

Class Struggle, Autonomy, and the State in Iran

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Traversing a century of revolution, counter-revolution, and regime change in Iran, Arya Zahedi traces out the social, political, and ideological tensions that continuously push the country toward the brink of insurrection.

It has been forty-five years since the mass revolution that overthrew the dictatorship of Muhammad Reza Shah and led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic. And it has been over a year now since the 2022 murder of Jina “Mahsa” Amini by the “guidance patrol” set off an insurrectionary uprising large enough to draw comparisons with the revolution of 1979.¹ While talk of the imminent fall of the Islamic Republic now seems premature, the situation is far from the image of order and stability that the state would like to put forth. The past year has seen the state respond with great repression, including show trials ending in executions for participants in the riots. Workers from a variety of sectors have been sacked. As the anniversary of the uprising approached, families of those killed during the riots and those executed were forbidden to hold commemorations. Yet actions continue nationwide. Strikes and demonstrations have been constant, while violent confrontations in the provinces have continued to recur, albeit at a lower degree of intensity. Far from being a sign of strength, the severity of the repression demonstrates just how fragile the situation remains.

Anyone can see that last year’s uprising was about much more than dress codes. It was a product of deep contradictions within the system itself. Revolts have occurred in Iran every year for the past decade. While much of this turbulence is rooted in the particular system in Iran, it must also be situated within the more general social crisis of the global capitalist system. The social causes that provoked last year’s explosion are still present, forming a crisis that cannot be overcome and will, in all likelihood, only become more severe. Not only have such explosions become more frequent, they also are increasing in both scope and depth. Nevertheless, the latest explosion was indeed a turning point. Previously distinct sources of discontent and issues of importance have begun to flow together into a single stream, allowing the totality of the system to be called into question. Whether the Islamic Republic will survive another year or ten years, no one can predict. What is certain is not only that another explosion is inevitable, but that an authentic revolutionary movement and culture has meanwhile reawakened and now exists in Iran today. What we are seeing are not isolated, spontaneous, or random explosions, but a response to the profound alienation and dispossession of an ever-larger mass of people. It may not have the formalities of revolutionary movements of the past, but perhaps we should let some of those go.

The current revolutionary struggle is not only important to the future of Iran but will have consequences for the wider region. As it was during the last decade of the Shah’s regime, the Islamic Republic has grown to be an important participant in inter-imperialist rivalries. As present conflicts in the Middle East threaten to generalize into a broader war, it is important to understand the Iranian regime, what constitutes it, and how it relates to the broader imperialist orbit.

¹ The slogan “woman, life, freedom,” (*zan, zendegi, azadi* in Persian) originates from the radical wing of the Kurdish national movement in Syria (*jin, jiyar, azadi* in Kurdish). Jina Mahsa Amini was a Kurd from the town of Saqqez, and Iranian Kurdistan was and continues to be the center of resistance to the regime.

At the same time that it is engaged in a revolutionary struggle against “its own” government, the Iranian working class is caught in the crossfire of a potential inter-imperialist war. As the so-called “proxy wars” between Iran and the US/Israel (of which the assault on Gaza is but one theater) threaten to generalize into a broader war, the revolutionary struggle takes on importance for not just Iran but the entire politics of the region, just as the events in the surrounding region impact what goes on inside Iran.

While imperialism is often discussed in relation to Iran and the Middle East, this is usually framed in a unidirectional manner, concerned primarily with external domination. Less attended to is the relation between external imperialist domination, on the one hand, and the internal class conflicts, on the other. But it is precisely this relation between the internal and external that proves most illuminating.

Imperialism, Capitalism, and the State

To understand the current situation, we must first demystify the political system in Iran.

Iran must be understood as a capitalist society and its state, both before and after the revolution, as a capitalist state. No amount of demagogic proclamations can change the fact that the Iranian state, while possessing many features peculiar to itself, is nonetheless a particular form of bourgeois class rule, a fact visible not only in its internal social relations, but also in the role it plays in the world system.

Through the course of the nineteenth century, Iran went through a process of *integration and peripheralization* into the rising capitalist world system. The Qajar dynasty (1794 to 1925) that ascended the Peacock Throne at the end of the previous century was quickly caught in the “Great Game” between the Tsarist Russian Empire and the British Empire as they both became more assertive in Asia. Military defeats resulted in the imposition of unequal treaties that not only led to a loss of territory but also included terms that established political and economic dominance. Iran was opened up to European commodities, while domestic production increasingly became geared towards the world market.²

Qajar Iran was a system that can be described as tribal-feudalism.³ The state was not a centralized modern state. The Shah (king) ruled through various local nobles, landlords, tribal-chiefs, and senior clergy who formed the landed aristocracy and played the role of the respective powers in their locality. The latter ruled over a large mass of peasant villagers and nomadic tribes-people. There was no national army, only armies tied to local lords and chiefs. People were divided up according to ethnic groupings, tribal or religious sects, and spoke a variety of languages and dialects.

In the urban centers, which often served as provincial capitals, the center of economic life was — and to a large extent still is today — the *bazaar*, the traditional commercial center in the urban Middle East, with the merchants and artisans who inhabit it being collectively known as *bazaari*.⁴ The bazaar was not just the center for shops and trade, it also often contained public

² For more on the “integration and peripheralization” of the Middle East in the rising world capitalist system, see James Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

³ I take this term “tribal-feudalism” from historian Nikki Keddie. See *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, Yale University Press, 1981.

⁴ *Bazaar* is the Persian-Turkish name for the central marketplace. *Souk* is the Arabic name used in the Levant and North Africa. Among participants in the bazaar there is diversity and hierarchy. It runs from those who sell spices

baths, tea houses, as well as the central mosque. It is common for bazaari and clergy to have familial relations. Wealthy bazaaaris fund the mosques and seminaries, religious processions, donate to charitable foundations, and form the main financial support for many religious affairs. Landholdings of the senior clergy and wealthy merchants increased over the course of the 19th century, with the clergy gaining land through religious endowments and donations by rich aristocrats and merchants. This relationship between the *bazaari*, as the traditional bourgeoisie, and the clergy is important for understanding the politics of modern Iran, and the 1979 revolution in particular, for it was this clerical-bazaari alliance that lay at the heart of the revolution, serving as the base of the Islamic Republic.

This process of integration into the world market, particularly in the form of European domination, contributed to the development of bourgeois national consciousness among merchants, clergy, and artisans. Struggles against foreign concessions and other forms of foreign domination became more commonplace as the merchant bourgeoisie of the bazaar became more assertive, solidifying a bourgeois form of national consciousness. This combination of a material-financial force in the merchants and the ideological force of the clergy transformed the traditional bourgeoisie into a genuine political force.

The integration and peripheralization characteristic of the nineteenth century brought with it close economic ties between Iranian and Russian merchants, but also contributed to the embryonic development of a modern working class. The reality of this process hit home in Iran when the global depression of the 1870s provoked a drop in agricultural prices. Worsening conditions in the countryside forced peasants to leave their villages in search of work. Naturally, they were drawn to the growing industrial centers of the Russian Caucasus, particularly the new oil industry, the center of which being the city of Baku.

Baku's oil fields were a crucible for working-class radicalism. In the late nineteenth century, the city attracted hundreds of thousands of Iranian migrant workers to the growing industry where they encountered the organizing of the *Russian Social Democratic Workers Party* (RSDWP), itself formed in 1898. Not only Iranians, but people from all over the region traveled to work in the industry, with the result that the city boasted a significant multi-ethnic and multi-religious working class. Employers stoked hostilities often, and Iranian workers and activists in the region became involved in many of the strikes organized by the party. It was a strike wave in Baku that sparked the events that would lead to the Russian Revolution of 1905. Amidst this wave, workers gained crucial experience in party activities and strikes, and it was during the same year the *Social Democratic Party of Iran* (SDPI) was founded.⁵

The 1905 Revolution would directly influence bourgeois national revolutions in Asian nations such as China and Turkey, but given its proximity and its historical ties, it was felt most immediately in Iran. For Russian and Iranian Social Democrats, the revolution in Iran was directly tied to the revolution against the Tsar. Following the Tsarist reaction just north of the border, many

and fruit on one end, to wholesalers and those involved in imports and exports on the other. It includes moneylenders as well as rug merchants, as well as workshops where artisans produce metalwork, gold, silver, jewelry, and fine textiles. Merchants and artisans were organized into guilds. Despite these classed differences, there is a cultural and ideological cohesiveness among the bazaar: for example, they are known for being pious and traditional, with a close relation to the clergy. In this way, they demonstrate that an understanding of class must consider not only economic factors but political and ideological ones as well. While this class is often, correctly, referred to as the *petit bourgeoisie*, the traditional bourgeoisie, and the traditional middle class, all of which are accurate, none of them really captures what the term *bazaari* does.

⁵ See Cosroe Chaqueri, *Origins of Social Democracy in Modern Iran*, University of Washington Press, 2001.

revolutionaries turned their attention south to Iran. The revolutionary wave landing in Iran at the end of the year marked a crucial turning point, ushering in the twentieth century with the Constitutional Revolution and Civil War (1906–1911).⁶ This revolution had a number of parallels with the one in Russia, and can even be seen as an extension of the latter, as it proved to be a similarly bourgeois national-democratic revolution with a strong social democratic element. Although it would not succeed in fundamentally altering the state or economic relations, it was nonetheless of great cultural-political significance, and every political tendency that will go on to shape the landscape of 20th century Iran draw their roots there. It also prolonged the bazaari-clergy alliance that had developed in the protests against foreign concessions, but did so while introducing a revolutionary element into the nascent working class and social democratic movement. Along with the struggle for a national assembly, or *Majlis*, we also witness the appearance and growth of the *anjumans*, or provincial councils that — as with the soviets — became sources of popular power that pushed the revolution further. In 1909, the first modern industry-wide trade union was established in Tehran among print shops and newspaper workers. 1910 saw the first industry-wide strike, which included all the major newspapers in Tehran. Their demands included, among other things, the eight-hour day and the installation of a minimum wage.

Faced with the threat of revolution from below and an ascendant Germany that was becoming increasingly more assertive in the Middle East, the Russian and British empires put their differences aside and came to an agreement in Asia which was formalized as The Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1907. The agreement made the division of Iran into Russian and British spheres of influence official, and served as a decisive step in the construction of alliances that would eventually erupt into world war.⁷ The December 1911 Russian-British invasion and occupation of Iran put an end to the revolutionary wave that had been ongoing since 1905. The Tsarist armies in particular oversaw a reign of terror against Iranian and Russian revolutionaries. While the parliament survived, it did so merely as a basis for aristocratic rule. The constitutional revolution posed, for the first time in Iran, the still crucial question: how should radical socialists relate to broader, popular democratic revolution? And it did so while demonstrating another persistent truth: in the face of social revolution bourgeois democrats will turn to imperialism and reaction.

Two years after the Anglo-Russian intervention that ended the Constitutional Revolution, the imperialist rivalry broke out into world war in 1914. Although the Iranian government officially declared neutrality, it proved powerless to prevent Iran from becoming part of the Middle Eastern theater of war between the Anglo-Russian alliance ('Entente Powers') and the Ottoman-German alliance ('Central Powers'). The war had devastating effects on Iran, as it did on any place that was treated as a battleground for imperialist slaughter. Roughly two million people died from the violence of war, famine, and disease. The situation underscored Iran's colonial situation, as the country was helpless in the face of foreign powers that effectively did as they pleased within its borders.

At this point, Iran proved to be an independent nation only in name, with the central government serving as a mere shadow for other powers. As was the case before the constitutional

⁶ The revolution established a constitution (*mashruteh*) and a national assembly or parliament (*majlis*) limiting the power of the monarch for the first time.

⁷ In 1908, oil was discovered in the southern region of Abadan, which was still under the British sphere of influence. This also augmented Britain's desire for security in the region. The oil industry in the south would contribute to the growth of the working class in ways that resemble the effects of the same industry in the north some years prior, drawing workers from various regions to the Abadan oil fields.

period, the central government had no real power outside of the nation's capital, and even there, such power was constantly disrupted by foreign intervention. Local tribal chiefs and aristocrats seized the opportunity to assert themselves and by the end of the war, clearly constituted the actual powers in their respective regions, going so far as to strike deals and sign treaties with imperialist powers directly without any involvement of, or mediation from, the central government.

The 1917 Russian Revolution fundamentally altered the situation, and breathed new life into the revolutionary forces. The Bolsheviks removed Russian forces from Iran while abolishing all Russian treaties and concessions over the country. The fall of the Romanov Tsar also marked the removal of the Qajars' principal patron. Following the removal of Russian and Ottoman forces at the end of the war, the British became the dominant imperialist power in the Middle East. The British had initially thought to turn Iran into a protectorate, but the possibility proved untenable. Anti-British sentiment was increasing, and they had quite simply spread themselves too thin. Most importantly, the October Revolution had ushered in a new threat of social revolution. Bolsheviks-aligned Iranian socialists formed the Adalat (Justice) Party, which in 1920 became the *Communist Party of Iran*. More than perhaps anything else, it was the October Revolution that threatened both the British and the local ruling aristocracy. By 1920, this threat had spread to the northern province of Gilan with the establishment of the *Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran*. The Red Army now had an official presence on Iranian soil, and succeeded in pushing out both British and Iranian forces from the area.⁸

This presence forced a change in the imperialist strategy of the British. Whereas the latter had thus far supported various local nobles and tribal chiefs in an effort to maintain their influence, this tactic (in addition to direct occupation) was beginning to prove unstable in the face of the Bolshevik threat. Alongside many among the Iranian ruling class, the British searched for a strongman who could seize power, restore order, and protect their interests from the threat of social revolution. It was in this context that an officer from the Cossack Brigades named Reza Khan distinguished himself as the best candidate for the job.⁹ He was encouraged to organize a coup, the result of which would be an insurance of security and the withdrawal of British forces from the region.

The Pahlavi Regime

The coup of February 1921 that brought General Reza Khan to power set into motion the creation of the modern centralized Iranian nation-state. The Pahlavi state should be seen alongside the other right-wing nationalist regimes that arose around this time in response to both the dissolutions brought about by WWI and the threat of the October Revolution. Reza Shah may be fruitfully compared to his contemporary in Turkey, Atatürk, as well as the models of authoritarian nationalist development seen in Germany, Italy, and Japan. As with these latter cases, the Pahlavi regime was “the product of a counter-attack by a weak capitalist class against a revolutionary movement, in a country that has slipped behind in the process of capitalist development. This class could only redress this position by repression and state-directed economic growth.”⁹

⁸ Cosroe Chaqueri, *The Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.

⁹ Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, Penguin Books, 1979, 53.

The political logic of this period can be summarized as *state-building*. Once the new government negotiated the withdrawal of Soviet and British troops, it moved to crush all remaining forms of opposition and centers of power. The powerful tribal armies were brought to heel, while autonomous and local powers, as well as rival officers in pursuit of power, were all crushed. A modern army capable of effectively asserting state power was assembled, followed soon after by nationwide conscription, government ID cards, the abolition of aristocratic titles, and the imposition of formal sur-names. Since the central pillars of the “new order” were a modern army and bureaucracy, the regime sought to extend the power of the state to all realms of society. Local languages were banned, and Persian was made the official language of the country. A modern educational system operating beyond the control of the clergy was established, and something similar was done with the courts, ushering in a modern legal system independent of the religious orders. Perhaps the most symbolic of these changes was the ban on the *chador*, which, alongside the rest of such reforms, provoked the ongoing ire of the clergy.¹⁰

Many reformists, and even some to their left, initially supported Reza Khan. Like the Lasalleans in support of Bismark, they thought that by supporting Reza Khan they could push through many of the reforms that ran into dead ends when employing exclusively democratic channels. In 1925, the Qajar Dynasty was abolished, but unlike Attaturk, who founded a republic, the following year he crowned himself Reza Shah Pahlavi and founded a new dynasty.¹¹ Reza Shah continued solidifying his rule with an iron fist. The regime promoted a chauvinistic nationalist ideology that appealed to the imperial glories of pre-Islamic Persia. The state in this period can be best summarized as a monarchical-military dictatorship.

While the environment was repressive, the industrialisation projects of this era increased the size and importance of the working class, within which communists organized successful union drives. This culminated in 1929, when a massive strike broke out at the Abadan oil refinery complex, which was under the ownership and control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The strike shook the ruling classes in both Iran and Britain, and served not only as a key event in the history of the working class movement in Iran, but also as a test for the state’s ability to maintain social order. The government responded with a great show of force, ratcheting up repression against communists. In 1931, a new law was enacted that criminalized the teaching and promotion of “communist” ideologies, banned trade unions, made striking illegal, and initiated a new wave of repression of socialist activists and intellectuals were imprisoned.¹²

Although the Pahlavi state enjoyed a degree of independence from the dominant classes, this also tended indirectly to facilitate the latter’s rule. Under both Pahlavi Shahs, it was through the state that capitalist development and industrialization took place. It was through the state that the modern capitalist class was consolidated and expanded, a fact that would remain no less true under the current day Islamic Republic. In many respects, it could be argued that both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic share features with the imperial state of Napoleon III after the

¹⁰ Chador is the traditional long black covering worn by women in Iran. While it is now primarily worn by conservative religious women, at the time it was worn by all urbanite women.

¹¹ He took the name Pahlavi from the ancient Persian language, reinforcing his nationalist project.

¹² See, M. Reza Ghods, “The Communist Movement Under Reza Shah,” in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Oct. 1990), 506–513. This “anti-Marxist” law would remain on the books until the revolution of 1979. It was a core of the Pahlavi state. When the last Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, was questioned by reporters regarding political prisoners in Iran, he often responded by invoking the law, saying “Marxism is illegal in our country. It isn’t allowed.” After the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic Republic would develop its own version of anti-communist laws.

coup of 1852: the latter built a state that was relatively autonomous from the ruling classes, yet which was in the end to the benefit of those classes as a whole, having “destroyed the political domination of the bourgeoisie only to preserve its social domination.”¹³

The reign of Reza Shah came to an end with World War Two. In the intervening years, the Iranian regime grew closer to the axis powers, particularly Germany, with whom it had affinities both political and ideological. The number of German advisors, engineers, and workers had increased greatly. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the Allies wanted to use Iran to send weapons from the Persian Gulf to the Russian front. When Reza Shah refused, the Allies promptly invaded and occupied the country. Reza Shah abdicated in favor of his young son, Muhammad Reza, and lived the rest of his life in exile.

The Allied invasion of 1941, which caused the fall of Reza Shah’s dictatorship, opened up a period of popular political mobilization and activity. Political prisoners were released, trade unions reconstituted themselves, and political parties began to come into shape. While the invasion caused the fall of Reza Shah, the Allies still maintained the state, particularly the monarchy and the military. The Allies would occupy Iran until after the end of the war, with once again the Soviets occupying the north and the British occupying the south. This is also the beginning of the American involvement in Iran, with a military mission sent to Iran to rebuild the army.

When the communist prisoners were released a core of them founded the *Tudeh* [masses] *Party*, which would be the official pro-Moscow communist party in Iran. The party had a democratic-populist platform and attracted many intellectuals and middle-class elements. It was also a major presence among the industrial working class, organizing what would be by the end of the decade the largest trade union confederation in the Middle East.

After the war, Iran would be the stage for the confrontation of many social struggles, as well as the first conflict of the cold war. In 1946, the Soviets continued to occupy the north after the agreed upon allied withdrawal. Two autonomous republics were founded in Mahabad and Azerbaijan under the protection of the Red Army. At the same time, a number of communists were included in the post-war coalition government. The Soviets withdrew their forces, and the imperial army moved in with great repression. The communists were also pushed from government, as would be the case with the fall of the coalition governments of France and Italy in 1947. This was the first victory of the new US-Iran military alliance that had begun during the war.

Following the Second World War, the movement for Iranian national independence experienced an upsurge, focused on the demand to nationalize Iranian oil. At the center of this surge was the *National Front*, led by Dr. Muhammad Mossadegh, who soon gained a mass following and was made Prime Minister in 1951. The National Front was not a party with a single ideology, but an alliance of various parties united around national independence through the oil question. When parliament voted to nationalize the oil industry, the British reacted immediately by imposing an economic blockade on Iran. The result was a great strain on the economy and a major increase in social tensions. The Tudeh Party was increasingly showing their strength. The United States feared that the uncertain situation would create an opportunity for Tudeh to seize power. This was the beginning of the successful coup by pro-Shah rightist military generals in 1953.¹⁴

¹³ Frederick Engels. *The Role of Force in History: A Study of Bismarck’s Policy of Blood and Iron* [1887–1888].

¹⁴ While the 1953 coup has gone down in infamy, there are common misunderstandings. Although the US clearly aided and supported the coup, it is quite unthinkable that it could have been successful if not for the opposition that existed and was growing, particularly among the army officers. One of the central conflicts was not just oil nationalization, but Mossadegh’s demand that the army be under the control of parliament and the Prime Minister.

The 1953 coup closed the door on the social movements that had opened up with WW2. The period that followed was one of severe repression. The coup would solidify the position of the Shah and the military against all rivals and competing sources of power. It also established the United States as the dominant imperialist power, supplanting the British. The main weight of the repression came against the communists in the Tudeh Party. The party's network was rooted out and the trade union confederation destroyed. Many militants were imprisoned, executed, or went into exile. It was in order to facilitate this new order that the US helped the regime set up a new secret police force, the Organization for Information and Security of the Country, known commonly by its Persian acronym, SAVAK. Its name would come to be synonymous with repression and torture under the Shah's dictatorship.

The White Revolution: Dictatorship and Uneven Capitalist Development

By joining the pro-western military alliance CENTO (also known as the Baghdad Pact) in 1955, Iran had made itself a key ally in the Western camp. In the early 1960s, the example of the Cuban Revolution led to a shift in the policy of US imperialism. The new Kennedy administration encouraged certain countries to carry out reforms that, it was believed, would promote capitalist development while also undercutting the threat of social revolution. As a result, there was a relative relaxing of the repressive environment, in the midst of which a resurgence of political activity occurred. The outcome was the White Revolution of 1963.

The idea was that by widening the popular base of the regime the state could also disrupt its opposition by incorporating elements of their program. Ironically, it was the results of these reforms that, by opening a period of rapid and uneven capitalist development, most directly set the stage for the Revolution.

Although designed to widen the base of support for the state, the new reforms were met with mass demonstrations that turned violent. The left supported the measures all the while opposing the dictatorial nature of the state, while the clergy were intransigent in their total opposition to the reforms, especially land reform, which threatened its land holdings, but also reforms to the status of women and minorities. The opposition to the reforms brought about a popular uprising led by the clergy (in particular Ayatollah Khomeini) and which was swiftly put down with extreme violence and repression, resulting in many killed and imprisoned. While leftists and democrats had different reasons than the clergy for opposing the regime, the 1963 uprising announced the possibility of some kind of alliance between them. Differences blurred in the name of a united front — in this, it could be seen as a “dress rehearsal” for the 1979 revolution.

The most dramatic policy of the White Revolution was land reform. The land reform program effectively ended feudal relations in Iran and replaced them with capitalist relations. The power of the landlord was replaced with that of the state. Yet it would be wrong to think that the aristocracy was disenfranchised. The feudal landlords still benefited from such developments, provided that

This the Shah could not accept, with the army being his only real base of power. Mossadegh believed he could gain the support of the Americans, and for a brief moment the US thought of using Mossadegh to gain a foothold over the British. But Mossadegh underestimated the extent of the alliance of the US with the Iranian army. At the same time, the Iranian bourgeoisie as well as most clergy increasingly abandoned Mossadegh, particularly as the economic situation deteriorated, and the communists increasingly showed their strength.

they were willing to become capitalists. Landlords that mechanized and hired wage labor, or rented to US agribusiness, were able to keep their estates. Other landlords found ways to hold on to the best quality land while redistributing that of the poorest quality. Aristocrats from the old powerful families were given ministerial positions in trade for supporting the state, and landlords were encouraged to invest in industry.

The great landowning estates were divided and distributed among the peasants with little or no technical assistance. The state then worked to promote large-scale capitalist agricultural production. Many of the former peasants sold their land and moved to the cities. Masses flocked to urban areas in search of work in the state's construction and industrial projects, while those who stayed behind took jobs in agribusinesses as wage earners, effectively rendering them agricultural proletarians. The whole process took only a decade. In a short span between 1963–1973, the population of Tehran doubled, as the ranks of its working class swelled. These newly proletarianized peasants took up residence in ever-expanding shanty towns, forming a vast army of “urban poor.” Some entered the manufacturing and industrial sector, but many more — when they were able to find employment at all — worked as manual laborers in the ever-expanding construction industry, building skyscrapers and apartment buildings for the rich.

Other reforms also promoted capitalist development. New education initiatives, authoritarian in nature, contributed to the growth of a modern bureaucracy. The furthering of scholarships and opportunities to study abroad created a modern educated middle class, many of whom would soon become politicized. The enfranchisement of women, accompanied by further employment and educational opportunities, also added to this modernizing development. What was missed, or at least underestimated by the regime, was the extent to which all these policies were creating the material basis for a social revolution. Like all development under capitalism, the results were uneven: the country as a whole became more developed, while class differences became more pronounced.

It was during this period that the state began in earnest to push through a radical development program that would transform Iran into a modern capitalist state. The state's modernization program favored the “comprador bourgeoisie”: government loans were given to large industrialists, many of whom acted as mediators for mostly-American corporations. Meanwhile, the traditional bourgeoisie of the bazaars, who were intimately connected with the clergy by familial relations, and who funds the religious endowments, celebrations, mosques, etc., became increasingly alienated economically, politically, and culturally from the Shah's regime.

In the years after 1963, a younger generation of activists inspired by the Cuban, Algerian, and Vietnamese examples turned to armed struggle. Of these, the two main groups were the People's Fediayan Guerillas, who came out of Tudeh and the left-wing of the National Front, and the People's Mujahideen, who came out of the religious wing of the National Front and cleaved to a left-wing Islamic-populist ideology. Although this period saw the rise of an urban guerilla movement, disruptions among the population generally remained minimal. Worker's strikes began to resume in the early-1970s but, for the moment at least, the regime was able to keep them from getting out of pocket. This was due not solely to repression (which certainly existed), but to the exceptional growth of the economy, which proved sufficient to keep a sizable part of the middle classes, and a significant number of white and blue collar workers, under control. With the incredible rise of the oil price on the international market, the early 1970s was the height of the Shah's megalomaniac claim to be transforming Iran into a “Great Civilization.” He did, however, solidify Iran's position as a regional power and anti-communist force. Under

Nixon-Kissinger, the US fully backed the Shah's regime as the gendarmerie of the Middle East, providing both weapons and political support.¹⁵

By 1975 the global price of oil had dropped, causing a general slow-down. Optimism about the constantly growing economy began to falter. The government's attempts to curb inflation only exacerbated public anger by causing a spike in unemployment. In response to the mounting crisis, the state became increasingly dictatorial, arresting a large number of bazaari merchants and further agitating the traditional bourgeoisie and their historic allies, the clergy. From late 1977 onwards, various sectors and classes joined the "popular" movement, until the regime finally alienated the majority of the population. In such a situation the autonomy of the state proved to be a weakness for the regime. The Shah had managed to alienate all classes with the exception of a small comprador ruling circle that included the royal family and the court, top military generals, and the "big bourgeoisie" of industrialists and elite families with ties to multinational corporations.

The 1979 Revolution

In 1977, after years of political stifling, dissent began building that would soon pierce the wall. In May, a number of prominent judges, intellectuals and liberal opposition figures began publishing a series of open letters to high level ministers decrying problems in society, highlighting violations of the 1906 constitution. A month later, and again in August, the government attempted to forcefully evacuate the shantytowns of Tehran. On both occasions, the fierce resistance of residents forced the government to call off their plans. In October, writers and poets organized a series of readings at the Goethe Institute in Tehran. Over ten days the readings continued to grow, taking on a definite political character. At their peak these readings drew crowds of up to fifteen thousand, with some nights ending in clashes with the police.¹⁶

That year the Shah made an official visit to Washington, with much fanfare from the Carter administration. The event at the White House was met outside by a large student demonstration. Confrontations between pro- and anti-Shah demonstrators turned violent. While the Shah and Carter were meeting with guests, teargas deployed by police wafted onto the lawn of the White House. Guests wiped their eyes amid the tumult outside, in full view of the media.

Back in Iran, student strikes and demonstrations on university campuses were increasing in momentum and frequency, so much so that by the end of 1977 almost all of the universities had been shut down or were unable to properly function. Strikes in various industries were increasing, but at this point still centered on economic demands concerning particular grievances, rather than more general political demands. In spite of all of these events, it was still not clear to most observers that the regime was in severe crisis, or that the country stood on the verge of a revolution. On New Year's Eve 1977, President Carter came to Iran, where he was treated to a lavish dinner hosted by the Shah and televised across the nation. Carter offered a toast to the Shah, declaring Iran to be "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world."

¹⁵ Iran at this period was asserting itself and backing the other reactionary regimes in the region. Iran intervened in Oman to help defend Sultan Qaboos against the rebellion of the Popular Front, while it also sent fighter jets to South Vietnam. It was also at this time that Iran first began its nuclear program with the full support of the United States.

¹⁶ One of the principal readers was Said Soltanpour, a Marxist playwright and supporter of the Fedaiyan, recently released from prison. His liberty wouldn't last long however, as he was one of the first prominent Marxists to be executed by the new regime.

In January 1978, a semi-official newspaper published a scandalous article accusing Khomeini (who was still exiled in Iraq) of being a British agent, among other things. Seminarians and theology students responded with mass demonstrations in Qom. The demonstrations turned violent, and a number of demonstrators were killed by troops, instigating a further wave of demonstrations led by the clergy after the traditional forty-day cycle of mourning. Each time a demonstrator was killed, after the forty days was up, their death would be marked with another demonstration; if during that demonstration another demonstrator was killed, there would be another demonstration after forty days, and so on. This dynamic helped push the religious opposition to the forefront of the struggle.

On February 18th, 1978 a mass demonstration in Tabriz descended into a riot. Government buildings and other symbols of the regime were attacked, marking a definite escalation on the part of the popular opposition. Within a month, mass demonstrations and riots had spread to over fifty cities. Attempting to appease the protesters, the Shah promised free elections and appointed a new prime minister pledging more reforms.

Meanwhile, in response to these events, workers' strikes began to take on a more political character. In August, a strike wave broke out in solidarity with the struggles taking place across the country. Many important industrial centers took part, and the wave rapidly gained momentum, eventually becoming a mass strike that would encompass the whole country. Attempting to quell the strikes, the government promised pay raises, benefits, and revisions to the labor law, but the situation had swelled past the point of return. The demonstrations continued to spread geographically, increasing in scale.

Finally, on September 7, 1978, martial law was declared in Tehran and eleven other cities. In violation of the order, a demonstration took place in Tehran's Jaleh Square the following day. Troops opened fire on the demonstrators, and over eighty people were killed. The day became known as "Black Friday," and marked another dramatic turning point for the revolution. However, instead of being intimidated, opposition to the regime only increased. The following day strikes spread to the oil industry, the linchpin of the Iranian economy. This entry of the oil workers into the strike wave was a severe blow to the state. Over the course of September, industrial action spread from refinery to refinery, as well as to other factories and industries. By the end of the month, the rolling waves of mass strikes had coalesced into a general strike, and the entire economy had been brought to a standstill.

In the hopes of restoring order, in November the Shah appointed a new military government, whose soldiers attempted to force the oil workers back to work. This worked for a brief moment, although those forced back to work by the barrel of a gun still succeeded in slowing down and sabotaging the works. Ultimately, however, the force of the army was no match for the collective refusal of the working class, and in December, the military government collapsed.

Next, the Shah attempted to form a civilian government with Shapour Bakhtiar — a leader of the National Front, longtime opposition activist, and former political prisoner — at its head. Bakhtiar accepted the proposal, and was immediately expelled from the National Front, who at this point had thrown their support behind Khomeini.

By this point, demonstrators numbered in the millions, and troops had begun crossing over to the other side, many of them being conscripts from poor families. The military leaders were finding it increasingly difficult to shore up obedience and maintain morale.

Finally, on January 16, 1979, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, fled the country for the second time, hoping that the military and Bakhtiar's government would be able to restore order. But history does not often repeat itself, and events would not play out as they had in 1953.

When Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile on February 1, 1979, he was greeted by massive crowds. He declared the Bakhtiar government illegitimate and appointed a provisional government consisting of members of the liberal nationalist opposition.¹⁷ At this point, the country was in a situation of dual power: there was the government of Bakhtiar, and that of Bazargan. Ayatollah Khomeini now appeared as the de facto leader of the revolution.

On February 9, 1979, after more than a year of demonstrations, strikes, and riots, a full-scale insurrection broke out. The spark was provided by a mutiny at the air force base in Tehran, when cadets declared their support for the revolution against their commanding officers. The elite Imperial Guard, the famous "Immortals," quickly attacked the base, attempting to restore order. Word spread, and guerilla groups sprung into action, rushing to fight the Imperial Guard. The action spread into the neighboring town and to other cities. Police stations and military barracks were raided, their weapons distributed to the people. As the police and military units were successively defeated, barricades were erected throughout the city. Government buildings, television and radio stations were all occupied. Prisons were attacked, and political prisoners carried out like heroes on the shoulders of crowds. Seeing that Bakhtiar's government was a lost cause, the top military generals declared their neutrality, asking those soldiers still loyal to them to return to their barracks. On February 11, 1979, Tehran radio announced the victory of the revolution.

Khomeini's Conquest

The months following the fall of the Shah was a springtime of revolution, a period of conflict and social struggle that provided a challenge to the new authorities. When workers returned to work, in many industries they did so under the control of the *shoras* (workers councils). Political organizations, suddenly free to operate after years of repression, began to flourish. Neighborhoods self-organized under the control of local committees. Universities became bases of left-wing opposition. The provinces were in rebellion.

How could such a broad based popular movement, with the oldest and largest left in the Middle East, result in the establishment of a clerical theocracy? While repression played a large role, the full story is far more complicated.

While the proletariat was strong and militant enough to overthrow the regime, they were not in a position to assert their hegemony over the movement. Moreover, almost immediately after the fall of the Shah, conflicts began to manifest within the coalition of revolutionary forces. While the movement was broad and popular, its leadership was drawn from the petit-bourgeoisie of the bazaari-clerical alliance. The problem for the new regime would therefore be to somehow establish undisputed political hegemony over this diverse patchwork of revolutionized groups, as well as the masses more broadly.

¹⁷ Mehdi Bazargan as Prime Minister. Bazargan was a longtime opposition figure who had worked in Mossadegh's cabinet and was the leader of the Freedom Movement of Iran, a religious-nationalist group representing the liberal-Islamic wing of the revolution. His cabinet comprised members of the National Front and the Freedom Movement.

It was not merely through extreme violence in the streets that Khomeini and his supporters were able to solidify their leadership over the popular movement. Certainly, they did employ lumpen-thugs (calling themselves the Hezbollah) to attack opposition rallies and break strikes. But their success was equally due to ideological manipulation. If there was one overarching ideological trait of the 1979 revolution it was *anti-imperialism*. Far more than an outcome of some religious revival or resistance to modernity, the Islamic ideology of the day assumed the form of a Third Worldist populism, one which would become so hegemonic over the revolution that all questions relating to it would eventually be seen through its prism. This was especially the case for the left, who contributed to this ideological confusion. It was through the manipulation of anti-imperialist ideology that the Khomeinist clergy was able to secure and maintain its hegemony over the revolution.

A key factor in Khomeini's ability to rapidly gain control over the movement lay in the near-total political vacuum that existed under the Shah's dictatorship. The entire weight of the regime's repression had been turned against the communist movement and the secular nationalists. For the masses of rural people who flooded into cities during the decade preceding the revolution, their traditional community having been disrupted by the land reform, the mosque was often the only place where they could find remnants of that community. However, mosques were not neutral, but under the control of the cleric, who found in this newly dispossessed population a ready audience. These cultural affinities were fused with a utopian-populist ideology that promised to end corruption and inaugurate a period of justice, uniting the various classes into an abstract people.

It is often suggested that the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah was hostile to Islam, or was pursuing a program of radical secularization. This is inaccurate: like his father, he was more interested in bringing religion under the control or service of the state. Although he sought modernization and national development, his approach to religion depended on how it served the state. For the Shah, the main enemy was the communist and left-wing opposition. Although the Pahlavi regime certainly promoted a nationalist ideology that emphasized the pre-Islamic past, the regime was not averse to using Islam when it served its purposes. It pursued a strategy that would be replicated throughout the region, encouraging religious ideology to counter the popularity of the Left. While the full repressive and propagandistic force of the state was wielded against the left, the Islamic forces enjoyed an incredible freedom, and even encouragement. Far from closing down mosques, the last Shah funded more mosques, prayer halls, and religious services. So long as they did not directly challenge the state or the monarchy, they were free to operate. This was especially the case if they directed their ire against godless communism. Many of those clergy who would be important figures in the Khomeinist movement during the 1979 revolution featured prominently in magazines and newspapers, and regularly appeared on radio and television. Of course, there was repression against the religious political opposition, but only of groups that directly opposed the regime. Those figures who stayed away from direct discussion of politics were given room to maneuver, which was unthinkable for the left.

Khomeini's intransigence and relative freedom of expression while in France soon made him the symbolic leader of the revolution — proof that symbols, when invested with enough power, become powers of their own. Khomeini enjoyed a network the communist movement could only dream of, with a strong following among middle and lower ranking clergy. As tapes of Khomeini's speeches were widely shared and distributed, mosques everywhere soon became a platform for voicing dissent. During the revolutionary insurrection of 1978–79, the neighborhood

committees that would later serve as an important base of the revolution were organized out of mosques in which the cleric was in control. These were increasingly controlled by a centralized revolutionary committee composed of Khomeini's supporters. Those that had remained independent were soon brought under control. These committees soon began to organize militias.¹⁸ Over time, these committees were all brought to heel, usually through violent repression. What they couldn't dominate by means of loyalists, they broke through frontal repression. But it was in Kurdistan where the autonomy from the central government was maintained the longest. This partially explains the repression that the state has always levied against the people there, who never fully accepted the Islamic Republic.

On November 7th, 1979 Khomeinist students took over the American Embassy. The crisis came at a perfect moment, when economic problems and frustration with the revolution was beginning to grow. One cannot understand the hostage crisis unless one recognizes that it was less about conflict with the US than about defeating the domestic opposition, particularly the Marxist guerrilla groups. It had the dual outcome of both forcing the resignation of the liberal nationalist provisional government *and* defeating the radical left, who still battled for hegemony over the anti-imperialist revolution. Prior to the hostage crisis, the new regime had no intention of opposing the United States. In this sense, the embassy takeover was the anti-imperialist spectacle perfected: by drawing attention away from the struggles taking place in the rest of the country, students who only recently would have been seen by their Marxist counterparts as religious fanatics and reactionaries could now present themselves as the vanguard of the anti-imperialist struggle. In this way, the crisis helped the religious factions defeat the left and secure their hegemony over the revolution.

From 1980 to 1983 the state launched a "cultural revolution" with the intention of purging the universities and educational institutions of radical left influence. Schools were shut down, faculty purged. Resistance was met with severe repression, leading to fierce battles between leftist students and Islamist thugs. The same was the case with the worker's councils in the factories, although in this case the initiative lay with the left-wing parties. Although the councils developed spontaneously out of the strike committees organized during the mass strike of 1978-79, they enjoyed the participation of the Left, who were invited to play a role in their direction. Whereas those workers councils that were dominated by the Khomeinists often tended to be corporatist in ideology, the more radical worker's councils were democratic in nature.

This difference points to the decisive question — by no means unique to Iran — of the internal diversity of the working class. The rapid and uneven character of capitalist development over the previous decade had created a significant though not unsurpassable chasm, a phenomenon common to many nations in the global south, particularly where development is marked by advanced technology, as opposed to more primitive forms of accumulation. This chasm meant that there was an important cultural difference between "new" and "old" workers, one that the Islamists played upon and used against the left and working class movement. There was a marked difference between the newly-proletarianized manual laborers or unemployed workers and second generation urbanites, who enjoyed different sources of entertainment and tended to support the secular parties of the left. This included white collar workers, but also "skilled" workers in

¹⁸ In places such as Kurdistan, the local committees were dominated by opposition forces such as the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and the Maoist Komalah party, while in Turkoman-Sahra they were organized by the communist Fedaiyan. In other areas they were loyal to other clerics, including those opposed to Khomeini's interpretation.

modern industries including oil, gas, and petrochemicals, which were central to the state and economy. Similar differences existed at the level of education, as well as in lifestyles. The clergy played upon this difference with their ideas of cultural imperialism. Imperialism was affiliated not merely with the rule of capital, but with all facets of Western culture, Marxism included. The upper sectors of the working class were characterized as Westernized, a trend consistent with Third World populism elsewhere, particularly in nations that are not among the farthest flung regions of the periphery and underdeveloped, but which are developing more rapidly in the direction of the global system.

Like fascist regimes before them, the Khomeini regime used disorder to establish order. They did not merely conquer the state but also seized power in the street, through the action of their revolutionary committees. By 1983 they had defeated all their political opponents. From the beginning, the Islamic Republic always incorporated a segment of the population into its police apparatus to surveil and repress the rest of the population. This policy allowed it to channel the cultural resentment of the lumpenproletariat into the regime's repression, and marked an important departure from the preceding regime.

The Winter Years and the War Economy

The period after 1983 was a dark and silent time for the socialist movement, if not the country as a whole. The Left had been crushed and defeated politically, and working class opposition was in a state of retreat. War had come to dominate society. A significant segment of the population was caught up in the nationalist fervor, which entailed at least implicit support for the state. Communists and others who still rejected the state were forced into silence as the tide turned against them. Khomeini described the Iraqi invasion as a blessing from God. The war took the anti-imperialist demagoguery to a new level, providing a new pretense for national unification, resurrecting patriotic ideology that authorized the state to silence dissent. Economic hardships could once again be blamed on the imperialist war-mongers, providing a great opportunity for Khomeini to impose his vision of generalized austerity. The latter also had its ideological components, which was promoted from all areas: sacrifice, suffering, obedience, authority, mourning, martyrdom.

So long as the war raged on, national unity could be maintained, and social-economic problems could be externalized. Iran during these years was a war economy. The war also gave the state the ability to extend its reach further into society. Whereas Khomeini and his supporters had always complained about the bureaucratic complexity of the Shah's regime, the Islamic Republic expanded the bureaucracy far beyond anything seen during the previous regime. The Islamization of society and the necessity to govern the minutiae of so many people's lives required the creation of new departments and ministries. The repressive apparatus had to be extended as well. Although the state under the Islamic Republic remains in a certain sense "autonomous" from the bourgeoisie and other domestic classes, unlike during the Shah's regime, Khomeini successfully built a base that connected popular classes to the state in a way that Muhammad Reza Shah only could dream of. Like the fascist regimes before it, it has incorporated many lumpenproletarian youths into the repressive apparatus. The Khomeinist militias and street gangs had gathered up scores of newly arriving disenchanting and alienated rural people during and after the revolution,

people who had lost their old sense of community, and who rediscovered it in and through the mosques. All these were later incorporated directly into the state.

The Islamic Republic

The 1979 revolution swept aside the monarchy and the comprador bourgeoisie that benefited from its rule. These were replaced by a new form of capitalist state, the Islamic Republic. The Iranian system is best described as state capitalist, both under the Pahlavis and the Islamic Republic. By that I mean, it is a system where the state is the main motor for capital accumulation. The private sector and modern industry are supported by state revenues, which mainly come from oil. The upper-level managers and bureaucrats constitute a class who, like those who filled this role in the previous regime, enriched themselves through positions within the state bureaucracy. Control of state power allows these “millionaire mullahs” to amass enormous fortunes. Their investments are global, including in Western democracies. This class now comprises not only those clergy, merchants, and state officials, but also their extended families, who make up a large and wealthy bourgeoisie. A central pillar of this state bureaucracy is the *Pasdaran*, or “Revolutionary Guards.”¹⁹

The Revolutionary Guards were formed during the revolution as a way to solidify the Khomeinist position. Khomeini and his supporters were distrustful of the army, as it was closely associated with the Shah’s regime. They also needed to counter the armed leftist guerilla groups who had a formidable presence as a result of their role in the insurrection. Consequently, a militia was created of committed Khomeini supporters, drawing from the militias that had evolved out of the neighborhood committees that sprang up during the revolution. The latter were themselves tied to the local mosques, which were in turn controlled by a central “Revolutionary Committee” presided over by Khomeini himself. After the revolution, these armed committees were purged of non-loyalists and formalized into the revolutionary guard. With the war, they became formalized as a military unit and formed the frontline of the battles. The Pasdaran were, and still are today, ideologically and institutionally tied to the seat of the “supreme leader.” At the time of the Guard’s emergence, this position was occupied by Khomeini, but now filled by Ayatollah Khamenei. Originally a middle-ranking cleric, Khamenei was a committed Islamist militant during the Shah’s period, who would go on to become one of Khomeini’s most ardent supporters, later serving as president for a time during the 1980s. However, irrespective of who is in government, the Pasdaran are autonomous and owe their loyalty to the leader.

Today, the Pasdaran are larger and even more institutionalized, having become one of the central anchors of the state, not only militarily and as a repressive force, but also economically. The Pasdaran are not only a massive military force that parallels the regular army. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, state bureaucracy provided a means of advancement for those previously excluded from state and economic power. The Pasdaran consequently became one of the largest corporations owned by the state, second only to the national Iranian oil company. Their books are completely closed, even to the official government. They draw their arms from the private sector, but also the black market, aided by their control of the borders. Iran routinely executes drug traffickers; indeed, these makeup most executions. But if you are an officer in the Pasdaran

¹⁹ *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami*, Revolutionary Guard of the Islamic Revolution, commonly referred to as the Pasdaran.

it can be a lucrative trade. Civil exams were replaced by religious exams, ensuring that those who were the most ideologically loyal and committed to the state could advance through the ranks and be given positions. The Pasdaran is also responsible for regional repression. For example, they organized and coordinated the repression of the Iraqi demonstrations of 2019. Their elite Al-Quds force has also been instrumental in supporting the Syrian state against its opposition.²⁰

Ultimately, at the level of political-ideological organization, the Islamic Republic operates similarly to other one-party authoritarian states, with the difference that religious networks replace the party apparatus. In other words, the Islamic social networks play the role that the party apparatus did in the fascist and Stalinist countries: the mosque is the party headquarters, and the Friday prayer leader is the local commissar, spreading the message of the state to the masses weekly. The Friday prayer at the central mosque in every city is the megaphone of the central government, while the cleric plays the role of the commissar doling out state ideology to those in attendance.

Reconstruction and Neoliberalism

After the war with Iraq ended in 1988, the country underwent a period of post-war reconstruction, centered around a policy of economic liberalization. The radical-populist rhetoric was momentarily toned down and replaced with a more pragmatic approach favoring privatization as a means to development. However, as before, this policy created a social base that would later develop into an antagonistic force within the republic. The economic boom created many millionaires, but also a generation of educated youth without economic prospects who were coming of age and becoming politicized. Added to this was a generation of young workers that entered not only an industrial workforce, but a newly-modernized and technically updated workforce, under conditions in which labor was becoming more uncertain. It was during the period under liberal-reformist president Muhammad Khatami that three social movements came on the scene that would later prove to be a recurrent force in Iran's revolutionary movement: the student movement, the women's movement, and the workers' movement.

The period of (very) relative political liberalization offered an opportunity for greater public organizing. However, the limits of this new liberalization would soon be tested.

The state first showed its hand during the student riots of 1999, which until then were the largest demonstrations since the revolution. There had been renewed activity among students both in the lead-up to the election and following it. In July, students organized large demonstrations in response to the closing of a reformist political newspaper. Afterward, government thugs raided the dormitories at Tehran University, killing a student. This led to six days of demonstrations and riots that spread throughout the country, to which the state responded with severe repression: over 1200 people were swept up in arrests, and a large number of students "disappeared."²¹

For its part, labor as an organized force has repeatedly mobilized since 2004, when striking copper workers in Khatoonabad were attacked by the local gendarmerie. Since then, there has been a series of militant strike actions, as well as efforts at coordination and organization among

²⁰ Over the last decade Iran has regained a regional influence similar to that enjoyed under the Shah's regime in the 1970s, only with the difference that it is no longer in the US camp.

²¹ "New Arrests and 'Disappearances' of Iranian Students," *Human Rights Watch*, July 30 1999.

different sectors of workers coming together as a class. Perhaps the most well publicized example of this was the struggle of city transit workers, in particular bus drivers, whose strike actions and organizing efforts were met with severe repression. Militant activity has also taken place — and continues to do so — among automobile workers at the Iran Khodro plant, the largest automobile plant in the region, as well as at the massive Haft Tappeh sugar factory — to mention only two sectors whose struggles continue into the present. Another very important sector has been public school teachers, who have emerged as one of the vanguards of the current struggle and whose agency featured prominently in the latest uprising. Among the militant working class broadly, the concept of the *shoras* (workers councils) has also had a presence.²²

The liberal reformist presidency of Khatami was followed by the rightist populism of Mahmud Ahmadinejad. A former Revolutionary Guardsman during the revolution and war, his campaign appealed to popular resentment and nostalgia for the Khomeini period, and he enjoyed a support base among the military apparatus from which he himself had emerged. For all his populist demagoguery, the liberalization, austerity, and immiseration of the working class nevertheless continued apace. In 2009, when the election that resulted in an Ahmedinejad victory against his reformist rival was perceived as rigged, the nation erupted into what came to be known as the “Green Movement.” Its significance lay in the way it exposed the limits of the reform movement and its liberal-democratic demands. In this, it announced a rupture: in the eyes of many, not only was the reformist strategy of working within the system not working to make any substantial changes, but its proponents were as much a part of the system as their more conservative-fundamentalist counterparts. After 2009, the system as a whole would increasingly come into question.

From then until now, there have been an incredible number of explosions, insurrections, and national uprisings that, although short lived, have been increasing in depth and militancy. The uprisings of the past 15 years generally begin with a particular issue, before rapidly generalizing into a revolt that calls the system as a whole into question. This tendency has only become more pronounced with every explosion. Although a proper discussion of the character of each of these events is not possible here, a few stand out as significant turning points. In late 2017 demonstrations took place in Mahshad against economic mismanagement and increasing austerity measures, and quickly spread into nationwide protests incorporating a variety of issues and grievances. In the fall of 2018 a highly organized and coordinated general strike took place involving a wide variety of sectors from industrial workers, teachers, bus drivers, truckers, but also a significant number of bazaar shopkeepers. This wave of agitation reached its highpoint in November 2019 during what came to be known as “Bloody Aban.” Brutal cuts in subsidies had prompted a sharp rise in the cost of basic goods such as fuel. Protests once again quickly spread across the country, but this time were marked with astonishing militancy. Riots and street battles were mixed with workers’ actions. The government matched the militancy with a violence that was gratuitous even by its own standards. For the militants in Iran, it was a point of no return. It is within this context that the murder of Jina Amini set off the latest explosion.

²² The *Iran Khodro* has been referred to as the “Detroit of the Middle East,” and its workers are known for their militancy and class-consciousness. However, measures such as temporary contracts, the threat of sacking, as well as blatant repression have been put in place to counteract this. During the protests of June 2009, the workers staged a work slowdown in protest of the repression and in solidarity with the popular movement.

Gender, Dress, and Capitalist Discipline

In the current revolutionary movement in Iran, women appear to be in the vanguard, whether this be in the workplace, classroom, or community. The radical feminist character of the current revolutionary movement is one of the main features that distinguishes it from past revolutionary movements. Although women have been an important presence in all past struggles, today it is young women who constitute its vanguard, shaping the very nature of the struggle, its ideas and aspirations. The current struggle has also reached deeper into student life than ever before: although universities have always been a center of radical activity in Iranian politics, the present struggle has seen this participation expand not only to high-schoolers but to children in middle schools and elementary schools, who defy authorities and tear up the pictures of the supreme leader.

Culture is a terrain of struggle in Iran, as it is everywhere. As a flashpoint in this conflict, the hijab is not merely a religious symbol, but is also about ideological allegiance. The cops that enforce its use — often women — identify with the ideology of the state, and see their enforcing of these laws as their role in upholding it. In this case, it is pro-regime women who police and control other women. These enforcers often harbor resentment toward those who flaunt such norms and who mock their ideology. The struggle against the hijab is therefore not primarily against people who wear Islamic dress out of piety or religiosity, but is rather political in nature, since it concerns the freedom to choose. By defying the hijab mandate, one is challenging an ideological pillar of the state, one which has, since the revolution, worked assiduously to incorporate lumpen and poorer women into its repressive apparatus.

The Islamic Republic is an instructive reminder that even laws that seem to have no rational economic logic can nevertheless be incorporated into the logic of capitalism and play an important role in its reproduction. Gender oppression is linked to capital accumulation in a way perhaps not apparent at first sight. It has long been observed that labor taking place outside the formal workplace, particularly women's domestic labor, is vital for the existence of wage labor and capital. In many regions, moreover, women's labor includes both unwaged domestic labor and waged work, both the production of commodities for sale on the market and housework. Sometimes both are done within the same space, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly commonplace in both core and peripheral countries, often driven by the force of necessity. In such cases, the distinction between waged and unwaged labor no longer corresponds to a distinction between two distinct or non-overlapping sets of workers, thereby challenging the distinction between "economic" and "extra-economic."

Since the 1979 Revolution, the state has led a concerted campaign to encourage women to be primarily domestic caretakers, pushing women's role as mother to the forefront of official state ideology. Yet capitalist accumulation also requires women's participation in production. The result is a labor system aimed at enabling this participation, without directly challenging patriarchal state ideology. In this system, a sizable sector of Iranian women does productive labor in its classical sense, but must do so under the cloak of invisibility.²³

²³ As Malm and Esmailian explain: "The number of women in the industrial labor force rose from 6 per cent in 1986 to 11 percent ten years later. However, most women engaged in manufacturing do not go to a factory: they work from home. The image of the Iranian woman as Fatima, a homemaker supported by her working husband, is just that: an image. In reality, a woman at home must work within the confines of the family, for the sake of her family's survival. Millions of working Iranian women are thus invisible in the official statistics, as they look after their children

This is an important characteristic of Iranian capitalism, and is indeed a common feature of capitalist production everywhere. It was the case during the Shah, but has been exacerbated by neoliberalism. One of the main reasons that trade unionism, or even the more radical syndicalism, become difficult concerns the uneven nature of production: Iran is an island of large modern production surrounded by a sea of primitive and traditional production. Even in large scale industries such as oil and petrochemicals, an increasing number of workers are precarious and work on temporary contracts.

The introduction of a strong gender division within the working class complicates conventional lines of class struggle, from which women's issues are often dismissed as external. The small workshops typically found in the textile industry — particularly in rural areas — were the first to be excluded from all labor legislation, whereas for women working at home there has, of course, never been any protection. This is one of the “advantages” of employing women: they are easily exploitable, as their connection to the labor market proper is never more than casual, and officially regarded so by the state. This also demonstrates how intimate and symbiotic the relation of class and gender can be. It becomes hard if not impossible to draw a sharp line between exploitation and domination, and between questions of gender and class.

The Islamic Republic reveals the inability of state ideology to overcome the contradictions inherent to capitalism. From its inception, the ruling order has tried to construct an order in which ideology, repression, and state control could be used to suppress the contradictions and crises inherent to the system. But if the global history of the past four decades has shown us anything, it is that what we call neoliberalism is nothing other than the inherent contradictions of capitalism manifesting themselves. Such is undoubtedly the case in Iran. Many of the laws and regulations that may seem to have no economic bottomline turn out to be intimately bound up with particular forms of labor discipline. Iran's regulations around gender offer a case in point.

The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism

Iran's latest uprisings have displayed incredible inter-ethnic solidarity, with a notable absence of nationalist slogans. This is all the more remarkable when one takes into consideration the historic animosity between certain participating groups. Nevertheless, nationalism runs deep. It would be short-sighted to believe that it cannot be utilized in some new formulation to unify the nation. It has happened many times in history that a movement or political figure that had fallen into obscurity can be resurrected in the midst of a mass social movement, especially if they know how to use it to their benefit. When the revolution against the Shah was in its early stages, many otherwise keen observers saw him as a man of the past. Important perhaps as a temporary figurehead, but with no future, someone who would retire to the seminary after the revolution. And yet within a year he had become the undisputed leader of the nation.

Today, we see a similar pattern. For decades, the Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi and his supporters had fallen into obscurity. Their support is increasingly limited to certain wealthy exile communities in California, D.C., and London. Within Iran their support was even more non-existent, aside from small mostly online right-wing nationalist nostalgists. However, the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement has given a new lease on life to the prince and his supporters. While it

while trying to finish orders from their textile manufacturers.” Andreas Malm and Shora Esmailian, *Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers & Threats of War*, Pluto Press 2007, 62–63.

is still primarily among the exile community, the speed at which he has been able to gain the support of liberal democratically minded people has been surprising and concerning.

There is a danger today that the Iranian opposition, while it may not take the same outward expression, has a similar content and dynamic. Whereas in 1979 anti-(particularly US) imperialism was the ideology that allowed a new form of capitalist domination to assert itself, today, among large parts of the liberal opposition, there are illusions about “democracy” that can be used to establish a new bourgeois hegemony, this time in support of the US/EU imperialist camp. We see this clearly in the case of Ukraine, to which Iran is connected in its support for the Russian campaign. Many on the liberal-left, out of a legitimate anger at the Russian invasion, have fallen into illusions about Ukrainian nationalism, and found commonality with reactionary elements in their opposition to both the Russian regime and the Islamic Republic. One has even seen anarchists and communists lower their guard against the reaction. We are once again heading into a situation similar to last century’s world wars, in which an internationalist position becomes increasingly challenging to maintain. Those who take the position of “no war but the class war” are looked upon with suspicion by both sides of the imperialist slaughter. Yet this remains the only consistent internationalist position.

The anti-imperialist ideology that drove the rise and demise of the Iranian revolution was a tragedy from the perspective of proletarian revolution. To resurrect such a position today would be farcical, since anti-imperialist ideology never was, nor is it now, revolutionary. Today, it serves only the forces of reaction, bringing workers, students, and women’s organizations into an illusory harmony with those who serve to maintain their oppression and exploitation. If this ideological position ever harbored any emancipatory potential, today it is both utopian and reactionary.

The Islamic Republic is a regime that understands the power of ideology. Ideological manipulation has been a pillar of the state from its very inception. The Iranian ruling class must not only be defeated politically and militarily, but also ideologically. This is precisely what was at stake in the televised show-trials and “confessions” of opposition figures that became such a mainstay of Iranian programming through the first decade of the republic. Spectacles of this sort continue to be an important feature of the state’s attempt to defeat all opposition. How effective they are after four decades is questionable, except perhaps among those loyal to the regime who believe all its propaganda in any event. Such people exist in every society, including our own.

Horizons

History presents us with a panoply of examples of the capitalist state’s ability to reconstitute itself in a new form. This does not always assume the form of a frontal attack on revolutionary elements, but is often carried out in the very name of the revolution itself. The revolution that brought to power the Islamic Republic offers a ready example of this dynamic. By 1978, no new order could constitute itself in the name of the monarchy. Any new form of rule had to be implemented in the name of “the people.” This was accepted by the United States, who by this time had already lost confidence in the Shah’s ability to maintain order, and were looking for an entity within the revolution with whom they could build a relationship. It may be the case that if the current revolutionary movement continues to grow, rendering the survival of the Islamic Republic untenable, ruling classes both within Iran and internationally will seek out a solution by which to protect their positions. This is perhaps the greatest threat to the revolution.

We must not assume — as the regime’s propaganda exhorts us to — that international capital is not heavily invested in Iran. It is *only* the US that wasn’t invited to the party. The sanctions by the US exist not merely to punish Iran, but to try to discipline other nations, particularly Western Europe. The idea that the US is an imperialist power, but French, German, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese, Russian investment has nothing to do with imperialism, is a curious position. Foreign investment and privatization have been on the rise ever since post-war reconstruction began. From the perspective of capital, the business situation in Iran is far from ideal, and the same goes for the domestic bourgeoisie. As it was under the Shah’s regime, the national bourgeoisie — both the bazaaris and private industrialists — have been in search of a more “rational” and less arbitrary system, and generally support the regime only so long as it is the prevailing order and, in the end, protects their interests.

In the end, however, the biggest obstacles to social revolution often come from those who speak in the name of the revolution itself. As the revolution against the Shah’s dictatorship demonstrated clearly, the counter-revolution is contained within the revolution. Reformist illusions are not unique to the advanced capitalist nations, but are also present in the global south as well. Although Iran’s liberal reform movement appears to be dead for the time being, we should not underestimate the possibility that life will be breathed back into it. This is especially the case if the revolutionary movement grows and becomes more all-encompassing and radical. *There are many who would like to see the end of the current regime, yet are equally opposed to social revolution.* Right now, it may seem that all are united in one big happy oppositional family. This is ideology at its most dangerous. It is this illusion that radicals must not fall into.

There are many, particularly among the wealthy, who may want to get rid of some of the more socially repressive aspects of the regime, but without altering the capitalist relationship, or their continued access to accumulation. This includes those elements of the bourgeoisie who are close to the regime, as well as those who have fallen out of favor with, or are marginalized from the corridors of power. The illusion that all who oppose the regime are in favor of a radical change is a dangerous one. If the revolution of 1979 teaches us anything, it is that the biggest obstacle of social revolution often emerges from within the revolution itself. The counter-revolution in Iran today may come from those, within and abroad, who themselves chant “woman, life, freedom.”

One can recognize these manipulators and forces of counter-revolution in two ways: on the one hand, there are those who deny any economic cause for the uprising, seeking to limit the struggle solely to the question of “democracy” and individual rights; on the other, there are those who deny any internationalist component to the struggle, by claiming that it is an “Iranian” struggle not relevant to those in other countries, including the United States. This is exemplified by those opposition exiles who speak of women’s oppression in Iran, yet who continue to associate with the very elements who are doing the utmost to destroy women’s freedoms here. Often enough, it is these same elements who argue that the struggle has nothing to do with capitalism. In either case, it is those internal elements who work to keep the struggle fractured and compartmentalized that present the greatest obstacle to its radicalization.

The third wordlist populism of the Islamic Republic has largely exhausted itself. As elsewhere, the ideological recuperation of the radical movement will henceforth be carried out under the banner of democracy, secularism, and human rights. Still, even if the particular brand of anti-imperialism born of the post-WWII decolonization moment may have lost its efficacy, nationalism still runs deep among much of the Iranian population. We should not underestimate what Fredy Perlman described as the “continuing appeal” of nationalism, which continues to offer fer-

tile soil for demagogues to rally around Politicians within the opposition, particularly those in exile, who frequently appeal to nationalism in their babble. There have been various attempts to reinject such nationalism into the movement as a means to dilute it and control it. The most apparent has been the attempt to spread the slogan “Mard, Mihaan, Abadi” (Man, Nation, Development), which is often presented as a supplement to “Woman, Life, Freedom,” even though it is clearly a reactionary slogan designed to undermine the radical presence of women within the struggle. It is often circulated on social media by people who support the movement, but are not aware of the reactionary character of the slogan. Whether the phrase originated within the regime, or perhaps among people inside the opposition who were opposed to the radical wing of the movement, one cannot know.

Today’s polarizations are unlike those witnessed during the Shah’s regime. By the late-1970s, the state had so alienated itself from most domestic classes that the uprising was that of a broad majority against an increasingly small circle around the Shah and his court, the top generals, and the “big” capitalists connected to the multinationals. No matter how widespread the dissatisfaction with the regime, it is unlikely that the same situation could repeat itself today. The Islamic Republic, since its inception, has made it a point to have strong foundations among the populace. As a result, the present situation presents the danger of a prolonged civil war, not merely in the form of a violent conflict, but along many fronts, including the cultural and ideological one. There are many segments of the population who either explicitly support the current state, or at least experience a profound relation of dependence upon it. Today’s demonstrators do not just face opposition from the police, but also from people on the street. It does us no favors to deny or downplay the obstacles involved in the revolution. When protesters take to the streets in small groups, particularly when composed of younger women, they frequently face harassment and vitriol from reactionaries, including other women.

On college campuses, it has always been a feature of life to have conflict between rightist-Islamist students and leftist students. This dynamic has become far more intense of late. Fights and battles between reactionary students’ groups and left-wing students are common. The reactionary right-wing student groups enjoy the support of the police and the administration, for whom they work as an auxiliary. They make it their duty to snitch and provide information on any students they know to be actively causing disruptions, including women who have become increasingly emboldened to violate dress codes.

One can tell a lot from the slogans that have proliferated. Some are throwbacks to past struggles, other new innovations: “Down with the Oppressor! Whether the Shah or the Leader!” is a common one widely used. “Unity, Struggle, Victory” was once the slogan of the Confederation of Iranian Students during the struggle against the Shah, and has been revived again on university campuses. What is new is the near-total lack of nationalist and chauvinist slogans, whether these be associated with Iranian nationalism, or the nationalism of oppressed minorities. While discrimination and civil rights for ethnic minorities has been central to the struggle, there is a solidarity and unity between ethnic groups that exceeds anything seen in the past. Significant, especially when one considers the historical animosity that has existed between these groups at different times.

The current radical movement in Iran has learned from and incorporated the lessons of the past. The Iranian movement has recaptured the “revolution of everyday life,” a struggle not limited to economic or political dimensions. Whether students or young workers, there exists a youth culture of resistance that plays an important role in the radical movement in Iran. Gender,

class, freedom of expression, and environmental destruction are no longer seen as separate issues. Much of this has to do with a response to their conditions. The Islamic Republic established through its authoritarian system the unity of all these aspects by denying freedom in any of these domains. For the young person in Iran, there doesn't seem to be any hope for the future, generating feelings of total alienation, as evidenced by high rates of addiction and suicide. However, the reverse of a feeling of total despair can also be a loss of fear. And that is a definite characteristic of the uprising: a shedding of fear that suddenly spreads contagiously.

As the capitalist crisis deepens, the social compromise on which the Islamic Republic is based will continue to wither away. The social question cannot be resolved by the regime without undermining its own position. It is for the same reasons that social democratic compromises, whether in the core capitalist countries or in the global south as a result of national liberation struggles, are not possible today as they once were. We shouldn't see in neoliberalism just the poor decisions of politicians, but rather the global tendency of capitalism to manifest its contradictions in the face of all political attempts to overcome them. The Islamic Republic is further proof that there is no political solution to the national question.

In the midst of the 1979 revolution, an observer made a remark that remains equally true for the struggle today: "The fundamental question in Iran is not which combination of forces will hold the state, but whether the workers will affirm themselves autonomously against it. If they don't speak for themselves, the bureaucrats will speak for them."²⁴ Whatever happens from here on out, it is clear that a revolutionary movement with its own distinctive culture and symbols exists in Iran, and is going to be much more difficult to extricate by violence alone. The social conditions that gave rise to such explosions persist, and it is increasingly obvious that they cannot be solved within the confines of the present system. What new social arrangement could supersede it is another question. The demand for a council system points in the right direction, but as we have seen in the past, simply calling for workers councils is insufficient, and can even be manipulated by the system. Everything depends upon how the councils operate, and whether they can maintain their strength and autonomy from the state. While it may appear that the movement has suffered a severe defeat, it is equally possible that what we are witnessing, in Iran as well as globally, is a rising tide rather than its ebb.

²⁴ Ken Knabb, "The Opening in Iran" March 12, 1979.

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