Imagination, meaning and revolution: The sources of the revolutionary power of Islam in Iran
Alinejad, M.

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Chapter Two

Text, Imagination and Hermeneutics of Action

Introduction

Being one and different is a main feature of the emerging forms of globalisation. In the economic, political and cultural modes of social existence, the trend of globalisation is toward affirming local identities while promoting a set of universal human interests. In the sphere of economy, local initiatives are increasingly directed at offering new interpretations of local traditions in order to make them receptive to the emerging patterns of global economy. In politics, new forms of nationalism are on the rise in the form of new connections with the past heroes, myths, religions, wars and revolutions; while still willing to belong to a global political hope for universal values of peace and non-violence, and respect for human dignity. Particular cultures are also being asserted in the form of specific identities that seek global recognition. It is being increasingly recognised that distinct collective identities must become a part of the global human experience.

With such an understanding of globalisation, I shall use the space in this chapter to situate modern collective movements, like the Islamic Revolution of Iran, within the context of the modern global politics of recognition. In this sense, I consider the desire to win global recognition as the driving force of the Islamic Revolution. The quest for the fulfilment of the desire for recognition, which Hegel identified as a generic human need, was manifested in Iran in the form of the ideology of a religious revolution.1 The religious character of the Iranian Revolution may thus be understood in terms of the transcendental motivations that were created by the Islamic political discourse. These motivations generated a powerful political force that was able to mobilise the population to take action for fulfilling the desire for recognition. To say this is not to say that socio-economic and politico-economic problems did not concern the revolutionary actors in Iran; but that these problems themselves found political meaning in the context of the desires and motivations, which were created by new understandings of the Islamic political discourse.

I have already made some references to the significance of collective memories and imaginations in motivating and actualising the Islamic Revolution of Iran. The present chapter lays out the theoretical backdrop of the connection of the hermeneutical interpretation of texts and the phenomenology of collective political action, which could be used in developing a new understanding of the Islamic Revolution. I shall discuss the connection between the hermeneutics of text, imagination and social action in the context of the rise of new ideologies in the global scale; ideologies that are offering new truth claims in order to create new variations of power.2 In particular, I shall use the dichotomy of distanciation - belonging in order to explain the tendency of the Islamic revolutionary movement in Iran to belong to both, a particular cultural tradition and a universal human culture.

My understanding of the role of the hermeneutical interpretation of the texts of tradition (the historical, religious and fictional narratives) in motivating political action is based on the assumption that there is a link between the act of interpretation

2 My arguments here will closely follow Paul Ricoeur’s theory of text and theory of imagination as developed in his essays collected under the title From Text to Action (1991).
and the psychic energies that bring collective action to existence. I argue that the act of interpretation is the means by which human collectivities discover in the texts of tradition meanings that make their existence as distinct collective identities comprehensible to themselves. I also argue that the texts of tradition, as the repository of human experience, connect particular human collectivities to the general human struggle for recognition. This interconnection between the act of interpretation and such psychic energies as collective desire for recognition forms the condition for the possibility of social change by creating the motivations that make collective action meaningful for its participants.

I view collective action as a movement emerging out of the tension between collective effort to grasp the meaning of the historical experience, and the attempt to use this knowledge to produce new variations of power. To put it crudely, human collectivities begin to act to change their lives by the will to knowledge of their historical experience. They try to gain this knowledge by distancing themselves from their own everyday experience, and by seeking the meaning of their present existence in their traditions. The interpretations of the text of traditions - the various historical, religious and fictional narratives, which are as rich and diverse as the various cultural forms of humanity - provide the means for this connection with the past. But human action does not reach its full potential unless there appears a form of belief, a psychic state of mind, which is normally formulated in the form of an ideological discourse. It is through this expression of desire in discourse that human beings return to self after the detour of the signs and symbols of humanity in order to participate in the particular historical experience to which they belongs.

I shall try to use this understanding of human action in demonstrating the liberatory potentials of the Islamic Revolution of Iran without failing to criticise its repressive and violent tendencies. My critique of the violence of the Islamic Revolution will be directed at the dysfunction of the Islamic revolutionary discourse when turned into the discourse of legitimation of a new mode of domination. It is thus in the process of the institutionalisation of the Islamic revolutionary ideology that the violent tendencies of this ideology could be understood. The violence appeared as a means for repressing the further outpour of the desire for liberation. In the language of psychoanalysis, this kind of ideological dysfunction is understood as pathological. In this sense, collective utopias, created in search of a meaningful existence in the world, become pathological when violence becomes a price to be paid for the gratification of certain collective desires and aspirations at the cost of others. The desire of the Iranian revolutionaries to form a collective identity on the basis of religious faith and national sovereignty became pathological when violence became an instrument for the institutionalisation of this desire.

But violence should not deter us from seeing in the Islamic Revolution a powerful liberatory force. This force has appeared, at one and the same time, as an attempt to find practical answers to the problem of joining Iran, as a particular political community, to the global process of historical development, and as a forceful struggle to assert a distinct cultural identity. The Islamic revolutionary ideology should be seen primarily as the formulation of a utopian dream of freedom and justice, which was a product of Iran's encounter with the global force of the Western modernity. Since the colonial period, the push for globalisation had taken concrete ideological formulations, with technical rationalisation and homogenisation of diverse economic and political cultures as its main guide. Under this ideology, the West had succeeded to create a global economy, which met the technical demands of "instrumental rationalism". This global ideology has been increasingly accepted as a
universal model for economic development. However, the project of globalisation has created strong tensions at both local and international levels by trying to extend the model of the universal rationalisation of economy to the sphere of politics. The reason for this situation is perhaps that politics belong by nature to the field of ethics of life, the field of regulations of emotions and passions that animate the properly human affairs. This is how Aristotle understood politics, and I think his understanding is still valid. And perhaps this is why political life still escapes the effort of modern instrumental rationalism to bring it under the control of its technical causality.

The process of globalisation of politics has thus suffered serious setbacks. Instead of the universal polity that the protagonists of instrumental reason from Hobbes to Marx had tried to theorise, the real course of globalisation has involved a proliferation of particular national and religious identities in search of objectification of their communal aspirations. The quest for recognition, which has appeared in the form of new religious and secular ideologies, underlies the demands for alternative power relations at local and international levels. They mark the advent of modern social movements, revolutions, and demands for nationhood or statehood.

Modern social movements in the advanced industrial societies, such as the movements on behalf of the women, ethnic and racial minorities, and homosexuals, although local, have created serious global reverberations. These movements are inherently connected with the historical repression of the desire of these social groups to assert themselves as distinct and dignified identities. In the dominated societies at the periphery of the global economic system, where new variations of power are often offered in violent outpour of religious or nationalist zeal, local political movements also demand global hearing. The Islamic Revolutionary discourse in Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world, and the States that are called “rogue” or “renegade” belong to this latter type of the expression of desire.

Hermeneutics, phenomenology and Critical Theory

Paul Ricoeur has situated the imaginative interpretations of traditions at the heart of understanding human action. Present action is thus understood as a consequence of new understandings of the past, understandings that unfold in the process of the interpretation of the texts of tradition. In this sense, text proposes an imaginary world, which is claimed to offer as a better condition of existence. This imaginary is offered in the context of a narrative of tradition. Action unfolds as a claim to make the “proposed world” in the image of a desired interpretation of traditions, which despite its connection to the past is a novel proposition, seeking social, political and institutional change through the critique of tradition.

Ricoeur’s theory of imagination is an attempt to bring the traditions of hermeneutics, phenomenology and psychoanalysis together by bridging the gap between interpretation, understanding and critique. It could be situated at the crossroads of the traditions of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Max Weber, Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas. Ricoeur’s work may be described as an effort to continue and correct the traditions of phenomenology, hermeneutics and psychoanalysis.

In developing my own hermeneutical analysis of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, I will follow Ricoeur’s theory of imagination and his hermeneutical critique of

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ideology. The hermeneutical critique of ideology can be situated in between the traditions of hermeneutics, phenomenology and critical theory, where it tries to identify the historical and theoretical links between these otherwise quite distinct traditions. It thus traces the continuities between Husserl’s phenomenology, Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Habermas’ critique of ideology, which may be considered as three of the main contemporary trends in political and moral philosophy. The Hermeneutical critique of ideology tries to explain and at the same time refine the discourses that take the relationship of tradition, ideology and authority as their referent. It seeks to fulfil a twofold task: to locate in the structure of phenomenology and hermeneutics the capacity to contribute to the development of a legitimate critique of ideology, and in the structure of critical philosophy the need of awareness of its own “hermeneutic presuppositions”.1 Here, I shall first discuss the attempt to link hermeneutics and critical theory referring to Ricoeur’s intervention in the debate between Gadamer and Habermas; and then I will develop my arguments on the continuity and disjunction between phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Gadamer - standing at the crossroad of the works of Schleielmacher, Dilthey and Heidegger – has continued and refined the tradition of German Romanticism. He has developed, in his *Truth and Method* (1960) and other writings on philosophical hermeneutics, a theory of understanding that seeks to locate historical consciousness in the interpretation of the texts of tradition, which transmit historical experience. Gadamer’s philosophy, according to Ricoeur: “turned hermeneutic philosophy toward the rehabilitation of prejudice and the defence of tradition and authority, placing this philosophy in a conflictual relation to any critique of ideology.” But at the same time, Gadamer’s hermeneutics has had a universal appeal that “surpasses” the narrowness of Romantic tradition in its connection with “the universal linguality” of the human condition, a universality that would make the struggle against the prejudices of particular cultures possible. The conflict between Romanticism and Enlightenment can thus be understood through the work of Gadamer in terms of the dialectical interplay between the nostalgia for cultural particularism, or “prejudice”, and the critique of ideology in its articulation of prejudice.

The whole structure of the binary opposition between the Enlightenment message of universal progress of mankind and the Romantic message of return to specific cultural traditions may thus be deconstructed in terms of this dialectical interplay between the universality of instrumental reason and the particularity of historical experience. On one side, there is the narrative of emancipation from the narrowness of cultural prejudice through a universal historical consciousness, which is manifested in the form of the modern State and modern revolutions. On the opposite side, there is the narrative of the return to authority through religious and mythical traditions by tapping into the emotional energies of the unconscious, which is manifested in the form of the literary imagination, religious resurgence, utopian desire and cultural fantasy.

As Ricoeur has suggested, one could find in Gadamer’s work the possibility of transcending the opposition of Enlightenment and Romanticism by reconciling the concepts of freedom and authority. Authority therefore becomes meaningful only if it is consented to by free individuals who make free judgements. The acceptance of authority is thus a process of “doubt and critique”. The authority of a tradition is recognised if that tradition is capable of securing the suitable condition for the

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1 Ricoeur, P. “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology” in *From Text to Action*, 1991, p. 271
2 Ibid, p. 273
3 Ibid, p. 280
freedom of judgement and critique. Preservation of such a tradition may thus involve a movement of renewal or revolution that would discard the unjustified violence and repression of that tradition via critique.

The critique of tradition therefore passes through a critique of cultural prejudice; a critique that is not out to destroy prejudice in its entirety, but to create a self-awareness that opens up cultural prejudice to views that are beyond its immediate horizon. Prejudice, as “the horizon of the present”, must therefore be recognised only as a starting point for understanding the meaning of action in terms of a force that opens up the horizons of the future. But this primary function of prejudice reaches its full potential only if it can avoid falling back onto itself. It is in its opening up to “the other’s point of view” that the self can confront with its immediate limitations and its prejudices. According to Ricoeur: “historical knowledge cannot free itself from the historical condition. It follows that the project of a science free from prejudice is impossible. History poses meaningful questions to the past, pursues meaningful research, and attains meaningful results only by beginning from a tradition that interpellates it.”

However, hermeneutical critique of ideology has to surpass the traditionalism of Gadamer’s theory of text in order to make evident the liberatory potentials of the historical experience. Hence, the essential need for recourse to the traditions of critical theory and psychoanalysis in order to introduce the theory of imagination. Critical theory, which arose from the interaction of Marxist theory of history and Freudian psychoanalysis in the Frankfurt school, stands opposed to the views that advocate the restoration of the authority of tradition. The opposition of critical theory to hermeneutics may thus be understood as a continuation of the dialogue between tradition and its critique. This opposition may be established along four lines: 1) the opposition of the concept of “interest” to that of “prejudice”; 2) the opposition between “critical social sciences” to hermeneutical “reinterpretation of cultural traditions”; 3) the opposition of the concept of ideology as a “systematic distortion of communication” to the theory of understanding as a hermeneutical recovery of meaning in traditions; and 4) the opposition of the ideal of “unrestricted and unconstrained communication” to the ideal of ontological belonging of the being to the world of text.

The concept of interest, as developed by Habermas in Knowledge and Human Interests (1968), has its roots in the interpretations offered by Lukacs and the Frankfurt school of Marxism as against the concept of prejudice which Gadamer inherited from the Romantic tradition and from Heidegger. In Gadamer, the concept of prejudice underscores the prior belonging of all understanding to a pre-understanding that precede it in the structure of traditions. In Habermas, the concept of interest points to the predication of all human action upon the force of desire. Habermas remains faithful to the tradition of critical reflection beginning with Kant and leading through Fichte and Hegel to Marx and Freud; but at the same time he tries to refine this tradition. In Marxism he sees a critical function that frees reflective philosophy from the dominance of the “Kantian subject”, the “Fichtean ego” and the “Hegelian consciousness”, and situates it in the domain of labour and production. The Marxian concept of “class interest” underlies the relations of production in which man, “the producer”, is situated. Marx’s concept of human labour revolutionised the theory of subject by bringing action to the forefront of the human critical activity. Man’s labour was henceforth understood as a force that shaped the condition of any reflective activity. Marx’s emphasis on the forces of production as the principal agent

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1 Ibid, p. 283
2 Ibid, pp. 285-286
of change pointed to the function of class interest in historical development. In Marxism therefore there is potential for both revealing the structural priority of the relations of production over the Kantian subject and Hegelian spirit, and the critical function to unmask the fundamental grounding of all knowledge and power in class interests. But Marxism as an ideology has not been immune to pathological tendencies.

Habermas advances a critique of Marxism, which targets its proclivity to abandon its reflective function in its consummation by positivism, objectivism and structuralism. This critique is a continuation of a tradition that questions the ideological function of Marxism as a specific form of ideological distortion, which seeks to present Marxism as “an allegedly disinterested knowledge”, a knowledge that would rationalise and legitimise “one category of action at the expense of all others.”

Beginning from the Marxian concept of interest, Habermas proceeds to a general category of human interests, which includes various forms of interest including but not limited to class interest. Class interests along with other technical or instrumental interests of humanity are considered as part of the human activity to gain mastery over the objective world in both its natural and social manifestations. This category of interests underlies the enterprise of “empirical-analytic science”. Another category of interests is proposed under the rubric of “practical interests” that belong to the sphere of human inter-subjective activity and the search for meaning, and underlies the “historical-hermeneutic sciences”.

It is in recognising hermeneutic sciences and category of practical interests that Habermas comes closest to Gadamer. In connecting the understanding of human inter-subjective activity to the domain of communication, he accepts that this understanding can be achieved through the interpretation of texts as the domain of exchange of inter-subjective messages. Human inter-subjective activity therefore belongs to the sphere of “communicative action”, which is of a different order than “instrumental action”. Ricoeur has emphasised the affinity of Habermas with Gadamer in that both recognised “communicative action” as the domain of meaning in distinction from “instrumental action” as the domain of exploitation.

Habermas thus presents an internal critique of Marxism in the sense that he offers his critique not in rejection of Marxism, but by remaining in the Marxist tradition. His critique of Marxism therefore amounts to nothing short of a peculiar reinterpretation of Marxism by recourse to what was hidden in the Marxist original discourse. In fact, it is in the distinction between the forces and relations of production in the original Marxist discourse that Habermas develops his theory of communicative action. Accordingly, in the forces of production there is the generic proclivity of man to express in labour his desire to master the objective world. Psychoanalytically speaking, this generic character of human beings is related to the world of the unconscious, the locus of the repressed energies of life; and as such it underlies the universal will to autonomy. In the relations of production, on the other hand, lies the source of the particular forms of organisation of human labour, the institutional structures of the activity of production, the specific cultural, political and legal forms that govern the division of labour and class antagonism.

It is in the field of relations of production that categories of subjectivity and consciousness appear in the form of a particular discourse of domination that seeks to

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1 Ibid, p. 287; Ricoeur’s analysis of Habermas’ concept of interest is largely based on references to his Knowledge and Human interests (1968). In his two volumes of The Theory of Communicative Action, he also advanced his ideas about the human interest in free communicative action.

2 Ibid, p. 288
impose a specific form upon these relations. The political concept of freedom arises in the context of this push of specific structures of knowledge and power to mould the discourse of power in one or another ideological form. Ideology therefore may be understood as a specific form of discourse that in its instrumental rationality seeks to control the free flow of human communication. Ideology, in this sense, is an instrumental action, which has the function of concealing, distorting and repressing the free and unrestricted communicative action by justifying violence and domination. The enterprise of freedom therefore finds its full potential in confronting this repressive and distorting function of ideology. In the context of the technical and systemic domination of humanity by the power of science and State, the generic human drive to autonomy appears in the form of various discourses of liberation, which express interest in restoring the meaning of action by resisting the ideological pressure of science and State on free communication.

The interest of humanity in establishing a free flow of inter-subjective communication underlies Habermas' appeal to “critical social sciences” as an enterprise for the critique of the ideological functions of sciences and the State. This critique is inevitably implicated in the critique of traditions that support the ideological functions of the institutions of power and knowledge. According to Ricoeur, the tendency of Habermas to give the critique of tradition a value higher than the constitutive and integrative values of the authority of tradition distinguishes him most sharply from Gadamer. Habermas’ critical social sciences are driven primarily by the human interest in liberation, and not by the interest in belonging to a cultural tradition. These sciences must then free themselves from ontological presupposition of the philosophy of being and take critical self-reflection as their point of departure.

What Gadamer sees in traditions as their strength, Habermas see as their weakness. The capacity of traditions in constituting our subjectivity is then seen as institutional constraints on our consciousness. Liberation is therefore placed above understanding, and critique above hermeneutics. The premise of hermeneutics is that misunderstanding is the source of the concealment of meaning in the structure of the text. Accordingly, misunderstanding presupposes an understanding that should be recovered in the form of meaning through the act of interpretation. In the Habermas' critical theory, ideology plays a similar role to misunderstanding in hermeneutics. But unlike hermeneutics, critical theory sees its task not in creating understanding through interpretation, but in the analysis and criticism of the pathological nature of ideology. Hence, the affinity of the critical theory with psychoanalysis. Unlike understanding that in the view of hermeneutics always precedes a misunderstanding, critique does not precede ideology, but comes after it. In the critical theory, ideology is seen as the discourse of justification of the repression, domination and violence of authority. In the language of psychoanalysis, the function of ideology is analogous to the function of repression and censorship, and the function of critique must be its cure.

In short, the critical theory questions the Heideggerian idea of being-in-the-world that is reformulated by Gadamer in terms of a prior understanding that is hidden in the texts of tradition and is to be recovered in the process of interpretation. It questions the claim that this understanding had existed as an ontological and constitutive “consensus” in the structure of language. It is suspicious of the hermeneutical claim that misunderstanding is the result of a secondary process involving a breakdown in the transmission of historical tradition to us; a breakdown

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1 Ibid, p. 290
that must be overcome by the recovery of meaning and by the restoration of the authority of tradition.

Suspicious of the claims of hermeneutics of tradition, the critical theory proposes that self-reflective critique “cannot be founded on a prior consensus, since what is prior is precisely a broken communication.”¹ For the critical theory, the task of critique is not to restore the authority of the tradition, but to unmask it as the locus of “false consciousness” and as the source of the pathological illusions of the subject. The critical social science of which Habermas speaks therefore has an anticipating rather than a recovering function. It should not therefore get entangled in an infinite process of recollecting and reinterpreting the past in order to develop a new understanding, because this function has an inherent tendency to recognise the authority of traditions and justify its violence. Rather, it must seek to establish an unprecedented form of communicative action that is unlimited and unconstrained. It must thus seek a fundamental break with violence of the past by changing the world in the anticipation of complete liberation and autonomy of the subject.

In Ricoeur’s words: “the gesture of hermeneutics is a humble one of acknowledging the historical conditions to which all human understanding is subsumed in the reign of finitude; that of the critique of ideology is a proud gesture of defiance directed against the distortions of human communication.”² Hermeneutical critique of ideology appeals to both of these gestures. It begins by acknowledging its fundamental belonging to past human experience; but at the same time, it seeks to confront the relations of domination that have incessantly violated and distorted human communication. It is thus in essence a political position advocating the enhancement of the present state of human communication by pointing both to its finitude and its need to free itself from the unreasonable and unjustified violence of this finitude. It does this by finding in hermeneutic philosophy the capacity to accommodate the demands of critical philosophy, and by pinpointing the fundamental limitations that a particular historical condition places upon critique.

Hermeneutical critique of ideology therefore reflects the effort to signify the emancipatory potential of the dialectics of “distanciation and belonging”, which brings this philosophical dichotomy to the level of a demand for political freedom. I shall use this method of hermeneutical critique to highlight the liberatory potentials of the interpretations of Islamic tradition in the case of the Islamic Revolution of Iran without neglecting their repressive potentials. These emancipatory potentials arise from the capacity of the texts of tradition to offer multiple meanings, which escape the effort of particular interpreters to impose limitations on this plurality. They challenge the efforts of ideologies to legitimise one or another mode of domination by fixating the text in one or another interpretation of traditions. The critical potential of hermeneutics lies in its power to offer the possibility of imagining new worlds and new belongings, a power that is only possible by the emancipation of the text from repression and violence that limit its capacity to open new horizons of reality. The mode of understanding the text should not therefore be limited to delineating the structure and style of the language of the text, although any such understanding must begin from a proper method for this delineation. The mode of understanding of the text is rather analogous to the mode of understanding action in the sense of deciphering action that is transmitted to us by the text. It is in this interpretative capacity of the text that new possibilities of being arise.

¹ Ibid, p. 293
² Ibid, p. 294
Here is where the theory of imagination offers itself as a new mode of understanding human action in the post-Heideggerian tradition. Heidegger had already introduced the notion of Dasein or “being-in-the-world” not only as a mode of being but also as a mode of becoming, a mode that opens up the horizon for “the projection of the ownmost possibilities” of the self. Gadamer introduced the texts of traditions as the domain of the emergence of new possibilities of being in the world, possibilities that we presume to be promising of a better future. But in the Heideggerian understanding of being, and in its further development by Gadamer, what was emphasised was the significance of the authority of traditions in determining the limitations of the new possibilities. By contrast, the Ricoeurian understanding of imagination stresses the role of “the subversive force of the imaginary” as the main driving force and the ultimate regulator of collective action to actualise new possibilities.

The power of imagination is twofold. First is the productivity and creativity of the field of imagination, particularly with respect to language. Poetics is a form of language that makes possible the operation of imagination as “a critique of the real”. In the work of fiction, the imaginary opens up the discourse to the possibility of other worlds. It is the capacity of imagination to make possible multiple interpretations of text, and hence multiple meanings, through “the imaginative variations of the ego”. Second, imagination has the power to regulate the outpour of fantasies of other worlds in the language of an ideal utopia, which is imagined as a concrete world, with its unique meaning; a world worth to be actualised in praxis. It therefore has the capacity to appear as a new mode of power, as the “power-to-be”. The power of imagination thus partakes from both tradition and critique. In its confrontation with the texts, imagination appeals to traditions; and in its capacity to make alternative interpretation of the texts possible, it appeals to critique. The imaginary thus gains the force of a hermeneutical critique that seeks to unmask the ideological distortions and repressive violence of the traditions, and at the same time resist its own tendency to become ideological.

In light of the theory of imagination, therefore a threefold interconnection becomes evident: the interconnection between human interest in liberation, the interest in survival and the interest in power and knowledge. The force of the imaginary to unveil the distorting and repressive potentials of traditions is gained from its capacity to project human beings as capable of emancipation through anticipation of an undistorted and unpressed communication. But the structure of this anticipation of emancipation is rooted in traditions. This is so because man’s only means to project his emancipation is by offering creative and novel interpretations of his cultural traditions. In Ricoeur’s words: “he who is unable to reinterpret his past may also be incapable of projecting concretely his interest in emancipation.”

Habermas, following Marcuse and Ellul, has already established that in the modern society the ideological legitimation of the State has not disappeared, but is being reproduced in a different form. Rather than using the enchantment of magic and religion, as Weber noted, the modern State uses the legitimating power of instrumental rationalism and secularism, which despite their religious origin have become inexorably linked with science and technology. Concealed beneath the gratifications offered by the modern society, lies the relations of domination that are legitimised by the scientific-technological ideology. However, whereas in the age of industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century the relations of domination were upheld

1 Ibid, p. 300
2 Ibid, p. 304
by appropriation of the surplus value of the industrial production by the capitalists, in the post-industrial society these relations are based on the productivity of “self-regulating systems”, such as the modern State. Instead of legitimising the maintenance and growth of the interests of the ruling class, ideology now serves the purpose of justification of the State and economy as technical sub-systems that make possible the operation of the social system as a whole.

The methodology of instrumental rationality and the productivity of instrumental action, offered by science and technology, appear as the proper modes for maintaining the modern society as a system. It is here that the scientific-technological ideology presents itself as a mode of domination, which tries to subsume the areas of life belonging to communicative action. Thus, “life-world” as the world of “agreed norms”, “symbolic exchanges”, “personality structures”, and “rational decision-making procedures” comes under repression and threat of “colonisation” by the “system”. The role of ideology in the post-industrial or post-modern world is therefore to justify the priority of the need for the maintenance of the State and economic systems over the desire for political autonomy of the “life-world” versus the State and economic systems.

In agreement with Habermas, I acknowledge the critical role of communicative action in freeing the “life-world” from the repressive domination of instrumental action through “reawakening of political responsibility”. But I side with Ricoeur in insisting that this reawakening is only possible in the domain of the text, which makes “the creative renewal of cultural heritage” possible through imaginative interpretations of traditions. I therefore call for the recognition of interdependence of the two distinct traditions of hermeneutical and critical philosophy in that they both promote the human interest in emancipation. As Ricoeur recalls, this interdependence is an ancient phenomenon, which is still relevant in terms of its liberating function for modern societies. After all, the liberating function of the memories of such foundational acts as the Exodus and the Resurrection are still instrumental in feeding new anticipations of freedom, which are based on new understandings of these traditions. Ricoeur is right in asserting that: “perhaps there would be no more interest in emancipation, no more anticipation of freedom, if the Exodus and the Resurrection were effaced from the memory of mankind.”

One can naturally extend the domain of the liberatory potentials of the Judaic and Christian traditions to the Islamic tradition due to their inherent interconnectedness. One can therefore fundamentally question the “deceptive antinomies that oppose the interest in the reinterpretation of cultural heritages received from the past and the interest in the futuristic projections of a liberated humanity.”

Distanciation and Belonging: A Hermeneutical Critique of Phenomenology

In this section, I discuss the possibility of a hermeneutical critique of phenomenology, which would offer a methodology of hermeneutical understanding human action as against its empirical explanation. The modern concept of phenomenology began with Edmund Husserl. In his Logical Investigations and Cartesian Meditations, Husserl established that the foundation of phenomenology is of a different order than that of the empirical sciences. Accordingly, phenomenological foundation is of the order of “meaning”, “intuition” and “intentionality” rather than “explanation”, “deduction” or “construction”. It is

1 Ibid, p. 306
2 Ibid, p. 307
concerned with the meaning and essence of experience rather than its empirical explanation. Thus, in Husserlian phenomenology, “transcendental subjectivity” takes the place of “empirical consciousness”. The subject of “transcendental phenomenology” is the meaning of being, which precedes the consciousness of the self.

Hermeneutical critique of Husserlian phenomenology must therefore take as its point of departure the concept of reduction whereby “transcendental subjectivity” becomes entangled in a radical abstraction, which gives this subjectivity a foundational character and thus, like empirical science, distorts the ontological unity of the subject and object. According to Ricoeur: “the problematic of objectivity presupposes a prior relation of inclusion that encompasses the allegedly autonomous subject and the allegedly adverse object.”¹ Thus, from a hermeneutical perspective, “the ontological condition of belonging” emphasises the belonging of the subject to the world that it sets out to constitute as an object of understanding. In this sense, belonging is understood as a “finitude”, which limits the radical foundational claim of subjectivity, and at the same time creates the possibility of transition from “transcendental subjectivity” to “being-in-the-world”.

Heidegger’s notion of Dasein, which he developed in Being and Time, expresses the belonging of the subject to the world as an ontological condition, which makes it possible for the subject to appear as capable of epistemological investigation. As has been noted, Gadamer followed the Heideggerian philosophy of being in his hermeneutical theory of text as developed in his Truth and Method and other works on philosophical hermeneutics. In light of the notion of belonging, Ricoeur, following Heidegger and Gadamer, proposes hermeneutics as the mode of inquiry into the meaning of being. However, in place of Husserlian “intuition” and Heideggerian “pre-given being” as the source of understanding, he suggests that all understanding is “mediated by interpretation” of texts. The notion of meaning is therefore understood as a “fore-having”, “fore-sight”, and “fore-conception”, which is to be recovered in the structure of an existing discourse, and not in a conscious “intentionality” or a “pre-given being”. Meaning emerges from a “structure of anticipation”, which is already formed by the existing categories of “explication” that underlie every discourse. Meaning is recovered in terms of understanding of something as something else via the interpretation of texts. Hermeneutical interpretation in this sense becomes part of the lived experience rather than a mere methodology of exegesis and philology.²

The possibility of multiple meanings of words as a consequence of their “polysemic” potential is deeply connected with the understanding of the meaning of being as a consequence of the “polysemic” interpretation of texts. It is through the interpretation of texts that the “semantic potential” of words finds its ultimate value. The metaphoric capacity of words reaches its full potential in a given context, which provides the condition for the emergence of meaning; but this capacity is never exhausted by any given context. As Ricoeur has suggested: “interpretation is the process by which, in the interplay of question and answer, the interlocutors collectively determine the contextual values that structure their conversation.”³

As a field much broader than a face-to-face conversation, text offers a vast domain of inter-subjective connections, which is as rich and as diverse as the vast heritage of historical, religious and fictional narratives. The textual transmission of the historical tradition alone reflects the rich diversity of cultural forms, social relations

¹ Ricoeur, P. “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics”, in From Text to Action, 1991, p. 30
² Ibid, p. 31
³ Ibid, p. 32
and political institutions that mark the vast domain of human inter-subjective connections. Interpretation of texts, therefore, entails a roundabout tour of the human relations, institutions and symbolic structures in search of the meaning of being in a particular situation. The meaning of the text thereby gets disconnected from its author, its original situation and its intended audience, and finds a new life in the context of the living collective discourse. It is through this autonomy of the meaning that the text opens up itself to multiple interpretations in connection with new situations and new audiences.

A tension arises at the moment of interpretation between the competency of the reader in understanding and the potential meanings that is offered by the text. The competency of the reader is limited by his/her pre-understanding or what Heidegger and Gadamer called “prejudice”, which in turn tries to limit the potential of the text to offer multiple meanings. This is the situation, which Ricoeur calls “the hermeneutical circle”, a situation where every new understanding is deeply connected to a pre-understanding or prejudice. In every act of interpretation, the polysemic potential of the text and the structure of the pre-understanding of the interpreter create a situation in which the interpreter is always an intermediary and never a founding or concluding agent. In Ricoeur’s words: “we suddenly arrive, as it were, in the middle of a conversation that has already begun and in which we try to orient ourselves in order to contribute to it.”

The text, in its capacity to transmit the historical tradition, creates the condition of a distancing, which is as necessary for the act of interpretation as is belonging to a historical tradition. It is this oscillation between “remoteness” and “proximity”, “distanciation” and “belonging”, that makes possible the interconnection of the temporal, geographical and cultural specificity, on the one hand, and the broad historical experience of humanity, on the other. And it is this interconnection which is the characteristic of every understanding and critique of tradition. But how are the understanding and critique of tradition possible? Here, hermeneutical interpretation offers the possibility of both understanding and critique of tradition through the understanding and critique of the ideological structure of traditions. And it is here that the full force of “hermeneutical phenomenology” becomes evident. Rather than being concerned with the subjectivity of the author or that of the interpreter of the text, hermeneutical phenomenology is concerned with the act of interpretation that transmits the message or as Ricoeur calls it “the matter” of the text, the action that is the text.

Through interpretation, text as the means of transmission of an old action becomes part of discourse, which determines the current action, and which shapes the message that motivates new action and provides a model for its representation. It is “meaning” that ultimately motivates action by making it intelligible to self and others; but this meaning is not to be found in the subjectivity of the author and the original circumstances of the text alone, nor in one or another form of interpretation. Meaning is rather hidden in the text and is to be recovered as action through a multiplicity of interpretations. It is through these multiple interpretations and the ensuing actions that the author and the historical tradition, in which the author comes to his/her subjectivity, are brought to contact with us.

True, as a version of the original action, which is never the original action itself, text may always be considered as a document severed form action. One may legitimately ask then: how is it possible to determine the authenticity of an action through the text? Here, as I mentioned earlier, hermeneutical phenomenology offers

1 Ibid, p. 33
“meaning”, which as the nexus between motivation and action, could authenticate action. To recover the meaning of the text is to connect with the past action in a way to create motivation for new action. The creation of meaningful motivations, which make action both desirable and imminent, may be the unique process of collective authentication of action. It is here that the hermeneutical interpretation intervenes not only as a method of exegesis and philology, but also as part of the human action for social and political change. Interpretation in this sense is part and parcel of the operation that begins with an attempt with understanding the historical tradition and ends up with the emergence of motivations, which inspire the quest for authenticity in new social and political action.

The power of meaning in motivating and compelling action to change the world is in the last analysis in the perceived authenticity of its “truth claim”. Beyond the author’s psychology and the internal structure of the text, the interpreter must always search for the meaning of the text in its “claim to truth”. According to Ricoeur: “hermeneutics can no longer be defined as an inquiry into the psychological intentions that are hidden beneath the text, but rather as the explication of the being-in-the-world displayed by the text.” In the quest for restoring meaning and authenticity to a text, the interpreter should discover in the historical, religious and fictional narrative their claims to truth, which connects these narratives to us as beings-in-the-world.

The meaning that the interpreter discovers in the text is therefore an authentic meaning for us only to the extent that it can propose a world in which we belong and in which we can project ourselves. This world, which may be historical or fictional, is of a meaningful value only insofar as it can relate to the “imaginative variations” that we would like to make to the existing or real world. It is meaningful therefore insofar as it opens up new possibilities of authentic being; otherwise, it would lose its meaning for us due to the loss of its referent, which is its truth claim. The text would still make a literal sense due to its internal coherence and structure; but devoid of its referent, it would lose its motivational capacity, which connects it to living action that envelops our lives and our projects.

It should be emphasised though that the hermeneutical critique of subjectivity, in the sense used here, is not intended to deny subjective responsibility altogether and end up as another form of structuralism. It only strives to restore to subjectivity the modest role that it can play in search for understanding. Accordingly, this role is not of a foundational character, but comes as a contributor in the process. In Ricoeur’s words: “subjectivity must be lost as radical origin if it is to be recovered in a more modest role.” The role of subjectivity is therefore not in its claims to a psychological understanding of the self as the originator of action, but in its preparedness to silence the foundational claims of the self in order to let the message of the text be heard. This message or meaning of the text, while including the psychological intentions of the self, is not limited to them. It is fundamentally connected with impulses, drives and desires that often escape the consciousness of the subject, but that are to be recovered as new forms of consciousness through new interpretations of the text. It creates the condition for the “distanciation of self from itself” in order to make true self-understanding possible. It is only through this distancing that the condition for a radical critique of the self as the carrier of traditions comes into existence.

In this manner, the core idea of phenomenology is saved through a shift from the field of intuitive consciousness to the field of hermeneutics of discourse. Instead

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1 Ibid, p. 36; Ricoeur here criticises the earlier traditions of hermeneutics in the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey.
2 Ibid, p. 37
of searching for the meaning of truth in "cognition" and "perception", one can seek the meaning of being in the "world of the text" by means of hermeneutical interpretation. In the tradition of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics, one can use the theme of "life-world" in the sense of "a world to which we belong", and from which we then distance ourselves in order to take an objective stand. The "distanciation" that makes scientific objectivity possible is therefore predicated upon our belonging to a world in which we constitute ourselves as subjects. The "finitude" of this belonging, however, renders the total transparency of the subject to itself impossible. The "distanciation" which enables us to set up the world as an object of inquiry for ourselves, and submit it to our judgement and mastery, is not based on our self-conscious subjectivism, but on the ontological world of signs, symbols and texts that always precedes our epistemological understanding. As Ricoeur has suggested: "there is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols and texts; in the last resort understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms."

It is in this context that I draw on the tradition of psychoanalysis where language is considered as the primary media for the utterance of the human desire. Accordingly, due to the access of desire to language, the unconscious self is guaranteed expression in speech, however distorted this expression may be. But "the speech of the other" always precedes the speech of the self and forms its condition of existence. Collective symbolism thus becomes the carrier of the metaphoric characteristic of language, which is its capacity to have multiple meanings, and thus provides for the creation of particular and common cultures.

From mediation by speech and symbolism there is a natural movement to mediation by texts, which offer the context for the emergence of multiple meanings out of metaphors and symbols. It is in the text that, as Ricoeur explains: "the same symbolism can give rise to competitive - even dramatically opposed - interpretations, depending on whether the interpretation aims at reducing the symbolism to its literal basis, to its unconscious sources or its social motivations, or at amplifying it in accordance with its highest power of multiple meaning."

It is in the text that the power of hermeneutics in "demystifying a symbolism" comes into fruition through the "unmasking" of what lies behind and beneath the collective symbolic structures. But this unmasking does not reduce the tensions inherent in the mystifying capacity of the symbols. Rather, the hermeneutical attempt at discovering the meaning of the text guarantees the rise of the conflict of interpretations. The power of hermeneutics lies in dispelling the "illusion of an intuitive self-knowledge by forcing self-understanding to take the roundabout path of the whole treasury of symbols transmitted by the cultures within which we have come, at one and the same time, into both existence and speech." The task of hermeneutics is thus to restore to the text its capacity to produce a discourse, which "never exists for its own sake" and always takes the richness and diversity of the lived experience as its referent.

As I mentioned earlier, the hermeneutical critique of Husserlian phenomenology preserves the phenomenological question of the meaning of being as the central problem in developing a theory of understanding. However, it questions the efficacy of transcendental phenomenology in discovering the meaning of being in itself via reduction and reflection alone. Accordingly, meaning is concealed not by its own structure but by the repression of alternative interpretations, which is exercised...
through a mode of domination. The task of hermeneutical critique of phenomenology is therefore to prepare the condition for the emergence of meaning by unmasking the relations of domination, relations that forbid the opening up of the text to new horizons of possibility. It is in this manner that hermeneutics of texts deals with language as the condition of experience. The search for the meaning of being in the language of the text is therefore the process of uncovering the motivations behind action, motivations that become action.

The correlation of action and language is of utmost importance in understanding the meaning of action along the same line as understanding the meaning of the text. In discerning a text there is always an intentional movement toward understanding the meaning of the words - in all their semantic variety - in a context that seeks to exhaust this semantic potential. Husserlian phenomenology used the concept of intentionality to underlie the movement of human consciousness toward the meaning of being in its manifestation as a subject. The hermeneutical critique of phenomenology seeks to demonstrate the autonomy of meaning with respect to words and consciousness. Just as words do not have control over the meanings that arise from their location in the structure of the text and its interpretations, transcendental subjectivity is not in control of the meanings that arise from the structure of collective experiences of which it is a part. In order to preserve its objectivity, the hermeneutical access of consciousness to meaning must take the path of suspension of the subject's belonging to the lived experience it is trying to understand. Hermeneutical phenomenology should do this though without any pretensions to the total detachment of the subject from the object of understanding.

The moment of hermeneutical “distanciation” provides the subject with the possibility to disconnect him/herself temporarily from a historical tradition to which he/she belongs in order to find access to its critical meaning. A metaphoric sign or a symbol stands to reveal the meaning of something as something apart from itself, but cannot be totally disconnected from that thing. Just the same, the interpreter stands to discover the meaning of a historical experience in the moment of suspension of his/her belonging to that experience without the illusion of being totally detached from it. Belonging to a historical tradition provides for the emotional affinity that moves the interpreter to discover the meaning of a given historical experience; the moment of distanciation makes it possible to signify experience in order to subject it to critique.

In short, the polysemie character of the natural languages is the basis for understanding the diversity of the interpretations of historical tradition. Every natural language consists of polysemie words that, outside a given context, have multiple meanings. In this sense, the very act of contextualising a word is the inseparable part of putting meaning into action. Action unfolds as a collective experience with language in which human collectives agree on certain meanings of the words by placing them in the context of their experience. As such, they try to produce “a relatively univocal discourse with polysemie words”. Hermeneutical interpretation is therefore the very act of discovering and offering meanings that can be collectively agreed upon in the very process of contextualisation of action.

The task of hermeneutics is thus to offer a theory of understanding human action based on multiple interpretations of the texts of tradition, which include the documents, monuments and institutions that form the condition of every collective existence. Written texts, symbolic structures and rituals of every community are handed down as the modes of fixation of the historical experience of that community.
It is this fixated experience that comes alive in new forms of action through the act of interpretation, and that makes new understanding of traditions possible.

In his essay, “The Development of Hermeneutics”, Wilhelm Dilthey, had already connected hermeneutics to the understanding of others through understanding of their experience, which is reflected in history, the great document of mankind. Following Dilthey, Ricoeur states: “knowledge of others is possible because life produces forms, externalises itself in stable configurations; feelings, evaluations, and volitions tend to sediment themselves in a structured acquisition that is offered to others for deciphering.”

Since knowledge of others by direct means is impossible due to their temporal, spatial or mental separation from us, this knowledge is not to be grasped in the illusive reconstruction of the original condition of their actions. Rather, this knowledge is possible through the interpretation of the systems of signification, which have carried to us messages that define the condition of our own action. “Self-knowledge is already an interpretation ... since I understand myself by means of the signs that I give to my own life and that are returned to me via others.”

Life as a “creative dynamism” could be discerned only through signification, which is handed down to every reader who is potentially an interpreter. Human action and the evaluation of its effects on self and others are thus understood through the exteriorisation of action in signs and the recovery of meaning in these signs via interpretation. The systems of signification, containing various social and cultural worlds, are therefore different forms of “sedimentation” of historical experience by means of which life is objectified for the purpose of understanding its meaning. “If I can understand vanished worlds, it is because each society has created its own medium of understanding by creating the social and cultural worlds in which it understands itself.” And it is via the detour of this memory of the past rendered meaningful by the act of interpretation, that any understanding of the self could be developed.

The hermeneutical critique should therefore surpass Dilthy’s hermeneutics, which limits it in the sphere of epistemology. Ricoeur, following Heidegger and Gadamer, has offered hermeneutics not merely as a methodology of human sciences but as “an explication of the ontological ground upon which these sciences can be constructed.”

Hermeneutical critique therefore is not merely an analysis of the text in order to grasp its structural sense; but it is an attempt to understand the new possibilities of being offered by the text. However, it should not be forgotten that this new understanding is never totally detached from the structural sense of the text, which is in fact its structure of “anticipation” or “pre-understanding”, and always tends to limit the possibilities of being. It is in this manner that the dialogue of history that we observe from a distance becomes discernible to us in the context of our present situation as a guide for the future. It is the virtual autonomy of this dialogue from the original interlocutors that makes it available for our interpretation in order to open up the horizon of a new being. But we are never able to make a total break with the past in the sense of creating something totally new, which is completely disconnected from the past. If a collectivity is to survive as a collectivity it must reproduce itself in new forms; but it can never destroy its past entirely.

Whereas the antinomy of distanciation and belonging, was the theme of Gadamer’s _Truth and Method_, in Ricoeur this antinomy is virtually overcome.

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2 Ricoeur, P. “The Task of Hermeneutics”, in From Text to Action, 1991, p. 60
3 Ibid, p. 61
4 Ibid, p. 62
5 Ibid, p. 65
According to Gadamer, an observer objectifies the past by means of distanciation thereby making possible empirical knowledge; but at the same time the belonging of the observer to the historical experience he/she is trying to understand renders the complete objectivity of his knowledge problematic. Thus, “either we adopt the methodological attitude and lose the ontological destiny of the reality we study, or we adopt the attitude of truth and must then renounce the objectivity of the human sciences.” Based on hermeneutical critique, we should not have to make a radical choice between these two attitudes. By considering text as discourse, we can find in text - beside its linguistic structure, which exist for itself and in this sense is “virtual” - the capacity to transmit a message that refers to a “meaning” that is real and is to be recovered in the process of an event. It is in this sense that Ricoeur has used the category of discourse as a dialectical interplay of “event” and “meaning”. All discourse refers to an event that occurs in time, occupies a space, but is not discernible until it is understood as a meaningful message that says something about something in the world. It is in its relation to the dialogue that it establishes with us, that the discourse as a temporal mute experience finds its meaning for us. Discourse as such becomes available to us as a dialogue that we, as interlocutors engaged in an event, can continue or repress according to our competence in discerning the meaning of that event.

Literary discourse is typical in its power to open up possibilities for the event of the text to become meaningful for us. It is in the context of fiction or poetry that, we relate to the storyteller, the characters and the event by losing ourselves in the “imaginative variations” that open up “new possibilities of being-in-the-world”. The horizon for escape from every day reality for those who are not content with the existing reality begins in the break with reality, which occurs in the work of fiction or poetry. “Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of the power-to-be.” Therefore, the world of the text attains its real force in its being imaginary, thereby suspending the real subject-object relations and opening up the subjectivity of the reader to new possibilities of being.

**Hermeneutical Interpretation of Texts**

Investigating the functions of narrative on the basis of a hermeneutical study of the text and its principle components, i.e. metaphor and symbolism, is fundamental to understanding text as action. The “narrative field” may be divided into two main categories: those that have a “truth claim” such as religion and history, and those that are “fictional” such as “epics, dramas, short stories and novels”. But, the main area of concern here is not the division between these narratives but their interconnection or overlapping. Accordingly, the truth claims of history as a science and theology as a scholastic discipline are discernible only in the context of interpretation of the historical and religious narratives to which they belong. Narrative is the nexus between history and religion. History and fiction cannot break with the narrative because they ultimately cannot break with the stories of human action that animate traditions. This is evident in the focus of both history and religion on categories such as “agents, aims, circumstances, interactions and results both intended and unintended”, which are the ingredients of human action.

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2. Ibid, p. 86
4. Ibid, p. 5
The fundamental connection of history, religion and fiction with the narratives of the past puts them ineluctably in a dialectical interaction. Since historical and religious realities are always constructed on the basis of a recounting of the past, they always carry an element of fiction. Conversely, fiction, while recognising its own unreal nature, strives to present itself as a version of reality. The reference of historical knowledge and religious canon to the past is not completely empirical; and fiction is not pure fantasy. As symbolic systems, they all contribute to shaping "our confused, formless, and in the last resort mute temporal experience".\(^1\) Humanity's "mute temporal experience" finds expression in the language of narratives, which are to be found in the texts of tradition: historical, religious and fictional. These texts always propose a world, which imitates reality, but invariably they also reproduce reality by proposing an imaginary of a world to be. History as a science tries to render the past transparent by means of objectivity; fiction deliberately mystifies the past; and religion combines the effort of authenticating the original event with its imaginative power of mystification.

Historical, religious and fictional texts share in their resistance to direct and positive verifiability. The world of history, the world of religion and the world of fiction can only be grasped indirectly through the capacity of "productive imagination" in offering multiple interpretations of the sings of humanity deposited in the historical, religious and fictional narratives. There are three distinct and at the same time interconnected interpretative operations in progress here. At one level, the Prophesy is handed down as an original message in the oral form to an immediate audience in the context of novel interpretations of the traditions that precede it. But the Prophesy undergoes a second level of interpretation before it is handed down to us via the texts of theologians. At the second level, History is shaped around the plot of the historical narrative by the historian's incessant recounting of the historical action through the interpretation of historical documents. And at the third level, the work of fiction is created as a plot of action on the basis of the author's interpretation of the "practical field" in a way to conform to the structure of narrative style.

The narrative history pretends to have access to truth by trying to reconstruct the real event in its original form. As such, it seeks to deny its interpretative nature by claims to scientific objectivity. The narrative fiction acknowledges that it can only imitate human action, but tries to reproduce the meaningful structures of action in the form of new horizons of reality. The religious narratives are privileged to have recourse to both a methodology to authenticate the truth of the event, and an imaginative power to project a world inhabited by truth. Religious narrative as such has an inherent advantage over narrative history and narrative fiction. The religious narrative appropriates the "polysemic" function of poetic language to offer the possibility of alternative realities, and uses the methodology of exegesis to project one or another form of ideal reality.

All the three forms of narrative have the capacity to create an imagination that demands to be articulated in action. But action is always mediated by a motivation that creates belief and certitude in the justifiability of the action. Although the narrative of belief is not constituted uniquely by the religious discourse, it reflects the main characteristics of this discourse. To be motivated to take action we need to adhere religiously to one or another interpretation of the text we encounter. Fiction has "the power to remake reality" only insofar as it can create a belief in acting to remake reality. And historical knowledge makes its own contribution to remaking

\(^1\) Ibid, p. 6
reality only where it is already inhabited by a fictional imagination to make belief. Otherwise history and fiction remain mere mute inscriptions. The formulation of this motivating belief, which is achieved by the fixation of interpretation, may be conceived as the proper function of ideology.

In its purposeful “transfiguration” of empirical reality, fiction, and particularly poetic fiction, give discourse the power to open the horizon of understanding human action not merely in terms of empirical explanation, but in terms of meaning. Language in its poetic power acquires the imaginative capacity to refer to truth beyond the “logical coherence” and “empirical verification” of a scientific explanation. But at the same time it creates the condition for the emergence of a different type of logical coherence by trying to close the possibility of infinite meanings.

The capacity of the text in opening up new possibilities of being by offering the possibility of alternative meanings, and the subsequent act of closure of meaning by the interpreter, may be conceived as the proper condition for the emergence of action. The radical power of the poetics lies therefore not only in its utopian capacity to open up new possibilities of being in the world, but also in its ideological capacity to justify one alternative as superior to other alternatives. It does this through the creation of a moral code that can be agreed upon through a system of belief, which may appear in religious, philosophical or aesthetic forms, and which seeks to legitimise an authority that would enact it. The polysemic capacity of the text makes interpretation the media of the emergence of multiple worlds; but ideology as discourse proposes one world, which becomes so attractive and desirables that is worth to be actualised. The attraction of the world that is proposed by the text ultimately determines the motivation that makes belief possible. The utopian and ideological functions of language are discernible in various degrees of intensification in all categories of text, but these functions figure in their classical form particularly in the language of religion and philosophy.

The quest of moral philosophy - in all its epistemological and ontological forms - to clarify the interconnection of the cultural, social and political configurations of human experience with an original Being has begun in the context of the interpretations of traditions. These interpretations have become possible by the poetic power of religious texts and the logic of historical narratives. The search of both the philosophy of religion and philosophy of history for this original force, and their effort to prescribe a new moral code has always faced the problem of providing a legitimate interpretation of traditions to which they belong. Both theist and atheist philosophies have been faced with this problem equally.

Marxism, for example, began its work in the context of the traditions of Hegel and Feuerbach and their appeal to a new morality. In its critique of these traditions though, Marxism itself became a moral philosophy dealing with issues of God, spirit and religion and their relationship with the world, albeit in a critical manner. Marxism is a moral philosophy insofar as it seeks to tackle the same ontological problems, which had concerned the religious texts, namely to find a salvation for man. However, it has sought to do this through a critique of the distorting language of ideology, which through the creation of belief in an illusive salvation in another world conceals the path of true salvation in this world.

In transfiguring the Hegelian spirit, Marx tried in The German Ideology to overcome German idealism by offering an epistemology of historical change. He did this by means of the uncovering of the secret of history. Marxism claims to set man free from his historical suffering that is a consequence of alienating relations of
production, and that perpetuates man's unhappiness. Accordingly, it is these relations of production that alienate man from his own meaningful action, i.e. his labour. Marxism thus appeals to the forces of life, that are hidden in man's labour, in order to unmask the ideological distortions that belie traditions in all their cultural, social and political manifestations. Poetics of labour has brought to the language of Marxism the capacity to refer to a classless world communism, which will restore to the living the whole value of their labour through the destruction of the class relations and the construction of a classless world.

But Marxism remains unaware of its own connection to the discourse of tradition and hence its proclivity to become ideological. Marxism remains powerful as an external critique of ideology to the extent that it targets it as a distorting phenomenon, which seeks to legitimise relations of domination. But it offers little tendency to become an internal critique that can account for the integrative function of ideology as part and parcel of its distorting function. In its push to make a radical break with the traditions that precede it and legitimise the living reality of alienation, Marxism remains oblivious to the meaningful structures of discourse, which allow both the preservation of order and its destruction. It is in this oblivion that Marxism as a utopian project for social change, itself has become a dysfunctional ideology, denying the emancipatory values of utopia and seeking to limit the possibilities of multiple meaning.

In the philosophical tradition of transcendental phenomenology, Husserl and following him Heidegger returned to Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche in search of the forces of life in a pre-given world and a pre-given being. The purely philosophical discourse of phenomenology and hermeneutics presented strong analogies to the language of poetic mysticism in its references to "life-world" and "Being". Poetics brought to the language of "transcendental phenomenology" the capacity to glimpse into the "Lebenswelt" (life-world). Husserl defined "life-world" as the world before it was divided into object and subject, a world that required, not an empirical, but a phenomenological understanding, an understanding based on "intentionality" and "intuition".

But, as I discussed earlier, Husserlian phenomenology without the power of hermeneutics, becomes entangled in an "infinite movement of backward questioning" in the quest for an "immediateness that is forever out of reach". The pre-given truth thus remains permanently illusive in Husserlian phenomenology. This is so because phenomenology per se ignores the living power of the metaphor, which makes the ordinary language a "polysemic" potential, a potential that can be realised through hermeneutics. It is this polysemic capacity that permits multiple interpretations of the discourse, and thus offers an ontological possibility for imagining alternative ways of being in the world.

From Philosophical to Religious Hermeneutics

Previous arguments about hermeneutical philosophy may be applied to religious texts as a particular category of the texts of tradition. The whole discourse of monotheistic religions - including the biblical and Islamic discourses - is the typical example of texts that are constantly subject to interpretation in order to shape new legitimate forms of action. In their incessant interpretations, specific theological discourses have produced specific forms of culture marking the belonging of diverse collectivities to specific historical experiences; but they have also retained their claim to truth, a claim that addresses mankind in general. The tension between the
dialectical interplay between distanciation and belonging in theological discourse has created the ever-present tension between the universal claims of various religions and their belonging to specific cultural forms. This tension may even be considered as the condition for the emergence of the modern tension between the universal claims of modern philosophical and scientific discourses on the one hand, and their belonging to particular modalities, on the other. In this sense, the fundamental tension between Enlightenment and Romanticism is also a consequence of the general tension that is the characteristic of the religious discourse.

As Ricoeur has suggested, the tension between the universal truth claim and the particular affiliations of the religious discourse is manifested in the form of “the opposition of the narrative and the Prophesy”. The profession of a certain faith is always related to a particular interpretation of the legends that are gathered in the sacred texts; legends that in their meaningful sequence form the particular understanding of a community of its origin and purpose of existence. In their sequence, these legends create a single grand narrative, which tells the story of mankind in relation to a central event, an original will, the Will of the one God. But the Prophesy of a faith always escapes the dimensions of a particular interpretation, which tries to create a univocal narrative. Out of this opposition also arises the conflict between the subsequent interpretations of the original religious texts.

It is in the dialectical interplay of these interpretations that the religious discourse has incorporated the logic of causality of events and the essence of being with the playful arrangement of sacred dramas and sagas that defy causality and forever elude an ultimate grasp of the essence of being. God is the source of a logical system of events, which in their meaningful sequence have made existence possible; but the relation of God with this system of events is forever out of the grasp of logical explanation. The events of the world can be understood in terms of the empirical study of the consequences of the human action; but the nature of the connection of the human action with the original Will that animated it is out of the scope of empirical understanding.

According to Ricoeur: “the tension between narrative and Prophesy” in the literary context corresponds to the tension between “the chronicle and the oracle”.1 The “narrative structure” occupies a space and become consolidated in time; but the “theological significations” in their connection with the original orality of the Word of God are “dislocating”, and in their search for “the meaning of the divine” tend to be timeless. Ultimately, God as the central figure of the religious discourse subordinates the narrative to His Will appearing both as the creator of man and as the deadly threat to him. His Will is the ultimate guarantor of the reward and punishment of man as the responsible agent of the world events. The Will of God intervenes in the world both as a power that can sustain the order of events, and as a deadly threat that can suddenly break the real sequence of history in a dramatic turn of events. As the power that underlies the historical progression from genesis to salvation, God intervenes at His Will in order to signify the fallibility and ultimate powerlessness of man.

Hermeneutics of the religious texts in a theological sense encounters two main problems. First it is essential for the interpreter to form an understanding of the relation between the original Word of God as related by the Prophesy in oral form to which there is no direct access, and the written text, which is related via interpretation by witnesses, and must be authenticated. The work of exegesis offers the method to tackle this problem. In both Christianity and Islam, theological discourse, in its

1 Ricoeur, P. “Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Tradition”, in From Text to Action, 1991, p. 92
various philosophical and mystical articulations, has developed and enhanced the position and methodology of exegesis. Scholastic theologians and the undisciplined mystics have both enriched the world of interpretations of the Revealed Word. The second problem is to understand the relation between the Prophesy and the tradition that pre-exists it, and which it interprets in its own right. For example, the Christian theology is based on the interpretation of the traditions received in the form of writing from the preceding Hebrew and Greek traditions. And the Islamic theology is predicated by these and other traditions that it receives via written texts.

So the interpreter, severed from the oral Word, is ineluctably faced with two types of text. The texts that precede the oral Word and are interpreted by it; and the texts that follow the oral word and try to interpret it. The common thread of writing, which relates these two problems, may be the key to a better understanding of these problems. In both cases, it is writing that enable us to hear the message of the original speech in the form of an interpretation. And in both cases, writing denies us direct access to the original speaker and the initial situation of the speech. It is through this capacity of writing that the original speech gains the power to distance itself from a particular situation and a particular audience and relate to us as its universal audience. And it is also due to this capacity that we become entangled in the web of multiple interpretations, which we try to limit and particularise. Writing therefore fixates discourse and by so doing makes it available as an “archive of memory” ready to be recounted in the form of diverse interpretations.

Hermeneutics of religious texts bears the task of placing the reader face to face with these problems, and thereby allow him/her to confront the text with the intention of discovering the core of both problems. It points to the universal message of the text, which is expressed in infinite forms of particularity. It underscores the fact that all texts propose a world, which they invite us to inhabit; a world that offers an alternative place for the new being that must be us. Thus, before any attempt at convincing, make-belief, or induction of feelings, it is necessary that hermeneutics allow the reader to come face to face with the new world that is proposed by the text in order to appropriate it as his/her own desired world. All beliefs and dispositions come after this initial free appropriation of the world of the text. Now, this world is not to be grasped through the intentions of the interpreter, who can at the most offer one possible interpretation; it can only be mediated by the work of interpretation itself, which transcends the intentions of the interpreter, and offers the possibility of further interpretations.

The poetic nature of the original religious message defies the logic of the interpreter to limit its meaning. The alternative world that is proposed by the religious message and the new being that will inhabit this world seem, at one and the same time, to be too close and too far. Man in his aspiration to become this new being has to struggle within the structures of the ordinary experience in order to build through his action the world he desires to inhabit. The project of building a new world that is proposed by the sacred text gives man the power to make his belonging to the world of the real his point of departure for breaking from this world. God, as the ultimate referent of the sacred text, then appears to be beyond any need for recognition, belief or praise. He just offers the possibility of a new being and a new world; and it is man absorbed by the grandeur of this possibility that needs to understand, to believe and to praise God in order to complement his partial and confused effort to enter the new world. God thus appears as glimpses of light to mark an otherwise dark path, and vanishes as man sorts out his responsibilities in the maze of the ordinary experience.
Man's confused and partial efforts to become a new being are reflected in his confused and partial discourses that have been expressed in the form of conflictual interpretations of the historical experience. Religious discourses offered in narrative and didactic forms, along with various literary-artistic and scientific-philosophical forms, are all partial discourses that aspire to unity and completion in the figure of God; but in their belonging to a particular experience they ultimately remain incomplete and partial. According to Ricoeur: "the referent God is at once the co-ordinator of these discourses and the vanishing point, the index of incompleteness, of these partial discourses."

The efficacy of hermeneutical understanding of the meaning of religious experience therefore lies in its power to recognise the meaningful partiality of all religious discourses and resist the attempts at "closure of discourse" and thereby closure of meaning. It is therefore the task of hermeneutics to create the condition for an internal critique of religious discourse through the critique of ideology and the illusions of impartiality and completion of the subject. This critique exposes both the irrational claim of ideology to complete legitimacy of one or another interpretation, which would close the horizons of new beings in the world, and the illusions of the subject to total mastery of the objective world. This critique opens up the capacity of productive imagination in producing new possibilities of being, as well as its capacity to become the vanishing point for the projection of a new reality. This critique is in fact a "de-construction of the illusions of the subject" about the foundational character of the will to choose. It does this by emphasising the ontological primacy of the field of imagination in which subject is offered with choices to begin with. It signifies the ontological priority of the freedom of choice over the will to make this or that choice.

The Dialectic of Text and Action

The dialectic of text and action is manifested in the complex relation between speaking and acting. This interplay of speech and action precludes the possibility of separation of these two phenomena. Speech, to begin with, is speaking of an action or experience that connects us to the immediate or distant past. Furthermore, any continuance of speech in the future has to be in terms of a project for new action. The interpretation of the historical tradition in the form of historiography, exegesis or drama becomes a meaningful interpretation only insofar as it can continue the original speech in the form of the written text, whose interpretation would become the source of action. Only then does interpretation produce feelings and emotions in us as its audience, feelings and emotions that enable us to become motivated, to intend something and to formulate reasons for actualising that intention. Using Wittgenstein's notion of "language games", Ricoeur suggests that to speak of events as caused by human action, "we enter a language game including notions like cause, law, fact, explanation, and so on." The task of hermeneutics is than to clarify the nature of the interconnection between language games and human action.

This interconnection is not to be understood in causal terms, but in terms of motivations and intentions. In this sense, the relationship between "intention and action", or "motive and project" may be explained in terms of a "logical sequence" based on "reason" and not on "causality". It is through this logical sequence that every project can be identified with a schema for an action, and every action becomes intelligible by way of a motivation that precedes it. A distinction can be made

1 Ibid, p. 97
2 Ricoeur, P. "Explanation and Understanding", in From Text to Action, 1991, pp. 132-133
therefore between the structural causality of action and the meaning of action. The structural causality of action is internal to action, and is the object of investigation in empirical science, whereas meaning is external to the structure of human action and is understood via hermeneutical understanding, which must be the guide for investigating the motivations behind action. According to Ricoeur: “the human phenomenon would be situated in between, between causation that has to be explained and not understood and the motivation belonging to a purely rational understanding.”

This argument may also clarify the interconnectedness of the world of reason and the world of desire by displaying the possibility of the expression of the irrationality of desire in the rationality of intelligible language. Motivation as the nexus between desire and language provides the condition for the articulation of desire in the form of reason. Through the intelligibility gained from the structure of language, motivation in its deep connection with desire becomes a reasonable statement that opens the horizon of meaningful action. In its access to the intelligibility of language, desire appears as motivation, which compels one to action via reasoning that justifies that action. Motivation thus does not concern itself with explanation of the causal structure of the action, but with the forces that make action possible by making it at the same time desirable and reasonable.

The causal relation of motivation with the internal structure of action is in fact concealed from understanding and can only come out post facto in empirical explanation. In other words, the structure of action is unaware of the meaning that motivates action and can make little contribution by way of compelling and moving an agent to act. Nonetheless, it can be used to explain the location of an action in relation with a cause and an effect. On the other hand, motivation makes understandable and justifiable something that is to defy causality by presenting itself as a new being. In breaking the chain of causality through reason, which is the justification of action, motivation becomes a driving force of experience unaware of the internal mechanics of the lived experience.

In a Heideggerian fashion, the human body may be considered as the appropriate locus for being that, in its compulsion to both desire and rationality, opens the way for the emergence of action capable of double meaning and hence double existence. It is in the context of the tension between desire and rationality that human action is emotional and functional, motivational and efficient. The position of the human body in nature is analogous with the situation of the human being in the world. The human body is, at one and the same time, an object among other objects in nature and a reflecting soul with a capacity for understanding, decision-making, reasoning and justifying. In Ricoeur’s words: “Human being is as it is precisely because it belongs both to the domain of causation and to that of motivation.”

Therefore, human action appears both as a function among other functions related to the systemic structure of nature, and as a force to change the world. It is the biology and psychology of the human body, which explains the function of the body as an agent of the equilibrium of the social system; and it is the interpretation of the human texts as discourse that makes the understanding of conscious human action possible. Biology, psychology and sociology as empirical sciences seek to explain the know-how of the function of the body, the psyche and the social system; hermeneutics of action tries to understand the meaning of the conscious act to change the society. In the first instance, we are dealing with the laws that regulate functions, in the second instance with the motivations that compel “intervention” in the world in the form of

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1 Ibid, p. 134
2 Ibid, p. 135
action. Hermeneutics of action must seek to clarify the interconnection of methodical explanation of functions and the interpretative understanding of motivations. As Ricoeur has suggested: “this dialectical tie between explanation and understanding results in a very complex and paradoxical relation between the human sciences and the natural sciences.”

Historical experience has been deposited in the signs of humanity and transmitted to us via the texts of tradition. Human aspirations to inhabit a new ideal world are central to this collective experience of humanity. These aspirations are manifested, however, in the form of particular cultures, which always project new utopias, new desirable worlds in which to inhabit. Hermeneutics of action must seek to unmask the operation of language in the form of ideology: its attempt at presenting particular desires as the universally legitimate projects of reason. In this sense, hermeneutics of action must take the task of offering a critique of action through the critique of ideology.

Since regrets and unfulfilled expectations of the past are the stuff of historical experience, which are reflected in historical, religious and fictional narratives, the hermeneutics of action must make them the subject of its attention. Do not the defeats and unfulfilled desires of the past always underlie new desires and expectations that connect us to the future? The hermeneutics of action as critique of ideology must seek to clarify this connection in all its complexity, a complexity that is marked by binary oppositions, such as uncertainty and certitude, fear and audacity, anxiety and confidence, and despair and hope. It is out of this complex process of emotional tensions that one or another form of action emerges vis-à-vis the world; and it is this complexity that must be taken as a starting point for the critique of action.

According to Ricoeur, the ideological function of discourse is best manifested in “the dialectic of freedom and institutions”. “Practical reason” is the agent of preservation of this dialectic in discourse by offering a mode of critique of the real world, a critique that offer something more than a mere knowledge of this world. “This critical function is prompted by recognising the gap between the idea of a political constitution in which the individual would find satisfaction and empirical reality of the State.” The constitution of State and other politico-social institutions, in this sense, stand in opposition to individual freedom. But this opposition, which may appear as a fundamental alienation, is in fact a result of the objectification of the individual desires in the form of collective inter-subjective relations. The alienation occurs in the distortion of the very process of objectification of subjective desires at the collective level. The State and its institutions signify this legitimate process of objectification, but the central role of language in this signification creates the condition for the distorting alienation via construction of ideologies. In this sense, ideologies present themselves as unique possibilities for interpretation of the texts of tradition.

The task of “practical reason” is thus to offer a critique of ideology while acknowledging the legitimate and imperative function of the “symbolic mediations” as identity structures of human collectivities. The critique of ideology therefore must seek to clarify the ideological distortions that tend to repress the autonomy of the individual vis-à-vis the excessive demands of the symbolic mediations. “The critical function of practical reason is here to unmask the hidden mechanisms of distortion through

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1 Ibid, p. 142
2 Ricoeur, P. “Practical Reason”, in From Text to Action, 1991, p. 206
which the legitimate objectification of the communal bond becomes an intolerable alienation.”

Critique of Ideology

From the foregoing arguments it should have become clear that the main problem of any critique of ideology is to determine whether or not it is possible for such a critique to move from a non-ideological position. Is it possible for the critique of ideology to claim the same ideological impartiality and logical integrity that is claimed by both modern science and the modern state? The answer to this question is a qualified no. If the critique of ideology is to render the claims of every discourse to total impartiality and objectivity untenable, it cannot offer itself as totally non-ideological. Every discourse, whether one which is fed by the will to knowledge, or one which is driven by the will to power, is intricately tied to a pre-understanding or prejudice, which makes it incapable of existing independent of the ideological conditions of knowledge and power. As Ricoeur has suggested, the critique of ideology must assume the modest role of “an interpretation that knows itself to be historically situated.” In this knowledge, it must first and foremost confirm and delineate its own belonging to the domain of the ideology it sets out to critique. It is only then that the critique of ideology can incorporate the “factor of distanciation” into its work of interpretation of the cultural tradition, and as such obtain a critical stance.

The deep connection between the interpretation of the cultural tradition and the critique of ideology is rooted in the connection of the forms of discourse of every historical community with the types of action that are agreed by that community to be of foundational character. Ideologies therefore arise as compelling and integrative interpretations of the founding acts of a community. These acts live in the community’s memories of the past, which are inherited by each community in specific forms of historical, religious and fictional narrative. Some are remote, such as the acts of creation in the mythical and religious narratives. Others belong to the near past, such as statehood, nationhood, and revolutionary transformations.

Ideology appears as an attempt by the community to make sense of itself by creating an image or representation of itself through the formation of a univocal narrative that seeks to align all the partial narrative into one complete and all-encompassing narrative. This grand interpretation of the discourse is at the heart of what we may call the constitution of a society. It constitutes a society in two fundamental movements: in terms of its own identity, and in terms of the identities of other societies. But these two movements are dialectically interrelated. In its separation from others, every society projects itself into the world of the other. It understands its own place in its relation to others, and in terms of its effort to project one universal world that must be made in its own image.

Ricoeur recalls Jacques Ellul in pointing to the significance of the founding texts and events in constituting and reconstituting major historical communities of our time. For instance, the incessant interpretations of the English, American, and French Revolutions have resulted both in shaping particular institutional structures that belong to specific nation-states, and in projecting universal forms of political, legal and social institutions. The same argument could be applied to the role that the

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1 Ibid, p. 206
2 Ricoeur, P. “Science and Ideology” in From Text to Action, 1991, p. 248
3 Ibid, p. 249
interpretations of the memories of Russian, Chinese, Cuban and Iranian Revolutions have played in shaping the historical experiences of Russians, Chinese, Cubans and Iranians, and in projecting particular moral and institutional forms as universal models for humanity. It is in the capacity to gain domination through repression and violence that the initially specific cultural projects seek to project themselves as universal claims on behalf of humanity. And it is the capacity to justify this violence that determines the extent that one culture becomes victorious and another vanquished.

Given that ideology is a function of interpretation of the discourse, it becomes evident that its critique should also develop in the domain of interpretation. Any critique of ideology therefore must start with the acknowledgement of its own belonging to a tradition that it seeks to both continue and bring into question. The fundamental belonging of the critique to the domain of ideology stems from the functional nature of ideology in constituting the condition in which the critique arises. In this sense, the critique cannot tackle the problematic of ideology by looking at it as a concept or theme to be analysed objectively. This is because, as Ricoeur suggests, "an ideology is something in which men live and think, rather than a conception that they pose."

A major difficulty of any critique of ideology is that its object of critique does not always appear merely as a rigid claim for the perpetuation of an old and outmoded conviction, which can be placed easily at a distance for empirical criticism. Rather, it appears as an energy that creates new convictions, which are immediate and urgent, and in their immediateness and urgency implicate us in the social and political events as actors with belief. It is in this implication of the temporal self in the immediate past that the present appears as an opaque situation that can never be rendered totally transparent. Hence, the impotency of the empirical criticism to understand the nature of ideology in all its complexity. Empirical explanation is not equipped to account for the role of the ideological energy in giving social and political action its due meaning. It is not fit to tackle the real power of motivational sources of this energy, which belong to the domain of emotions, hopes, fears, intentions, anxieties, intuitions, fantasies and imagination. It is this motivational power that lies at the root of the social praxis. It appears as a form of reasoning that both compels action and justifies it. Any critique of ideology cannot but take stock of the power of ideology in tapping into the energies of life.

The all-encompassing nature of ideology poses another major problem for its critique in that it poses itself in the form of a moral code that has the capacity to influence every area of human experience in profound ways. Both knowledge and power can become ideological via a process of idealisation that infuses thought and action with belief in an ideal image that is to be fulfilled. Religious belief is only one significant form of the outcome of this process of idealisation. Liberalism, socialism and scientism in all their pretence to be free from religious convictions are ultimately other forms of manifestation of ideological belief. What makes ideological convictions similar in all their theist and atheist manifestations is their inherent resistance to critique. In fact, the secret of the operative nature of ideology, which provides for the condition of social action, lies in this resistance. The tendency to idealisation of a project closes the ideological belief to critique; but at the same time it creates the convictions that absorb all the allegiance and commitment of the believers in implementing one big project. In all its rigidity and imperviousness to critique, the belief system is the source of the motivations that make social action possible. Hence,

1 Ibid, p. 251
the critique of ideology must be aware of this dialectical interplay of closure of meaning and opening up of action.

Like the ideology it sets out to question, the critique of ideology must interpret a past action. But the mode of this interpretation can remain faithful to its critical function only if it can clarify not only the distorting potentials of ideology, which carry negative values, but also the integrating potentials of ideology, which have positive values; and in so doing, it must avoid becoming pretentiously anti-ideology. It is its distorting inclinations and not the ideology per se that should be opposed. The critique of ideology must therefore unmask the pathology of the ideological function of distortion, which is the basis for its legitimating role; and at the same time it must lay bare the ideological condition of all action. Action could thus be understood both in terms of the effort of an established authority in preserving the authority of the tradition that supports it, and as the effort to offer alternative interpretations of the tradition in order to question the authority and the relations of domination it has established.

Like the ideological legitimacy it tries to question, the critique of ideology must possess a motivating character, which makes it legitimate. But unlike ideological legitimacy, the critique must be aware that its motivational force can be of value only insofar as it can question the ideological legitimacy. It must thus push the limits of the ideological legitimacy without denying ideology as an ontological condition that makes action possible. Hence, the connection of the critique of ideology with the critique of action and the critique of the self. It is nonsense for the critique to question ideology on the basis of its prejudice, orthodoxy and intolerance in general. Every society - even the most pluralist societies - carries a marginal population that is considered either intolerable or "unassimilable". Every society in different degrees marginalises the forces that are perceived to be threatening to the fundamental connection between the society and its founding event. A force that threatens the condition of existence of a community is naturally rejected, repressed or marginalised. All repressive forces justify their act of repression of marginal groups by appeal to a greater good of the community.

The symbolic structures – particularly rituals – of every community, as Levi-Strauss has shown, connect it to its image of the past. Ideology plays the part of formulating this connection in a way that creates a force that exercises real power. Max Weber has noted the sedimentation of this power in the authority of the modern state, which is achieved mainly through legitimacy and marginally through violence and repression. The critique of ideology therefore must address itself not to the general condition of repression and violence but to the claims that seek to justify violence and repression in specific conditions.

The critique of ideology cannot question the validity of the general claims of cultural traditions to justify the acts, which would seem undesirable and reprehensible, as if it could observe them from the outside. This critique must move from the inside to illuminate the structure and the content of these justifications by signifying the limitations of the legitimacy of violence and repression in a particular situation. This signification will appear not as a completely new discourse, but as a development and refinement of the existing discourse. It will appear as a mode of enrichment of the previous interpretations of traditions, which reflect the various modes of the dialogue of humanity. It is only in the continuation of this dialogue that critique can become aware of its own critical nature. As a continuation of humanity’s quest for enhancing

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1 Ibid, p. 251
the condition of existence, critique of ideology will thus appear as a critical dialogue that opens up new possibilities of interpretations of tradition, and hence new possibilities of liberation.

The critique of ideology therefore must incorporate both the awareness of its belonging to a tradition of interpretation in order to become intelligible to its intended audience, and the radical power of distanciation in order to be able to unmask the pathological illusions of this belonging. On the one hand, by incorporating the traditions of Hegel, Heidegger and Gadamer, the critique of ideology can develop its awareness of the belonging to a historical tradition. Hegel’s spirit, Heidegger’s being and Gadamer’s text are all characterised by their belonging to the world that precedes them. The development of the theory of spirit to a theory of being and a theory of text has involved a refinement of the methods of interpretation of traditions. The theory of text gives the critique of ideology an advanced tool for understanding the real power of social motivations in collective actions that make up the historical experience. The world of the text when revealed through critical interpretation exposes the operation of the spirit of traditions and the being-in-the-world in human institutions in their various religious, legal and political forms.

On the other hand, by continuing traditions of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud in psychoanalysis and critical theory, the critique of ideology can refine its own critical discourse in unmasking the pathological aspects of the ideological belonging. Ideology, as Marx had suggested, is based on illusions that offer only an erroneous image of reality in the sense that it will never allow access to the original reality. Incorporating Marxism as one mode of critical interpretation of traditions, therefore, the critique of ideology can refine this tradition and develop new traditions that at one and the same time continue and criticise Marxism. In the tradition of critical theory, for example, which is exemplified by the work of Marcuse and Habermas, Marxism can become a powerful tradition of critique of ideology in its function of presenting a distorted image of the past as the original event. But at the same time, this refinement of Marxism can offer the possibility of an internal critique of Marxism as an ideology with pathological potentials.

In light of the hermeneutical critique of ideology, the Marxist critique of ideology meets its own limitation. Despite its pretence to break totally from the illusions of the past in the construction of a completely non-repressive society, Marxism itself appears as assuming the illusive function of rendering the past transparent. The function of the hemeneutical critique of ideology is therefore to reveal that Marxism like other ideologies tries to conceal the fact that the present is eternally severed from the original event, and that new action is only possible in the context of an imaginative interpretation of the original event. In continuing the tradition of hermeneutical interpretation and critical dialogue, it would then be possible to combine the vigour of Marxism in breaking from traditions at a radical critical moment with the power of meaning that come out of the interpretative understanding of traditions. A new mode of ideological critique can then be proposed; one that would enhance the liberatory potential of this critique.

In short, the hermeneutical critique of ideology incorporates the phenomenology of understanding with the dynamic power of motivation. It combines the hermeneutical interpretations of texts with the emancipatory potentials of critique. It searches for the meaning of action in the meaning of text; but owing to the textual possibility of multiple meanings, it creates the condition of emergence of the critique of the present reality and the proposing of alternative realities. It thus creates the
condition of new action not through a mere explanation of the historical experience, but by exposing multiple possibilities for liberation that are offered by this experience.

**Ideology and Utopia**

A particular capacity of “cultural imagination” is its appearance in the system of social action in the complementary modality of ideology and utopia. Taking Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* (1929) as his point of departure, Ricoeur has looked at ideology and utopia as “deviant attitudes toward social reality,” which represent the various modes of human “non-congruence” with this reality. Accordingly, it is a capacity of cultural imagination to question social reality through a subversive function with the potential to be both “constructive and destructive.” Ideology and utopia may thus be seen in a polar relation whereby their positive sides, i.e. their integrative and constitutive sides, on the one hand, and their pathological sides, on the other, are in a complementary relationship.

As for ideology, its pathological side is best understood through interpretation of original works of Marx like *The German Ideology* and *The Manuscripts of 1844*, where the Hegelian and Feuerbachian traditions are both continued and brought into question. As such the idea of history as a progression from a beginning to an end was preserved, but the centrepiece of idealist philosophy of history, the self-conscious man, is made problematic. Historical reality thereby could not be found in the consciousness of man but in the human activity of labour, which is felt as enslavement by forces beyond man’s consciousness or control. It is in this context that the idealist tradition of the philosophy of consciousness is criticised as the tradition of false consciousness.

In this perspective then ideology is understood as a mode of representation that offers an *imaginary* account of reality through ideas that make man oblivious to the fundamental limitations placed upon him by the real conditions of production. By the inducing man with a false consciousness, this imagination is to conceal the true reality, the material conditions of life, which are beyond the grasp of the individual consciousness and operate independent of the individual intentions. Ideology, in this sense, seeks to divert attentions from the real process of life, which belong to the sphere of production, by presenting religious, political, legal, moral and aesthetic superstructures as the fundaments of social praxis.

Marx also takes the notion of “estrangement”, which Feuerbach had used to present religion as the product of the processes whereby man’s consciousness objectifies itself in an inverse image of himself, which would then find the existence of its own and the power to enslave man. But Marx uses this metaphor in explaining how labour, as part of man’s life energies, become estranged from him in the act of production, which is the process of objectification of labour and its transformation into an alienating and enslaving power.

Equipped with this theoretical assumption, Marx then understands ideology as a mode of legitimation of the relations of domination that seek to preserve the alienating and enslaving human condition by fragmentation of human activity of labour under a class-based division of labour. Marx then offers “dialectical” and “historical materialism” as a new mode of science that would use the “language of real life”; a language that makes an “undistorted mode of thought” possible; a language that would allow “the actual depiction and presentation of practical reality.”

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2. Ibid, p. 311
It is evident that here Marxism raises itself to the level of a science of politics, society and history that can avoid becoming ideological; a science that is capable to rise above ideologies to observe the world from a position of no attachment, a position of nowhere.

The critique of Marxism can appeal to Max Weber in order to address the questions of domination and legitimacy as the principal elements of a political structure. Legitimacy is thereby defined as a form of collective consent of belief that accords a structure of power the authority to impose its will upon its dominion with impunity. This legitimacy is fundamental to all systems of authority and therefore makes it imperative for every authority to offer an ideological explanation, which would encourage and justify the belief in its legitimacy. The force of legitimacy is such that it gains for the State the privilege to exercise its monopoly on the use of means of physical coercion in the institutions of law and order. The operation of ideology is therefore primarily and mainly based on motivations that it raises in support of the belief in its legitimacy, and only marginally on its power of coercion.

As Ricoeur has argued, the internal connection between motivation to believe in legitimacy of authority and the resultant relations of domination ensures that “no system of legitimacy is completely transparent.” Thereby every system of authority demands a universal legitimacy that motivates people to believe in its legitimacy, but that always exceeds the ability of the society to supply, and hence its resort to distortion, dissimulation, repression and violence. To maintain such a function then, every ideology must 1) identify itself with the common interests of the people, 2) make its claim to legitimacy acceptable on the basis of logical justification rather than sheer coercion, and 3) present itself as a general principle agreed upon by all social classes.¹

Clifford Geertz has also noted the interconnection of the distorting and integrating functions of ideology by pointing to the mediating capacity of ideology. In his article “Ideology as a Cultural System”, Geertz’s had used Kenneth Burke’s literary concept of “symbolic action” to offer a symbolic theory of ideology.² Accordingly, human action can only be presented for understanding via symbolic mediation, which always needs to become intelligible via the interpretation of symbols. The meaning of ideology therefore is not be grasped only in its distorting influence, but in its function as an interpretation that offers a collectively acceptable understanding of the historical experience. In this sense, the “rhetoric of ideology” in the sphere of social action is analogous to the relation of metaphor with its referent in the context of literature. In all its features, ideology appears as a force that keeps together a form of social or political order; a force that prevents the disintegration of the order in the face of the forces that tend to explode it. To use the language of psychoanalysis, the function of ideology is thus both therapeutic and pathological.

Utopia shares with ideology in the capacity to perform therapeutic and pathological functions. But utopia stands in a polar relation with ideology. Its therapeutic function is most recognisable when the pathological tendencies of ideology is strongest. On the other hand, when ideology functions in its integrative mode, utopia appears as a destructively subversive force. It is in this polar relation that ideology and utopia complement each other. As opposed to the ideological function to preserve order, utopia therefore manifests itself as a subversive force that seeks to shatter order. But in subverting the existing order, utopia also proposes its own alternative order. As Ricoeur has put it: “the shadow of the forces capable of

¹ Ibid, p. 316
² Ibid, p. 317
shattering a given order is already the shadow of an alternative order the could be opposed to
the given order."

The expression of utopia as a shadow reflects the manifestation of the utopian
desire in the symbolic structure, particularly in language, in terms of the shadowy
world of fantasy and fiction. In its inception, the concept of utopia appeared in fact in
Thomas More’s fictional text, *Utopia* as referring to a place that is “nowhere”.
Whereas ideological discourse appears to be rational, practical and philosophical, the
language of utopia tends to be poetic, fictional and mystical. Utopia presents its
proposed world only in *imaginary* sketches, and hence allows for the continued
operation of the capacity of imagination in completing the picture. But, the closer
utopia gets to formulation of the final draft of its desired world, the more it gains the
distorting and repressive characteristics of ideology.

In its full imaginative potential, utopia appears as a constitutive invention.
According to Ricoeur: “the utopian mode is to the existence of society what invention
is to scientific knowledge.”\(^2\) In its imaginative variation to social reality, utopia offers
an opportunity not only for a “radical rethinking” of social, political, economic and
even religious institutions, but also for an alternative model which would offer a
better life and better existence than there is. And it is in this escapist sense that it has a
collective therapeutic capacity. In its reference to “nowhere” as its own location,
utopia opens up a radical possibility of challenging established ideologies from a
stand that is imagined to be at a distance, outside all belongings. Herein may lie the
power of fantasy as a critique of social reality, and as a possibility of alternative
realities.

The literary style of the language of utopia does not detract from its subversive
and integrative political force. Utopia in this sense operates both as mode of critique
of ideology that seeks to unmask the flaws of the ideological legitimacy of the
existing order, and as a mode of integration that forms a univocal, grand narrative
with a grand ideal, which must be actualised here and now. Utopia is therefore
inevitably a form of psychic desire for a “power-to-be” that offers a new mode of
relations of power in place of the old. In all its manifestations, whether in the form of
“micro-societies” or religious cults, new experiences in business and management, or
the larger projects such as the “kibbutz” “commune” and the “kingdom of God”, the
utopian impulse to establish new relations of power is evident.

But the new modes of relations of power in the utopian language appear too
radical and fantastic to be actualised, hence the take over of utopia by ideological
distortions in any venture of actualising utopias. In its quest to be a dream come true,
which would herald the radical reversal of the course of human experience, the
impulse to utopia offers its imaginative “escapism”, its challenge to exiting reality, its
motivational force that compels action, and its model for an alternative reality.
However, in its tendency to become too idealistic, perfectionist and escapist, it gains
pathological characteristics, which Ricoeur has compared to symptoms of
“schizophrenia”. It is this schizophrenic symptom of the utopian impulse that gives
rise to “a logic of all or nothing, which ignores the labour of time,” and which makes
escapism a recipe for disconnection from social praxis. This disconnection from social
reality, which Ricoeur calls “eclipse of praxis”, may be at the root of the tendency of
the utopian desire to offer “frozen models” of the future that have to be “immediately
perfect”, and that deny “the logic of action” in producing undesirable consequences.\(^3\)

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1 Ibid, p. 318
2 Ibid, p. 319
3 Ibid, p. 322
Ideology and utopia therefore have a relationship that may be best termed as dialectical. This interplay between ideology and utopia may be considered as the source of two tendencies of “the social imagination”: the centripetal tendency to integration through affirmation of the order, and the centrifugal tendency to tear the order apart through revolution. In their dialectical interaction, however, these two forces guarantee the coexistence of social stability and change in a relationship full of internal tensions. It is also within the context of this dialectical interplay that “social imagination” offers a more fundamental dialectic: “the dialectic of concealment and revelation”.

It is this latter dialectic that lies at the heart of the operation of the text as the locus of social action. Social action therefore arises in the confrontation of the reader with the text as a field of concealment in which the meaning or truth is hidden. Action unfolds as the reader in his/her confrontation with the text tries to recover a meaning and reveal a truth, which create in him/her motivations that make action both desirable and imminent. Yet the hermeneutic function of the dialectics of concealment and revelation carries within itself the seed of the “pathological dysfunction” of social imagination, which is evident in the polarity of ideology and utopia. “Utopia tends toward schizophrenia just as ideology tends toward dissimulation and distortion.”

The Political Power of the Poetic Metaphor

I shall now try to demonstrate the relevance of the theory of imagination to the case of the Islamic Revolution by returning to the hermeneutical understanding of imagination, action, ideology and utopia. As I discussed previously, the concept of imagination can be extended from the context of metaphor and semantic innovation in the sphere of language to the domain of discourse, which belongs to the sphere of action. By linking imagination and semantic innovation, it has been possible to prepare the ground for the identification of the links between the social imaginary and social action.

Contrary to empiricist and behaviourist theories of knowledge, which have sought to discredit the phenomenon of imagination by referring to it as an unobservable, immeasurable subjective and purely mental experience, I have followed Ricoeur in thematising imagination as a phenomenon, which constitutes the representation of objects and concepts as well as the sense of them. This thematisation is based on Gottlob Frege’s “distinction between the sense of a proposition or a concept - objective and ideal sense - and the representation, which remains subjective and merely factual.”

The philosophy of imagination, developed by Ricoeur, treats its object of study both as a trace of reality, an image which is a mere reflection and hence less than the actual thing, and as the representation of something absent, a creation or innovation which is other than present. The first treatment gives rise to theories of “reproductive imagination” in the sense of producing a fainted replica of reality, and the second to theories of “productive imagination” in the sense of departing from the existing reality or creating alternative realities. It is with these latter types of theories that I am concerned here.

1 Ibid, p. 323
2 Ibid, p. 324
Through invoking the theory of metaphor, the source of imagination can be situated in the language use, as against the conventional understanding of image as a product of perception. To demonstrate the connection between the theory of metaphor and the theory of imagination, Ricoeur points to the emergence of meaning via imagination and “semantic shock” out of metaphor. “It is ... in the instance when a new meaning emerges out of the shambles of literal predications that the imagination offers its own special mediation. ... Imagination is the apperception, the sudden view, of a new predicative pertinence. ... Suddenly we see old age as the close of the day, time as a beggar, nature as a temple or living pillars, and so forth.”

Imagination thus gives a meaning to metaphor by creating a “semantic shock”. This is essentially analogous to Kant’s theory of *schematism*, according to which “schema” gives an image to a concept. The image that schematisation gives to a concept is the source of an emerging meaning. Likewise imagination, by providing an image for the poetic metaphor, creates a meaning. In this sense, image, instead of being seen as a faded production of perception, is seen as the producer of meaning.

In this sense, the meaning evoked by imagination in confrontation of the reader with the text affects “the sensorial fields” of the reader, and brings back the memories of the past experiences. This affect is not limited to evocation of past memories alone; it can also produce new meanings with the potential to create new possibilities. No where is this presented more clearly than in the case of fiction where meanings are suspended in a state of “uninvolvement” until the imagination shapes them into concrete images bearing concrete meanings. Imagination is thus “a free play of possibilities in a state of uninvolvement with respect to the world of perception and action”, a state in which “we try out new ideas, new ways of being in the world.”

The power of imagination to make possible the creation of new possibilities of being in the world, through the production of fiction, is in fact the source of what I have referred to as utopian desire. As such, I shall speak of utopia in terms of its role in shaping the *imaginary* that drives a revolution. In its power to suspend the belief in the conventionally accepted order of things, this *imaginary* in fact provides a re-description of reality with the potential to present itself as a new reality displacing the previous one. It creates belief in a new reality, which has yet to be actualised; it is thus be conceived as an impulse to a utopia to be instituted. This reaffirms my earlier psychoanalytical discussion about the role of imagination in producing alternative realities.

From this argument also follows that, despite the common perception that utopia is a projection toward the future, it is in fact extended both ways towards the past as well as the future. The example of the Islamic Revolution of Iran clearly demonstrates that the people had to go back to prepare for a perfect future. To inform the utopia of the Government of God on earth, the *imaginary* of the Islamic Revolution evoked the age-old myth of the Hidden Imam. It, therefore, appeared to be backward looking as much as it was futuristic, regressive as much as progressive.

What in fact happened was that the revolutionary actors - already exposed through the established religion to the poetic language of the *Qur'an*, the narrative of the disappearance of the *Mahdi*, and the various literary styles (e.g. mystical poetry) and oral traditions (e.g. *hadith*) - were also offered fresh interpretations of their traditions. The modern revolutionary leaders offered new re-descriptions or re-interpretations of the old texts and traditions. These re-interpretations had the power to displace the belief in earlier interpretations and hence played a heuristic role by

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1 Ibid, p. 122
2 Ibid, p. 123
uncovering new possibilities with the capacity to create new realities out of the poetic discourse of the sacred texts and literary narratives.

What is important for my discussion here is to demonstrate how these fictions can be linked to the Islamic Revolution as a form of collective human action? To do this I shall proceed by reiterating that human action is in fact an outgrowth of fiction following what Ricoeur calls “iconic increase” in the sense that every icon re-describes reality by increasing the dimensions of reality by the use of “abbreviations” and “articulations”. As Ricoeur suggests: “The first way man tries to understand and master the diversity of the practical field is to provide himself with a fictional representation.” This is achieved through the narrative structure, which in the form of epic, tragedy, fable, drama, novel and the like, creates the effect of the “iconic increase”.

The larger than life picture, which is offered by the narrative, performs two important functions: it recreates the reality with accentuated dimensions; and at the same time it provides a schema for further human action. Hence, the invention of so many stories in human history with recurring themes and characters, as well as the persistent act of recounting and narrating these stories. This process is an indication of an important historical phenomenon: that humans not only re-describe the past action in increased dimensions, but also constantly strive to use these re-descriptions to schematise new action. This is predicated on a process similar to that of the poetices, whereby the poet creates new action in the context of his/her poetry through imitating a previous action, which he/she extracts from say mythology, history or religion. This is why Aristotle saw poetics as more philosophical (and more politically powerful), than history.

Whereas history concerns itself with reporting action at its contingent level, poetry goes beyond the routine course of action and concerns itself with the forces that lie beneath and above action, forces that are the essence, the source and the motivating drive of action. Hence, as I suggested before, a poetic of action is not concerned only with reconstruction and description of the past action. Rather, through the schematising function of imagination, it can also become the source of new action.

Politics of Poetry in Iran

The political power of poetics was certainly evident in the pre-revolution Iran, where poetry played a powerful role in raising social and political consciousness and preparedness for political action. In Iran, the role of poetry, in both traditional and modern genres, was phenomenal in politicising the population. New interpretations of the older works such as Omar Khayyam, Khadj-e Shams-ad-Din Hafiz and Mowlana Jalal-ad-Din Mowlavi, as well as political readings of the works of modern poets, such as Nima Yushij, Ahmad Shamlu, Mehdi Akavan-Saales and Sa’id Sultan-pour, were the stuff of most of the socio-political discussions among the religious and non-religious activists. Such a phenomenon may be explained by the fact that in Iran, like anywhere else, metaphoric poetry, when subjected to popular imaginative interpretations, was able to provide a schema for action. And this is of course the reason for the brutal suppression of poetics in Iran and other authoritarian States. Under democratic States too, the political power of poetics is repressed, if not by brutal means, by non-violent but systematic distortion and repression of normative structures of communication.

1 Ibid, p. 125
It would be interesting to use the concepts of modern philosophical hermeneutics, such as those of Gadamer, in illuminating the political aspects of the texts and traditions, which, despite, and perhaps because of, their poetic nature, have played a highly significant political role in modern Iranian history. (See Chapters 7 & 8 for examples.) These texts include mystical texts, such as Divan of Hafiz and Masnavi of Mowlavi, and the epic texts such as the Shahnameh (the Story of the Kings) of Abol-Qasem Ferdowsi. To these might be added the social and anecdotal texts, such as Golestan and Boustan of Sheikh-al-Ra’is Sa’adi, and the satirical texts, such as Mush-o Garbeh (the Cat and Mouse) of Obeid Zakani. It would also be interesting to trace the influences of these old, religious texts even in the writings and poetics of secular modern writers such as Ahmad Kasravi, Sadeq Hedayat, Houshang Golshiri, Shahrokh Meskoub, Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, Golam-Hussein Sa’edi and Reza Barahani.

Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak has discussed the role of modern poetry in the pre-revolution Iran in his Iranian Writers and the Iranian Revolution of 1979. He has noted the use of the metaphors such as “evil”, “night”, “winter”, “walls” and “chains”, etc. by the modern Iranian poets to portray the dictatorial image of the Shah from the 1950s onwards. For example, in the early 1950s, Nima Yushij, the founder of Iranian modern poetry, used a metaphoric language to recreate imaginatively the real confrontation of the people and the Shah’s dictatorship. In his poem entitled Morgh-Amin (The Amen Bird), for example, he used the metaphor of a “phoenix-like” bird that would lead the people to destroy a “demonic enemy named jahan-khareh (the world-eater) with the sheer force of their collective voice.”

The bird as a “dreamy figure” is a symbol “signifying the collective energy instilled in – and articulated through – the people’s chant.”

Toward the late 1950s, Ahmad Shamlu, another famous modern poet, also engaged in the language of metaphor to intervene in the political discourse of resistance against the Shah’s regime. In his poem Pariya (The Fairies), he narrated the story of a horseman setting off from “Qal‘e-ye Afsaneha-ye Pir” (The Castle of Old Legends) to “Shahr-e Gholamha-ye Asir” (The City of Captive Slaves) in order to free the slaves from the bondage of the evil “amu zanjir-baf” (uncle chain-maker). As Karimi-Hakkak has noted, Shamlu, in this poem, has deliberately blurred the division between fantasy and reality “to replace the conventional didacticism of fairytales” with his own vision of “the poetic dream of an egalitarian society.”

In the case of the Islamic Revolution, the poetics of the irfan (mysticism) played an important part in providing the motivation and capacity for action to the revolutionary Muslims. For example, the mystical metaphor of reunion with God in the from of the annihilation of the lover in becoming one with the beloved was taken out of its purely religious-mystical context to enhance the political concept of shahadat (martyrdom) for an ultimate cause. Interestingly, this metaphor not only served the radical religious ideologues to create a psychological preparedness for sacrificing one’s life in the path of Allah, but also was used by the atheist ideologues to enhance the morale of the leftist revolutionaries in the face of torture and execution.

The most powerful forms of the metaphors of poetic narrative, however, was found in the Shi’i mythical and historical narratives. For example, the popular narrative of the disappearance of the Mahdi, as well as the narrative of his

2 Ibid, p. 510
3 Ibid, p. 510
reappearance, found through the schematising power of popular imagination a projective aspect that connected it to the future. The narrative of the *Mahdi* made possible the contemplation of the real possibility of his immanent emergence and the establishment of his world government, despite the overwhelming logic of modernity, which ridiculed such an idea. The very anticipatory function of the *imaginary* of the Government of God, as a political order to be expected and achieved, extended the narrative of the past to the present in order to build a utopian project of the future as the end purpose of existence.

This *imaginary* also shaped the motivations driving human action by providing for the ethical justification of the project and the desirability of the projected utopia. The ethical justification was rooted in the legitimacy of the project, which had been nourished for centuries by the *Shi'i* jurisprudence and mystical literature. The desirability of the project, on the other hand, was substantiated by the rewards that the utopian society under the *Mahdi* would provide, such as perfect social justice.

Finally, the *imaginary* of the government of the *Mahdi* gave rise to the public confidence in the capacity for action, something that was lacking for a long time in the population. For a long time, the people had felt being betrayed by their king, but had also felt that they had no power to do anything against the king’s military might and the secret police brutality. (I shall discuss further the significance of the *imaginary* of the Hidden Imam elsewhere.)

Building on my discussion about the role of the *imaginary* in instigating social action, I shall now proceed along Ricoeur’s phenomenology of social action to further clarify the role of the *social imaginary* in creating the possibility of collective action. Drawing on Husserl’s *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*, Ricoeur speaks of an “historical field of experience” based on the connection of the temporal fields of the individual experiences, which consists not only of the cross-section of contemporary individual and collective experiences but also the experiences of their predecessors and successors. This kind of all-encompassing inter-subjective connection of the individuals makes possible the transmission of traditions, which may then be rejected as outmoded or embraced as desirable. This is also what we call common history, which in Ricoeur’s view historically relates a collective of individuals by transferring the meaning of ‘I’. According to Ricoeur: “Like me, my contemporaries, my predecessors and my successors can say ‘I’. It is in this way that I am historically related to all the others.”

Now, the question is; how does the imagination create the condition and means of this inter-subjective connection or historical field? I have already hinted at ideology and utopia as two imaginative practices, which create the conditions and means of inter-subjectivity.

**The Progressive Potentials of Rituals**

The secret of the protagonists of social change in Iran was that they could present themselves as bearers of a progressive message even when they were appealing to the past. The success of such a progressive appeal to mythical, religious and historical narratives is in fact central to any successful revolutionary movement in that it creates, in the words of Zdzislaw Mach, “an image which presents the postulated changes as progress, or as a return to the Golden Age.”

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1. Ricoeur, P. 1994, p. 127
2. Ibid, p. 128
Shi ‘i Islamic rituals, such as the commemoration of the martyrdom of the Imams, or that of the revolution and war heroes, were also used as symbolic constructs and identity structures, which acted both for confirmation of social order and its transformation in a progressive sense. Their order-preserving role has been played out emphatically after the victory of the revolution during the institutionalisation of the Islamic revolutionary government. But before the revolution they were basically invoked in their order-shattering role. Their post-revolution function presented similarity to funeral rites, which, as Malinowski asserted, were an example of the symbolic restoration of social order following the crisis produced by the uncertainty of death. But in their transforming role before the revolution, these rituals provided both justifications and models for change in the old patterns of social, cultural and political structures. In this sense, they presented similarity to the rituals of rebellion, as noted by Max Gluckman, which are potentially order transforming, but often contribute to the overall restoration of social order by providing an outlet for social conflicts through “ritualisation”.

The Islamic rituals, as rich symbolic structures, have thus appeared in various forms playing different roles. In the form of memorials, passion plays and religious processions, they have played the role of “rituals of catharsis”, such as carnival, providing for social cohesion. But, they have also been used as a means of rehearsing for fundamental social change when radical opposition has grown within the social system.

Although the Shi ‘i symbolic rituals were more conspicuous in their subversive function before the Islamic Revolution, they in fact performed a mixed function; both that of funeral rites and that of the rituals of rebellion. In their former capacity, they provided for the preservation of strong politico-religious sentiments within the community of believes; and in their latter capacity, they provided for social catharsis as long as the radial opposition to the existing order was not strong. However, as the radical Islamic opposition grew, the revolutionary leaders gradually took these rituals beyond their pre-determined boundaries.

The Islamic Revolution thus went beyond the boundaries of ritual in the sense that it did not follow an expected and predictable process, which is the characteristic of rituals. Victor Turner’s processual theory of social action may be used to explain the dynamic nature of the Islamic Revolution. Accordingly, revolutions as a type of “living action of the human species can never be the logical consequence of any grand design.”1 Turner’s adoption of Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* and his own identification of the middle face of *liminality* or anti-structure, provide a basis for the development of a theory of fundamental social action in the context of collective symbolic structures. Persons or groups in the *liminal* phase are excluded from the normative structures, and hence can experiment with new ideas and ventures, which cannot be exercised in the domain of conventional life. “In due course these new conceptual models are transformed into the (new) social structure, thus making social change possible.”2

In Iran these models were provided by small religious networks, which were excluded from the dominant cultural modes, but whose existence had to be tolerated due to their deep roots in the Iranian traditions. (See Chapters 5 & 6 for more detail.)

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Within the framework of their unofficial and initially small associations, the individuals who wanted to experiment with alternative forms of social and political order, developed an understanding of the existing structures, as well as an understanding of themselves. It was this creative self-understanding that was behind the creation of an ideology of revolution.

This self-understanding was clearly an imaginative creation, which was based on the traditions of Islamic hermeneutics and disputation. It was mainly in the context of the interpretative understanding of the sacred text that the radical Shi’i ulama took the Shi’i faith to the level of a political ideology capable of inspiring a revolution. Due to the significance of the Islamic hermeneutics in laying the ground for revolutionary interpretations of the Shi’i faith, I shall concentrate in the last sections of this chapter on the connections between the Islamic interpretative knowledge and the Islamic Revolution.

The Cultural-Historical Nature of the Islamic Self-Understanding

In *Debating Muslims*, Fischer and Abedi have dealt with the cultural-historical nature of “Islamic self-understanding”, which despite the claims of religious dogma to its timelessness, has undergone drastic changes. To demonstrate this, they explore the historical changes in interpretation of the ritual of *hajj*, which ranges from an apolitical and ceremonial understanding of this ritual by the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia to the revolutionary political understanding of it by the modern Shi’i clerical and non-clerical intellectuals in Iran.¹ In reviewing their work here, I am generally concerned with the transformation of the meaning of myth and religion throughout history not only by those, who believe in them, but also by those, who try to understand them as observers. Hence, the existence of opposite accounts of myth and religion even within one tradition of thought.

A clear example of this is the Marxist tradition. Marx himself both despised mythical and religious tradition as opiate of the masses, and elevated the borrowing of the past traditions as a source of confidence for the revolutionary actors. Walter Benjamin saw in religion both an oppressive tradition and a tradition capable of providing “revolutionary impulses”. Louis Althusser, while opposing religion as a capitalist ideology, acknowledged the “structural autonomy” of religious ideologies. And Antonio Gramsci, emphasised the importance of popular myths in providing a means of resistance against the “hegemonic ideologies of the State”.

Within the Islamic tradition too there has been conflicting accounts of the nature of the involvement of religion in politics. Fred Halliday, for example, has noted the “novelty of the Iranian Revolution” in its being “unequivocally religious” and at the same time inspiring a revolutionary upheaval far more modern than the Russian and Chinese Revolutions.² (I shall discuss further these conflicting accounts in the following chapters.)

However, there has been certain reluctance among political scientists in studying revolutions as politico-cultural phenomena due to perceptions that issues of culture lack scientific clarity. Robert Wuthnow has criticised social scientists for their preference for topics such as class analysis, social stratification, and structural theories of State at the expense of the issues of “ritual and symbol, belief and ideology, or

meaning and moral order.”¹ The same criticism may be levelled at those engaged in the study of politics as a cultural phenomenon. One reason for this lack of interest may be that, in Wuthnow’s words, “culture remains, by many indications, vaguely conceptualised, vaguely approached methodologically, and vaguely associated with value judgements and other sorts of observer bias.”²

The understanding of culture has thus oscillated between its consideration as a collection of beliefs and attitudes on the one end of the spectrum to understanding of culture as an “objectified ontological system” on the other end. Perhaps, the most relevant understanding of culture for my purposes in studying the Iranian Revolution of 1979 is an understanding that poses culture as a domain, which is produced by what Wuthnow has termed “competent social actors” for dramatising social obligations. Culture as such is reproduced by organisations that “process resources for the purpose of ritualising, codifying, and transmitting cultural products”; organisations, which may develop links with the State and with other sources of political power.³

It is in this context that the political role of religion as a cultural product may be understood in a proper way as opposed to the “reductionist” understandings, which portray religion as a kind of false consciousness that provides a naïve understanding of the forces of nature and history. As Wuthnow suggests, a conception of religion, which rests on the premise of “human requirement for wholistic meaning” may help create for religion “a niche that is largely immune from reductionistic or positivistic attacks.”⁴

The substantive relevance of religion to various areas of life including politics may thus be viewed as a fact of nature. Religion as such addresses fundamental questions, such as the meaning of life, the conditions of existence, the beginning and end of reality and the absolutes to which people need to cling in order to orient themselves toward a direction in the confused and enigmatic world around them. However, an intuitive as well as scientific understanding of religion itself may not be possible through understanding of the religious belief as a mere attitude, but through deciphering the meanings of its signs and symbols. Speculative philosophers and mystics of the Islamic tradition such as Hafiz, Mowlavi, Sohrevardi and Mulla Sadra have sought to find the meaning of religion in contemplative reflections and transcendental journeys. So too, modern philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Heidegger have searched for the meaning of the world in transcendental arguments. Wittgenstein is quoted as writing: “The meaning of the world must lie outside of the world.” He also wrote: “The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time.” In other words, the realm of religion and its symbolic structures cannot be reduced to “empirical world”, nor can they be understood with tools of “empirical enquiry”.⁵ The symbolic structures of each cultural entity operate at various levels, in art, cultural traditions, transcendental philosophies and individual and collective fantasies.

As Wuthnow has noted, phenomenology and hermeneutics have provided “particularly attractive methodologies for the study of culture because each explicitly denied the possibility of reducing symbolism to any other aspect of reality.”⁶ In the

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¹ Wuthnow, R. Meaning and Moral Order, University of California Press, USA, 1987, p. 3
² Ibid, pp. 5-6
³ Ibid, p. 15
⁴ Ibid, p. 40
⁵ Cited in Ibid, p. 41
⁶ Ibid, p. 43
light of the forgoing, one may appreciate the significance of such concepts as symbolic structures, narratives and their interpretations in giving rise to revolutionary conditions. Some of the scholars of revolution, such as Theda Skocpol, have underestimated revolutionary ideologies as subjectivist factors vis-à-vis the more significant objective, structural factors, such as the structure of the State and the objective conditions of the social classes. In this picture, however, such important objective factors as the solidarity among the working class and the peasants, and the recognition of the State as the source of grievances by the revolutionaries, may not find sufficient explanation. These factors may only be fully explained through “the cultural, or symbolic-expressive, dimension of group life, of the moral economy of peasant communities, and of the State itself.”

**The Qur’anic Dialogue**

The hermeneutic analysis of the Qur’an as a sacred text is important because various interpretations of the Qur’anic verses played a constitutive role in Iran’s modern political developments. In his analysis of the Qur’an, Fischer identifies three sorts of dialogues, which he believes, are central to the reading of the Muslim holy book: 1) “dialogue in the colloquial sense of oral communication between two face to face persons”; 2) “dialogue in the Greek etymological sense of cross-play between arguments”; and 3) “dialogue in the sense of juxtaposition of points of view in a political struggle for hegemonic control of interpretation of how the world should be seen.”

The latter type of Islamic “dialogics” is of current relevance to Muslim politicians and intellectuals for it provides them with a native political paradigm with which to enter the current national and international discourses of confrontation. On the national level, there is the discourse within the Muslim societies between Muslim radicals and Muslim liberals, and the discourse of confrontation between Muslim and secular intellectuals. And on the global level, there is the discourse of argumentation between the Islamic and Western political philosophies, codes of social morality and types of economic ethics.

As Fischer notes, only through some knowledge of the Qur’anic interpretative tradition, is it possible to understand the current political movements in the Islamic world. One may expand this field of interpretative knowledge to include the whole system of traditions, preserved via the collective imaginaries, built upon selected parts of the collective memories of the past, and expressed through natively valid symbols and meaning structures in various religious, fictional, poetic, and philosophical narratives.

In Iran, like most other societies in the Islamic world, few texts could match the Qur’an in their capacity to provide for a rich field of interpretative hermeneutic knowledge. The Qur’an is no ordinary text created by man. It is the word of God, and thus considered divine. Moreover, like other sacred texts it belongs to the era where literacy was not yet a feature of human society. Its language is thus enigmatic, full of mysteries and beyond the capacity of man to reach a definitive interpretation of it.

These characteristics have given rise to a profound historical divergence, which has created two broad interpretative styles with serious socio-political implications. The first style allows for an indefinite openness to ever new interpretations of the Qur’an, hence refusing to accept either a closure of meaning, or

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1 Ibid, p. 62
a group that is qualified to have the exclusive authority to determine the boundaries of this closure. And the second has insisted on identifying certain interpretations as authentic, valid, and thus of sacred value, rejecting others as inauthentic, inconsistent, and thus potentially heretic. (See Chapter 8 for a discussion of the confrontation of these two interpretative styles.)

This latter form of the Qur'anic hermeneutic knowledge identifies the ulama, or those who are learned in scholastic religious science (ilm), as an elite group that is qualified to provide correct interpretations of the Qur'anic rulings (ahkam). These interpretations are required in order to meet the spiritual and moral needs of the Muslim community in coping with emergent legal, social and political questions.

The qualified ulama, are also considered fit to practice ijtihad, which means deriving new rulings from the oral traditions of the Prophet and the infallible Imams; hence their title mujtahid. They are usually trained in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), scholastic theology (kalam), authentication and explication of the oral traditions (hadith), exegesis of the Qur'an (tafsir), and to a lesser extent reading philosophy (falsafa) and mysticism (irfan). (I shall discuss the historical development of the socio-political role of the Shi'i ulama in more detail in Chapter 5.)

The Shi'i ulama, as an elite group, have historically been recognised by their peers and the public at large as having the authority to determine the acceptable meanings of the Qur'an. However, the intellectual vulnerability of the ulama in limiting the domain of acceptable meaning vis-à-vis those, who allow for free exploration of the multiple layers of meaning of the sacred texts, has pushed them to a position of refraining from deep engagement in exegesis of the Qur'an. Despite their professed high regard for exegesis as an important religious science, they have, as Fischer notes, relegated it to the position of an optional subject in the madrasas (Shi'i centres of religious learning). And historically, they have not hesitated to level accusations of heresy against mystics and speculative philosophers such as Hussein Mansur Hallajj, who had allegedly claimed to have intimate knowledge of the essence of the Vahyy (Divine Revelation). Such knowledge, according to the ulama, apart from God, was reserved for the great Prophets and the infallible Imams, who were in intimate contact with the essence of the revealed word.

But, the enigma of the Qur'an is not limited to its capacity to be invoked by the mystical philosophers and dogmatic theologians for validating their transcendental claims. The Qur'an, despite its position as a “text generative of a scholastic tradition”, as Fischer suggests, is a text that is profoundly suspicious of writing, whereas it speaks highly of its own “orality and musicality”. It is thus that its referred to as the qur 'an (literally oral recitation), which must be memorised and be orally transmitted to future generations of believers.¹

This insistence on orality may have come from the lack of existence in Arabic language of 1500 years ago of a disciplined grammar, syntax and phonetic structure, just as was the case in Hebrew before the Old and New Testaments could be put in the form of written texts. It might also have, at least partly, been due to the mistrust of the Prophet Muhammad in unauthorised use of the Qur'an and the distortion (tahrif) of the word of God by the enemies of Islam. At any rate, it was in the lifetime of the Prophet that certain trustees, such as Abdullah Ibn-e Abbas, were hand-picked to recite the Qur'an in a correct manner. These trustees were also to create the science of exegesis, and to orally transmit the Qur'an verses and the traditions of the Prophet, including his own versions of the meanings of the verses, to future generations.

¹ Ibid, pp. 97-98
The emphasis on the orality of the Qur'an has also been important in stressing the functional role of the ulama - both Shi'i and Sunni - as teachers of the Holy Book. In this regard the ulama have compared their function in transmitting the true meaning of the text to that of the infallible Imams, who are referred to as the Quran-e nateq (speaking Qur'an). According to a famous hadith, in the battle of Saffain, the first Shi'i Imam Ali, admonished his troops for relenting to the Umayyad Caliph Mo'aviyya's tactic to place texts of the Qur'an on the lances of his soldiers. Mo'aviyya had thus hampered the advance of Ali's troops on the ground that any attack on the soldiers holding the sacred texts would amount to violation of the sanctity of the Holy Book. Ali ordered his army to attack the enemy despite the possibility that the sacred texts would be stumped by his troops, explaining that what was on the lances was paper and ink, whereas he (Ali) was the speaking Qur'an.

As such, new disciplines were produced over time to make the Qur'an intelligible as a mushaf (written text), "disciplines of grammar, history, phonetics, poetics, law theology, and hermeneutics", which became distinct from, but interacted with, the Jewish, Greek and Christian traditions. However, much of what we know about the meaning of the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions, though sketchy, come from the oral transmission of the Qur'anic traditions.

The oral traditions remained strong, particularly among the Shi'is, who added to it the oral transmission of the traditions of the twelve impeccable Imams. This emphasis on orality of the Qur'an and hadith has still kept some of its force today. Fischer attributes this to concerns, such as that of Plato in Phaedrus, that submission to writing and other means of monologic transmission of meaning - as the dominant mode of communication - may kill the tradition of oral dialectical disputation. This tradition is respected because of its vital capacity in educating the young and generating deeper levels of meaning.

Fischer depicts the structure of the Qur'an and the hadith in terms of a house of mirrors "playing upon appearances and resemblances (mutashabihat) that may or may not be grounded (muhkam)", thus providing for the debate and dialogue between various perspectives of the interpreters. It is this tradition of critical dialogue that should be remembered in order to avoid perceptions that Ayatollah Khomeini's so-called fundamentalist interpretation of Shi'i politics has reached its definitive end in the form of a coercive ideology to legitimise a totalitarian theocracy.

Quite the contrary, the totalitarian understanding of the Shi'i political philosophy has already been challenged from within the religious camp on doctrinal and logical grounds. (See Chapter 8 for more detail.) Just as Plato, whose concept of philosopher-king projected a utopian and, according to Karl Popper in his Open Society and its Enemies, a potentially totalitarian model of society, Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of velayat-e faqih has presented a strong propensity to authoritarianism and totalitarianism. However, again like the case of Platonic political philosophy, these totalitarian tendencies have been hampered by a return to dialectical tradition, the Islamic art of disputation and hermeneutic interpretation of religious texts, which seem capable of inhibiting a total collapse of Iranian politics into totalitarianism.

The ruling Shi'i ulama in Iran have extended to themselves an attenuated version of the Imamic qualifications claiming that only they are fit to identify the muhkam (firmly grounded) verses of the Sacred Text, and offer the correct exegesis of

\[1\] Ibid, p.98
\[2\] Ibid, p. 100
\[3\] Ibid, p. 101
the Qur'an and the hadith. Ayatollah Khomeini played an important part in the politicisation of this tradition through his interpretation of the concepts of "primary and secondary rulings". Accordingly, the qualified faqih would be permitted to temporarily suspend certain highly important religious practices, such as namaz (daily prayer), or amr-e be ma'rouf va nahiye az monkar (enjoin good and prohibit evil). But, he could do this only if he was convinced that upholding these practices in a given situation endangered the entirety of the faith. This extension of the authority of the ma'soum (innocent) Imams - considered to be completely innocent of sin - to the ulama, who may commit sin like other humans, obviously confers upon them extraordinary powers in political decision-making.

Of course, disputes are already raging from within the ranks of the ulama for and against such interpretations. Ayatollah Khomeini, as an expert in the Qur'anic hermeneutics, repeatedly warned against the attempts of the West and the Islamic States allied with West to repress the true message of Islam. He insisted that the "puppet clerics", "mercenary intellectuals" and "rulers of the Islamic lands" were out to destroy Islam by publishing distorted versions of the Qur'an. He also warned against the attempts of the enemies of Islam at providing wrong exegesis of the Holy Book and the hadith. A large part of Ayatollah Khomeini's last will and testament is dedicated to emphasising this warning. (See Chapter 8.)

The exclusive claim of the radical ulama on the authority to limit the attempts at exegesis of the Qur'an and the hadith by outsiders (mainly Iranian and non-Iranian lay intellectuals) has relied on the usage of certain methods of authentication of the existing exegeses. In fact, in order to guard themselves against the accusation of heresy by the conservative ulama, the radical ulama have rarely claimed to be shar'e (literally lawgiver, and figuratively those who have knowledge of the essence of the Revealed Law). Rather, they have presented themselves as shareh (explicator of the Shari'at). In this sense, they have rarely claimed that what they are qualified to do is ta'wil (providing a definitive interpretation of the Revealed Word).

There are only a few faqih, who have been recognised by their peers and followers as qualified to engage in ta'wil. More generally, for the ulama, the science of exegesis has meant merely to explicate the ta'wil, offered by the Prophet and the twelve innocent Imams, who are universally recognised as shar'e. They, therefore, only claim that they, by way of training, have gained the best knowledge of the traditions of the Prophet and the twelve Imams, and hence of their interpretation of the Revealed Word. The farthest the ulama may go is to engage in ijtihad in order to adapt the original interpretations of the Qur'an by the Prophet and the Imams to the current situation. This, in contrast with the tradition of most Sufi orders, is theologically modest. In most Sufi orders, the qotb (pole), pir (elder) or morad (object of wish), is considered by the morid (follower) to be the Revealed Word personified.

The Methods of Authentication of the Sacred Texts

The methods of authenticating the hadith and hence identifying the muhkamat (solidly grounded) verses of the Qur'an at any given time, is instrumental for the ulama in order to derive the sahih (correct) exegesis of the Qur'anic verses. In order to curb what they consider to be incorrect interpretations of the Qur'an and the hadith, the ulama use isnad (documented validation) to establish the chain of trustworthy
narration of a hadith back to the time of the Prophet or the Imams. Fischer has identified various methods, used by the ulama to evaluate the hadith.¹

A hadith may be called “mutawatir” (having multiple confirmations) when several independent and fully reliable chains of narration have been identified to link it back to the early days of Islam in the lifetime of the Prophet and the Imams. A hadith may be called “mashhur” (famous) when there can be found famous variants that relate it to a particular reliable narrator. The evaluation of a hadith is thus a rational and literal process of gradation on the basis of its strength and weakness. A mutawatir hadith is of the highest grade. Below that, a hadith may be graded “sahih” (correct) if one expert confirms that all links in the chain of narration are reliable. It may be considered “maqbul” (acceptable) if it has been invoked by a faqih to issue a fatwa, or “hasani” (good, but not fully reliable). And finally a hadith may be graded “mursal” when lacking connected chains, “za’if” when it is considered weak, or “maj’ul” when “it is known to be fabricated.”²

However, the literal and rationalistic understanding of the Qur’an and the hadith, as offered by the ulama, has historically failed to satisfy the freethinking intellectuals. From the medieval mystical philosophers to present day Islamic modernists, the freethinkers have ventured to gain knowledge of the essence of the religion, refusing to accept the total discipline of the madrasa. Mystics and speculative philosophers have sought to transcend a mere mimetic understanding of the Sacred Text, and have delved into individual exploration of the esoteric meaning of the Qur’an, and in this quest, many like Hallajj, Sohrevardi and Shari’ati have lost their freedom and their lives.

There certain are Qur’anic verses whose interpretations contradict the rationalistic understanding of the ulama. These verses include those concerning the dialogues between God and the angels over the creation of man, God and Iblis (Satan) over the prostration of angels before Adam (the first man), and Satan and Adam over the violation of the Divine ban on the forbidden tree.³ In the first dialogue, the angels question God over His creation of man, who would corrupt the earth. In response, God makes it clear that Adam was a creature superior to the angels due to his knowledge of essences as opposed to appearances, a knowledge to which the angels were blind. God reveals that “the angels being pure reason without animal passion do not have Adam’s capacities for moral struggle, for approaching God through interiority, love or faith, modalities of intention beneath the surface”, and hence have to bow to Adam. Satan’s refusal to bow to Adam on the ground that he was made of fire and Adam of wet clay is also refuted by God, who retorts: “I breathed His spirit in the clay and made it capable of speech.”

It is conventional understanding, an understanding reiterated by the ulama, that Satan’s eternal subversion against God, which began with this refusal to prostrate before Adam, and heightened by his deception of Adam and Eve to violate the ban on the forbidden tree, was due to his untenable pride. However, Muslim mystics and speculative philosophers in their interpretations have suggested that Satan’s rebellion against God had to do with his insistence on pure reason and his incapacity for love and passion. In this they have, in fact, criticised the scholastic jurists for their rationalistic and rigidly legal understanding of the Qur’an, which, metaphorically speaking, are Satanic attributes.

¹ Ibid, p. 108
² Ibid, p. 125
³ Ibid, pp. 109-110
One of the main referents of the *ulama* in order to warn against the attempt of the ordinary people at *ta'wil* (understanding the hidden meaning of the Qur'anic verses) is the verse. “He it is who sent down to thee the Book, wherein are verses/signs (*ayat*) of plain, firm, basic or established meaning (*muḥkamat*) that are the essence/foundation of the Book; and others that are ambiguous or allegorical (*mutashabihat*). Those, whose hearts are perverse follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension and searching for its hidden meaning or interpretation. But, no one knows its hidden meanings or interpretation except God and those firmly grounded in knowledge (*al-rasikhun fi-al-ilm*) [who] say, we believe in it; all is from our Lord; and non grasps the message except men of understanding.”

Herein lies the source of the belief, reverberated by Imam Ali in *Nahj-ul-Balaqa*, that the Qur'an has *zaheri* (exoteric) and *bateni* (esoteric) meanings; and that only selected people are fit to understand the hidden, esoteric meaning of the Qur'an. The reason for this complexity is, of course, the allegoric, metaphoric and symbolic nature of the Qur'anic text, in which, as Fischer has noted, various concepts are presented in terms of resemblances, appearances and resonances concealing essences or ultimate meanings. It is the understanding of these essences that requires *ta'wil* (interpretation) by *rasikhun* (those who are firmly grounded).

Traditionally *rasikhun* have been understood by the *Shi'is* as the Prophet himself, the twelve Imams and the few who were known to be trusted by the Prophet and the Imams. The *rasikhun* are interpreted as those believed to be capable of identifying the *muḥkam* (firm) and *mutashabih* (allegorical) meanings of the Qur'an. This interpretation of the *rasikhun* is also the basis of the claim of the *ulama* that they are fit to claim access to at least part, if not all, of the knowledge of the Imams. The *ulama* can thus identify themselves as the *rasikhun* on the basis of a hadith, which confirms that they were trusted by the Imams as the experts of the religious law and collectors of the hadith.

However, historically, such claims has not prevented disputes, not only by the opponents of the *ulama*, but also from within their own ranks, over the correct way of understanding the *muḥkam* and *mutashabih*, since the Qur'an describes itself both as *muḥkam* and *mutashabih*. In verse: 11:1 (cited by Fischer), for example, it describes itself as a “book whose verses are made *muḥkam*”; whereas in verse: 39:23; it says: “God revealed a book which is *mutashabih*”. Although there have been attempts by certain theologians to solve this apparent contradiction, there has not been yet a universal agreement on a final resolution.

This lack of a definitive, universally accepted, interpretation of the Qur'an, coupled with the efforts of the mystical philosophy to push the limits of interpretations of the Sacred Text, has led to a sort of unofficial consensus among the believers that the Qur'an is ultimately unknowable by ordinary humans. According to the *ulama*, ordinary believers would be able to benefit from the laws of the Qur'an, if they abided by the rulings of the faith as derived and prescribed by the just *faqih* (jurisprudent). The just *faqih* is usually a *mujtahid* (qualified to update the religious rulings), and *alim* (most knowledgeable in religious sciences such as *kalam*, *hadith* and *tafsir*). This emulation of the *faqih* by the ordinary believers is what is referred to as *taqlid* (literally imitation) in *Shi'ism*. Doctrinally, however, every believer can potentially become a *mujtahid* without any race, class, status, ethnic and gender limitations or discriminations blocking their path. The only qualification a Muslim

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1 Ibid, pp. 112-113; cited form the Qur'an 3:7

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must have to become a mujtahid, apart from the belief in Islam, is the knowledge of the Islamic theology and law.

According to Ibn-e Abbas, Prophet’s aide and known by many as the founder of the Qur’anic exegesis, all people must try to learn the Qur’an, but only the most learned get the most complete understanding of the Holy Text. Approaching the most complete understanding of the Qur’an, however, means that the believer must have or acquire extraordinary characteristics by means of purification of the soul (tazkiyyat-e nafs), which would enable him/her to find access to the esoteric meaning of the Holy Book.

There have been figures, who were recognised for reaching in-depth understanding of the Qur’an both among the ulama and among the orafa (mystics; plural of aref). Some of these figures have been known to be both faqih and aref (mystic, one who is known for having knowledge of irfan). The acknowledgement of an esoteric level of meaning for the Qur’an has had important political implications. Hence some ulama have claimed that they can read certain hidden meanings in the Holy Text that the ordinary people cannot, due to their access to what is called a “protected chain of interpretative understanding”.¹

A clear example of such claims is Ayatollah Khomeini’s claim that, despite the lack of explicit reference to the political authority of the ulama in the Qur’an, this authority is in fact has been clearly based on the “correct” understanding of the firmly grounded verses of the Qur’an. In his Hokumat-e Eslami, Ayatollah Khomeini clearly claimed political power for the ulama on the basis of what he claimed to be “correct interpretation” of the oral traditions of the Prophet and the twelve infallible Imams. He even acknowledged that that if he not been able to substantiate his claim by a reasonable and credible exegesis of the Qur’an and hadith, his Qur’anic references alone in their literal sense, would be insufficient to support his claim. In his venture, Ayatollah Khomeini set out to establish that in the Qur’anic verse: “obey God, obey the messenger, and obey the ul-al-amr (holders of authority) among you”, the ul-al-amr, referred to the political authority of the qualified Shi’i ulama. He argued that although the twelve Imams were undoubtedly the original referents of the ul-al-amr, but in the absence of the twelfth Imam, the political authority of the Imams could be extended to the qualified ulama.

As Fischer has noted, Ayatollah Khomeini dismissed the quietist arguments of the apolitical ulama on three grounds: First, that for first two centuries of the rise of Islam, under the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali, the Islamic faith had been instituted politically. Second, that logically there must be a legitimate political authority to spend Islamic taxes (khums and zakat) on the Muslim community (ummat). And third, that acceptance of the necessity of an Islamic government, necessitate the acceptance of the political leadership of those most educated in the knowledge of Islam.²

Conclusion

In conclusion, I shall recapitulate the theory of imagination in order to point to a new political philosophy that is proposed on the basis of this theory. I have taken the hermeneutic-phenomenological theory of understanding as my point of departure in arguing for the possibility of using this new political philosophy both as a

¹ Ibid, p. 122
² Ibid, p. 132
hermeneutical mode of understanding of tradition and as its critique. In light of this hermeneutical critique, it would then be possible to view human collective action, even when violent, as part of meaningful human endeavour to change the environment of his existence for the better. Based on the Ricoeurian hermeneutical critique, this political philosophy appeals to both the tradition of hermeneutics and that of the critical theory. As I have noted, this political philosophy appeals to the traditions of Marxism and psychoanalysis on the one hand, and those of the philosophy of being and theory of text on the other. In this effort, it seeks to resolve the conflict of instrumental rationalisation of labour, the human interest in emancipation and the human desire for autonomy.

Ricoeur’s philosophy shows that “the rational organisation of labour...constitutes a discipline on individual arbitrariness” to the point that man of the age of technology and economic rationalism is “the first man who lives universally and who understands by means of this universal rationality.” But at the same time, his philosophy may be used to show that this modern economic rationality and its grand regulator, the modern State, are linked with a peculiar spirit or morality. It is in the spirit of this modern ethics that wealth and power gain both a meaningful position in mediating human experience, and appear as a fundamental threat to both human existence and freedom.

Ricoeur’s regret about the historical mistake of Marxist tradition in perceiving the nineteenth century political liberalism as merely a mask for economic exploitation, may be extended to the mistake of the liberal-capitalist ideology in our post-modern condition in perceiving global movements of dissent as merely violent, fanatic, terrorist, or rogue. The mistake of Marxism had a destructive consequence whereby the popular struggles for autonomy that are as ancient as historical experience were seen as mere luxuries of liberal capitalism, and as expendable in a true economic rationalism, i.e. communism. The mistake of liberal capitalism has led to its oblivion to the real sources of violence in the repression of the human quest for community and cultural particularity. The mistake of Marxism was regrettable because it had already contained the seed of the most serious critique of the relations of domination as the source of man’s unhappiness, discontent and feelings of injustice. The mistake of liberal capitalism is also regrettable because it has the potential to provide the most rational justification of aspirations for political community on the basis of the demands of traditions. The political philosophy that arises from the theory of imagination should thus try to recover the power of critique, which exposes the alienating objectification of the modern society. But at the same time, it should turn the admiration of liberalism for human nature into a hermeneutic philosophy to understand the connection of human action with traditions. It is in this manner that hermeneutics could respond to the demands of critique. The category of meaning may be considered as the nexus of hermeneutics and critical philosophy.

As Ricoeur has suggested, modern man is dissatisfied because he finds himself in an incessant struggle for survival in an environment of intense competition, but at the same time he does not find a meaning beyond mere physical survival. Man is unhappy because an unreasonable injustice and inhumanity is inherent to the technical rationality of labour, an injustice that alienates man from the product on his own labour. He is discontent because, as human being, he is the inheritor of the human historical experience that is mediated by the symbolic cultural structures, the religious, historical and fictional narratives that demand a moral responsibility and an

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1 Ricoeur, P. “Ethic and Politics”, in From Text to Action, 1991, p. 327
“ethical intention” to live a meaningful life. Man needs to be motivated, but the sphere of his labour is increasingly severed from the sphere of motivation. Hence, the effort of modern man to find meaning in religion, fiction and leisure outside the sphere of technical rationality, and hence the impetus to a new ethics.

Man’s discontent is thus the source for his recourse to the sense of community that is to be recovered in new interpretations of cultural traditions. One could, for example, point to the trend of the defence of the private sphere against the expanding domain of technical rationalisation, which may be considered as a mode of reaction of the advanced industrial societies to the problem of meaning. Another example on the global level may be various forms of religious and nationalist resurgence in both advanced and developing societies.

As Ricoeur has suggested: “the task of political philosophy is defined by the attention given to what, in political life, is the bearer of meaningful action in history.” Responsible politics in this sense could be elevated to the level a form of ethics of individual freedom in the context of reasonable collective limitations, which arise from inevitable belonging of the individual to a political community. This political philosophy is thus intricately connected with the culture of citizenship. In other words, the sense of freedom felt by an individual is fundamentally constituted by his belonging to a collective practice as a citizen with the right to demand this freedom. This sense of freedom is thus accorded the individual as a privilege in a society where individual freedom is placed at a high moral standing.

In light of this new political philosophy, the State may be defined as a form of communal organisation, which signifies the collective ability of the citizens to make decisions as a community. This ethical understanding of politics runs against both the idea of state as an arbiter to save man from himself as advocated by Hobbes, and the idea of State as merely an instrument of class-based coercion as advocated by Marx. In this sense, although States have all been borne out of violence, “it is not violence that defines the State but its finality, namely, helping the historical community to make its history.”

This decision making process is naturally most efficient where there is a collective agreement in the form of laws that minimises the original violence of the state. The continuation of violence in the relationship of a given State and its citizens and in between different States lies in the fact that there is no universal political community. As Ricoeur has pointed out, “political community is, in principle, particular and different”. In this sense, the violence that has characterised the movement of human history is in essence a drive toward non-violence. This perhaps the reason why peace and non-violence have become “the primary utopia of modern political life.”

But this pursuit is increasingly enveloped in the resurgence of religious or secular beliefs in the form of traditional and modern convictions. Even in most secular polities, the need for such beliefs are so strong that new modes of connection to the past traditions have proliferated in various forms of religious and nationalist convictions, as well as ritual commemorations of the founding traditions. It is in these new connections with the traditions that particular political communities strive to assert their particular identities in the context of the global rationalisation of economic life. I shall now try to use the foregoing discussion as well as other contributions to

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1 Ibid, p. 330
2 Ibid, p. 330
3 Ibid, p. 333
the theory of imagination in the further discussion of the *imaginary* that motivated the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

I shall consider the Islamic Revolution of Iran as a liberation movement that although has given rise to a new State, which challenges the political uniformity demanded by liberal capitalism of the West, should be understood not as an international pariah, but as a demand for autonomy. I shall propose that this revolution should be seen as a novel form of collective action, which has unfolded in the context of the interpretations of the signs, symbols and narratives to which it belongs. It is only through recognition of its belonging to particular discourses that the violent expression of the Islamic Revolution could be subjected to an internal and effective critique. In light of this recognition, it will become evident that the actors of this ostensibly subversive movement, while belonging to certain cultural traditions, which they struggle to assert, try to distance themselves from the repressive nature of their belonging. In order to address themselves to the global human experience, the actors of the Islamic movement in Iran, while trying to assert their distinct cultural identity, are inevitably engaged in a struggle to change their immediate circumstances through imaginative critique of their traditions. The attempt of Iranians for cultural survival is thus connected with the effort to criticise the violence of the relations of power to which they belong. The new interest in cultural, intellectual and scientific dialogue with the West indicates this critique may become possible through the appropriation of the discourse of the other.