious communities (although, the relative success of this duty is questionable given India's history of sectarian violence). As Gandhi said, spirituality is not the problem, organized religion and politics are. The notion of spiritualizing politics implies bringing an ethics into politics, which Dr. Jahanbegloo indicated was the role of the intellectual. In this sense, secularism becomes a code of (moral) conduct in politics.

The idea of secularization has long been the prisoner of semantic definitions and presented as an ideological project. It has been associated with some of the most brutal dictatorships in the history of the Middle East and with the destruction of civil society in the region. Kemal Ataturk in Turkey and Reza Shah in Iran developed secularism modeled on French republicanism because they were worried about the political power of religious groups. The opposition between secularized civil society and the conception of the Islamic state is becoming more and more entrenched in contemporary political discourse. Today, we are witnessing the politicizing of religion, which is very different from a project of spiritualizing politics.

Dr. Jahanbegloo also spoke of a “temporalized civil society,” wherein intellectuals become the protagonists of secularization in Iran. This situation depends on a state of culture as a non-religious phenomenon. Religion, the state, and civil society would have to occupy complementary (and perhaps conflicting?) spaces. Models for the future of Iran could embrace India's non-sectarian attitude, the idea being not assimilation, but associative conciliation.

## **Conclusion**

Is the role of the intellectual in Iran simply to bring ethics into politics, or can the intellectual effectively act as political activist, a la Marx's age-old prescription in *Theses on Feuerbach*? This seems to me to be a question that necessarily invokes the political stakes raised by Marx in *The 18th Brumaire*, and by Gramsci, specifically the question of how authoritarian political formations come to power on the backs of those whose interests they do not serve (the French and Italian peasantry, the urban poor in Tehran, etc.). How can the intellectual effect social change and also avoid accusations of vanguardism? In my conversation with Elham Mireshghi after the para-site, she raised the important point about the geographic dispersion of intellectual activism in Iran. If one travels outside of Tehran, or even outside of smaller cities like Isfahan or Shiraz, how effective can activist campaigns be that originate from Tehran's intellectual milieu, or from the Iranian diaspora? It seems to me that the 1 Million Signatures campaign is an effective, pragmatic movement that unites the intellectual-as-activist with (for lack of a better word) the “common” folk. Yet, how is the campaign received in Iran versus the diaspora, and in Tehran versus the countryside? As Elham pointed out, can any such movement really bring about change until there is a widespread cultural shift toward equality and tolerance, and if so, how might that shift be precipitated?