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Chapter One

The Discourses of Revolution

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall discuss the discourses of power, which have played a role in the creation and explanation of the Iranian-Islamic Revolution of 1979 and its political outcome, the Islamic Republic of Iran, with the view of laying the ground for my own understanding of these phenomena. These discourses consist of the ideological, literary, academic and religious texts, as well as narratives and speeches that created the environment conducive to the revolution, or have tried to understand the nature of this revolution and its political outcomes. I refer to these discourses as discourses of power due to their concern with the reproduction, resistance to or legitimation of the relations of power in the context of the interaction of religion and politics in Iran.

In discussing these discourses, I shall particularly try to show how they have dealt with the role of interpretations of religious, historical and literary narratives, and other symbolic structures of the Iranian-Islamic culture in the revolution. Some of these discourses have dealt with issues pertaining to culture, collective imagination, narratives and symbolic structures by not considering them worthy of serious attention. Some have given these issues marginal value and, instead, have emphasised the role of socio-economic factors as the dominant force in instigating the revolution and drawing the path of its future development. Only a few have seriously studied the significance of existing patterns of political culture, found in the religious and non-religious traditions, in motivating the revolution and shaping the post-revolution political and social institutions. In my reading of these discourses, I shall engage in a critical dialogue with them, and thereby express my own views on the issues under discussion.

In a simple categorisation of these discourses of power, one may see two broad types: one based on basically politico-economic and socio-economic criteria, including various types of class analysis, which pay little attention to the fundamental role of culture in politics. The other is based on various forms of cultural analysis, which range from those with a generalist view of culture to those advocating the significance of cultural specificity.

However, this simple categorisation may not be able to reflect all the intricate aspects of the discourses of the Iranian Revolution. This is the case because there are important writings, which belong to one category but contain important elements of the other. These discourses contain various doctrinal, theoretical, political and cultural arguments ranging from religious doctrines, fictional and poetic writings, ideological and political analysis, to cultural, social and psychological theories, dealing with notions of class analysis, religious legitimacy, collective conscience, psychoanalysis of the political leaders, etc. In all these approaches, however, there has been a degree of emphasis, positive and negative, on the role of culture and religion in politics. Therefore, it would be appropriate to use a more detailed categorisation, which may reflect more fully the empirical variety of the perspectives in which the revolution has been viewed.
The literature on the Iranian-Islamic Revolution may thus be categorised not only on the basis of the type of their analysis of the revolution, but also on the basis of their acceptance, rejection and neutrality toward the revolution. In other words, one should take account in this categorisation of the positioning of each category with respect to the revolution and its institutional consequences. According to this categorisation then, one can identify both types of cultural and politico-economic analyses in the different categories. Thus, with a certain simplification of reality, I shall consider the following categories of writings on the Islamic Revolution for discussion: 1) the discourse of secular intellectuals; 2) the conservative discourse; 3) the religious modernist discourse; and 4) the secular academic discourse. The main concern here is to emphasise the importance of religious significations and cultural symbolism in making the revolutionary action meaningful for its participants without failing to appreciate the equally important role of the politico-economic and socio-economic conditions within which these meanings could be conceived.

The Discourse of Secular Intellectuals

The discourse of Iranian secular intellectuals can be broadly divided into two ideological categories of liberalism and socialism. The Western political discourse in both liberal and socialist formulations had penetrated deeply into the course of the development of political thought in Iran since the early twentieth century. The modernist Western literature had also a lasting influence on the development of modern literary and poetic styles in Iran. A main concern of modern secular intellectuals in Iran was their concern with the political, economic and cultural encounter of Iran with Western modernity. The reaction of the early Iranian secular intelligentsia to the West was twofold. Those, such as Malkam Khan, Taliboff, Akhundzadeh and Taqi-zadeh had been fascinated by the Western modernity, and advocated a wholesale imitation of the West in the modernisation of Iran as the way to historical progress. These views found advocates mainly among the political elite, intellectuals and technocrats, and had a strong influence on the constitutional revolutionary movement of the early twentieth century and the subsequent rise of the Pahlavi regime. Others, such as Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani and Ahmad Kasravi, however, were alarmed by the wholesale imitation of the West and advocated a more critical appropriation of the Western ways. As such, this second approach exercised a more enduring influence on the following generations of revolutionary secular intellectuals. Both of these reactions, however, shared in their fascination with the Western ideology of modernity and their pessimism about the progressive potentials of the Iranian religious culture.

From the mid-twentieth century, intellectual politicisation was marked predominantly by the socialist ideology at the expense of liberal ideology. The identification of the Pahlavi regime with the liberal democracies of the West, particularly since the 1950s, and the political acquiescence of the liberal intellectuals, shifted the intellectual expression of political dissent mainly to the side of the socialist ideology. After the 1953 coup, liberal intellectual activities became limited to a mainly apolitical group of literati, and many authors, poets, dramatists and filmmakers secured successful careers in the 1960s and 1970s.

As Mehrzad Boroujerdi has suggested in his work on modern Iranian intellectuals, the apolitical literati consisted of modernist and traditionalist
tendencies. Whereas, the modernist intellectuals with liberal apolitical tendencies expressed in their work a pessimistic view of the existing social order and offered mild criticisms of the political situation, the traditionalist literati "became very much involved with the officially sanctioned culture of the time." Some of the members of the later group also pursued academic, cultural and loyalist political careers, and received financial and political support from the government. But the core of political activism of the secular intellectuals inside Iran, as I noted, was identified with socialism.

The discourse of the left includes the literature, which has distinguished an ideal type of revolution and evaluate the Iranian Revolution on the basis of its conformity or non-conformity with that ideal type. According to the leftist writings, which have been prevalent among the Marxist revolutionary groups since the early twentieth century, a true revolution was defined on the basis of the Marxist typology: bourgeois, bourgeois-democratic and socialist. Writings, speeches and memories of Marxist revolutionary figures such as Heidar Amughlu, Taqi Erani, Ehsan Tabari, Amir-Parviz Pouyan, Hamid Ashraf, Bijan Jazani, and Mas’oud Ahamad Zadeh in the period between the 1920s to the 1980s are typical of various ideological understandings of Marxist revolutionary theory in Iran. These writings along with political treatises, pamphlets and translations of the writings of Russian, German, French, Chinese and Vietnamese Marxist revolutionaries comprised the bulk of the leftist revolutionary discourse in Iran. They reflected the views of the political organisations, such as the Communist Party of Iran, the Tudeh Party (Party of the Masses), Fada’iyan-e Khalq (the Devotees of the Masses), Paykar dar Rah-e Tabaq-e Kargar (Struggle in the Path of the Working Class), Rah-e Kargar (the Path of the Working Class), etc, which were involved in the political activity against the Pahlavi regime.

The Tudeh Party and the liberating image of the Soviet style socialism exercised an important influence in the politicisation of intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s. The Tudeh (Mass) Party was officially founded in 1941 by a group of Marxist intellectuals who had survived the suppression of Marxism by Reza Shah. It introduced itself as the heir of Taqi Erani who had spread the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary ideology in Iran under Reza Shah, and had paid for it with his life. The journal Donya, which had been founded by Erani, became the main vehicle for the propagation of the political and theoretical ideas of the central committee of the Tudeh Party.

The Tudeh Party saw itself also as the heir of the Communist Party of Iran, which had been founded in the early part of the twentieth century by Heidar Amughlu in Azarbaijan, and which had been mainly concerned with the cessation of the northern provinces and forming a republic on the Soviet model. The Tudeh Party announced that it was the new party of the working class with a patriotic mission to maintain the ‘Boroujerdi, M. Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism, Syracuse University Press, New York, 1996, p. 44. The modernist literati like Hushang Golshiri, Shahrokh Meskub, Ebrahim Golestan, Nader Naderpur, Yadollah Ro’yai and Sohrab Sepehri were influenced by the Western writers like “Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Beckett, William Faulkner, Eugene Ionesco, James Joyce, Franz Kafka and John Steinbeck. There were also filmmakers, like Mas’oud Kimia’i, Dariush Mehrjou’i and Ali Hatami, who brought modernist artistic genres to Iranian cinema. Some other modernist literati, like Muhammad-Ali Jamalzadeh, Sadeq Hedaya and Sadeq Chubak, had already left Iran and pursued their literary and artistic activities in the European countries. The traditionalist literati, on the other hand, consisted mainly of the older generation of “Persian classicists” like Sadeq Razazadeh Shafaq, Badi’ozzaman Foruzanfar, Jalaloddin Homa’i, Mojtaba Minovi, Parviz Natel-Khanlari, Sa’id Nafisi and Zanollah Safa.

1 Boroujerdi, M. Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism, Syracuse University Press, New York, 1996, p. 44. The modernist literati like Hushang Golshiri, Shahrokh Meskub, Ebrahim Golestan, Nader Naderpur, Yadollah Ro’yai and Sohrab Sepehri were influenced by the Western writers like “Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Beckett, William Faulkner, Eugene Ionesco, James Joyce, Franz Kafka and John Steinbeck. There were also filmmakers, like Mas’oud Kimia’i, Dariush Mehrjou’i and Ali Hatami, who brought modernist artistic genres to Iranian cinema. Some other modernist literati, like Muhammad-Ali Jamalzadeh, Sadeq Hedaya and Sadeq Chubak, had already left Iran and pursued their literary and artistic activities in the European countries. The traditionalist literati, on the other hand, consisted mainly of the older generation of “Persian classicists” like Sadeq Razazadeh Shafaq, Badi’ozzaman Foruzanfar, Jalaloddin Homa’i, Mojtaba Minovi, Parviz Natel-Khanlari, Sa’id Nafisi and Zanollah Safa.

2 Ibid, p. 44
integrity of Iran and offer freedom and justice to the masses. It advocated democracy, national independence, State support for the national economy, and social justice for the lower classes in the context of a revolutionary internationalism. For the Tudeh Party, Marxism-Leninism of the Soviet style was the ideology of an international revolution against the U.S. imperialism and its allies. Therefore, the interests of the Party were, from the beginning, connected with the interests of the Soviet Union and opposed to the American interests in Iran.

In contrast to the leadership of the original Communist Party who had been predominantly of Azari ethnic background, the leaders of the Tudeh Party were mainly Persian (Farsi) speaking intellectuals and did not favour disintegration of Iran along ethic lines. The Tudeh Party was thus founded on a platform, which defended “the urgent economic, social and political interests of the working class and other toilers of Iran”.

It advocated the spread of what it called “scientific socialism” in order to analyse “the acute social problems” of Iran and to “enlighten the minds” of the people. It pledged to “remain faithful to the principles of Marxism-Leninism” and to “creatively adapt” these principles to the specific condition of Iran.

The leftist literati used literature to create a radical political consciousness in the people. They were deeply influenced by the European so-called social-realism and translated many of such works into Persian. Under the influence of the bipolar division of the world, and based on the success of the Anti-Western and particularly anti-American rhetorical and ideological campaign of the Soviet-sponsored Tudeh Party, the discourse of the left acquired an anti-West and particularly an anti-American bent since the 1940s. This anti-American sentiment became stronger after the 1953 coup, sponsored by the United States, against the nationalist government of Mossadeq. The anti-Westernism of the leftist discourse was mainly concerned with the notion of American imperialism and the international Marxist-Leninist ideological and political campaign against Western imperialism.

Literary and artistic expressions of the leftist Iranian intellectuals gradually acquired a strong measure of political protest in the guise of a well-developed metaphoric and poetic language. With the suppression of the Tudeh Party in the 1950s and the allegations of treachery and revisionism that bemoaned this Party ever since, and with the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, new radical leftist tendencies took shape in the 1960s and 1970s. As such, a new concept of literature emerged, which advocated what it called adabiyyat-e mota‘ahhed (committed literature), and would be responsible for expressing the voice of the lower classes. As Boroujerdi has suggested, the advocates of adabiyyat-e mota‘ahhed criticised the apolitical literati as “government puppets, alienated from the masses, superficial, absurdists, escapists, nihilist, decadent, imported, artificial, lifeless, and unethical”, representing their own work as “attentive, loyal, dutiful, ethical, and authentic”.

1 DONYA: The Political and Theoretical Organ of the Central Committee of the Tudeh Party of Iran, No. 1, 1985, pp. 5-6
2 Ibid, p. 19
3 Authors like Bozarg Alavi and Mahmud E’temadzadeh (Behazin) and others adopted the style of social realism in their own work, or translated the works of Anton Chekhov, Ivan Turgenev, Roman Rolland, Maxime Gorky, Bertolt Brecht and others into Persian.
4 The works of famous authors like Samad Behrang, Sa’id Sultanpur, Khosrow Golesockhi, Ahmad Shamlu, Mehdi Akhavan-Sales, Golam-Hussein Sa’edi, Reza Barahani, Ehsan Taheri, Fereydun Tonekaboni and Ali-Ashraf Darvishian, although differed in their political allegiances, belonged to the category of the politically conscious and socially responsible leftist literature.
5 Boroujerdi, M. 1996, p. 43
Almost all of the main leftist groups agreed that a revolution was in the destiny of the Iranian society. Also, they largely shared the view that such a revolution could not take a bourgeois course, which they attributed to the English Revolution, the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the European Revolutions of the nineteenth century. Only a few groups understood the Iranian Revolution on a socialist model, as they understood the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Most of the main groups though saw the Iranian Revolution as a bourgeois-democratic revolution. The variation in the approaches to revolutionary theory, reflected in the writings of these latter groups, was due mainly to the disputes over the question: which type of bourgeois-democratic course would the Iranian Revolution take? These disputes ultimately determined the positions of the leftist groupings with respect to the revolution, and led to numerous instances of splitting within these groups. One of the most important of these splits was one that occurred in the Tudeh Party in the aftermath of the 1953 coup d'état, which restored the Shah to power and led to the sever crackdown on the Party.

The split in the Tudeh Party had to do mainly with the alleged treachery of the Party under Mossadeq, its submissiveness to the Soviet Union and its lack of revolutionary enthusiasm after the coup d'état. The Party was also accused by its critics of reformism and revisionism as a result of the influence of revisionist views of the Soviet ideologues on the Party leadership. Various splinter groups branched off from the ranks of the Tudeh Party, but the most consequential one was the Fada'iyan-e Khalq. The Tudeh Party took a rather conservative view of revolution in Iran, arguing that the modernising policies of the Shah must be allowed to progress in order for Iran to transform from and feudal agrarian society into an industrial capitalist society. Only then, according to the Party, would it be possible to initiate a bourgeois-democratic revolution in Iran. Meanwhile, the Party announced that it would continue its struggle on behalf of the working class through trade union activities and advocating the economic rights of the workers within the framework of capitalist growth, deferring political socialist demands.

Some of the leftist intellectuals, dismayed with the Tudeh Party and the Soviet Union, joined the burgeoning radical guerrilla movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The writings of these intellectuals consisted mainly of the adaptation of the political theories and polemics of the Marxist revolutionaries like Ernesto Guevara, Mao Zedong and Regis Debray. Their decision to initiate a guerrilla warfare against the Shah’s dictatorship was also inspired by the contemporary Algerian, Palestinian, Cuban and Vietnamese liberation movements. The guerrilla group Fada'iyan-e Khalq (Devotees of the People) was founded in 1971 and launched a rural guerrilla warfare in the northern provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran. But their aim to mobilise the peasants under their leadership against the regime remained unfulfilled. Their quest for a peasant uprising did not go much further than an attack on a gendarmerie post in the village of Siyahkal in the northern forests, which did not instigate any local support, and came to a brutal halt after a military offensive by the Shah’s armed forces. Some of the guerrillas were killed and a number were hunted down and arrested, ironically with the help of some of the local peasants.

1 Iranian Marxist intellectuals like Bijan Jazani, Mas'oud Ahmadzadeh, Hamid Ahraf and Amir-Parviz Pouyan belonged to the group of revolutionary activists who combined Marxist theory and revolutionary activism to launch a heroic armed struggle on behalf of the “oppressed Iranian nation” against the Shah’s “military dictatorship”, in the hope that their heroism and sacrifice would “reawaken” the nation.
Although the *Fada'iyan* were unsuccessful in inspiring a peasant uprising, which they later attributed to their wrong assessment of Iran’s economic formation, they were successful to gain a relatively strong measure of support among university students.\(^1\) *Fada'iyan*, therefore, turned to urban guerrilla warfare recruiting members and supporters from the ranks of urban youth, particularly university students. Leftist activists also expanded their activities beyond Iran. They created effective networks and associations outside Iran, particularly in Europe and the United States among the rapidly growing population of Iranian students in Western universities.\(^2\) They thus initiated a successful political campaign, which rallied the Western public opinion against the Shah’s dictatorship, “publicised the plight of Iranian political prisoners, broadcast radio messages to Iran, published a variety of newspapers, translated books and articles, and reprinted many of the books outlawed in Iran.”\(^3\) Guerrilla organisations also established contacts with revolutionary organisations and sympathising governments around the world.

For all their success in attracting supporters among young intellectuals and students and moulding a revolutionary consciousness among their supporters, the militant intellectuals of the left remained disconnected from the masses. In fact, the requirements of secrecy and underground activity, the usage of a language overburdened with theoretical Marxist analysis, and particularly the lack of connection with cultural and religious aspirations of the ordinary people, did not allow the leftist intellectuals to establish meaningful ties with the ordinary people. Also, the militant intellectuals of the left suffered from constant persecution and bore the brunt of the repressive policies of the *Pahlavi* regime.

The leftist intellectuals actively supported the revolution of 1979 in the hope that it would help materialise their socialist dreams of equality and justice; but with the establishment of the Islamic Republic, they found themselves under a new regime of repression and persecution. Many of the leftist intellectuals and activists had lost their lives in combat against the Shah, had been imprisoned and tortured, or had gone into exile. Many more suffered the same fate under the Islamic regime.

The revolution that actually occurred in 1979 bore no relation to the prescribed versions of the revolution the leftists had in mind, and thus did not have an immediate impact on their views of a true revolution. There were only a few references in the writings of the leftists to the role of culture and religion as a substantial and lasting political influence on the revolution. What mattered to them now was how to bring the revolution of the people, which had been pushed off its true course by the “opportunist” religious forces, back into the right track.

Nonetheless, the realities of the revolution, especially its undeniable religious expression and the popular acceptance of Ayatollah Khomeini as its leader, caused serious organisational and tactical changes and splits in the leftist groups. The political disputes between the various Marxist groups gave rise to an intense

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\(^1\) In their theoretical pamphlets, the *Fada'iyan* theorists initially assessed Iran’s economic system as a semi-feudal structure, which demanded a peasant revolution on the model of China, Vietnam and Cuba. Later they revised their theory and assessed Iran as a capitalist society, and turned to urban guerrilla warfare.

\(^2\) As Boroujerdi has noted, the umbrella organisation called the Confederation of Iranian Students, which had accommodated the supporters of various and sometimes opposing secular groups such as Tudeh Party, National Front and leftist guerrilla organisations, became “instrumental in politicising a great number of the new arriving students” in the Western countries. This organisation also raised money to support the struggle against the Shah’s regime inside Iran, and established ties with revolutionary organisations and sympathising governments around the world.

\(^3\) Boroujerdi, M. p. 39
polemical discourse, which was the stuff of the writings of these groups before and after the victory of the revolution. These writings appeared in various leftist publications such as Kar (Labour), Kargar, (Labourer) Zahmatkeshan (Toilers), Mardom (People), Haqiqat (Truth), Donia (the World), etc.

Deeply impressed by a secular concept of revolution, the leftist theoreticians could not admit that a revolution could be deeply religious, and yet remain true. They idealised revolution, but only one that complied with the teleology of a Marxist model. They saw the presence of religion as a stain on the purity of the revolution, not as its prime mover. Nothing was more appalling to the leftists than the idea of a “religious-reactionary revolution” after the investment of so much effort, energy and yearning to create a “progressive revolution”. For them, a true revolution would end not only “political despotism” but also “religious ignorance”. Naturally, they even refused to use to the Islamic prefix, which had justifiably become the routine way of identifying the Iranian Revolution.

As Roy Mottahedeh has suggested, the leftist intellectuals were bewildered by the enigma of the Islamic Revolution. “The earth had moved, and when it settled again it seemed that- however ingeniously they sought to prove that the masses had been deceived- the masses had acquiesced in the leadership of the new elite in place of the old elite.” One of the important texts that may well clarify the leftist understanding of revolution in Iran are Bijan Jazani’s Capitalism and Revolution in Iran, and A Thirty-Year History of Iran. Also important are the publications of the Tudeh Party, especially their journal Donia.

Jazani’s texts are interesting because they contain a rare attempt to address the issue of the role of the Islamic culture and the radical Shi'i ulama (clergy) in politics. Jazani referred to the radical ulama, even when acknowledging their political activism, as “popular leaders by default”. He considered the bulk of the ulama as “representatives of feudalism and compradore bourgeoisie”, but he acknowledged that, as “an important part of the cultural and political hierarchy”, they had “a special position” in the Iranian society. But ultimately, he submitted to the conventional leftist assumption that the ulama would be playing “a far less important role” in the nascent “compradore bourgeois culture” than the declining “feudal culture”. Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, and killed shortly before the revolution, Jazani would be surprised to see the drastic increase of the social and political importance of the clergy in the very decline of feudalism. Since the victory of the revolution, the clergy in power, in fact, has become the agent of the destruction of the vestiges of feudalism in Iran.

In a classical leftist view, Jazani described the political popularity of the religious leaders among the working class and the peasants as “a cover for the expression of class sentiments against the regime”. He considered Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers as an exceptional group among the otherwise feudalist ulama, who had become part of the “vanguard forces” of the “national and petty bourgeoisie”. Jazani expected though that the clergy, as an interest group, would eventually side with the regime against the would-be bourgeois-democratic revolution, and that the

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1 Mottahedeh, R. The Mantle of the Prophet, Pantheon, USA., 1985, p. 384
3 Ibid, pp. 62-63
4 Ibid, p. 63
5 Ibid, p. 64
small revolutionary group within them would come under the leadership of the secular revolutionary forces.¹

To be sure, Jazani noted the revival of religious ideology among “the petty-bourgeois intellectuals”, and predicted correctly that the role of “modernised religious tendencies” in the future political developments would be greater than in the past.²

But, like most of his contemporaries, he underestimated the role of the clerical establishment in a future revolution. Ervand Abrahamian has offered a more sophisticated, but basically similar, analysis of the revolution in recent years. I shall discuss the work of Abrahamian later in this chapter.

Factional infighting eventually resulted in a major split in the ranks of the radical left in the 1980s. This split occurred in the Fada’iyan-e Khalq itself and, following the Bolshevic-Menshevik model, divided this group first into majority and minority factions, and later into two separate organisations. The majority faction, Aksariyyat moved closer to the Tudeh Party and took a more conservative approach to the definition of a bourgeois-democratic revolution. Politico-economically speaking, this approach gave more weight to the development of national bourgeoisie in Iran prior to proposing any demands for radical socialist change in the interest of the proletariat. This approach relied too much on the model of “non-capitalist growth” put forward mainly by the official Soviet ideologues. The Soviet version of Marxism since Brezhnev had prescribed the petty-bourgeoisie as the main force of revolution in the Third World, and proposed a model of development for Iran similar to that of Iraq, Syria, or other countries whose regimes were anti-Marxist in expression, but allies of the Soviet Union nonetheless.

This version of Marxism proposed that any project of revolution in Iran should be engaged in the Cold War hostility between the superpowers of the East and West in support of the Soviet camp. It thus addressed the domestic issues from this international perspective. The political groups like Tudeh and Fada’iyan (majority) were guided by an emphasis on the strategic importance of an anti-American (anti-imperialist) position, which demanded support for what was called “the really existing socialism”.

The minority faction, Aqalliyyat, belonged to the camp of various radical Marxist groups, which were mainly anti-Soviet and advocated radical measures in the interest of the proletariat. Their version of the revolution was associated with advocacy of a leading role for the socialist and Marxist forces in the revolution and in the government that should emerge from it. Their anti-Sovietism was fed mainly by the attachment to alternative “really existing” socialist, democratic or people’s republics, such as China, Cuba, Yugoslavia, Albania, etc. Their theoretical models were mainly constructed on various interpretations of the Maoist version of the theory of “Three Worlds” and the thesis of “social-imperialism”.

In this theoretical view, the United States and the Soviet Union were both considered imperialist forces comprising the first two worlds, which were trying to divide the Third World between them. According to the thesis of “social-imperialism”, the Soviet Union was seen as even more dangerous for the Third World than the “U.S. imperialism”, in that the Soviet Union was an emerging superpower, whereas the United States was a superpower in decline. In this, reference was made to Mao Tse Tung, who had called the United States a “paper tiger” and the Soviet Union

¹ Ibid, p. 65
² Ibid, p. 139
a "bear with atomic teeth". As I mentioned earlier, the militancy of these groups, which largely advocated armed struggle as the only means of a true revolution, was justified by references to radical Marxist writers such as Regis Debray and Che Guevara, who had philosophised and theorised guerrilla warfare.

**The Conservative Discourse**

What I have called the conservative discourse belongs mainly to the camp of secular Iranian nationalists with monarchist tendency. The nationalist-monarchists had resented the idea of Islamic politics since the Reza Shah period (1925-1941), and offered their own ideology of revolution, nation and State. Since the fall of monarchy, the monarchist ideologues have been attacking the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic from a mainly cultural standpoint. But the conservative discourse also includes the discourse of the traditionalist ulama like the grand Ayatollahs Seyyed Kazem Shariatmadari, who rejected the politicisation of religion. The ideology of modernisation, which began to shape under Reza Shah was based on the basis if a chauvinist understanding of nation. It was the inspiration of building a modern State in Iran, and initiated a systematic attack on the religious institutions and tribal structures of the Iranian society. Modern schooling and legal system were established at the expense of the Shi'i religious establishment, a standing army was created, which routed the tribal Khans and warlords, and a railway system and a network of roads connected the nation. Under his secular nationalist agenda, Reza Shah also created a modern bureaucracy and established new industries.

Reza Shah’s programme of modernisation reached new heights under his successor, Muhammad-Reza Shah (1971-1979). The Shah turned this ideology into an ideology of return to the glorious past. Under this ideology, he forged a revolution, which he called the White Revolution, and was a blueprint of rapid modernisation of Iran. Under the White Revolution, the Shah launched a land reform program, and used the hugely increased oil income to finance a programme of rapid industrialisation and infra-structural building. He also created a modern military force equipped with advanced weaponry, and dedicated to the monarchist ideology. But more than anything, the Shah tried to end the institutional and cultural influence of the Shi’i establishment on the Iranian society. In debt to the United States for helping him to crush the oil nationalisation movement in the early 1950s, he also forged a close economic, political and military alliance with the U.S.

The texts of the nationalists, particularly those of monarchists, have been basically hostile to the idea of any revolution that would run against the Persian pre-Islamic glory, which the conservative nationalists consider as part and parcel of modern Iranian national identity. They have also been deeply hostile to any serious influence of Islam on State politics. They have occasionally advocated the idea of revolution, but only when it legitimised the spirit of secular nationalism in association with the ancient Persian Empire and the heritage of pre-Islamic mythological and historical kingdoms. These writings are full of references to and interpretations of ancient history, myths and fables. Meta-historical figures, such as Cyrus and Darius - the great ancient kings - and the mythical characters such as Fereydoun and Kaveh - popularised in traditional epic literature - are frequently used by the conservative nationalist discourse to reconnect people with an all but forgotten past.
According to Mottahedeh, Iranian nationalist intellectuals, in praise of the pre-Islamic past, felt a sense of emotional connection with Persian ancient mythology, which offered an image of Iran fascinated with heroes such as Cyrus, the Great, and not with Imam Hussein, the martyr. Many of the writings published as part of the nationalist and monarchist propaganda against the Islamic regime have tried to question the rationality and cultural relevance of Islamic symbolism as against the pre-Islamic religious and cultural symbolism.

As I mentioned earlier, a conservative view of revolution is not limited to the writings of political conservatives in the secular nationalist camp; ironically, the teachings of some conservative religious leaders have also supported monarchy and opposed both the idea of revolution and the direct involvement of religion in politics. They have, in fact, understood the concept of revolution in the Aristotelian sense of sedition, which would lead to chaos and disorder; and as such they have referred to scriptural texts in order to legitimise the kingship as God’s grace, which would help create order in society. They have seen the monarch as zelollah (the shadow of God), who should be obeyed as ul-al-amr (the holder of authority) as ordered by the Qur’an. In grounding monarchy in the religious tradition, the conservative ulama referred to a dubious hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. In this hadith, the prophet is reported as saying: “I was born during the rule of a just king”, where “just king” is believed to refer to the Sassanian King, Anushiravan, nicknamed adel (just).

The Religious Modernist Discourse

The Islamic modernist discourse was initiated by figures like Seyyed Jamal Asadabadi in the early twentieth century and continued in the Muslim world through such figures as Muhammad Abduh in Egypt, Iqbal Lahuri in Pakistan, and Jalal-e Al-e Ahmad, Ali Shari’ati, Mortezab Motahhari and Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran. It remained faithful to the Islamic religious and cultural heritage, and shaped it into a political ideology of a religious nationalism in resistance to the colonial and post-colonial appearance of the West in the Orient. The Islamic modernists, nonetheless, did not support a wholesale rejection of the Western modernity. Rather, they advocated a selective appropriation of the West, rejecting its moral pitfalls, but validating its scientific and technological achievements.

The discourse of religious modernism includes the works of those who recognise and propagate the desirability of a modern religious revolution as the only credible form of revolution. They include, but are not limited to, the discourse of those Muslim ideologues, such as Al-e Ahmad, Shari’ati, Motahhari and Khomeini, who shaped the notion of an Islamic utopia and an ideology of an Islamic revolution.

These ideologues initiated the discourse of alienation and the politics of identity. Al-e Ahmad popularised the notion of Ghabzadegi (Westoxication) in the 1960s as a critique of the secular intellectuals, who were stricken by “the disease” of imitating everything Western, for their neglect of the political potentials of the Shi’i tradition. He turned away from Marxism to become a vocal advocate of the political

1 Mottahedeh, R. The Mantle of the Prophet, pp. 383-384
2 Shoja-ad-Din Shafa’s texts are a case in point. For example, he has sarcastically used the title Towzih-ul-Masa’el (Questions Answered) - the title of certain religious treatises - for one of his books, where he attacks the validity and credibility of hadith, and as such the basis of the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic.
authority of the radical Shi'i ulama whom he praised for their native roots, revolutionary capacity and ability to mobilise the masses against the State. Al-e Ahmad was also one of the precursors of the religious anti-Western discourse in Iran. He contributed to a nativist ideology that created the image of the West as the other in the Iranian political consciousness.

Shari’ati was one of the principle contributors to the Islamic revolutionary ideology in the 1970s. He created the discourse of “the return to self”, and enhanced the nativist ideology of Al-e Ahmad. Shari’ati, however, did not favour the political leadership of the clerics, and instead looked to a new generation of young committed Muslims who would embrace his ideological version of Shi‘ism in creating a liberation movement and building Iran as a modern revolutionary nation. His theory of revolution combined socialist ideals with a progressive reading of the Shi‘i symbolism. His ideology was also instrumental for enhancing the anti-Western discourse in Iran.

The Shi‘i ideological anti-Westernism of the Islamic modernists, however, should be distinguished from the anti-Westernism of the leftist ideologues of the Tudeh Party and Fada‘iyan-e Khalq. The religious anti-Western discourse, although it intersected with and was enriched by the leftist anti-Westernism, was deeply religious, cultural and nativist, and was primarily concerned with the collective desire for a native cultural identity, and involved religiously based cultural and political fantasies.1

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution, many of the post-revolution religious intellectuals described the Islamic Revolution as a divinely inspired movement, and viewed the Islamic Republic as its legitimate political outcome, not as an accident to be deplored. In this sense, they too used the idea of revolution to legitimise the polity, but the polity they had in mind was a religious polity where religion would have a direct role. Quite contrary to the teachings of the conservative ulama, the speeches and writings of the Islamic clerical and non-clerical ideologues after the revolution support the direct intervention of religion in politics. They predominantly consider the qualified Shi‘i jurists as the true ul-al-amr whose task it is to implement the religious duty of amr-e be ma‘rouf va nay-e az monkar (enjoining good and prohibiting evil).

From this discourse, the texts of the radical ulama like the Ayatollahs Khomeini, Tabataba’i, Motahhari, Azari-Qomi, Jannati, Khamene‘i, Meshkini on the nature of Islamic Revolution and the concept of velayat-e faqih (the governance of the jurist) are significant. These writings categorically support the Islamic government as a theocratic State, with its rulings considered as divine ordinance. However, the writings of Khomeini, Tabataba’i and Motahhari also contain modernist tendencies, which have a lot in common with the ideas of both turbaned and lay religious modernists.

The writings of Islamic modernists, such as Ali Shari‘ati, Mehdi Bazargan, Mahmoud Taleqani, Hussein-Ali Montazeri, Ni‘matullah Salih-Najafabadi, Abdol-Karim Soroush, and Muhammad Murtahid Shabestari, also belong to this category.2 However, the Islamic modernist discourse, which has developed out of the same ideology that inspired the Islamic Revolution, has been increasingly shifting in the post-revolution era toward an oppositional standing with respect to the present theocratic interpretations of the Islamic State in Iran. In this category, there are also

1 I have discussed this ideological discourse in more depth in Chapter 7.
2 I have discussed the views of some of these Muslim intellectuals in Chapter 8.
writings, published mainly via newspapers and magazines by Muslim revolutionaries with leftist economic tendencies and modernist political and social views. Organisations such as the Mojahedin-e Enqelab-e Eslami (the Warriors of the Islamic Revolution), journals like Kiyan, and newspapers such as Salam (Greetings), advocate political and economic reforms in the context of modern industrial, scientific and technological developments in Iran, with stress on the need for pro-social justice policies.

The contemporary Islamic modernists have “often mocked the traditionalist (sumnati) ulama for being old fashioned (kohneparast).” The opposition of the Islamic modernists to the theocratic interpretations of the Islamic State, advocated by the ruling Shi’i jurists, is mainly peaceful and entails electoral, cultural, educational and intellectual activities. They draw on the tradition of the Shi’i revolutionary tradition in order to offer new interpretations of religious texts and narratives in opposition to official interpretations that also invoke the same tradition to support the views of the ruling jurists.

In the discourse of Islamic modernism, I also include the writings of the former Mojahedin-e Khalq (The People’s Warriors), which is now operating as The National Front for Resistance from the soil of the neighbouring Iraq to overthrow the Islamic Republic through armed struggle. For them, Shari’ati was an original source of inspiration. But in pursuit of violent political opposition to the Islamic Republic, they have increasingly shifted from aspirations for an egalitarian Islamic society to ambitions for political power for their own group at any cost. Out of the humanist, existentialist, socialist and religious discourse of Shari’ati, they have only preserved and accentuated his anti-clerical sentiments.2

The Secular Academic Discourse

The fourth category of the discourses of revolution consists of the writings of scholars and analysts based in the West including authors of Iranian background. These writings, including both class and cultural analyses, have purported to offer impartial and scientific explanations of the revolution. However, it is not difficult to demonstrate that they too have often engaged in taking political and ideological positions toward both the Islamic Revolution and the post-revolutionary Islamic government.3

In most of these writings, the element of religious culture has been acknowledged as a contributing factor to the development of the revolution. But more often than not, such acknowledgements do not go further than admitting the undeniable and persistent presence of religious culture in Iranian politics as a minor subjective parameter, which is ultimately determined by the objective forces of history, economy and class structure. Only on rare occasions has attention been paid

1 Abrahamian, E. Khomeinism, Essays on the Islamic Republic, University of California Press, USA, 1993, p. 16
2 The current writings of the Mojahedin are mainly propagated through their publication Iran-zamin (Iran-land), heavily burdened with military and political propaganda, and occasional rhetorical commentaries. Their earlier writings, however, were of significant value in generating a novel form of Islamic radicalism in Iran, which would connect Shari’ati’s ideal of an Islamic renaissance with the broader struggle of the radical Muslims of the Arab lands beyond the clerical influence.
3 Examples of analytical academic discourse on the Islamic Revolution include the works of Ervand Abrahamian, Michael Fischer, Said Amir Arjomand, Hamid Algar, Nikki Keddie, Shahrough Akhavi, Mansoor Moaddel, Mohsen Milani, Ali Banuazizi, Eric Hooglund, and many others.
to religious culture, or as I will call it the religious imaginary, as a constitutive force in the revolution.

Here, I shall briefly review some of the academic writings on the Islamic Revolution before concentrating in more detail on the works of Ervand Abrahamian and Michael Fischer, which I consider as credible representatives of class and cultural analysis respectively. I should make it clear though that by focusing on these two writers, I am not about to deny the substantial values of other writings, many of which I shall use myself to further my own arguments. However, I believe that a detailed analysis of the work of these two authors would be sufficient as a point of departure for offering my own account of the Islamic Revolution and its aftermath.

In her article “Can Revolutions Be Predicted: Can their Causes be understood?” Nikki Keddie has criticised the so-called Iran experts for their failure to predict the Iranian Revolution, proposing that there were “critical” historical incidents along with important structural factors, which could have been used by the analysts to predict the Iranian Revolution. To support her argument, she refers, for example, to the American backed coup d’etat of 1953, which restored the Shah to power by overthrowing the national government of Muhammad Mossadeq. She also mentions the structural incompatibility of the autocratic style of the Pahlavi regime with rapid modernisation. Such events and structural factors, of course, are not unique to Iran. Keddie therefore introduces along these two factors, the uniquely Iranian factor, namely the “network” of the Shi‘i clerics (ulama) with its potential to seize political power.

Viewing the Islamic Revolution as a phase in Iranian modernisation, Mangol Bayat has referred to Shi‘i revolutionary ideology and the theory of velayat-e faqih (the government of jurist) as attempts to secure legitimacy for the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic government. Marvin Zonis has also noted the role of the Shi‘i political ideology in providing legitimacy to clerical rule in Iran. He has rightly pointed to the attempt of the ruling jurists to establish the divinity of their rule by capitalising on “a monopolisation of the interpretation of the sacred law.” Although Zonis is right about the dominance of absolutist theocratic tendencies in the Islamic post-revolutionary polity, he neglects the alternative forces and voices of dissent within the Islamic polity and society, which have grown to challenge theocratic tendencies.

In an earlier article, Zonis had advocated a “psychoanalytic interpretation” of the Islamic Revolution in order to offer “a general theory of revolution.” But his psychoanalytic approach was focused on the “personal history” and “character structure” of the Shah as the leader of an existing political order, and Ayatollah

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1 Keddie, N.R. “Can Revolution Be Predicted: Can Their Causes Be Understood?” Sociological Abstracts, Debates in Society, Culture, and Science, 1992, 1, 2, winter, 159-182

2 Roy Mottahedeh, has tried to dispel Western monolithic views of the contemporary Islamic movements by exposing the divergences of political cultures within the Islamic governments due to the influences of specific “cultural settings”. In his article “The Islamic Movement: The Case for Democratic Inclusion”, he criticises the Muslim intellectuals who fail to recognise “individual rights” as a component of “popular sovereignty” and social integration. See Mottahedeh, R. “The Islamic Movement: The Case for Democratic Inclusion”, Sociological Abstracts, Debates in Society, Culture, and Science, 1995, 4, 3, spring, 107-127.


Khomeini as the leader of the revolution. His attempt although illuminating in many aspects, neglected to pay serious attention to the autonomous role of the cultural imaginaries of Iranians as a community.

Said Amir Arjomand has tried to explain the Islamic Revolution from a “post-Weberian” perspective by using an interpretative method. In his books *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam* (1984) and *The Turban for the Crown* (1988), he explored the role of the Shi’i establishment since the Safavid period (1500s) on political developments in Iran. He thus appropriately connected social change in Iran with the novel interpretations of the Shi’i culture by Muslim ideologues and the role of traditional middle class or the bazaar.

From a sociological perspective, Arjomand has also tried to factor in the impact of modernity on social and political developments in Iran. In an article published in 1985, he examined the weaknesses of the modern State with respect to the religious establishment as the main source of the strength of the revolutionary movement. However, he was too quick to attribute fascistic characteristics to the Iranian Revolution. Although he has acknowledged the significance of Muslim ideologues in dealing with problems of a modern nation-State in competition with secular political ideologies, he has by and large been pessimistic about the prospects of religious reformation and democracy in Iran.

In a more recent article, Arjomand has reiterated the idea that the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic government of Iran are moving toward “the legal framework of a modern nation-State”. He has thus interpreted the Islamic Revolution as a political revolution, which began with the politicisation of religion by Ayatollah Khomeini and has advanced toward “the transformation of Shi’i Sacred Law from jurists’ law into the law of the State.” Referring to the political developments of 1988-1989 as a “constitutional crisis”, he has suggested that the clerical rulers attempted to overcome this crisis through a “legal revolution”. Accordingly, this “legal revolution” consisted of two elements: “the radical depreciation of the traditional Shi’i institution of marja’iyat-e taqlid (paramount religious authority of the source of imitation)”, and the “increasing centralisation of authority in the post-revolutionary State.” However, in line with his pessimistic view of the future political developments in Iran, Arjomand predicted that the constitutional reforms of 1989 would lead to an increase in the State autocracy. He thus underestimated the political potency of the serious disputes that have arisen since the demise of Ayatollah Khomeini over the interpretation of religious laws and the constitutional reforms, and have actually weakened autocratic tendencies.

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1 Arjomand, S.A. “The Causes and Significance of the Iranian Revolution”, *State, Culture and Society*, 1985, 1, 3, spring, 41-66
3 Ibid
4 Ibid
5 Another author, Mohsen Milani, has also referred to the constitutional reforms of 1989 in which the political and religious powers of the valayat-e faqih were differentiated. (See Milani, M. “The Transformation of the Velayat-e Faqih Institution: From Khomeini to Khamene’i”, Historical Abstracts, *Muslim World*, 1992, 82(3-4): 175-190.) In “The Shi’i Clergy of Iran and the Conception of an Islamic State”, Eric Hooglund and William Royce predicted that the concept of political rule of the Shi’i jurists “will not be firmly established within Shi’ism unless the Khomeini regime is able to establish institutions able to survive Khomeini’s death.” (See Hooglund, E. Royce, W. “The Shi’i Clergy of Iran and the Conception of an Islamic State”, Sociological Abstracts, *State, Culture and Society*, 1985, 1, 3, spring, 102-117.) Sami Zubaida has correctly noted that Khomeini’s theory of Islamic government, or velayat-e faqih, although based on traditional Shi’i doctrines, has produced modern ideological
The notion of meaning has rarely been adopted in the explanation of the Islamic Revolution. Gene Burns, for example, has emphasised the role of various “meanings” that emerged from the “ideological unity” of the people during the revolutionary process in Iran. Criticising the reductionist views of ideology, Burns has argued that the meaningful ideological unity of the revolutionary actors against the old regime, although it was “ambiguous” and contained multiple meanings, was crucial to the victory of the revolution. Mansoor Moaddel has also offered a new analysis of ideology with regard to its role in ideological movements, such as “Islamic modernism”, “liberal nationalism” and “fundamentalism”. According to this analysis, the process of “ideological production” should be traced in the debates and disputes between competing ideologies in the context of socio-political and socio-economic developments.

Focusing on the “factionalism” and power struggle in the post-Khomeini Iran, Ali Banuazizi has stressed that this factionalism is an inevitable consequence of the contradictions between the requirements of a modern State and the persistence of absolutist theocratic tendencies. Banuazizi is rare among the secular analysts of the Iranian Revolution, in expressing optimism about democratic change in Iran. For him, interpretations of original Shi'i doctrines, which are conducive to modern notions of “nation” and “nation-State”, have added the “world-system” as a structural factor to other factors, such as religion, State, class structure and political processes in order to give a more comprehensive picture of the Islamic Revolution. Shahin Gerami, for example, has viewed the Islamic Revolution as a strategy against dependence of Iran on the “world-system”. He has noted Iran’s transformation into a peripheral State of the capitalist world-economy, which resulted in uneven economic development and emergence of revolutionary resistance. (See Gerami, S. “Religious Fundamentalism as a Response to Foreign Dependency: The Case of the Iranian Revolution”, Conference: American Sociological Association, 1988.) Valentina M. Moghadam, while emphasising on the combination of modern and traditional tendencies in the Iranian Revolution, has noted the question of “reintegration of Iran into the world system” as a source of post-revolution power struggle. (See Moghadam, V. M. “Islamic Movements in the Middle East: Causes, Consequences, and Antinomies of Islamic Populism in Iran”, Conference: International Sociological Association, 1990.) Pointing to the influence of the Shi’i political doctrine on the revolutionary behaviour of Iranians in 1979 in the context of bureaucratisation of the State and modern class stratification in Iran, Shahroukh Akhavi has emphasised the exclusion of the Shi’i clergy from the polity as an important contributing factor to the revolution. (See Akhavi, S. “The Ideology and Praxis of Shi’ism in the Iranian Revolution”, Comparative Studies in Society and History, 1983, 25, 2 April, 195-221.) Ali Banuazizi has also paid attention to the role of the cultural symbolism in the success of the Islamic Revolution. (See Swenson, J. D. Martyrdom: “Mytho-cathexis and the Mobilisation of the Masses in the Iranian Revolution”, American Psychological Association, Ethos, 1985, Sum Vol. 13 (2), 121-149.) Ali Mirsepassi-Ashtiani has acknowledged that the rise of the clergy to power was a result of the success of Shi’ism to offer a viable alternative to secular politics. (See Mirsepassi-Ashtiani, “The crisis of Secular Politics and the Rise of Political Islam in Iran”, Social Text, 1994, 38, spring, 51-84.)

3 Brigid Starkey and Farideh Farhi have also emphasised cultural and ideological dimensions of the Iranian Revolution as key elements that cannot be reduced to economic and political factors. Starkey has warned against disciplinary understanding of the revolution in strictly Marxian, Weberian or Durkheimian terms. And Farhi has emphasised the role of ideology as an explanatory factor, along with socio-economic and socio-political factors, in explaining the success of the Islamic Revolution. (See Starkey, B. A. “Islam, Culture and Revolution: The Case of Iran”, Journal of Developing Societies (Netherlands), 1990, 6(1): 87-97; and Farhi, F. “Ideology and Revolution in Iran”, Journal of Developing Societies (Netherlands), 1990, 6(10): 98-112.)
4 Banuazizi, A. “Iran’s Revolutionary Impasse: Political Factionalism and Societal Resistance”, Middle East Report, 1994, 24, 6(191), Nov-Dec, 2-8
the growing popular and intellectual resistance against the oppressive tendencies in the Islamic State could provide democratic possibilities.¹

A good example of writing in the tradition of cultural analysis is the work of Michael Fischer, particularly developed in From Religious Dispute to Revolution and Debating Muslims. Fischer’s work represents a type of cultural analysis of the revolution that I find closest to my own. Fischer has paid serious attention to the role of the sacred texts, rituals, symbolism and doctrines of the Shi‘i faith in inspiring the revolution and legitimising an Islamic State. But he has paid little attention to the imaginative appropriation of these symbolic structures to create novel discourses of resistance against the new modes of domination during and after the revolution.

I shall argue that there was no intrinsic propensity as such in the symbolic structures to inspire a revolution. Rather, it was the imaginative projection of such symbolism into the future by means of its creative adaptation to the present, which made revolution meaningful, desirable and urgent. In this sense, it will not be the deep understanding of scriptural texts and rituals that is important in shaping the future socio-political developments in Iran. Rather, it is important to deeply understand how new interpretations of the texts of tradition can offer new possibilities of being in the world by freeing these texts from the outmoded interpretations of the past, and by turning them into the vital ingredients of the future. It is in this context that modern interpretations of the texts of tradition offer imaginative variations that motivate political and social action in the context of modernity. Among those using the class perspective, Ervand Abrahamian’s work is significant. Following the pioneer work of the likes of Christopher Hill, E. G. Thompson, George Rude and Eric Hobsbawm on revolutions, it strives to break away from reductionist models of class analysis so prevalent in the analysis of Iranian modern history. Hence, I have chosen his analysis of the revolution, developed in his books Khomeinism and Radical Islam as a credible example of a rather sophisticated class analysis worthy of detailed review. Acknowledging the informative and profound contribution of Abrahamian to understanding the Iranian Revolution, I shall critically discuss his work to highlight his neglect of the constitutive role of the imaginary in precipitating the revolution, which is consistent with his intellectual background.

Abrahamian has heavily emphasised the relevance of class interests as a socially motivating force in inspiring the Iranian Revolution. I shall argue that class interests played only a partial role in inspiring the collective (revolutionary) action. I suggest that class interests were significant not in their motivating role, but in their analytical function in illuminating the structural elements of the revolution, which were discernible only retrospectively. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I shall discuss the works of Fischer and Abrahamian.

¹ Another author, Bernard Hourcade, has pointed to the possibility of religious reformation and secularisation of politics in Iran. Emphasising the political ambitions of the younger generation of Muslim intellectuals as the main driving force of the Islamic Revolution, he has suggested that the political rise of the young “Islamic cadres” with respect to the traditional theologians could lead to Islamic reformation and “secularisation.” (See Hourcade, B. “Religion, Demography, and the Third World: Islam and the Ambition of Young Iranians”, Social Compass, 1989, 36, 4, December, 469-480.)
In his book *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, which was written shortly after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Michael Fischer attempted to examine the role of religion in contemporary cultural and political transformation of the Iranian society with the Islamic Revolution as his point of departure. Much of what Fischer raised in that work is still valid and warrants renewed attention. His was an effort in creating a mode of thinking in the Western analyses of the Iranian Revolution, which would strive to form a deeper understanding of the role of religion in the Iranian politics. Of particular importance are the questions that Fischer raised regarding the scriptural, scholastic, philosophical and literary influences of the Shi'i religious heritage in shaping the consciousness and hence the political culture of Iranians. His work was also important in raising interesting questions about the possibility of a critical but creative dialogue between the Islamic and Western cultures. It is therefore important to highlight his still valid arguments as against the assumptions that are no longer relevant.

Fischer rightly connected the understanding of modern cultural and political changes in Iran with the developments in the Western modernity. In his view, the changes in Iran should be seen in terms of “the challenge of science and technology to religious fundamentalism” and “the changes in social consciousness encouraged by modern education and a more modern class structure or division of interest groups.”

In explaining why such changes did not follow the model of European and American history, Fischer referred to the suppression of the Constitutional Revolution of the early twentieth century (1905-1911) and the return of autocracy as a political factor; and to the underdevelopment of industry as an economic factor. He considered the Constitutional Revolution as a bourgeois revolution that, if successful, could have instituted democracy in Iran and paved the path to a full-blown industrial development. He thus attributed the 1979 Revolution to the legacy of the aborted attempts at a bourgeois revolution and the preponderance of the tradition of political usage of religious rhetoric after the constitutional movement.

It may be argued that religious language had more than a mere rhetorical value for the revolutionary actors in Iran. In both the Constitutional and Islamic Revolutions, the religious understanding of politics played a constitutive role, and was not just a disguise for or a surface expression of a bourgeois revolution. It was this constitutive character of religious language that determined the course as well as the fate of these two revolutions. I will argue that this was also the case in the oil nationalisation movement of the early 1950's.

Fischer is aware of the sophisticated role of language, particularly the language of modern Western philosophy, and the multiple levels of meaning in the rhetoric of Christian doctrines. He even attributes some of the same sophistication to the Islamic discourse used for teaching in the *madrasas* of Iran. But he asserts that the “tragedy” of Muslim leaders is that they are not able to defend their heritage by the use of “tools of linguistic analysis.” Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the aggressiveness of the religious language in Iran was due to the fact that the religious

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2. See Chapters 5 & 6 for more detail.
leaders “feel themselves engaged in a life-and-death defence of the coherence, rationality, and integrity of a culture under siege”.

Fischer rightly suggests that the main factor in the Iranian political development in the Pahlavi era (1925-1978) was the rise in the social scene of a literate young population, which, despite its modern education, retained “a profound respect for Islamic morals and tradition.” This generation with its enthusiasm for both its religious culture and modern technology is thus considered as the main force of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. He is also right in his recognition that the popular religious culture and not the scholastic religion of the Shi‘i ulama was the most crucial factor in the development of religious revolutionary politics in Iran.

The Constitutive Role of Language

Fischer’s reference to culture, following a historical-linguistic model, acknowledges the role of language and culture as the objectification of “socially constituted inter-subjective worlds”. Taking his argument one step further, one may suggest that language and culture provide the symbols and narratives, which contain the collective imaginaries and subjective experiences that, although they may not have been objectively validated, constitute ideologies and utopias that inspire and formulate participation in social action.

Language may thus be understood as constituting the pattern of communication of the agreed-on meanings of publicly available symbols and narratives, which at any given time form what a group or society consciously understands as its culture. However, different groups and societies may agree on different meanings, which they may read in similar symbols and narratives. This conflict cannot be attributed simply to an instrumental use of language for understanding one’s culture. It is also connected to the symbolic use of the language, which requires interpretation. It is the conflict of these interpretations that may result, either in the acceptance of plural understandings, which would coexist with each other, or alternatively in the rejection of the other, which would lead to violent clashes.

In this sense, culture and language find a fundamental autonomy in originating collective action, which renders them as objective forces, rather than subjective by-products of socio-economic factors. The socio-economic factors themselves are felt not only in terms of the social divide between the rich and the poor, but also in terms of the cultural divide that is created by cultural repression and political hegemony. The legitimation of this repression and hegemony is the proper function of ideology. In a given society (as well as between societies), the social, political and cultural divides create a gap that needs to be bridged. When the language of ideology becomes distorting and thus dysfunctional, violence and transgression become the modes of bridging this gap. But alternatively, when ideological discourse functions properly, it will become possible to bridge the social, political and cultural divide through understanding and legitimation, which is achieved through the creation of meaning.

As Anthony Cohen has suggested, symbolic structures in themselves, like language, do not determine the meanings that form a particular culture; but they

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1 Fischer, M. 1980, p. 3
2 Ibid, p. viii
3 Ibid, p. 4
enable the people to produce meanings.\footnote{Cohen, A. P. \textit{The Symbolic Construction of Community}, Tavistock and Ellis Horwood, NY, 1985, p. 16} In this, Cohen follows Geertz, who, in his \textit{Interpretation of Cultures}, has metaphorically compared human culture to “webs of significance”, spun by people themselves. Geertz asserted that the knowledge of culture is not possible through a scientific search for laws, but through an interpretative search for meaning. In the same vein, one may argue that collective significations, such as a shared language, or any other cultural symbolic structure, contain multiple layers of meaning, which may lay dormant with no apparent significance until they become meaningful in an active sense through the act of interpretation.

Interpretations, therefore, activate meanings through which collective interaction becomes possible at the social, political and cultural levels. In this sense, interpretations make interaction at these various levels a contingent phenomenon, which is essentially a transaction of particular forms of meaning in such a way as to allow the symbolic structures to retain their collective forms without the constraints of only one meaning.\footnote{Ibid. p. 17-18} Inter-subjectivity is thus achieved, not simply through sharing a common meaning, but through exchanging different forms of meaning, derived from shared memories and traditions via communication, cultural exchange and interpretation. Therefore, the rise of disagreements in this process of exchange of various meanings is only natural and may not by itself lead to violence. One may even claim that the acceptance of such disagreements has played a significant role within and between primitive communities as well as between the modern nation-States in maintenance of peace and prevention of war.

\section*{Collective Imagination: A Source of Meaning}

In proposing symbolic structures and common sense as the two most important elements of culture, Fischer comes closest to the notion of collective \textit{imaginary} as a derivative of sacred texts, narratives, fictions, poetics and rituals. One may suggest that by understanding culture in terms of imaginative and creative interpretations of traditions, as proposed by Gadamer and Ricoeur, one may include symbolic structures and narratives under one conceptual framework, namely collective imagination.

Collective imagination is thus understood as a repository of collective memories of mythical and historical figures and events represented by symbols and narratives; figures and events, which are interpreted in the present time in terms that are more relevant to building the future than memorising or authenticating the past. In this sense, the process of reaching cultural understanding need not be focused on the accuracy of the past events, texts and traditions. Rather, it should be based on the ingenuous ways that the present generation selects and interprets portions of the past memories in order to motivate and validate a specific collective action, which would shape the future.

Naturally, these interpretations result in multiple layers of meaning, which are publicly available through symbolic structures, with various groups agreeing on varied and at times common layers of meanings. This capacity of man to produce shared meanings, as Robert Bocock has suggested, lies in his need to make his life dramatic, and to see himself as part of a larger story or drama.\footnote{Bocock, R. \textit{Ritual in Industrial Society}, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1974, p. 22} This need for creating
a universal drama may be also seen as the *imaginary* invention of collective mental or psychic categories that make history possible in the form of narrative.

As Cornelius Castoriadis has put it: "History is impossible and inconceivable outside of the *productive* or *creative* imagination... It is impossible to understand what human history has been or what it is now outside of the category of the *imaginary*... A *meaning* appears here from the very start, one that is not a *meaning* of the *real*, one that is neither strictly *rational* nor positively *irrational*, neither true nor false, and yet (one) that does belong to the order of *signification*, and that is the *imaginary* creation proper to history, that in and through which history constitutes itself to begin with."¹

Castotiadis’ notion of the possibility of history through imagination is basically a psychoanalytical understanding of human experience. But so far as the *imaginary* carries a shared meaning, it can only be reached through linguistic significations, which in the case of history, just as the fiction, is irredeemably connected to cultural narratives. Hence the essential link between the theory of psychoanalysis and the theory of text.²

The fundamental quest of every culture to validate itself against other cultures through connection with its specific and yet collective narratives is well recognised. One may add that this process at a very basic level reflects the connection between the human psychic need for shared meanings and the use of particular linguistic significations in creating specific and yet collective historical, fictional and religious narratives. The creation of historical action at present, therefore, often takes place through the interpretation of particular traditions, or in other words through varied understandings of collective historical experience in an attempt to fulfil an imaginative variation of the past as a model for the future. The political significance of this process is evident in incessant desire and aspiration of cultural collectivities to create new forms of political community on the basis of new interpretations of the past. This inevitable engagement in various interpretations of shared and yet particular historical experiences could be manifested in the quest of specific communities for achieving understanding via communicative action, or if that fails, in the attempt to achieve harmony through coercive hegemony over others. As such, the degree of conscious awareness of this complex process could play a fundamental part in the collective choice for understanding or hegemony in a given political conflict. In other words, it determines whether a political dispute is settled through peaceful means or through the use of violence to overcome the other.

*Shi’ism* and its various forms of cultural expression (preachments, passion plays, and the curricula debates of the *madrasa*) could thus be seen as a symbolic cultural structure in which a religious experience became a compelling form of collective historical experience. This historical experience inevitably entailed collective aspirations for creation of an alternative political community, and involved making choices for understanding or hegemony in settling political conflicts. In this sense, *Shi’i* religious experience for Iranians, just as any other historical religious experience, should not be viewed as “a set of doctrines that can be simply catalogued.” It is rather “a language, used in different ways by different actors in order to persuade their fellows, to manipulate situations, and to achieve mastery, control, or political position.”³

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² See Chapter 2 for more discussion on the connection of psychoanalytic and textual theories.
³ Fischer, M. *From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, 1980, pp. 4-5
Thus, as Fischer has suggested, one may consider the popular versions of the Shi'i religion practised in the Iranian village life, the scholastic religion of the madrasas (the traditional centres of religious sciences) and the mystical religion of the Sufis as creative domains of symbolic structures. These domains at the deep level shape the forms of common sense, which tend to create understanding around certain levels of meaning. But, one should be careful to recognise that such common understandings also have an inherent tendency to constrain creative attempts to produce new meanings.

The Religious Modernist Movement

In his cultural analysis of the precipitants of the Islamic Revolution, Fischer, in agreement with Shahrough Akhavi, stresses the role of religious modernist movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s. This movement was initiated by lay religious thinkers such as Jalal Ale-Ahmad, Ali Shari’ati and Mehdi Bazargan and the clerical figures such as Ruhollah Khomeini, Mahmud Taleqani, Muhammad-Hussein Tabataba’i and Morteza Motahhari. Fischer sees, for example, in Ali Shari’ati “the hero of Iran’s youth in the 1970s” and “one of the patron saints” of the Revolution of 1979, who “attempted to bridge the gap between traditional Shi’ism and contemporary sociology.”1 However, Fischer is at a loss to explain why a modernist figure of the 1960s and 1970s like Shari’ati, and indeed all other figures mentioned above, had to be less secular than the “the culturally analogous figures” of the 1930s and 1940s such as Ahmad Kasravi. His answer ultimately tends to give weight to the lenient policies of the Pahlavi regime toward religious revivalism. He rightly argues that the suppression of secular political discourse “forced politics into religious idiom.”2

This argument, however, should not cause us to neglect that the suppressive measures of the Pahlavi regime against politically motivated religion were as harsh if not harsher than its measures against secular activists. The anti-religious campaign of Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi, and the open persecution of religious activists since the 1950s by Muhammad Reza Shah, the second Pahlavi, are well documented. The anti-religious policies of the Pahlavis leave little room for explicit and implicit claims that they somehow left the development of politics unconstrained in the religious domain, while brutally suppressing the secular, and particularly leftists, political organisations.

Rather than giving the credit for the political success of the religious forces to the Pahlavi regime, one may argue that the political wisdom of the religious activists in selecting appropriate forms of struggle (i.e. a predominantly cultural struggle) was responsible for their success. This political wisdom could be appreciated more emphatically against the irrelevant and unwise forms of struggle of the secular forces, such as resort to the guerrilla warfare. The religious forces, particularly since the 1960s, launched a modest but sustained, consistent and focused struggle for reviving religion in political terms. By contrast, the secular forces, particularly since the nationalist movement of the 1950s, were either in disarray and virtual inactivity (the National Front and the Tudeh Party), or engaged in irrelevant, inefficient and self-destructing forms of struggle, such as guerrilla warfare (The People’s Fadai’iyan).

Moreover, it was not only the radical secular political organisations that were subject to open suppression. Radical religious organisations such as Mojahedin-e...

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1 Ibid, p. 5
2 Ibid, pp. 5-6
Khlaq (People’s Holy Warriors), which were also engaged in guerrilla war against the regime, were brutally dealt with all the same. One may even argue that the demise of secularist movements (including the liberal and socialist movements) since the Constitutional Revolution, was due mainly to the lack of coherence and focus in their struggles, and their unrealistic vision of Iran’s political future.

In this light, the suppressive policies of the Pahlavi regime, which went for all political activities secular or otherwise, may be seen no more than a secondary factor. A careful reading of the political views of liberal figures such as Malkam Khan and Taqi-zadeh of the early twentieth century, and of such radical reformers as Kasravi of the 1930s and 1940s, reveals that, despite their high ideals and aspirations, they had an immature, simplistic and incoherent understanding of international and domestic politics. As such, notwithstanding the valuable contributions of these intellectuals to modernisation of thought in Iran, their political contributions could be considered as insignificant. This was also the case for the socialist activists such as Heidar Amughlu, a leading figure of the Communist Party of Iran in the early twentieth century. The same could also be said about the leaders of the ethnic secessionist movements of the Azaris and Kurds in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Pishevari and Khiabani.

Fischer’s analysis of religious culture is much richer than modern historians of Iran, and particularly the Orientalists. Such authors as Ann Lambton, as Fischer himself suggests, have concentrated on piecing together historical fragments extracted from written texts, and have ignored the nuances, which shape “the rich web of lived-in experience.” By contrast, Fischer’s attention is to the emotional and motivational values that “symbolic structures”, such as the “Karbala paradigm”, have held for the people. His aspiration in his own words is to develop “more than a wish for ever more rich detail”, or in Geertz term, a “thick description” of Iranian religious culture. To understand a cultural form, he writes, “requires an appreciation of its internal symbolic structure, its historical boundaries, and its lines of cleavage or change.” In this sense, he sets out to understand how the “Karbala paradigm” as a symbolic structure is variously interpreted to become both a means for “mental agility” in the popular culture, and an “sterile” scholastic concept for the traditional politically conservative theologians.

Fischer differentiates in the political movement under the Shah three broad ideological orientations based on a simplified class analysis: that of the secularised middle and upper classes; that of the rural and urban workers and that of the traditional urban middle class including the “merchants, landowners and the ulama.” It is immediately questionable to include the landowners under the traditional urban middle class. Fischer is in fact offering this class stratification to avoid reliance on the widespread notion of “traditional versus modernity dichotomy”; but he does not make any substantial use of this class analysis in his following arguments. His strength, however, is his attention to religious settings in rural and urban areas.

These religious settings included “the mosque with its daily routine of prayer; the rawda with its homiletic entertainment; the majlis madhhabi, or weekly gatherings for religious discussion, recitation, or pietistic exercises; and the annual passion

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1 I shall have more to say about the modernist social movements in Chapters 5 and 6.
2 Ibid, p. 8
3 Ibid, p.136
plays.” Also included were “special pilgrimages, the celebrations on Omar’s death, mourning on the death of the various Imams and celebration of their births.” To this may be added “the zurkhana, or traditional gymnasium, ... where the virtues of Islamic chivalry are acted out; and the sufra (ritual feasts) attended primarily by women for vows, cures, sociability, and homiletics.” As yet other examples of these religious settings Fischer also names “the tombs and stopping places of saints (imamzada, qadamgah), and the sacred trees and wells ... for vows and cures; the khaneqah or Sufi conventicles; the bazaar with its language of Islamic morality ...; the Thursday afternoon ziyarat (visits, pilgrimages) to the graveyards to reaffirm ancestral ties and duties...; and of course, the gatherings for weddings and deaths.”

The Resurgence of Sufism

One of Fischer’s important contributions to the literature on the Iranian Revolution is his attention to the resurgence of modern forms of mysticism. His focus is on Sufism as a significant mystical discourse, which was prevalent among the upper class and the middle-class modernised Muslims during the Pahlavi period. It should be noted that although Sufism made an inroad during the Pahlavi period among the Western educated members of the upper class, who were faithful to their religious tradition, it had remained strong as a form of popular religion among the lower classes. Fischer’s attention to Sufism is, however, focused mainly on Sufism of the upper and upper middle classes. The inroad of this elitist Sufism was mainly among the professionals, bureaucrats and technocrats and other members of upper middle class, who had modern education and yet had strong religious feelings. In this elitist view, the official clergy were ignorant and backward, incapable of adapting Islam to the modern world, and rigidly attached to a literal understanding of religion. For the upper class and Western-educated Iranians, the appeal of Sufism was due to its links with more sophisticated aspects of religion, which would bring it in contact with metaphysics, philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics.

One important example of Western-educated intellectuals, who has made a significant contribution to the enrichment of Sufism as a modern philosophical discourse, is Seyyed Hussein Nasr. His major works present a view of Sufism that is reserved for “the intellectual elite of the traditional classes.” By writing many of his works in English, Nasr has also sought to make Islam relevant to the modern world by stressing the validity of its “esoteric psychology, philosophy, and eschatology” in the context of the modern global culture. He has thus attempted to make Islam appealing not only to the young Muslims with modern education, but also to the non-Muslims, by posing it not as burdened with the Western conceptualisations and ideologies, such as rationalism, socialism, liberalism, etc. but as an alternative to these concepts and ideologies.

The strength of Nasr’s effort in posing Sufism as the intellectual core of Islam lies primarily in his vast knowledge of the Islamic tradition of mysticism, speculative philosophy and cosmology. His strength also derives from his ability to address himself to Islamic thought and sciences in a non-sectarian mode free from parochial

1 Ibid, pp. 136-137
2 Ibid, p. 140
3 Ibid, p. 142
4 Ibid, p. 143
Shi'i-Sunni rivalry. His works therefore view Islam in a fashion that provides an alternative to the scholastic theology, which is dominated by Islamic jurisprudence, and hence by the differences between Shi'i and Sunni schools of law. In this he is, in fact, responding to the attacks of the traditional jurists (fuqaha) against Sufism, which began in the seventeenth century by Mulla Muhammad Baqir Majlisi in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and have continued until the present time.

Nasr's task in defending Sufism against the attacks of the official clergy is a difficult one due to its incompatibility with the scholastic jurisprudence. Even the theologians such as Ayatollah Khomeini and Allama Tabataba'i, who had expressed interest in mysticism and speculative philosophy, were despised by the more traditional ulama, who saw fiqh as the main source of religious knowledge. Nasr tries to defend Sufism against what is taught in madrasas by referring to it as one of "intellectual (aqli) sciences" as against jurisprudence, kalam, and hadith, which are considered as "transmitted (naqli) sciences".1

Nasr's challenge is not only to defend the intellectual integrity of Sufism against the scholasticism of the Shi'i ulama; he is also concerned with presenting Islamic mystical philosophy as a mode of knowledge epistemologically distinct from the Western rationalist mode of knowledge. In this sense, he basically advocates, as Fischer has noted, a return to a new form of metaphysics. His critique of the rationalism of Renaissance and the nominalist trends in the Western philosophy is in many ways similar both to the romantic and postmodernist critiques of the humanist philosophy of the Enlightenment. Nasr criticises Western rationalism for its role in the poverty of "man's mental universe" and its "reduction of man to purely human, cut off from transcendental elements".2

In competition with the Western rationalist thought, Nasr, following the great Islamic mystics of the past, advocates a contemplative knowledge derived from Islamic cosmology, which defines the whole universe as an "icon of contemplation". This contemplative knowledge is accessible neither through scientific certainty, nor through philosophical relativism. The objects of this knowledge are neither facts nor illusions. This contemplative knowledge is basically symbolic and is accessible through ta'wil (interpretation) of the symbols; symbols that serve as "a bridge between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds." However, symbols, in the sense that they are used by Nasr, are not artefacts of human language, but mystical characteristics of "the World Soul", which hold the key to Nature's divine mysteries. These mysteries may thus be revealed not by gaining knowledge of the facts of nature, but by becoming aware of one's own spiritual nature. According to him: "a symbol is not based on man-made conventions. It is an aspect of the ontological reality of things, and is as such independent of man's perception."3 It is by way of Sufi esoteric knowledge, gained via passage through various states of spiritual development, that one finds the ontological meanings of the symbolic structure of the universe. Nasr has also emphasised that in the Islamic tradition contemplation and action are "complementary" rather than "antithetical".4

1 Ibid, p. 144
2 Nasr, S.H. Science and Civilisation in Islam, 1968, p.244
3 Ibid, p. 247
4 Nasr, S. H. "The Complementarity of the Active and Contemplative Lives in Islam", Main Currents, 30, 64-68, N-D 73
Finally, for Nasr, mystical-spiritual development is an individual venture concerned with the purification of the individual soul rather than society. In his “Self-awareness and Ultimate Selfhood”, Nasr argued that man’s inner being or “ultimate selfhood” could be reached only through individual spiritual discipline, which could in turn create a more profound relationship between the self and the external world.¹ This kind of Sufism stood in contrast with mysticism as understood by the scholastic ulama, which was primarily concerned with the purification of the society. As Fischer has noted: “the religion of the ulama, beyond the rules of ritual, is essentially a moral and social ethic...concerned with community rather than the individual.”² This statement should be qualified, however, by adding that the Sufis and the ulama are concerned with both individual and social purification. The difference as understood from the mystical and scholastic texts may seem to be a variation of the degree of emphasis on one or the other aspect of human existence. However, in closer reading of these texts and the way they are interpreted in the present, one may find a radical difference in social and political philosophies of these two types of understanding religion.

The Sufis, following the tradition of irfan (mysticism), emphasise the transcendence of the individual soul beyond the letter of religious law in order to achieve the salvation of the community. Beyond the Shari‘at (Islamic Law), They refer to the Tariqat (Path) and Haqiqat (Truth/God) in order to map the path through which individuals, each in their private spheres, find the same ultimate truth or God by achieving mastery over their inner selves, and by transcending the constraints of social and legal regulations. In doing so, they, consciously or unconsciously, dismiss any legislative or executive authority for religious leaders in regulating and governing society in order to secure its collective salvation. This type of understanding is reflected in various traditions that are constantly invoked by the Sufis, such as the tradition of Mansur Hallajj. In the imagination of modern Iranian mystics, the figure of Hallajj is memorised as the epitome of this individual transcendence and merging with Truth/God. Hallajj is remembered as the one, who publicly proclaimed “an-al-haq” (I am the Truth/God), and was hanged for this blasphemy at the behest of the scholastic ulama.

The Sufis and many theologians, who hold mysticism in high regard, remember Hallajj as a true believer. Whereas, the theologians, who see the implementation of the Shari‘at as the only means to social and hence individual salvation, see the tradition of Hallajj as an ecstatic and irrational form of religious contemplation. They claim that such traditions would not allow for a disciplinary learning of religious knowledge, and thus would open the way for heretical views. However, it should be noted that Sufism as a practice at the popular level has, over the centuries, lost much of its emphasis on the free and undisciplined individual transcendence beyond the constraint of institutional and hierarchical impositions. The relationship between morid and morad (disciple and guru) has degenerated in many Sufi orders into one of blind and absolute obedience of the follower to the paramount leader (Qotb), and strict disciplines and sectarian beliefs that differentiate one order from the other.

However, at an ideal level, Sufism, by addressing the problem of social morality to the individual professes a political philosophy that advocates a negative view of politics. Politics, as they argue, is an enterprise, which creates attachment to

² Fischer, M. From Religious Dispute to Revolution, 1980, p. 147
power and wealth, and hence is strewn with conspiracy and deception. For the Sufis, it is therefore better to leave the politics to the politicians. Although there have been historical precedents of Sufi aspiration and even ascendance to political power, such as the medieval movement of the Sarbedaran and the millenarian movement of the Safavids in the sixteenth century, these precedents have not formed a solid basis for a change in the basically apolitical attitude of Sufism. On the contrary, such examples as the formation of the Safavid Empire - with all its corruption and cruelty - have been frequently used by the Sufis to confirm the dangers of turning to direct political participation on the part of the religious leaders. In contrast to the Sufi apolitical attitude, the Shi'i ulama, since the disappearance of the twelfth Imam, Mahdi, have incessantly reflected on the utopia of the Government of God or a true Islamic Government, which must be established on earth in the future.

The Persistence of Teleological understandings of Revolution

Most of the existing cultural and class analyses of the Islamic Revolution are still under the influence of a teleological understanding of revolution. Crane Brinton’s general stages of revolution, which outlined in his Anatomy of the Revolution, still tempt to expect a predictable course for revolutions. The teleological paradigms of Iranian leftist intellectuals and activists present striking similarities with Brinton’s model. Some liberal intellectuals still expect that the Iranian Revolution would take the course of a bourgeois revolution, or at least lead to a liberal political structure, with the downturn in religious zeal. Fischer has acknowledged that it was “still premature to characterise in a Webersian fashion how the revolution might function to create a stronger State with greater mass mobilisation, participation, or loyalty.”

The teleological reading of the doctrine of Occultation (disappearance of the twelfth Imam) by such scholars as Lambton and Montgomery Watt, for example, have led some to the conclusion that Shi’ism like Sufism is basically an apolitical school. Contrary to these assumptions, however, the concept of entezar (waiting) for the re-emergence of the Mahdi had always meant the ultimate preservation of the Shi'i claim to political power. Even the age-old apparently apolitical practice of the conservative Shi'i ulama prior to Khomeini had not weakened this deep political sentiment. This was in fact the main reason for the warm collective reception for the concept of open politicisation of Shi’ism, put forward by the late Ayatollah Khomeini during the 1970s, and the popular support that it received during and after the Islamic Revolution. The overwhelming acceptance by the public of the Islamicisation of such clearly political phenomenon as revolution, where other forms of political ideologies were readily available, testifies to the deep-rooted place of a positive understanding of politics in the Shi'i religious culture.

Throughout the centuries, and this is patently clear at least since the Safavid period, the ulama have been concerned with the implementation of morality and justice at the social level via a religiously legitimised government. As Fischer has suggested: “the concern of the ulama with justice and social morality, with rationality and community, is only natural given their training in the law and its principles, with philosophy of the soul given a second billing.” He has offered a brief discussion about the shaping of Shi'i political theory as a result of two distinct period: the period of Ali’s caliphate,

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1 Ibid, p. 239
2 Ibid, pp. 147-148
in which the Shi‘is had political power, and the period after Ali’s demise, where the Shi‘is were deprived of political power.  

Yet the successful politicisation of Shi‘ism in Modern Iran should not create deterministic predictions about the future course of the Iranian Revolution. Certainly the predictions of Iranian secular nationalists and monarchists about the absolute stagnation of politics under a religious revolution have been questioned by new movements of resistance against absolutist theocracy. Fischer’s assertion that “the revolutionary youth of Iran are introducing a new populist religious idiom”, which although religious is cynical about the clerical establishment, may still prove right. Yet the volatility of the situation makes the course of political developments a lot dependent on the choices that revolutionary actors, Iranian intellectuals and the Western powers would make in the future.

The Significance of the Islamic Ideologues

In Debating Muslims, which was published almost ten years after From Religious Dispute to Revolution, Michael Fischer, along with his co-author Mehdi Abedi, continues his study of Iranian/Islamic political culture. Here, Fischer and Abedi provide a study of Shari‘ati and Motahhari as two rival interpreters of religious myths and rituals in order to identify two various versions of Islamic revolutionary ideology. Shari‘ati is correctly claimed to have borne one version of the Islamic ideology, advocating a kind of Protestant reformation, which would empower modern Shi‘ism by identifying it with the true and original purity of Alavids Shi‘ism (Shi‘ism under Ali).

Shari‘ati’s version of Islamic ideology would thence aspire to rid Shi‘ism from the corrupt and superstitious state that the official clergy had brought upon it since the Safavid period. To identify Ayatollah Motahhari, and along with him Ayatollah Khomeini, as the bearers of the second version of political ideology of Shi‘ism, is also a valid argument. But, to go further and identify the living tradition of Islamic ideology entirely with Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, the notoriously literal theologian of the Safavid period, may only serve as a simplification of history for analytic purposes.

Majlisi in the eighteenth century under the weak Safavid king, Shah Sultan Hussein, used his religious and political influence to establish fiqh (jurisprudence), and collection and authentication of the hadith (oral traditions) as the highest officially recognised religious endeavours in the field of knowledge. In the social and literary arenas, he helped establish a bold face of public piety. The regulation of the religiously ordained codes of conduct of society by the State was even tougher under Majlisi than the time of the medieval poet Kadje Shams-ad-Din Hafiz, who had so succinctly criticised in his mystical poetry the push for imposition of a pious face on the society by the State and religious authorities. Majlisi also helped suppress, as Arjomand has noted, the traditions of mysticism and speculative philosophy, which had reached new heights by his contemporaries, Mulla Sadra and Mir-e Damad. He achieved this mainly through the promotion of apolitical literature, passion plays, and

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1 I have offer a detailed explanation of the development of the Shi‘i political philosophy in Chapter 5.
2 Fischer, M. 1980, p. 240
3 See Chapter 7 for a more detailed analysis of Shari‘ati and Motahhari.
ceremonies of lamentation for the martyrs of Karbala, whose public influence has continued to this day.

It is true that Khomeini and Motahhari promoted religious rituals, such as weeping in mourning for Hussein and the worship of the holy shrines due to their genuine religious convictions and scholastic upbringing. It is also true that they have frequently referred to Majlisi as an example of public piety. However, these truths should not imply that they strictly followed the scholasticism of Majlisi in their social and political convictions. Rather, due to their belonging to the modern world, they had acquired a deep appreciation of the social and psychological potentials of religious rituals in enhancing Shi’ism to the level of a political ideology, particularly during the revolution and the war with Iraq. This kind of appreciation was naturally missing in the likes of Majlisi. It is in this sense that the modern Shi’i theologians, such as Khomeini and Motahhari, have also expressed views that are also similar to modernist religious intellectuals like Shari’ati, in that they emphasised the use of religious symbolism of Ashura and Karbala for political agitation rather than merely sentimental lamentation. As such, while they appeared to be faithful to their scholastic traditions, they were also clearly critical of the superstitious notions of these traditions, such as the ecstatic use of religious impulses by both the Sufi dervishes and some public preachers. In fact, they despised the apolitical mourning ceremonies of weeping for superficial expression of personal piety, conducted by the local Mullahs, akhunds or rowza-khans for pay, and attempted to indulge themselves in philosophy and mysticism as an intellectual pursuit of excellence.

The contributions of Ayatollah Motahhari to Islamic philosophy and mysticism under the guidance of Allama Tabataba’i, and reflected in his extensive notes on Tabataba’i’s treatise Usul-e Falsafeh va Ravesh-e Re’alism (the Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism) and in his book on Hafiz, have been outstanding. Ayatollah Khomeini was Motahhari’s teacher. He too, contrary to the likes of Majlisi, had a deep interest in mystical poetry and philosophy. His own mystical poetry, which was published posthumously, although could not be considered as an original contribution to mystical literature, nonetheless reflected his sincere interest in alternative interpretations of religion, which consciously or unconsciously, questions his scholastic convictions.

A Class Analysis of the Iranian Revolution

As I have noted earlier, a distinct genre of writings on the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and its political outcomes is that which tries to provide an understanding of recent political development in Iran in terms of class analysis. The work of Ervand Abrahamian is a significant example of this genre of writing. His three important texts are Iran between Two Revolutions, Radical Islam: the Iranian Mojahedin and Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic.

The first book is focused on the class analysis of the political movements in Iran in the twentieth century. It pays special attention to social, ideological and organisational transformations of secular and particularly leftist political forces of this period. The significant original contribution of this study is the light it sheds on the history of the communist movement and particularly, the Tudeh party of Iran.

The second book is focused on the radical Islamic movement, shaped during the Pahlavi period, and particularly the history of the Organisation of Mojahedin-e
Abrahamian has chosen to study this primarily guerrilla organisation because he sees it as “the first Iranian organisation to develop systematically a modern revolutionary interpretation of Islam.” He is also concerned with the Mojahedin because he believes that this organisation, both through its armed struggle against the Pahlavi regime in the 1970s, and through its participation in the revolutionary events in the period 1978-1979, has secured an identity of its own. This identity, according to Abrahamian, is distinct from both the conservative ulama, and the so-called “populist” clergy.

Abrahamian refers to the Mojahedin as “a major political force”, committed to a revolutionary version of Islam, while he uncharitably dismisses the Islamic revolutionary movement led by the radical clerics, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, as a populist and semi-fascist version of Islam. He compares the ideas of the Mojahedin to those of “Catholic liberation theology” despite major doctrinal differences between them; and that of Ayatollah Khomeini’s “populist” movement to semi-fascist movements of South America, such as that of Peronists, again despite vast differences between them.

For Abrahamian, as long as there is a certain socio-economic, in this case “petty bourgeois”, commonality between two political movements, they can be categorised and labelled accordingly. Such huge differences as between culture, religion and symbolic structures of Iran and for example Argentina are brushed aside by socio-economic similarities. Ironically, the course of events has shown the rise of fascist tendencies to be more prevalent within the Mojahedin organisation in Iraq under protection of Saddam Hussein, rather than in the post-Khomeini era in the context of religious disputation and expression of demands for political reform in Iran.

Abrahamian has put three main questions to answer in The Radical Islam. “What were the social background of the Organisation’s founders?” What were the main features of their ideology?” (And), “why did the Mojahedin succeed in attracting a mass following but failed in gaining political power?” He has done a brilliant job in identifying the backgrounds of the founders of the movement, just as he had done in Iran between Two Revolutions about the Tudeh Party and Fada’iyan Khlaq. But with regard to the complicated questions about the ideology of the Mojahedin and the reasons for its failure to gain political power, his answers are open to dispute.

Abrahamian has allocated a whole chapter to Shari’ati in order to locate and analyse the ideological origins of the Mojahedin. He highlights the influences of Shari’ati on the Mojahedin; but he provides very little by why of the differences between the political ideology of the Mojahedin and that of Shari’ati. Throughout the book, Abrahamian provides a view of the Mojahedin, which, despite mild criticisms, portrays them as inherently more revolutionary, in the sense of being more progressive, than the “populist” movement he calls “Khomeinism”. He thus attributes the failure of the Mojahedin to sustain their political popularity mainly to the wrongs that others have done to them. In answering his proposed questions then Abrahamian engages in a historical analysis of modern Iranian politics, an analysis that reflects a fine example of class analysis. Due to the relevance of this analysis to my discussion, I shall review it in some detail.

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2 Ibid P. 3
Abrahamian has approached his posed questions via an analysis of the roles of State, intelligentsia and religion with respect to modernity. In his analysis of the role of the Pahlavi State, he has focused his arguments on the structural weaknesses of the Pahlavi regime. He has discussed these weaknesses in terms both of its disengagement from the class structure of the Iranian society, and its socio-economic problems, which, in his view, were the main causes of the revolution.

In his discussion on the structural weaknesses of the Pahlavi regime, Abrahamian does not pay much serious attention to the loss of legitimacy or credibility as factors that bring down governments. He does not attribute any centrality to the fact that the Pahlavi regime failed to sell its image of Iran to the Iranian people. This criticism, of course, does not by any means dismiss the importance of socio-economic factors and class stratification, but only questions the universality of their importance.

In discussing the role of the intelligentsia, Abrahamian has concentrated on the modern-educated, salaried intellectuals of middle class background, which he acknowledges, were alienated from the masses. He thus draws a line of division between what he calls “traditional” and “modern” middle classes, and as a result, he understands the Mojahedin as an intersection of these two middle classes.

Abrahamian sees Islam as a part of Iranian popular culture. However, in Islam as a culture, he does not see any independent or autonomous political force. He portrays the Shi'i religious culture as a neutral context within which various ideologies operate with both, order-transforming and order-maintaining potentials. But, he does not clarify what there is, if anything, to religion and culture with respect to ideology. He believes that political or social action has to do less with religion and culture, and more with “economic, social and political environment.” Thus, he does not recognise that economic, social and political structures find their meanings within the context of the nuances and biases of the cultural symbolic and linguistic structures, which are manifested in the form of mythical, religious, ideological and utopian beliefs.

Abrahamian’s view of culture and ideology shares in some measure with sociological views of Habermas and Eisenstadt, and to a much lesser extent with philosophical views of Gadamer and Ricoeur. On the question of religion, he tries to free himself from reductionist Marxist views by avoiding the usual practice of dismissing religion as a merely super-structural entity. He also distances himself from the Durkheimian tradition, which he criticises for its “structural functionalism”, and its attempts to elevate religion to the level of “the essential cement that holds together the whole edifice of the society.” Rather, he expresses willingness to follow Marxist philosophers such as Antonio Gramsci and Marxist historians, such as E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, George Rude and Christopher Hill. These Marxist writers have acknowledged that religion is “an important part of popular consciousness that helps determine how people react to economic crises, social strains, political upheavals and historical transformation.”

However, Abrahamian does not apply the non-conventional views of these writers to his argument to make it clear how the religious collective consciousness of peoples, in the context of economic, social, and political crises, is shaped by cultural, ideological, and religious factors.
Iranians shaped their understanding of their social, political and economic environment. To be sure, he acknowledges that the collective consciousness provided the people with a “sense of right and wrong, justice and injustice, legitimacy and illegitimacy”, which put them on the course of historical action. But, he does not make it clear: how then would it be possible to relegate this consciousness to a secondary position that plays virtually no significant part in his discussion of the Iranian revolution?

In his discussion of theories of State, Abrahamian criticises modernisation theorists, such as Apter, Binder and Huntington for the persistence in their views of Hegelian etatism, which understood the State as an “impartial regulator” standing above the society performing the function of legitimising the political authority. He also criticises modernisation theorists particularly for their insistence on the virtues of autonomous modernising States in traditional societies in instigating economic development, building modern institutions, and fighting the essentially backward traditional forces.

Among the Marxists, Abrahamian has identified two trends, emanating from differences of emphasis in Marx’s own arguments on the role of State in the society. Originally, Marx described the State as a mere instrument of the ruling class. On other occasions, however - particularly in explaining the case of the Bonapartian State in France in the nineteenth century - Marx proposed that it was possible for some States to gain a limited degree of autonomy from the main social classes. He referred specifically to the Bonapartian State as one that with demagogic populism rose to power on the back of the middle classes and peasants, and thus was able for some time to sustain its power by playing a balancing act between the main social classes, i.e. proletariat and bourgeoisie.

In contemporary Marxism, these varying positions of Marx have been taken up by the likes of Miliband and Poulantzas in order to offer new interpretations, which differ in the degree of their emphasis on the “relative autonomy of the State” in “regulating class conflict”. Abrahamian criticises scholars such as Theda Skocpol for exceeding the limits of the State autonomy, prescribed by Marx; and points to her tendency to confer a sort of absolute autonomy particularly upon the Third World States, a tendency similar to that of modernisation theorists. According to Abrahamian, the case of Iran has proved Skocpol wrong in claiming that independence of the State from social classes makes it stronger in terms of its ability to embark on bold socio-economic changes. Rather, he rightly emphasises: “The Pahlavi State was weak precisely because it was autonomous of society... (And) the Islamic Republic ... has been strong and durable because it has been closely allied to certain social classes and thus enjoys a social base.”

In Abrahamian’s tour of the Pahlavi period (1925-1979), what is conspicuous in his review of this period is his astonishment at the unreasonableness of the sudden fall of the regime at the hand of the ulama. His astonishment is particularly due to the perception that the ulama were a group least expected by the intellectuals - who had nostalgically glorified revolution for decades with no avail - to lead a successful revolution against the monarchy. After all, the Pahlavi kings created, for the first time, a centralised and bureaucratic modern State in Iran, with all the nominally required institutions. They created new military and bureaucratic institutions, new institutions

1 Ibid, p. 10
2 Ibid, p. 11
of law and order and modern educational institutions (secular education at school and university levels). They also preserved the existing political institutions, such the Majlis (Parliament of the Constitutional Revolution), and created new political parties (Iran-e Novin, Mardom and Rastakhiz). Moreover, under the Pahlavi Kings, especially under Muhammad Reza Shah, an unprecedented economic growth, remarkable by any standards, swept the country, which not only increased the economic output quantitatively, but also transformed the economy qualitatively from a rural into an industrial formation.¹

The State was the main, and in many areas of economy perhaps the only, mover of this massive and ambitious socio-economic development. The theoretical justification of this grandiose plan of development came from the Western, and particularly American, advisors of the Shah, who in turn relied on the American modernisation theorists; and the funding of it from the growing oil revenues.

Beside the military and the bureaucracy, as Abrahamian has noted, the court establishment was the third pillar of the Pahlavi State, which by 1979 had grown to colossal proportions. It spent over 50 per cent of the government budget on salaries paid to as many as 1,600,000 employees of State-owned and State-subsidised companies, which comprised almost a third of all adult males working in the cities.²

The Shah was thus to change the face of Iran by building infrastructures (roads, railways, electricity, telegraph and telephone networks, etc.), and by changing the way social life appeared (by bringing the ordinary Iranian folk into contact with Western cultural fads via American and European films, magazines, consumer goods, etc.). But, he was not to change the soul of Iran; a failure, that would come back to haunt him.

To be sure, class analysis may be fruitfully used to demonstrate how the policies of the Pahlavi regime eroded the power base of the traditional Iranian aristocracy by shifting State power from the parliament, dominated by the landed aristocracy, to the royal court. As Abrahamian has noted, the regime did this firstly by extending the central government to provincial and rural areas, thus reducing the influence of local notables; by suppressing the powerful tribal leaders, Khans; and secondly by recruiting army officers from outside the ranks of the aristocratic elite.

The Shah's land reform was particularly designed to shift the relations of economic production from one based on sharecropping to one of wage labour. One may even claim, as Abrahamian does, that it was in this process of building a modern bureaucratic State that the Shah alienated "the politically articulate forces: the old landed elite, the modern intelligentsia and, most important of all, the traditional bazaari middle class".³ It, however, remains problematic to attribute so much importance to the traditional middle class, and at the same time claim that it played no substantial economic and political role in the Iranian society under the Shah.

One of the major weaknesses of the Pahlavi regime, frequently cited by the analysts of the revolution following Brinton's model of revolution, was the alienation of the modern intelligentsia from this regime. The process of this alienation was problematic from the point of view of the class analysis basically due to the assumption that the support of people for a polity is determined by the representation of the interests of the classes in government policies. Going by this standard, it was

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¹ I have offered a detailed analysis of the Pahlavi period in Chapter 6.
² Abrahamian, E. p. 14
³ Ibid, p. 15
surprising that the modern intellectuals, who clearly benefited from Shah’s policies to create a centralised State, should turn against the author of these policies. Policies such as disarming the tribal warlords, destroying the economic and political power of the feudal lords, introducing modern industrial development, expanding modern education and enhancing the position of women, were clearly in the interest of the intelligentsia.

Abrahamian has explained this alienation in terms of intellectuals’ disdain for the accumulation of wealth by the Pahlavi monarchs. Other reasons have also been voiced, such as the disregard of the regime for the 1905 Constitution, its suppression of the national movement of Mossadeq in 1953, its affinity with the Americans and the British, its brutality against the leftist political organisations, and its failure to bring prosperity to the poor.1

Abrahamian portrays the dissent movement of the religious intellectuals in the 1960s sometimes as a continuation of the resentment of the secular intelligentsia toward the policies of the Pahlavi State and sometimes as traditionalist movement of the ulama and the merchants. In this light the Islamic ideology, which took shape as result of the religious intellectual movement, led by the likes of Al-e Ahmad, Shari’ati, Khomeini, Motahhari, Taleqani and Bazargan under the core concepts of alienation, Westoxication, return to self and the necessity of religious reformation, is not seen not as a novel intellectual movement within the religious establishment, but virtually as an outgrowth sometimes of the modern secular intellectual movement, and sometimes of the traditional middle-class movement.

To be sure, the religious-modernist intellectual movement of the 1960s and 1970s endeavoured to appropriate the language of modernity in voicing the socio-economic grievances and misgivings about the loss of national identity in religious language. But, this movement was not a mere emulator of the secular intellectuals, nor did it use modern thought in a purely demagogic attempt to increase its popularity. Neither was it completely a part of the movement of the “traditional middle class”, despite the clear affinity between the religious origins of these two movements. This religious reform-movement was in fact an independent movement that found its own voice gradually in the space of interaction between religious and secular discourses in modern Iranian history. Rather than simple back and forth moves between “tacit alliance” and “open hostility” based on the Pahlavi policies with respect to traditional interests, the sophisticated political interactions of the religious intellectuals of clerical and non-clerical background with the Pahlavi State, were based on deep doctrinal, institutional, ideological and cultural conflicts. The atrocities of the Pahlavi regime against the religious movement were clear indications that the regime had some awareness of these conflicts.

Thus, Abrahamian’s emphasis that the Pahlavi regime took a cautious approach to Shi’ism and attempted to please religious leaders by suppressing the atheists of the left can not be sustained either logically or empirically.2 Rather, the regime was tough on radical tendencies both in religious and secular ranks. It was prepared to please the traditionalist ulama by espousing religious rituals and practices only so far as the radical ulama did not impregnate these practices and rituals with political interpretations of religion. Just as it tolerated secularism as long as it could

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1 Ibid, p.17
2 Ibid, pp. 18-19
provide for the legitimacy of the regime and not espouse radical political or social demands.¹

Even within the Marxist tradition, writers like André Gorz, Alain Touraine, Alvin Gouldner and Jurgen Habermas, have reconsidered and revised “the Marxist problematic of working class revolution”, suggesting that “movements whose relationship to class was ambiguous or non-existent, have entered history without the old parties and their constituents.”² D. A. Foss and R. Larkin, in their Beyond Revolution, have also shown that there is no merit to narrow understandings that depict social movements as invariably determined by social classes in their classical Marxian sense. No doubt, the underlying structural importance of class forces must be acknowledged; but the new movements such as those shaped around such concepts as race, women and youth rights, and particularly religious movements of the 1960s and 1970s, are not to be understood merely in terms of class struggle. Rather, they “should be engaged in their own terms as valid responses to historical conjunctures, including economic forces, that produced them.”³

Of course, it is wrong to consider the global social and political movements since the 1960s as purely cultural movements in the sense of culture as a collection of beliefs, norms and attitudes. They are cultural in that they are predicated on shared symbolism, language, tradition and memories contained in institutions, and enacted via imaginary creations such as ideologies and utopias, which motivate and animate ordinary people politically, and transform them into revolutionary actors. Social, political and economic relations and institutions are located in parallel with religious, philosophical, legal and literary institutions within the framework of the web-like structure of culture.

These relations and institutions are, in fact, various forms of symbolic structures, which are manifest in the life-world at various layers of meaning of which the society is only partially conscious. These layers of meaning are largely hidden and need to be recovered and sometimes invented via the interpretation of written and oral texts, the archives of documents and figures, and the archives of the collective memories of the members of a community.⁴

The in-depth understanding of the real effect of the religious imaginary on the minds of the Shi'i ulama over centuries would clarify that Shi'i political ideology was not merely a means by which to address socio-economic problems, which had affected the traditional middle class. A political view of religion was in fact part and parcel of the faith from the beginning. Not only did it define Shi'ism, since the ouster of the infallible Imams from power, as a quest to return political authority to its rightful owners; but also it provided a political and social Utopia around which the believers could be mobilised in order to build that utopia.

Thus, Shi'ism as an ideological interpretation has always carried the seeds of revolution; but not a bourgeois, nor a socialist revolution; rather an Islamic revolution whose task it was perceived to be to return the faith, which had been derailed by the Umayyads, to its “true path”. This “true path”, however, does not belong to the past.

¹ I shall discuss modern intellectual developments in Iran in more detail in Chapters 6 & 7.
³ Ibid, p. xii
⁴ Even economic facts and figures are part of this symbolic structure. Beyond the level of sheer survival, the economic facts and figures find social force only when they are made sensible to people by economic and financial analysts. See Chapters 2 & 3 for a more detailed theoretical discussion on these issues.
although it is not totally detached from it either. It is rather oriented toward the future in the figure of the Mahdi and the utopian government of justice that is to be built under him. Both quietist and activist positions of Shi’ism should, therefore, be understood as deeply political in its Islamic sense, not as now apolitical now political merely in the sense of representing a social class.

Abrahamian is right in pinpointing the “White Revolution” and the death of Ayatollah Borujerdi in the 1960s as two important events that marked the beginning of the political expression of the protest of the ulama against the regime. But, he may not be accurate in seeing Ayatollah Borujerdi as a figure solely responsible for maintaining the tradition of political quietism, and the subsequent rise of Ayatollah Khomeini as the inception of political activism of Shi’ism. Moreover, the political expression of the ulama cannot be limited to the threat of land reform to the properties of religious foundations, or the extension of the right of vote to women.

The history of political claims of Shi‘ism goes back long before the so-called “White Revolution”. And there is reason to believe that the objections to the land reform and right of vote for women were largely tactical political moves considered necessary to keep the regime at bay. The ulama, once in power, actually encouraged women’s political participation. Even the quietist position of Ayatollah Borujerdi may be considered as a tactical move considered fit for the time that the Pahlavi regime enjoyed high popularity, and there was no chance of putting up any serious political challenge to it.

The Modernity of the Islamic Movement

Movements such as the Islamic Revolution of Iran should be included among the movements of the “post-modern condition” of the Third World type. They involve new forms of political intervention in cultural forms. These movements, as Foss and Larkin have suggested: “entail, for their adherents, a reinterpretation of social reality, and they almost always propose a transformation of social relations and of human nature.” Moreover, these movements, despite the assertion of Foss and Larkin to the contrary, do not necessarily have to be short-lived and end in decline after institutionalisation. Such assertions would mean that, for instance, the trade unionist, feminist and gay movements have stopped to produce new forms of reality, or have declined as a result of having been enshrined in the laws and social institutions of the Western democracies. Such a claim is evidently flawed given the vital functions of these movements in the Western democracies today. It makes more sense to see these movements as being in constant regeneration, which is responsible for the salvage of society from total stagnation and degeneration.

Political Philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Henri Lefebvre, and anthropologists such as Van Gennep and Victor Turner, have been right to consider that reproduction of social, political, ideological and economic relations and institutions has meant constant disruption of the prevailing order by forces of “anti-society” or “anti-structure”. But it is not only the anti-order capacity, which characterises the forces that result successfully in the reproduction of social relations. The success of these forces comes when, in denying the existing order, they establish

1 Abrahamian, E. 1989, p. 20
2 For more detail see Chapters 5 & 6.
3 Foss, D. A. & Larkin, R. 1986, p. xiii
themselves as alternative orders or as competing forms of political community vis-à-vis the existing order. And, this is when we can speak of revolution in the proper sense of the term.

Becoming part of the new order does not necessarily mean - as is often the case with “single-issue pressure groups” - that proper social movements degenerate totally to become the “legitimating baggage” of the new bureaucracy. They will continue to resist against total instrumentalisation, and in ever new forms will continue to “revolutionise the human condition”. As Aronowitz has suggested these movements are “simultaneously utopian and practical”. Extending this argument, one may add that the existence of utopia and pragmatism side by side in these movements is the key to the reproduction of society in new forms.

The development of religion and politics in Iran since the 1960s is but a testimony to this claim. In the case of the Islamic Revolution, one may argue that within the current Islamic movement in Iran this process of creation of new experiments with social reality in political terms has not yet been settled and should not be written off. The most that can be said at this stage is that the forces of change have become new sources of political power and resistance to power since the institutionalisation of the revolution.

In this light it would be simplistic to assume that the decisive take-over of the secular opposition by 1963 politico-religious uprising, which was totally under the ulama leadership, was only a result of accidental events. The success of this uprising, despite its apparent defeat at the time, was that it was seen as a dress rehearsal of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This uprising had an immediate effect; it demonstrated to the people how effectively and wholeheartedly they could fight for what they wanted in the context of religious symbolism. It was not only an instrumental use of religious language with which this uprising overshadowed the secular nationalist and leftist opposition to the Shah. Rather, in this uprising, the religious language could provide the people with a collective consciousness, which was motivating and mobilising, and could facilitate the organisation of the movement. Within the motivational domain of this collective consciousness, making sacrifice became easy and thus enhanced the moral force of the movement.

And it was within the context of this religious understanding that in the period 1978-79, people conducted mass demonstration of huge proportions, organised large-scale strikes, and at the same time sustained social order and prevented looting and destruction nation-wide virtually without a State apparatus. No political party could claim responsibility for such an orderly, decisive, organised and sustained mobilisation (not even the ulama network). The real driving force behind the mass movement was the collective conscience, which was created out of the religious imaginary by the intervention of the modernist ulama and other reform-minded religious intellectuals and activists. This intervention was mainly in the form of offering new interpretations of religious symbolism, language and culture.

The Islamic Revolution: A Populist Movement

Abrahamian has asserted that the Islamic movement, which accepted Ayatollah Khomeini as its leader, was actually developed on the basis of Khomeini’s

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1 Ibid, xiv
2 Abrahamian, E. The Radical Islam, 1989, p. 21
populist version of the Shi'i Islam. This argument is, at least partly, based on the assumption that the popular support for Khomeini was deceptively won by his populist rhetoric, which he then gradually changed to meet the interests of his class interests. Against this, one may argue that Khomeini played a significant part as leader because he was able to offer a revolutionary ideology and a theory of State acceptable to the people via creative interpretation of religious texts, symbols and narratives. In order to explain the appeal of religious medium to the people, leftist analysts prefer to see the effectiveness of the symbolism of Ashura, Karbala and Muharram during 1978 revolutionary events, in their facilitatory role, and in the superstitious and rumour-mongering habits of Iranians.1

The Shah demonstrated a stronger sense of the ideological power of the religious movement when he established the Rastakhiz (Resurgence) Party in the mid-1970s to create a new ideological base for the legitimacy of the monarchy. He had realised that the old form of legitimation - offered by a combination of the support of the traditionalist Shi'i clerics and stress on the divine origins of monarchy in Persian mythology - was no longer an option. Therefore, he wanted to create an alternative symbolic system on the basis of new interpretations of 2500 year-old pre-Islamic political and religious institutions. He also held a utopian view for the Iranian nation: the utopia of Tamaddon-e Bozorg (the Great Civilisation) in which Iranians would live in absolute affluence, and in which the chauvinism of the superior Aryan race, which he claimed for Iranians, would run supreme.

However, the regime failed in selling this imaginary to the population, and the Resurgence Party was unable to bridge the huge gap that had been created between the State and the society. It was, in fact, a political gamble for all or nothing. And for the Shah, the outcome turned out to be nothing - no power, no credibility, and eventually no existence. It is true that once the ideology of the revolution assumed victory over the ideology of the State, there was no respite for the Shah to remain in power. But, it may not true that the structural weakness, social isolation and political alienation were so endemic in the Pahlavi regime to make it, as Abrahamian suggests, “perpetually unstable and susceptible to revolution”.2

On the contrary, regimes in far worse structural weakness and social isolation than the Pahlavi's have either faced no revolution, or have weathered revolutionary movements. Therefore, one could claim that at least until the late 1960s, there was still a small chance that the regime could forgo a revolutionary threat to its entire existence with making certain reforms to address the political and cultural alienation of Iranians. Instead, it relied solely on economic fortunes offered by shaky and untenable surges in oil price, and on the coercive means such as the army and the secret police.

The relatively easy fall of the regime to the mainly non-military action of the Islamic movement was followed by the failure of all other political movements to put up a serious challenge to the clerical leadership of the revolution. This situation indicated very early on that the revolution was not to be complying with the designs of the leftist professional revolutionaries and the Islamic guerrillas. Yet, these latter forces persisted in their hopes, based on their ideological anticipations, that eventually the revolution would come back to sense and offer them the leadership. The Islamic Republic, as the political product of the Islamic Revolution, despite the expectations

1 Ibid, pp. 23-24
2 Ibid, p. 27
of secular forces, was not a religious government only in form, simply representing
the traditional middle class. It was a government religious in content as well, which
was to create a new concept of State, new ideological discourses and new institutions.

Abrahamian refers to the Islamic Republic as the government of clerical
populists, who had the goal of creating a theocratic State, based on Khomeini’s theory
of velayat-e faqih. He also distinguishes other categories of contending political
forces from the clerical populists. His list includes clerical liberals under Ayatollah
Shariatmadari and his Muslim People’s Party (Hezb-e Khalq-e Musalman), lay
religious liberals including Bazrgan and his Liberation Movement, lay religious
radicals including the Mojahedin, secular liberal organisations including the National
Front, and secular radicals comprising of the Tudeh Party, Fada’iyan, and smaller
leftist groups.

Abrahamian stresses on the move of clerical populists in strengthening their
positions and the rising of the Mojahedin against this move as the important features
of the post-revolution period. He rightly attributes the success of the clerics to three
factors: the institutionalisation of clerical revolutionary organisations, the systematic
take-over of State institutions, and the preservation of links with the traditional middle
class, bazaar. He acknowledges that the Islamic Republic is more viable than the
Pahlavi regime, but attributes this mainly to its traditional links with the bazaar. This,
he insists, has made up for the social conservatism of the Islamic Republic after
securing power, as against its earlier populist rhetoric. He thus put forward tentative
claims that the Iranian Revolution has arrived at its Thermidor.

However, Abrahamian does not pay much attention to the alternative ways of
thinking and organising, which have taken shape within and without the inner circle of
the Islamic Republic after the revolution. He refers selectively to the conservative
social policies of the government. He also refers to nuances and differences of stress
in Khomeini’s later speeches as compared to his earlier speeches to conclude that
Khomeini had moved from radical populist positions to conservative pragmatic
positions.

Finally, Abrahamian stresses the popular dismay with the “watering down of
the populist ideology”, the eight-year war with Iraq and the steady increase in “public
apathy”, and predicts that this situation will be the feature of the Islamic regime in the
future. He thus anticipates that in the future the regime will be “vulnerable to a military
coup d’etat, either from the conventional army or from the ever-growing pasdar
(revolutionary guards) army.” Already Abrahamian’s prediction about the continuation
of public apathy and decline in the rate of participation in elections have come against
empirical difficulty with the huge turn-out and strong popular interest in the 1997
presidential election and the increasing popular demands for political and social
reform ever since.

1 Ibid, pp. 43-44
2 Ibid, p. 51
3 Ibid, pp. 69-70
4 Ibid, p. 77
Religious Ideology: More than a Superstructure

As I hinted before, Iranian class analysts often ignore the unconventional interpretations of class analysis even among the Marxists themselves. Abrahamian is exceptional among the class analysts in taking interest such alternative interpretations. For example, he has noted the studies of the English Revolution by Christopher Hill. In fact, Christopher Hill, Perez Zagorin and Lawrence Stone have argued in separate works that this revolution should be explained in terms of the ideological struggle that aimed at reinterpreting the social reality of England of the seventeenth century.1 These analysts agree that the ideological struggle, launched by the gentry against the English royalty’s attempt to turn English monarchy into absolutist monarchy of the continental type, was presented in the language of “religious sectarianism”, and the language of “constitutional legal theory”.2

Hill particularly has connected his class analysis of the English Revolution to the study of the differences in the political philosophies, which were shaped around the struggle of gentry against the monarchy over the differences in religious faith. This ideological struggle was in large part focused on attacking the legitimacy of the regime, which was trying to turn the religious establishment into an instrument of despotism. The success of the gentry was thus, at least in part, due to the consent of the public to the new interpretations they offered of the same religious texts as their opponents used. It was out of this religious struggle that new political philosophies developed, political philosophies, which made a fundamental contribution to the formation of the English legal and political institutions of the later centuries.

By the same token, the Islamic Revolution must be seen in its post-modern context. As such, it inevitably presents similarities with the post-modern socio-political movements of the West in terms of their capacity to produce a counter-culture. The dissident student and women’s movements, as well as the race and gay movements in the West since the 1960s, and the more modern forms of dissent expressed in anti-abortion and pro-euthanasia movements, or the religious extremist movements, have all found coherence around one or another form of “sub-culture”. So did the nascent Islamic movement in Iran of the 1960s and 1970s. Just as these Western movements, the Islamic counter-culture began its ideological struggle against the existing social and political order from informal and simple associations and networks rather than formal and hierarchic organisations and parties.

This similarity is also evident in that these movements have in various degrees constructed ideologies, which have found expression in subjective, mental and cultural terms. Obviously there have also been huge differences between the Western movements and the Islamic movement of Iran in terms of the variation of emphasis on political, social and religious expressions. The Western movements have more often been expressive in fighting over single social issues, but have had undeniable political or religious tendencies as well. The Islamic movement, by contrast, has addressed multiple issues. Nonetheless, it has been explicitly political and religious, and has so far been successful in converging fragmented social forces under the common umbrella of Islam. This situation, however, may not last for too long. Nonetheless, it is obvious that categorisation of these movements as strictly populist is premature.

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2 Foss & Larkin, Beyond Revolution, 1986, p. 4
Although the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic have presented populist tendencies, the nature of these phenomena may not be discerned only in terms of populism. The reproduction of social reality in Iran, as everywhere else, has been a function of various variables. These variables operate in parallel rather than along each other in the order of base and superstructure. These variables operate at four levels that, as Foss and Larkin have noted, are in “partial combination and partial contradiction” with each other, thus rendering the reproduction of society problematic.

These levels are: 1) the level of biological reproduction including the behaviour necessary for physical survival; 2) the level of material reproduction including collective action to sustain one or another pattern of economic production or consumption; 3) the level of cultural reproduction including the reproduction of social norms and relations, techniques and relations of production, and language and other symbolic structures: beliefs, worldviews, ideologies and in short “shared conceptual categories that define meaning”; and 4) the level of political reproduction including “the reproduction of patterns of domination and authority relations”, which is closely connected with the third level. It is mainly at cultural and political levels that the symbolic structures and narratives concerning the origins and destiny of a community are invoked to construct various forms of ideologies and utopias: conceptual categories, which give rise to a meaningful life and make shared meanings possible. These meanings, however, may or may not be apparent, and very often they are “implicit within the thought forms that a collectivity imposes upon itself.”

Whether false or true consciousness, it is this vague consciousness or subconscious drives and motivations, built around the available interpretations of symbolic structures, that makes the continuation of a specific form of society and polity possible. And there is no denial that so far all these forms of polity and society have included relations of power and domination under the guise of ideologies and utopias. Foss and Larkin speak of ideologies as facilitators of “class’s own parasitism by inverting it into a resolve to defend civilisation, …or some other mystique.”

I prefer to follow Ricoeur in searching for the characteristics that make ideologies so universally used by the collectivities to define and identify themselves. At any rate, one has to agree with Gramsci, that “hegemonic ideologies” reflect the interpretations that justify dominance of exploiting classes over the polity by way of manipulation of religious establishment and other ideological means available to them. Yet, these ideologies constitute the shared imaginaries, which make the conduct of social and political life meaningful.

These ideological structures are not only available to the ruling classes; revolutionary actors also use these structures in order to intensify social and political conflicts in their own favour. Revolutionary movements as such create a collective experience, which transcends and undermines the hegemonic ideologies of the ruling classes. They are comparable to the so-called “peak experiences”, which facilitate the formation of “communitas”, a state of union and solidarity that is far stronger than the solidarity of the troops available to the ruling regime.

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1 Ibid, p. 28
2 Ibid, p. 38
3 Ibid, p. 40
4 See particularly Chapters 2 for a discussion of Ricoeur’s theory of ideology.
5 Foss & Larkin, 1986, pp. 142-143
The Islamic movement, therefore, may be included among the movements of the post-industrial or post-modern global experience, which begin with constructing anti-structure sub-cultures or counter-cultures and offer new “subjective-experiential interpretations of reality.” It is on this ground that I set out to analyse Abrahamian’s text *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*.

**Khomeinism**

In his more recent book, *Khomeinism: Essays on Islamic Republic*, Abrahamian sets out to cast away the spell of fundamentalism that has haunted the Western discourse on the Islamic Revolutionary movement in Iran. He deservedly tries to break the stereotypical understanding of the Islamic Revolution in terms of a religious fundamentalist movement, which portrays it as xenophobic, militant, extremist, fanatic and obscurantist. But, he replaces the myth of fundamentalism with the myth of “populism”.

Abrahamian rightly criticises Western analysts who consider the Khomeinist Islamic movement synonymous with “religious atavism”, and who search for similar movements in “such far-afield places as Israel, Nigeria, and Indonesia”. But, he himself searches for populist parallels to Khomeinism in even farther-afield places such as Latin America. For him, Khomeinism does not fit the label of fundamentalism, which “implies the rejection of the modern world”. Therefore, he labels it as “populist”, which means: “attempts by nation-States to enter the (modern) world.” But this definition of populism renders the title problematic and in a sense irrelevant. He insists that “populism” is the character of the Iranian Islamic movement because it corroborates with the “intellectual flexibility” and “ideological adaptability” of this movement, rather than religious purity and adherence to scriptural texts, which are the characteristics of “true fundamentalism”. He thus explains Khomeinism as a political protest movement against the status quo, driven by socio-economic concerns.

However, such an understanding of populism would be politically innocuous if it were not loaded with another understanding of the term, namely the understanding that equates populism with demagogic use of a popularly appealing rhetoric for political gain. It is in this latter understanding of populism that Abrahamian reiterates his position in *Radical Islam*, namely that Ayatollah Khomeini and his group of clerics “transformed Shi’ism from a conservative quietist faith into a militant political ideology” only to return it to a new political and social conservatism after they seized power. Thus, there is no problem with Abrahamian’s characterisation of the Islamic movement under Khomeini’s leadership in terms of “intellectual flexibility” and “ideological adaptability”, which was able to transform Shi’ism from an apparently non-political religion to a political one. The problem is that by using the label of populism in his arguments, he implies that the religious rhetoric of the revolution was deceptively used in order simply to turn an essentially apolitical religion into an instrument for political hegemony of the traditional and conservative middle class. He thus discounts the political tradition of the Shi‘i faith, which was responsible for the popular receptivity for politicisation of the apparently apolitical living Shi‘i practice.

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1 Ibid, p. 158
3 Ibid, p. 3
Among the variety of religious and secular political positions, which were freely propagated during this period, people chose to follow the position of the Khomeini group not only because of the populist nature of Khomeinism; but also because it was successful to win the contest for political power. In this sense, the contest for the leadership of the revolution involved a competition for power by revolutionary means, which gave rise to a measure of political pluralism. This political pluralism during the revolutionary period became possible because in the period 1978-79, there was no coercive means to prevent political agitation of various persuasions. For a period, the State had virtually vanished; and, as I hinted before, the society ran itself freely, autonomously and, strangely enough, extremely orderly.  

In the context of modern Iranian politics, there was no strictly non-political understanding of religion. What is known as political quietism of the traditionalist ulama must not be taken to mean no political involvement. Even the apparently apolitical tendencies carried strong political overtones. For example, in 1962-63 protest against the Shah's so called White Revolution, clerics - some of whom are labelled as traditionalist - were involved in expressing political opinions distinct from Ayatollah Khomeini's. Highly learned clerics, in fact, such as the grand Ayatollahs Shariatmadari, Mar'ashi, Golpayegani, Khonsari, and Qomi differed in their opinion from Ayatollah Khomeini, a fact that Abrahaminan himself acknowledges elsewhere.  

This difference of opinion should be interpreted, not in terms of quietist versus political, but in terms of two competing views as to how religion should deal with politics. Thus, there is a degree of simplification in denying the political influence of the so-called quietist ulama.

None of the grand ayatollahs, who were regarded by their followers as marja 'e taqlid (source of emulation) in their own right, could be included in Ayatollah Khomeini's group of clerics. The latter group consisted of predominantly younger, more politically radical clerics, who were less learned in fiqh and other religious sciences. These clerics (Motahhari, Behashti, Montazeri, Khamene' i, Rafsanjani, Nateq Nuri, etc.) were mostly referred to as Hojjat-al-Eslam (Evidence of Islam) and not Ayatollah (Sign of God), due to their juniority in the ranks with regard to their religious knowledge.

It is true that the political protest of the so-called quietist ulama was less poignant in terms of its articulation, and demanded not revolution but only certain political reforms; but it was political nonetheless. The success of Khomeini's movement naturally meant that his clerical followers, became the political cadres of the Islamic Republic, and the former group, who opposed Khomeini's unofficial party, did not.

The failure of the Mojahedin, just as other forces, such as the Liberation Movement, the National Front, the Democratic National Front, the Muslim People's Party, the Tudeh Party, and the Fada'iyan guerrillas, which attracted some public following but gained no political power, should also be understood in this perspective. Even figures such as Bazargan and Bani-Sadr, who gained a measure of political power by winning the offices of Prime Minister and President respectively, could not stay in power for long because they fell out with Khomeini’s imaginary of the Islamic government. This can also explain why there was wide reception and rapid acceptance.

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1 In the period of revolution, crimes of various sorts, as well as violent expressions of social and psychological problems had become non-existent, or more accurately unnecessary.

2 Abrahaminan E. 1993, p. 10
among the “traditional masses” of the use of religious concepts and symbols in political struggle.

The fact that people in their millions, and so rapidly, welcomed the revolution, questions the claims that the quietist tradition had become an inherent feature of Shi’ism over many centuries. If political quietism were ingrained in the popular mind, then how could one explain the spontaneity and scope of people’s reception for the politicisation of religion, and the popular aptness and skill used to produce religious rhetoric for political expression? During the revolutionary events, people, literally on a daily basis, produced new forms of an unending stream of melodic slogans, combining religious rhetoric with political purposes. They also incessantly improvised new tactics for confronting the troops, which under martial law had orders to shoot the protesters.

The fact was that the activist tradition of Shi’ism had never been replaced by a quietist tradition, and the quietist interpretations of Shi'ism had to have either temporary religious justification, such as taqiyya (dissimulation), or tactical political justification in order to be accepted. Otherwise, figures such as Khomeini or Taleqani would not rise so rapidly in popularity at the cost of the decline in the popularity of more politically conservative clerics. The secret of this popularity was in the ingenuity of these religious leaders to tap into politically relevant and publicly validated traditions by way of novel and acceptable interpretations of those traditions. This of course should by no means imply that other forces that contested political power were doomed from the beginning in the face of the inherent advantages of Khomeini and his followers; but that in the absence of more attractive alternatives, Khomeinists used their advantages effectively to win power.

Contrary to the claims that Ayatollah Khomeini was catapulted to power due to screening of his image by the world media from France, such media coverage was only relevant to the extent that it would be in a genuinely democratic condition. Therefore, such claims as “without Khomeinism there would have been no revolution - at least, not the Islamic Revolution”, can hardly be validated.1 If one means by such claims that there would be no revolution in the exact form that it happened, it would be saying something obvious. And if by it one means that there could be a revolution of the sort to fit the mythical moulds of modern revolutions (bourgeois or socialist revolution), it would probably be saying something impossible.

Referring to the recognition of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates in the Middle Ages by the Sunni ulama, Abrahamian claims that the Shi’i ulama, “failed to develop a coherent theory of State”, because they were ambivalent toward the idea of accepting the reigning rulers as legitimate.2 It is difficult to substantiate this claim because the Shi’i ulama, even as early as the lifetime of the sixth Imam, Jafar al-Sadeq, had formed a rather coherent political theory. Some Western scholars, such as Montgomery-Watt and Lambton, have referred to this political theory as “quietist” and “apolitical”. And, in the light of the current ulama interpretations of the hadith, this political theory may be understood as an alternative political theory to that of their Sunni counterpart.

The rejection of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates as usurpers of the rightful political authority of the Imams, thus, was not political ambivalence, but the core-concept of a theory of State that would keep the belief and hope in an alternative

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1 Ibid, p. 12
2 Ibid, pp. 17-18
political order alive. It would also justify the rule of the ulama as the forerunner of the government of the Mahdi.

Abrahamian refers to a decree of Imam Ali’s in Nahj-ul-Balaqa, in which he had warned the people against dangers of social disorder, as evidence for non-political attitude of Shi’ism. However, such an interpretation is very far-fetched considering numerous substantiated interpretations by the politically active ulama of Nahj-ul-Balaqa arguing that Ali’s philosophy of religion was in fact extremely political. Apolitical interpretations of Ali’s decrees and sermons, would be readily dismissed by the radical ulama on the ground that Ali’s warning against endangering social order was a political decree to maintain a legitimate order. This would be contrasted with the call, for example, of Imam Hussein for insurrection against the existing order, which was considered to be a call against an illegitimate order.

Even the move under the Safavid dynasty by the Shī’i jurists to theorise political collaboration of the ulama with the State may be considered as a clear political development. One may even argue that the move by the clerics such as Majlisi to legitimise Safavid monarchy in exchange for the State’s upholding of the principles of faith followed the model of political alliance of the Sunni ulama with the Ottoman sultans. References of the Shī’i ulama to the king as the zellollah (shadow of God) was thus in analogy with the references of the Sunni ulama to the caliphs and sultans as the amir-al-mo’menin (the leader of the believers) and the ul-al-amr (the holder of authority).

Nor was the theory of velayat-e faqih an invention of Ayatollah Khomeini. Rather, it was long known to the ulama in the sense of social and legal guidance of the believers as marja‘e taqlid, and in terms of the legal guardianship of minors, widows and those, who were incapable of looking after their own interests, such as the insane. However, this concept too had been re-interpreted at least as early as the eighteenth century by the clerics such as Mulla Ahmad Naraqi to imply that the ulama had a right to political authority. Political authority of the ulama had also been expressed implicitly in the 1890s during the Tobacco Movement by Mirza-ye Shirazi, and during the Constitutional Revolution by constitutionalist clerics.

The existing class analyses of the Iranian Revolution interpret Ayatollah Khomeini’s political career as one of conservative-turned-radical-turned-conservative-again. They see in the changes in Khomeini’s political positions, expressed in Kashf-ul-Asrar and Hokumat-e Eslami, the moves of an opportunist politician. For them, Ayatollah Khomeini was a politician who was totally conservative in the beginning, lagging behind secular and Islamic intellectuals in political radicalness; and then turned radical at the moment of political victory, borrowing intellectuals’ radical rhetoric to claim political power. He is alleged to have then turned conservative again following his accession to power in order to defend the class interests of the traditional merchants of the bazaar.

The emphasis of such views is on Ayatollah Khomeini’s stance in Kashf-ul-Asrar, published under powerful Reza Shah, where he had refused to call for the overthrow of monarchy. And there is also reference to his radical position during the 1970s against the monarchy, when the leftist secular and Islamic forces had already prepared the condition to call for the overthrow of the monarchy. This view thus implies that Ayatollah Khomeini hijacked the political leadership of the revolution.

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1 Ibid, p. 19
2 See Chapter 5 for more details.
from its rightful owners by using opportunistic tricks. Such analyses appear to be questioning the genuineness of Khomeini’s radicalism and revolutionism on the ground that he gradually moved from a cautious political protest against the monarchy to a radical opposition to this regime.

However, it is not difficult to understand the political manoeuvring of Khomeini in terms of the moves of an opposition political figure. According to this interpretation, Ayatollah Khomeini’s political moves may be seen in a different light. As such, in the 1940s, he demanded representation for his constituency: Islam, by admonishing the government to respect the faith, let more clerics to enter parliament, and seek advice from the ulama to ensure the conformity of the government legislation to the Shari’at. But after about three decades of silent observation, followed by open political protest against the religious, cultural, social, political and economic developments that were occurring under the Pahlavi regime, he became disappointed with any possibility of democratic means of political representation. Having grown into a sophisticated religious leader, and a moral, social, and political thinker and activist, he thus demanded the whole power by challenging the ideological structure of the legitimacy of the monarchy. In his quest, he also put forward a program of political sovereignty for an Islamic Republic under the guardianship of the faqih.

However, the natural right of religion - as a faith, as a culture, as an institution, and as an interest group - to political representation was not recognised by the Shah. It is arguable that if the Shah had recognised this right and had provided institutional means for this representation of religion, the course of Iran’s development, both culturally and socio-economically, could have been different. No doubt, there would still be an increase in political activism among the ulama. But, the occurrence of violent mass movement might well have been averted.

In fact as many observers would admit, the idea of revolution and republic did not initially exist among the ulama; rather, it was raised in time as their hopes for political participation were dashed. Khomeini’s appeal to the government in the 1940s to give a chance to the ulama to participate in addressing social problems, as social reformers and moral philosophers, went unheeded by the regime. Even as late as the 1960s, as Abrahamian acknowledges, Ayatollah Khomeini asked the Shah to stop mistreating the ulama, who were the “true guardians of Islam”, and to reform the government so that “he would not go the same way as his father did, namely into exile.” These were clear enough political expressions. If they were heeded at the time by the regime, there was still a chance, from the late 1960s onwards, to see the development of a form of political pluralism in Iran in which religious forces could participate as serious political parties and organisations.3

The Shortcomings of Class Analysis of the Islamic Revolution

In criticising the class analysis of the Iranian Revolution, I do not claim that this type of analysis has no relevance; rather, my claim is that such analysis cannot explain many important aspects of this revolution. Class analysis can certainly explain

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1 Abrahamian, E. 1993, pp. 20-21
2 Ibid, p. 21
3 In Pakistan and Turkey, the tolerance of Islamic political parties has arguably reduced the chance of political revolutions around Islamic ideologies.
the socio-economic conditions of Iran, the stratification of the society, and certain aspects of the events, movements and political alliances involved in the revolution and its aftermath. But, it cannot explain the understandings, motivations, passions, feelings and determinations that linked the latent background conditions to collective action.

For example, in explaining the process of the Iranian Revolution, as well as the important post-revolution events, class analysis answers as many questions as it leaves unanswered. Events, such as the hostage crisis, the war with Iraq, the fall of the provisional government of Mehdi Bazargan, the election of Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr to presidency, the cultural revolution (enghelab-e farhangi), the uprising of the Mojahedin and the fall of Bani-Sadr, cannot be explained fully by class analysis.

The causes of the revolution may be attributed to the social and economic crisis of Iran. This crisis could in turn be explained away by the rise and fall in oil prices, the rise of the capitalist mode of economy and the new developments in social stratification, the growth of industrial wage-labour, the repression of national bourgeoisie, and the political agitation of the new middle class. But, these attributions do not explain the rise to power of clerics and the traditional middle class, which were of least economic importance in the modern socio-economic developments in Iran. Similarly, the hostage crisis, the fall of the provisional government of Bazargan, the cultural revolution, the deposing of Bani-Sadr and the suppression of the Mojahedin may be attributed to the push of petty-bourgeois populist clerics to consolidate, their grip on power. But, such an analysis does not deal with important cultural, religious and political issues involved in the confrontation of Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers with their domestic and foreign opponents.

In the case of confrontation with the United States, for instance, it is vitally important to understand the depth of the imagery of the revolution as a just cause of the oppressed (mostaz'afin), and the need to confront a powerful and unjust enemy, the Great Satan. This need was expressed in the take-over of the American Embassy in Tehran, and the ensuing hostage drama and propaganda war over the American espionage nest (laneye jassusi). Also in the confrontation with the domestic forces, which were perceived to be the enemies of the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini and his followers moved to curb what was already identified as corrupt influence of the Western culture in Iran (gharbzadegi) by a generation of Iranian religious modernists.

The fear of the return of American influence pushed the revolutionary enthusiasts to overthrow Bazargan and Bani-Sadr, who were concerned with Iran's economic and political isolation from the world, but were perceived to be leaning toward the West. The cultural revolution against the universities, and particularly the division between the maktabi (devout) and motekhasses (expert) intellectuals, should be understood in light of the perceived fear of the religious intellectuals of an atheist, Western and, at any rate, anti-Islamic source of cultural and political propaganda and agitation.

Nietzsche had already alluded to the fear of enemies, which had dominated Europe in the late nineteenth century under the rubric of "armed peace", and was to become the state of affairs between all nations thereafter. He wrote: "The so-called armed peace, as it now exists in all countries, is the absence of peace of mind. One trusts neither oneself nor one’s neighbour and, half from hatred, half from fear, does not lay down

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1 This term was attributed to the American embassy in Tehran.
arms.” Robert Rieber and Robert Kelly have discussed the psychological processes that give rise to the collective need to create “a shared image of enemy”, as part of “the logic of group action and mass mobilisation”.

Whether in Adler’s “fictions”, Jung’s “persona”, or Freud’s “Oedipus complex”, the process of enmification must be understood as part of a process of “self-inflation”, which makes it necessary for the individuals as well as groups to see the Self as all “virtues” and the Other as all “vices”. From a psychological standpoint, Reiber and Kelly have emphasised on the “intervention of a symbolic layer in the regulation of human conflict,” which is responsible for the “prejudice” that underlies “the rational man of compromise and conciliation”. In this vein, they exemplify among other cases, the revolutionary language of Ayatollah Khomeini whereby the West and particularly the United States are portrayed as enemies of Islam in terms of “infidel” (kafr). The global expansion of the American power since the World War II on the back of the images of enemy as fascist, anti-democratic, communist, fanatic, terrorist and fundamentalist is another example of the same phenomenon.

This process of enemy making, which is one of the prerequisites of any attempt at mobilising a collectivity against domestic and foreign enemies, is in various degrees relevant to all belligerent groups during wars and revolutions. It is, in psychological terms, the same phenomenon as we have previously discussed in political terms under the rubric of ideology, whose function it is “to organise the common perception around certain images in the pursuit of a policy for collective action.”

Psychoanalytically speaking, the human mind creates images, which become the basis for paradigms and models of understanding and action. The collective imaginaries of a society, constructed by the family, the school, the media and the State via language use, are guiding agents, which make it possible for collectivities “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” the infinite number of relations, techniques and events that occur within and beyond their control. These imaginaries in fact provide for “the background stocks of knowledge and the cognitive maps”, which are responsible for the coherence of every form of community.

Of course, one must distinguish between “rational recognition of an important adversary” and “an irrational distortion of policy brought about through enmification.” But, as far as experience is any guide, apart from rare instances of recognition of others as different, the belligerent approach of the stronger powers toward the weaker powers of different persuasions have been based on distortive enmification. Examples of such enmification are evident in the confrontation of the United States with Islamic Iran, the encounter of the Pahlavi regime with the Islamic Revolution and the approach of the Islamic Republic as a new power to its perceived others.

One main problem with the class analysis of the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic has been the insistence of the analysts on denying any validity to the

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1 Nietzsche, F. Human all too Human, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 204
3 Ibid, p. 11
4 Ibid, p. 14
5 Ibid, p. 22
6 See Chapters 2 & 3 for an in-depth discussion of the theory of imaginary.
7 Rieber, R. W. ed. 1991, p. 28
professed intentions of the Islamic revolutionary actors. For example, the popular intention to save and protect Islam as a religion and as a culture has never been considered as a serious factor by the “objective” analysts of the Iranian Revolution. As if self-awareness and consciousness of these actors played no role in the actions they were taking.

Despite much emphasis by the Marxists on the role of class consciousness in revolutionary action, the Marxist analyses of the Islamic Revolution have often assumed that the revolutionary actors in Iran were driven by superior powers of class interest, relations of production, and historical materialism. It is true that not all actions, collective or individual, are driven by conscious intentions; and that non-conscious and unconscious forces of history, economy, culture, psyche, memory and imagination play an important part in inspiring and motivating collective action. But, it is also true that such forces must not be elevated to a metaphysical level in the analysis of collective action.

Unfortunately though, attempts by some Marxist analysts and professional revolutionaries to make out of such forces as history and economy the only concrete and precise agents of change can be considered nothing short of elevating this forces to a metaphysical level. In fact, these attempts are as metaphysical as, if not more metaphysical than, the attempt of the religious leaders of the Islamic Revolution to assign the victory of the revolution solely to the power of Allah and other supernatural forces. Even Marx, when read non-ideologically, would reject such extremism. As Fischer has indicated, even class analysis and class-consciousness could not exclude Islam as a vital socio-political force in Iran.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing arguments, and if we have to somehow categorise the Khomeinist movement under a familiar title for political qualification, we may call this movement a religious modernist movement, rather than a fundamentalist, or a populist one. Many sources could be named among the religious modernists as points of reference for Ayatollah Khomeini in developing his revolutionary ideas, sources like Arab religious modernists, such as Seyyed-e Qotb and Muhammad Abduh. Other sources may also be named, like the Iraqi Shi'i ulama in Najaf (Ayatollah Sadr and Ayatollah Hakim), who, as Abrahamian has noted, “were forging new concepts” to combat the Communist Party of Iraq. Lay religious modernists, such as Ale-Ahmad and Shari’ati could also be named in this regard. These new influences are suspected to have begun during Ayatollah Khomeini’s 15-year exile in Najaf, Iraq. Ayatollah Khomeini himself has not acknowledged any of these sources in his writings.

Challenging the legitimacy of the monarchy was in fact a much easier doctrinal position for Ayatollah Khomeini to sustain in the political atmosphere of the 1970s than not being openly political. This was so because of the lively existence of already popular traditions of Karbala and Ashura, and the symbols of sacrifice and martyrdom of Imam Hussein, and the wide receptivity of the people to the politicisation of religion. In being politically explicit, Khomeini, as a religious leader, could be forthright about the age-old Shi'i belief that all monarchies were inherently corrupt, and that it was a sacred duty to fight against the monarchy in Iran. He could also claim, as he did, that it was the divinely ordained right of the Shi'i Imams to
wield political authority, and that it was the duty of the Shi‘i ulama to accept the burden of political rule in the period of the absence of the twelfth Imam.

There is no doubt that Ayatollah Khomeini challenged the existing interpretations of religious texts in order to innovate the Shi‘i political philosophy. But, it is hardly arguable that he did this due to pragmatic adaptation of religion to politics; rather, one may claim that Khomeini in fact did the reverse, in that he used a sense of pragmatism to adapt politics to religion. In his innovations in religious politics, he only revealed the age-old secret ambition of the Shi‘i believers to build an Islamic State, an ambition, which was discussed privately by the ulama and their students, followers, and private audiences decades before the revolution. In fact, Ayatollah Khomeini recognised the right time for articulating these ambitions in a revolutionary and, at the same time, pragmatic program of collective action, which was radical and at the same time sensible.

Ayatollah Khomeini’s doctrinal reformulation was necessary in forming a religious politics. For example, on the issue of the religious law (Shari‘at), he sensibly argued that the Shari‘at was formulated by God for the guidance of the Islamic ummat (community), and therefore, it was natural that it should be implemented. It was equally sensible that the implementation of the Shari‘at should be trusted in those who were most learned in the religious law. It was also sensible to say, as he did, that due to the spread of wrong interpretations of the Sacred Text by the enemies of Islam over the past centuries, true religion (as proposed by him) “might sound strange”.\footnote{Ibid, p. 25} It was in this context, therefore, that he declared that crucial concepts, such velayat-e faqih, distorted for a long time by the monarchic regime and its religious puppets, must be re-interpreted to reflect the responsibility of the ulama to participate in politics.

Even in the arena of society, it was understandable for Khomeini to change his positions on socio-economic issues within more than three decades between the 1940s to the 1970s. This change naturally meant a shift from a position of hoping for social reforms to one frustrated with the increasing social divide between the rich and poor, and the ever-burgeoning corruption. Thus naturally, the moderate demands for reforms, which would have addressed economic problems of wealth and equity without threatening the social order, were transformed to demands for radical social and political change in order to benefit the poor and eradicate the corrupt capitalists.

Khomeini’s revision of the theory of velayat-e faqih during his lifetime was also natural, due to emerging doctrinal matters raised in the face of various social and political crises. Crises such as the war with Iraq, the confrontation with rebellion of the Mojahedin, the problems associated with economic embargo placed on Iran by the West since the victory of the revolution, and the problems associated with foreign policy in general, warranted these revisions. For example, he proclaimed in 1989, just before his death, that the jurists, “most knowledgeable about the contemporary world”, had priority in assuming political posts over those, who had limited themselves to excellence in strictly “religious scholarship”.\footnote{Ibid, p. 35} As such, he already provided for the means of further arguments in support of some sort of secularisation of religious politics, which may or may not take a course like that of the West.

His revision of velayat-e faqih has also been interpreted to justify the ascendance to power of younger clerics loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini, rather than those...
opposed to him. Also the Constitution of the Islamic Republic has provided for many social reform programs in the benefit of the middle and lower classes. It has clauses, which prescribe “citizens pensions, social security, unemployment benefits, disability pay, medical services, and free secondary as well as primary education.”

From the foregoing arguments, it is difficult to conclude, as Abrahamian does, that “Khomeinism used organisations and plebiscitary politics to mobilise the masses, but at the same time it distrusted any form of political pluralism, liberalism, and grass-roots democracy.” As I shall show in the following chapters, the Islamic imaginary proposed by Ayatollah Khomeini and other ideologues of the Islamic Revolution can prove to be the best chance Iranians have yet had for the construction of civil society, political pluralism and democracy. In this chapter, I could not cover all of the writings on the Islamic Revolution. However, I believe, the texts that I have covered contain the core concepts of the vast majority of the literature on the Islamic Revolution. Nonetheless, in the following chapters, I shall discuss some of the alternative interpretations of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic of the post-Khomeini era.

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1 Ibid, pp. 35-36
2 Ibid. p. 38