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Chapter Three

The Imaginary of the Islamic Revolution

Introduction

In the last chapter, I discussed the hermeneutical theory of text as developed by Paul Ricoeur in the tradition of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In this chapter, I shall try to further discuss the relevance of the concept of imaginary, as developed in philosophy and psychoanalysis, to the understanding of the Iranian-Islamic Revolution of 1979. I shall particularly concentrate on the concept of imaginary as developed by Cornelius Castoriadis. I suggest that the understanding of the social significance of the imaginary could be enhanced by new interpretations of the tradition of psychoanalysis founded by Freud. My concern though is mainly with the psychoanalytical approach to the question of the transformation of the fragmented imaginaries into collective imaginaries, or in other words the transition from individual self to social subject in the political sphere, where questions of domination and resistance are at issue.

As Anthony Elliott has suggested, “Psychoanalysis, has inspired a fundamental transformation in social theory in respect of issues related to how forms of political domination and exploitation become interwoven with the constitution of the self.” This has been possible by transcending the views that take social reality as given and ignore the role of psychic desires in constituting and reproducing social reality through cultural innovations and “ideological power relations”. A generation of writers has attempted to extend the Freudian psychoanalysis in order to reveal the antagonistic structure of the culture and its symbolic structures. Writers such as Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas in the tradition of Frankfurt School, and others such as Louis Althusser and Ernesto Laclau, in the tradition of Jack Lacan, have tried to emphasise the importance of the relationship between self, society, existence, and collective moral and political institutions.

The Lacanian concept of imaginary has been extended to reveal the constitutive role of the unconscious both in shaping human practice in producing oppression and domination, and in shaping human action in resisting domination, innovating social order, or transcending the old order to create new orders. As Elliott has put it: “On an individual and collective plane, human subjects are never passively shaped by the symbolic forms of society, but actively receive such significations (within specific social and ideological relations of domination and power) and creatively reconstitute them through representational activity.”

As such, “the relations of domination and exploitation” are not to be seen simply in terms of social repression, but as a psychic field of energy, which can give rise to creative and productive ideologies. Human subjects, although inserted within “the social, political and ideological relations”, are invested with “psychic energies”, which “feed back into the social world”. It is in this context that “specific sites of cultural renewal and struggle become intelligible.”

2 Ibid, p. 10
3 Ibid, p. 13
George Bataille has quoted a passage from Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, which is illustrative on the issue of the social power of desire as a field of psychic energy. “Desire is what transforms Being - revealed to itself by itself in (true) knowledge - into an object revealed to a subject different from the object and opposed to it. It is in and by – or better still, as – his desire that man is formed and is revealed to himself and to others as an I, as the I that is essentially different from, and radically opposed to, the non-I. The very being of man, the self-conscious being, therefore, implies and presupposes desire... But, if animal desire is the necessary condition of self-consciousness, it is not the sufficient condition. By itself, this desire constitutes only the sentiment of self. In contrast to the knowledge that keeps man in a passive quietude, desire disquiets him and moves him to action. Born of desire, action tends to satisfy it, and can do so only by the negation, the destruction, or at least the transformation, of the desired object...”

What should be emphasised here following earlier arguments is that the individual psychic experience is not really individual in a strict sense, just as no individual subject is strictly individual. In fact, an individual experience is biologically and socially generic, and in this sense is “an imaginary creation”. No experience is therefore more authentic or privileged than other experiences, and an individual or social life-world is but one type of collective experience among infinite number of others. At stake here is in fact a conflict of a variety of imaginaries and in the political context, where the question of power struggle is at issue, the prevalence of one imaginary over other imaginaries.

Thus, what I shall be trying to argue here must not be taken as an attempt to provide a sentimental view of the Islamic Revolution, and for that matter to any specific form of collective action. Nor do I intend to make the Islamic Revolution appear as the most authentic alternative Iranians had to chose when they undertook to change the course of their destiny. Rather, I intend to look at the conditions, which provided for the political success of one imaginary project for an alternative society, namely Khomeini’s Islamic imaginary, over other strong contending imaginaries such as the socialist, liberal and nationalist imaginaries.

After all, it was through imaginative interpretations of the collective memories of the past that the ideology of an Islamic revolution and the utopia of an Islamic government were shaped. The memory of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, for example, or the memory of the occultation of the Mahdi, the twelfth Imam – played, through symbolism of narrative and ritual, an important role in providing for the ingredients of the imaginary of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. In this sense, the ideology of an Islamic revolution, and the utopian or millenarian hope for the institution of a perfectly just society, were constructed on the basis of the new interpretations of the memory of the revolution of Imam Hussein in Karbala, and the narrative of disappearance and return of the Mahdi (Saviour).

It was in the context of these interpretations that a critical understanding of the existing social and political reality was developed in the hope of a better future. The critical understanding that was developed in the context of the overwhelming dominance of the absolutist monarchy was the flip side of the motivations and hopes that were created in the population via new ideological and utopian interpretations of the memories of Hussein and the Mahdi. The collective acceptance of these interpretations was the origin of the rejection of the existing social and political arrangement under the Pahlavi State. But in the context of the global

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interconnectedness of the relations of power in the modern time, the critique of the past and the creation of new imaginaries of the future could not remain purely a local affair. The rejection of monarchy in Iran was thus immediately supplemented by the rejection of the world order dominated by the “Great Satan”, the United States, that had, along with other “minor devils”, supported the Pahlavi monarchy.

Through creative interpretation of the “evil” rationale underlying the existing social and political institutions, the public found a focus for the expression of their angry frustrations, which may have been caused by divergent reasons. This was followed by the creation of a common cause and a general will to actualise the hope of bringing into existence what had been hitherto considered practically impossible or doctrinally unacceptable, i.e. the institution of a Godly government on earth before the return of the Mahdi. This radical leap into the future, which was as daring and audacious as erratic and violent, was largely motivated by new political interpretations of quietist and spiritual Iranian-Islamic religious and mystical traditions. With the total domination of the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate from the ninth century onwards in the Muslim world and the disappearance of the twelfth Imam, an apolitical interpretation of religious texts, based on the notion of taqiyya (dissimulation of the faith) had become the feature of Shi’i political philosophy. The tradition of apolitical interpretation of the faith had already been disrupted in the medieval period by the millenarian movements, such those of the Sabedaran and the Safavid. The millenarian movement of the Safavid was particularly important because it brought to power a Shi’i State in the sixteenth century for the first time in the Iranian history. However, the tradition of tradition of political quietism was restored with the institutionalisation of the Safavid State, and the employment of the Shi’i ulama as the instruments of the religious legitimation of the new relations of domination.

The new interpretations of the religious texts and narratives since the 1960s and 1970s sought to revive the millenarian hopes of Shi’ism through a new revolutionary understanding of the Shi’i traditions. Because of the reality shattering momentum of this new understanding, the process of actualisation of the new utopias of the future often involved violence, whose intensity depended on the flexibility or otherwise of the existing power structures and vested interests. The key to the success of such an apparently outmoded concept of politics has arguably been the creative adaptation of the scriptural and doctrinal themes to create a rationale for the institution of a religious government in the modern world. There can be little doubt that any discussion of the interpretation of scriptural texts is only possible through the discussion of the connection of cultural imagination and symbolism with political action in modern Iranian history. I have already noted the affinity of the hermeneutical theory of imagination with psychoanalysis. Here, I shall further discuss the relevance of the concept of imagination as developed in psychoanalysis and philosophy to the case of the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

The Concept of Imagination

The concept of imagination has been subject of reflection since the ancient time. Imagination has known no philosophical or religious boundaries. The tradition of philosophising and theorising about imagination has extended throughout history and across cultures. Generally speaking, there is a consensus, and an obvious one at that; it is accepted that an imagined object need not be physically present; and yet
as William James has suggested: "in comparing a present sensation felt, with a past one imagined, it will be remembered that we often judge the imagined one to have been stronger". Moreover, the object of imagination need not even be located in the past like an object of memory, nor does it need to be located in space. In fact, it need not have existed at all. It may only be a possibility.

However, as David Hume suggested, an object of imagination, even when non-existent, relies on certain elements for its construction that must have been experienced. Hume noted that it was possible to imagine, for example, a golden mountain only through the combination of separate images experienced, such as mountain and gold. Memory and imagination are thus understood as dependent upon sense perception through previous experience.

This concept of memory as an imagined knowledge of the past experience is vital to my discussion of the imaginary of revolutions, and particularly the imaginary of the Islamic Revolution. This concept can be traced back to Aristotle who held that memory came out of sense-perception and experience developed out of frequently repeated memory of the same thing. For Aristotle thinking and formation of ideas or abstract concepts as imaginary products was connected to sensory images. Accordingly, the soul never thinks without an image. However, this linking imagination with images must not be taken as an absolute denial of the possibility that imagination can also stem from where there are no images.

It seems to me that one cannot define the imaginary as a product of conscious construction of images, which have not been experienced, nor as the combination of the images that have been merely experienced. But, following Castoriadis’ psychoanalytical understanding of the concept of imaginary, I consider the imaginary as a creation ex nihilo. That is, although it exists in causal connection with the objectivity of the lived experience and the subjectivity of human consciousness, nevertheless, its existence is experienced and understood neither objectively, nor subjectively. It appears to us as it has always been there, like air, sky, or customs and religions. As Anthony Elliott has suggested: “The imaginary comprises a good deal more than just specular images, illusions, traps. As a psychic mode of elaborating self and objects, the imaginary is a constitutive feature of human subjectivity. It is the creation of a certain relation of the individual subject to itself, forged through phantasy, drives, and affects.”

In Aristotle, there were, in fact, two readings of imagination or phantasia. In his De Anima, most of Aristotle’s attention was given to what may be called secondary imagination, or in other words, “imitative, reproductive or combinatory imagination.” This is the view that has provided for the conventional understanding of imagination. However, Castoriadis has noticed another reading of phantasia by Aristotle in Book Three of De Anima, without which “there can be no thought and which possibly precedes any thought.” Castoriadis’ concept of “radical imaginary” corresponds to this primary imagination, which he discovers in Aristotle, and which he locates at the root of human reason.

The imaginary as the source of reason radically redefines the notion of reason as has been prevalent in the Western thought. Reason, thus, would not be defined

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1 James, W. Principles of Psychology, the University of Chicago Press, U.S.A., 1990, p.498
3 Elliott, A. 1992, p. 146
4 Castoriadis, C. 1994, p.136
5 Ibid, pp. 136-137
through its logical or rational connotations, rather it could be understood through its association with the radical imaginary; “animals are certainly much more logical or rational than humans: they never do something wrong or in vain.”¹ In this sense, reason is a product of language, itself a primordial imaginary institution of society, a spontaneous creation of anonymous human collectivities.²

According to Castoriadis, philosophical reason, which made it its business to discover the “true being” by replacing tradition and religion, as the source of the law and the meaning of the world, is bound to have been produced out of the same imaginary source, which produced fictions and illusions. Reason is not found only in things, ideas and subjects, as was understood by classical philosophy, but also in “anonymous social collectives”.

This view of reason is the view that I shall take in outlining the meanings behind such apparently irrational movements as the Islamic Revolution, which in the view of rationalist philosophy seems to have been striving to turn back the wheel of history against reason. Despite the attempts of a generation of post-modern writers, who have tried, in the fashion of Nietzsche, to expose the flaws of instrumental concepts of reason, the Western rationalism has remained stuck with the concept of reason as “démystification of the sacred”.

Since the Enlightenment, and particularly since the French Revolution, the non-sacred understanding of reason has found the sanctity of its own by breaking the back of the tradition of reason developed by mystical philosophy. This non-sacred understanding has thus become the basis for the development of the modern knowledge of the world. However, as various critiques of modernity have revealed, this process has never been complete. Alternative forms of knowledge, although accused of the heresy of unreason, have nonetheless survived, developed and provided for means of insurgency and anti-structure.

In the Muslim tradition, despite the deep inroads of the instrumental reason, the break with religious mysticism never reached the Western proportion. There, as Seyyed Hussein Nasr has argued, mysticism is considered as a path to knowledge rather than a means for its obscurity. In religious mysticism, as Huizinga has noted, imagination makes an effort to transcend sense-experience by extension of surface and depth, and creation of the feeling of infinite space in order to attain a state of void or absence of images.

In the ancient Western tradition, Plato’s doctrine of reminiscence gives a quasi-mystical understanding of the process of imagination. Plato conceived remembering as an imaginative process that was the source of knowledge. Accordingly, all learning is a kind of remembering knowledge already present in the soul. He considered Idea an abstract but real entity that is the essence of Being. In modern Western philosophy, phenomenological traditions of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have also maintained that ideas and concepts, as creations of imagination, were not mere images but existed as intelligible objects, which could be grasped by the power of intuition.

As such, I have used the terms such as imagination and imaginary not only in their connection with images as illusive replications of reality, but also in their close association with invention and creation of new realities. This concept of imaginary is used in distinction to the concept of imagination as a simple reflection or reproduction

¹ Ibid, p.137
² Ibid, p. 148
of reality. It is "to emphasise the idea that this imagination is before the distinction between real and fictitious...it is because radical imagination exists that reality exists for us."¹

I also use the concept of radical social imaginary to indicate the creation ex nihilo of socially meaningful visual images, such as "totem poles", "emblems" and "flags", as well as socially constituting images such as linguistic and non-linguistic significations, and social institutions. Whereas the seat of the individual imagination is the psyche, the seat of the social imaginary is the "anonymous collective and, more generally, the social-historical field."² Based on this conceptualisation, it will become clear how certain primordial images such as the poles, flags and emblems used in Muharram processions in mourning the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, without any need for historical authentication, could convey meaningful messages for mobilisation and organisation to the revolutionary population in Iran.

The Unconscious Sources of the Imaginary

In order to develop a psychoanalytic understanding of the concept of the imaginary, I take Castoriadis’ argument against Kant. Whereas Kant asserts that "all our intuitions are sensuous imagination and therefore belong to sensibility", Castoriadis, drawing on Socrates’ assertion that "imagination is the power to represent that which is not", defines imagination as "the power to make appear representations whether with or without an external incitement."³ This is important in its implication that certain imaginary projects may rise up in the collective mind episodically without direct historical precedent. Rather, these imaginary projects may arise in reference to the distant past, which may not even be historically authenticated, and yet is able to motivate spontaneous action in the present.

Psychoanalytically speaking, this imaginary capacity is a product of the unconscious, which should be understood as "a meaningful organisation of representational forms, drives and affects" underlying the linguistic structure.⁴ As such, the representational capacity of the unconscious is a creative force through which "persons reflect upon phantasies", and which people use in "the process of achieving autonomy".⁵ I shall refer to the sources of these imaginaries as non-historical due to their unconscious character, which cannot be located in history in a strict sense.

The recent analyses of the medieval millenarian revolutions, as well as the modern revolutions, demonstrate the mythical sources of these movements.⁶ From the English to the French and Russian Revolutions, the power of the imaginary productions of the past to transcend the present and build the future has been evident. In Iran, the imaginary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, and the expectation for the emergence of the Mahdi, have fed the imaginary of revolution for centuries. The expectation for the Mahdi, which had come from a non-historical, mainly mythical context, and had implied a 1400-year old waiting by the Shi’i population for the promised messiah, had all but lost its power to make any sense of historical reality.

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¹ Ibid, p. 138
² Ibid, p. 139
³ Ibid, p. 139
⁴ Elliott, A. 1992, p. 152
⁵ Ibid, pp. 152-153
⁶ See Tocqueville, Taine, Le Bon, Ortega y Gasset and Park’s analyses of the crowd and masses in Europe, etc. Hill’s analysis of the English Revolution, Gramsci and Desroche’s analyses of the ideology of revolutions, Norman Cohn’s analysis of the millenarian movements, etc.
over centuries of social development. Then suddenly and dramatically, it became so real, powerful and urgent that the population became prepared to take drastic action to hasten the imminent return of the *Mahdi* by creating a modern revolution.

Although conceived as an ethereal phenomenon, the “Hidden Imam” (*Emam-e Ghayeb*) was visualised in concrete representations. Before the revolution, people gathered in ceremonies of prayer for the return of the Imam. In Jamkaran, a village near Qom, gatherings are still being organised every week in the expectation of the imminent emergence of the *Mahdi*. During the revolution, the face of Ayatollah Khomeini was seen on the moon, and was taken as a sign of this imminent emergence. During the war with Iraq, the Imam appeared to the civilian militia (*basijis*) in the warfronts as a saint riding on a white horse blessing the warriors.

The real effect of these appearances was also evident in boosting the morale of the revolutionaries in the late 1970s during the revolution and that of the warriors in the war with Iraq during the 1980s. Examples of this morale boost can be found in the letters left from the *basijis* who lost their lives in the warfronts and became martyrs. The main theme of these letters was the expression of readiness for the ultimate sacrifice in order to be consumed in the love of the Imam, and ultimately be reunited with God. The *basijis* were also highly motivated by the belief in the imminence of their ascent to paradise immediately after death. Many truly believed that they had the keys to the gates of Paradise, a significant boost to their capacity for engaging in heroic acts and a natural advantage from a military point of view, and at the same time an object of ridicule for many secular intellectuals.

Equally importantly, the *imaginary* of the battle of Karbala (an ancient city in Iraq) and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein was the central theme of the annual processions during which the participants expressed their sorrow by beating themselves in collectively regulated and orchestrated processions. They thus vented their feelings of guilt for not having been able to revenge the innocent and tragic loss of Hussein, his family and his disciples. This apparently apolitical and, in the belief of many modern-educated intellectuals, superstitious ritual, was significant during the revolution in its capacity to provide a schema around which the vague and fragmented feelings of political resentment toward the modernising policies of the *Pahlavi* monarchy took a concrete shape.

The martyrdom of Imam Hussein, especially following the ideological interpretations of this event by Ali Shari’ati, Morteza Motahhari, Ruhollah Khomeini and others during the 1960s and 1970s, was capable of promoting a schema of martyrdom (*shahadat*), which gave it both a sense of ultimate value and undisputed urgency. In the new political interpretations of the Iranian-Islamic mystical concept of “death before death”, the martyr (*shahid*) was seen as the ultimate hero whose highest goal it was to be consummated by its love for its beloved Allah for the cause of an Islamic revolution. The sense of urgency of this revolution was accentuated by the widespread empowering belief that the sooner the task of overthrowing the “evil” Shah (*taghut*) was accomplished, the sooner the *Mahdi* would return.

**The Inter-subjective Character of the Imaginary**

The meaning of the *imaginary* constructions of society escapes the field of a plain empirical understanding. It could be paralleled, in this sense, with the example of colours, sounds and smells, which could not be understood in their own terms by
simple physical measurements. For the science of Physics, colours exist only in terms of waves, fields, atoms and molecules, if they are to exist objectively. Physics, in the strict sense of the term, does not consider colours, sounds or smells as objective facts in themselves. Their mental objectivity arises owing to the power of the imaginary. They are pure creations of the radical imagination, which create imaginary representations of things in forms that have no strictly physical relation with those things. The reality of colours therefore, without making any physical sense, becomes manifested in objects in connotation with the sensations that are embedded in the soul. For example, the colour green does not make any physical sense until it is manifested in objects such as trees and grass in connotation with the imaginary of green, which is inherited from symbolic preconceptions of green as something carrying meanings beyond a mere colour; meanings that are embedded in the soul by culture and language. In other words, these meanings arise from the cultural memories that are transmitted via language use, and that are evoked at the sight of a given colour.

The same could be argued for the utopian imaginaries, which stem apparently from nowhere, but find real shapes in concrete actions in connotation with the memories embedded in the soul by culture and language, memories that signify something far beyond mere historical facts. Just as representations such as numbers, figures, sizes, colours, sounds and tastes, representations such as “the Great Satan” or “the Evil Empire” are creations of the faculty of imagination. This faculty is real nonetheless, because it is itself a capacity of the living body, or in other words, of “the embodied psyche”; just as the colour green is real not because its physical existence, but because it exists for us living bodies with psychic capacities. But, this means that human psyche does not function only as a mere biological outgrowth representing objects of biological needs. Rather, it becomes the seat of the creation of collective social objects such as “God”, “King” and “Country”, which are potentially of the same, if not more, social significance as objects of biological need. This may be conceived as the origin of the creation of symbolism, language and social institutions by the radical social imaginary.

In other words, the meanings of the collective social objects are not created through a mechanical interaction between human biological sensibility and the external stimuli (although they are certainly conditioned by the external stimuli), but through a creative process of image making in which inter-subjectivity plays a vital role. The role of inter-subjectivity is significant in its providing for the creation of collective rather than individual or fragmented imaginaries. As Castoriadis contends: “Light waves are not coloured, and they do not cause colour qua colour. They induce, under certain conditions, the subject to create an image which in many cases - and, so to speak, by definition in all the cases we can speak about - is generically and socially shared.”

This capacity of making images, therefore, goes beyond a mere iconic imitation; it is rather a creation of something new out of something familiar without necessarily any direct relationship with it, like the creation of a utopian project out of the existing discourse of a community. In Iran, this creativity was evident in the many bold innovations, which the ideologues of the Islamic Revolution made to the Shi‘i politico-religious doctrines and rituals, such as velayat-e faqih, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), the treatment of non-believers, etc. Evidently, what they did changed the belief and practice of many of Shi‘i scholars and millions of believers for good.

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1 Castoriadis, C. 1994, p. 140
But, it would be quite simplistic to conclude that these innovative interpretations, which came out of the existing Islamic discourse, were mere pragmatic measures adopted for political expediency. These were rather genuine, ground-breaking, novel projects for building a new form of government, which would implement the edicts of Islam in a way which would save it from extinction in the face of the all-encompassing cultural, political and economic dominance of the West. The Islamic imaginary provided the schema according to which a general plan for and a detailed structure of the institutions of the present Islamic Republic of Iran could be perceived.

In other words, imagination, in this sense, tends to defy the strictly Cartesian and phenomenological limitations. Thus, imaginations are neither, confused ideas in the mind, nor solipsistic first person experiences. They are neither a fading imitation of reality, nor an experience to which others have no access. In Husserl’s strictly phenomenological standpoint, “the first person stance presents things as they appear in the life-world” for him/her, whereas this presentation, in fact, is not solipsistic and takes place through “the generic biological imagination and the social imaginary”, which is shared by fellow humans.

This argument is supported by the obvious observation that, for instance, there can be no existence for a colour except through the existence of the living body in general, and that the imaginary of a colour for instance is a shared rather than a solipsistic imaginary. As Castoriadis has suggested: “Philosophy starts when we begin trying to break the closure of this life-world in both its biological and socio-historical dimensions. Of course we can never break it to such a degree as to be able to fly outside any closure, to have a view from nowhere. But break it we do. And there is no point in pretending that we do not know that there is no (colour) red except for, in and through a living body. Or, for that matter, that there are no nymphs in the springs and gods in the rivers - which were a perfectly legitimate part of the life-world of the ancient Greeks.”

From the foregoing arguments, it should have become clear that the understanding of the social significance of the imaginary could be enhanced by recourse to the psychoanalytical theory. My concern though, as I said earlier, is mainly with the psychoanalytical approach to the question of the transformation of the individual imaginaries into collective imaginaries, or in other words the transition from individual self to social subject in the political sphere.

The Social Power of the Psyche

From a psychoanalytical standpoint, the process of transition from the singular to the collective imaginary is a transition from a “projective” to an “introjective” scheme. According to Castoriadis, the “projective” scheme is formed by the singular psyche and shapes its own world, containing solipsistic meanings, which make life understandable to the singular psyche itself. Therefore, the singular psyche, or as Castoriadis terms it “psychic monad”, is the structure around which the inner world of the individual psyche is built; and this is what differentiates the socialisation of humans from animals. Using this faculty, humans always interpret what is transmitted to them from the society around them, whereas animals do not go much further than a process of mimesis in their socialisation.

1 Ibid, p. 141
The “introjective” scheme, on the other hand, is formed since the singular psyche or the “psychic monad” has to abandon its monadic meaning for the shared meanings that the society provides. Through the “introjective” scheme, the psyche becomes socialised by internalising the supplied meanings of the society. George Herbert Mead went as far as suggesting that there was no singular psyche prior to the social self, and that the self was formed through the other. Here again we are dealing with the role of inter-subjectivity in creating social imaginaries.

The example of the prevalence of the imaginary of the Islamic government as developed in Iran is illustrative in this regard. Innovative interpretation of the concepts of State and revolution in Islam prevailed in the revolutionary discourse through introjection and internalisation. The Islamic imaginary then displaced other non-Islamic imaginaries, which had something to say about the possible forms of a desired revolution and government. There was, for example, Shari‘ati’s imaginary of the monistic classless society, which was taken up by the Mojahedin. There were also imaginaries expounded by the clerics such as Ayatollah Taleqani, and the Islamic modernists such as Bazargan and his Nehzat-e Azadi (Liberation Movement). These imaginaries, however, were subsumed by the Islamic imaginary of Ayatollah Khomeini.

There were also the socialist imaginaries of the Marxist groups such as the Tudeh Party and Fada‘iyan, and the liberal-secular imaginary of the National Front. These imaginaries varied from dreamed political utopias of ordinary people to the well-developed imaginaries of various socialist and liberal intellectuals. But, these imaginaries too either succumbed to the collective Islamic imaginary, or were defeated by it. However, this submission, or defeat, of the more fragmented imaginaries to a larger collective imaginary was not always a conscious process, and was almost never complete.

The question which remains here is; how conscious or unconscious is the process of transition from the individualistic and fragmented imaginaries to a collective imaginary? Even if we accept that the faculty of imagination is rooted in the living body, it is not evident that there is a conscious connection between the body and the social imaginary. Just as there is a simultaneous continuity and discontinuity between the body and soul, or the soma and the psyche, there is also a sometimes conscious and sometimes non-conscious relationship between the body and the social imaginary. For example we might choose to move a hand to displace an object, but we have almost no conscious control over the innumerable organic processes going on all the time within our bodies such as the movements of the bowls; nor can we control the content of our dreams.

By the same token, we may not have a conscious control over the process of our submission to the cause for which we might even be prepared to die. However, once we have internalised a collective imaginary, which constitutes for us a collective cause, then we may become capable of exerting conscious control over the extent of bodily suffering that we are prepared to endure for that cause. This is evident in the example of the resistance fighters who “even under the most horrible tortures will not give their comrades to the police.”

The bodily existence of the individual psyche, therefore, is mortgaged by its submission to socialisation, and thus, as we have already established, singular

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1 Ibid, p. 147
imagination has to be subjected to a collective imaginary creation in a virtually non-conscious process. “Social imaginary significations” embodied in the social institutions are a perfect example of this collective imaginary creation.

**Language: An Imaginary Construction**

Language may be characterised as the most significant social imaginary signification, which, according to Castoriadis, can only be seen as “a spontaneous creation of a human collective”. From the psychoanalytical standpoint, language is the primary social institution, which is responsible for the creation of socialised individuals out of “psychic monads”. Hence, the individuals we encounter on the social level are very rarely presented in their pure psychic state; rather, they are presented as fragments of a social whole. However, they are total, not partial, fragments, which embody “the essential core of the institutions and the significations of their society.” Individuals who do appear in their pure psychic state are often judged as abnormal or insane. In this sense, society is represented through socialised individuals.

Society and individuals are thus neither in opposition nor reducible to each other; in fact, one is virtually meaningless without the other. Society is a collective of individuals, who have established a network of intricate relationships, held up by systems of meanings, which are disseminated through commonly agreed institutional significations, such as language. According to Castoriadis, society is a creation of itself, the emergence of an ontological form of being, which is “held together by institutions (language, norms, family forms, tools and production modes, etc.), and by the significations these institutions embody (totems, taboos, gods, God, polis, commodities, wealth, fatherland, etc.).”

This argument can be used to explain the breakdown of the sense of society in Iran prior to 1979 through the collapse of the lines of communication between the society and the State, and the production of a collective religious imaginary with a revolutionary bent out of a new discourse. It is demonstrable how the loss of the meaning of the social institutions and significations under the Shah created individuals, who were no longer total fragments of the social whole, nor did they embody any longer “the essential core of the institutions and the significations of their society”. On the other hand, the Islamic social significations were well placed to create individuals who gradually internalised the imaginary of a society to be built, the imaginary which resulted in the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The social institutions under the Shah were debased in the sense that the transition from a traditional to a modern culture was never meaningfully accomplished. The Shah embarked upon a huge project of social engineering targeting not only linguistic significations, but also such crucial institutions as arts, media, religion, and politics, which were all linguistically based. (See Chapter 6 for more details.) For example, there were attempts to regulate the language use; specifically speaking the official language of the government, the language of the media and the language of school texts were attempted to be purged of religious vocabulary despite popular resentment. There was an onslaught on the traditional or customary discourses, which were used in conducting business, trade, marriage and divorce.

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1 Ibid, p. 148
2 Ibid, p. 149
raising children, dispute resolutions, etc. without any opportunity for the traditional
groups to peacefully resist this attack through dialogue.

There were also attempts to devalue religious beliefs, but this deepened the
generation gap, which had left the family values of older generation in ruins in the
eyes of the youth. And there were huge changes in the mode of production, as a result
of industrialisation and land reform, which catapulted a huge number of people from
the provinces and the rural areas to the big cities into the alien world of fashionable
sounds and images. This superficial world of American movies, discos, high-rises and
shantytowns, however, failed to accommodate the large number of uprooted peasants,
who had rushed into the big cities in search for a better lifestyle.

In the area of social significations as well, there was a general sense of failure
on the part of the Shah to sustain a credible system of taboos, which would protect the
legitimacy of his regime. The language that the Shah tried to revive out of the
“glorious ancient Persian culture”, put too much emphasis on being non-Islamic. The
concepts such as the ancient concept of Farrey-e Iyzadi (Divine Grace), which was
supposed to have legitimised the kingdom by investing it with God’s Grace, were
easily challenged by the Islamic as well as popular culture. Moreover, the ancient
God, Ahuramazda, which was elevated to validate the Shah’s push for the revival of
the ancient Persian religion further alienated and antagonised the Muslim population
and the Shi‘i establishment. Even the triad of “God, King and the Country” which
elevated the king over the country was widely criticised as an attempt by the Shah to
undermine the sense of nationhood.

The Shah’s systematic attempt to be represented in the media as khodayegan
(godlike) made the situation even worse as far as Shah’s credibility was concerned.
Ironically, even the undisputed economic growth and increase of wealth, which
occurred in Iran under the Shah, were not seen in a positive light; they were seen
basically as the source of corruption and decadence of Iran. All this was matched by a
large-scale attempt by the people from below to create a culture of resistance based on
an imaginary view of an alternative society through modest but popular religious
networks.

Society: A Creation of Itself

In the process of the development of a revolutionary resistance in Iran, one can
readily observe the self-creation of society through the production of new forms of
discourse, and hence new schemes for social and political order. However, this self-
creation becomes obscured by the social institutions once they are built. The
concealment of the fact that society is a self-creation creates the impression that the
existing order is a primordial order. This concealment is only realised retrospectively
by taking account of the existence of various social forms and the recorded changes of
each society over historical time. It indicates that the members of each particular
society are constantly involved in generating the forces contributing to the self-
creation of that society. The human experience in producing diverse social and
political forms, held up by diverse systems of meanings, which are hidden in new
linguistic significations, testifies to this fact. Take for example the variety of types of
society known to human beings: “polygamous, polyandrous, monogamous, fetishistic,
pagan, monotheistic, pacific, bellicose, etc.”, which have inevitably developed diverse
polities to match these diverse social forms.
The concealment of the fact that society is a creation of itself is more conspicuous in the traditional societies, although it is by no means limited to them. Modern societies are also deeply rooted in adherence to the continuity of the past, despite the fact that they were rooted in an apparent break with the past. Despite the diversity of the forms of traditional societies, modern societies, in fact, just as the traditional ones rarely break with traditional institutions and ultimate beliefs openly. Nonetheless, modernity has been marked with an increase in the expression of desire for breaking with traditions, and hence has posed the question of collective autonomy in the form of modern revolutions.

This was the case also in Iran where the Shi'i quietist tradition had established a tradition of non-militant political attitude toward the ruling kings for centuries until the nineteenth century. (See Chapter 5 for more detail.) In the traditional Iran, as elsewhere in the world, the path to autonomy was often sought either through salvation by religion, or through individual endeavours for mystical transcendence. Modern Iran, however, was influenced by the spirit of the modern collective emancipatory movements and self-reflecting philosophy, which had originated from Europe and had been the primary factor in giving rise to what Castoriadis has called “the project of collective and individual autonomy” with the ultimate object of political freedom.

Therefore, there was an added problem for the Shah. Not only did he have to deal with the discourse of cultural resistance from the Shi'i religious establishment. But also, he had to face this project of political freedom, which had become very appealing to both religious and secular intelligentsia in the process of the cultural and political reproduction of the Iranian society. Not only had he to face the resistance by the rising Islamic revolutionary discourse, represented by the ideologues such as Khomeini, Motahhari and Shari'ati. But also, he had to deal with the religious socialist discourse of the Mojahedin, the religious liberal discourse of the Freedom Movement of Bazargan, the discourse of secularist liberals of the National Front and the atheistic discourse of the variety of Marxist groupings.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Shah was facing these multiple sources of resistance and demand for change, the credibility, and often the existence, of such sources were never acknowledged either by himself or by the dominant mentality of his regime. While the credibility or existence of these sources of demand for change was consciously or unconsciously denied, their “mischievous” actions were treated with brutality. Firmly stuck with the essential continuity of the past, the Shah branded the forces of change as “alien-inspired forces of red and black reaction”, or the conscious agents, the “fifth column”, of the foreign enemies, which intended to subvert the primordial institution of kingship in Iran.

But, it was not only the Shah and his regime that failed to recognise the agents of change; the alternative contenders of power were also ignorant of the severity of what they themselves were involved in doing. Therefore, the process of recreation of society, which I mentioned earlier, was in full swing in Iran prior to its explosive outpour through the revolution, without being consciously recognised by its actors.

Marx noted this non-conscious creation and recreation of society in a reference to the role of past memories of each society in building the future. In his analysis of the French revolution of 1848 he wrote: “It is when men seem to be busy creating something quite new that they invoke the spirits of the past.” As such, one can argue more rigorously that the sense of history, mediated by the meaningful interplay of the
accepted discourses in each society, undeniably connects that society to its past; and consequently it is vital to its sense of present. In fact, it is in this remembering the past that imagination plays its vital role.

In Iran, just as any other society in the modern world, the common acceptance of social significations, embodied in the existing institutions, were vital to the sense of society in the present. As such, the rapid and violent changes that Iran experienced in modern time could only become meaningful, when they were relegated to the past and then remembered or reinterpreted in the present. It seemed as though Iran, in making its history, tried to both disconnect herself from her past, and at the same time recreate herself using an imagined memory of the past. Under the Shah, particularly between 1963 and 1977, Iranians by and large remembered their past through an imaginary, which amounted to the emergence of a sense of stability. Since the late 1970s, however, their imagination of the past involved the creation of a revolutionary imaginary, which sought to shatter the existing order to build a new order on the model of the past. (See Chapter 6 for more detail.)

By allocating to the past the undeniable and in many cases drastic changes that had founded the modern Iran, Iranians tried to find a sense of stability in their present. This may be the main factor in veiling the fact that Iran, even while trying to stabilise itself, was generating the forces that were most destabilising, the forces which tended to recreate the past by projecting it into the future. Hence, there was a constant tension within the Iranian society, which neither allowed it to repeat the past, nor to sever itself from it completely. This was especially important in remembering both its ancient and recent past, which were, at least in the present, perceived as opposite poles, despite the fact that they had a lot in common.

The Constitutive Role of Language

Iran was thus created by its specific imaginary significations such as its myths, scriptures, laws, sciences, etc. and the institutions built around them. But, if these institutions were of any import, it was because they were backed by systems of meaning, which were in turn constituted by the form of the language use, itself a social imaginary signification. The importance of the Persian language thus cannot be overemphasised. The emotional attachment of Iranians to Persian has a lot to do with the role of the Persian language in defining their cultural and hence national identity. Persian was the only widely spoken language that survived the attempt to make Arabic the sole language of the world of Islam in the seventh century.

By adopting the Arabic alphabet, Persian was transformed into a language that since the tenth century has remained the symbol of cultural and literary excellence for the Muslim Iranians. Not only did it survive the cultural hegemony of Arabic, but also it established itself as the dominant literary and bureaucratic language in not only in Iran, but also in other Islamic cultures, such as the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the Indian Mogul Empire. In fact, up until the nineteenth century the official language of bureaucracy and stylistic literature in these latter empires was Persian. Also, the Turkic monarchs of Iran from Seljuqs to the Qajars all had accepted Persian as their official court language. It goes without saying that the literary tradition, particularly the epic and mystical poetry were composed almost entirely in the Persian language.

The Persian language, in its socially constitutive capacity, performed a dual function, just like any other language. It had an instrumental function, which was vital
in rationalising and formulating the day to day actions, which reproduced the Iranian society. In other words, it determined the language of social reality, including the language of bureaucracy and that of economic and contractual transactions. It also played a poetic role, which created a language of transcendence of the social reality. It was this language that was vital in preparing the ground for collective actions, actions that pushed the society beyond the limits of its existing order at any given historical episode. In both of its roles, the Persian language had to provide the Iranian psyche with social meanings, which were able to displace the psyche’s inner world. It was in providing these social or inter-subjective meanings that religion played its undeniable part.

In displacing the pre-conscious inner psychic world of the individual, the religious imaginary significations provided collective meanings for life, death, existence and the world via various literary, philosophical and mystical discourses. The religious imaginary too played a dual role: one of justifying the existence of the world as it is; and another of projecting a world to be created. Of course, as is the case for almost every society, the creation or recreation of a social world did not happen in a vacuum, it almost always occurred against the background of a historical past or tradition.

In fact, it was in relating to its received past that Iran as a collective being recreated itself in the present, just as the “Athenian tragedy” received the “Greek mythology”, and recreated the Athenian society. In this sense, the recreation of society in Iran through reinterpretation of the Islamic significations was part of the universal human development in a concrete variance. In this universal historical process, there have been other important concrete manifestations. Christianity rivals Islam in this regard. The history of Christianity, as Castoriadis has noted, is also marked with the “continuous reinterpretation of the same sacred texts, with amazingly differing outcomes.”

But, the recreation of society via reinterpretation of the past traditions is not limited to religious context. In the sphere of philosophy, for example, the tradition of the classical Greek philosophy has also been “the object of incessant reinterpretation by the Western Europeans since the thirteenth century.”

The Order-shattering power of the Imaginary

The historical past of the Iranian society consisted of two main elements. One was the ancient glory of the Persian Empire, which was all but disconnected from the present, but had left a proud memory. This collective memory was kept alive by the people through the Nowruz (literally new day) annual celebrations, and by the State through the pretensions of the monarchs to the ancient glory. The other element of Iran’s past history was the continuous tradition of the Shi’i Islam, which extended to Iran’s present and had created its own moment of pride. There were also other important historical memories, which extended to the present such as the irfan (Persian mysticism), which was part and parcel of the Shi’i history, but had a lot in common with the Iranian pre-Islamic traditions. The interpretation and reinterpretation of the oral and written texts, which transmitted these traditions to the people of each historical episode, were the bases of the social institutions of each period.

1 Ibid, p. 150
2 Ibid, p. 151
It is important to note that at each historical episode, once certain reinterpretations of traditions were established as the dominant interpretations, any further reinterpretations were officially disallowed. In other words, the recreation of a particular mode of a relatively stable social existence, and its associated institutions, would not allow any further reinterpretation, which would question the validity of the established institutions, to be posed without needing to transcend the routine operations of the existing institutions.

This process of “closure of meaning”, was vital to the maintenance of the existing social and political order, and could be achieved only through the imaginary institutions of the society. Iranian society, as such, survived while it could reproduce individuals for whom questioning the existing institutions and laws were not only forbidden by the fear of persecution, but also inconceivable, because it would not fall within their accepted system of meaning. These conformist individuals were conscious or unconscious bearers of social and political stability.

When a socially accepted system of meaning was fundamentally challenged with the emergence of alternative systems of collective meaning, the ground for social and political change was broken. This is, in fact, what I mean when I speak of the power of imagination in shattering the existing order; the power to present an alternative order as meaningful and the existing order as meaningless.

The displacement of the social and political order in Iran, in this respect, presented similarities with Russia and Turkey. The impact of the developments in Russia and Turkey on Iran was inevitable due to the historical rivalry between the Ottoman and Persian empires since the sixteenth century and the enormous military and political presence of Russia in Iran from the nineteenth century until the World War II. Of course, there was also the geographical vicinity of Iran to these States.

The developments in the modern world-economy in the nineteenth century had locked the Russian, Ottoman and Iranian State in a conflictual relationship. (See Chapter 4 for more detail.) In the early twentieth century, with the fall of the Russian and Ottoman “world-empires”, the political culture in Russia was overtaken by the imaginary of socialism, and in Turkey by secular nationalism. Both of these imaginaries heavily influenced modern Iranian political culture in rivalry with the Islamic imaginary. (See Chapter 6 for more details.)

In responding to the threats of falling into a peripheral position in the “world-system”, Russia, Turkey and Iran strove to empower themselves with modern political ideologies constructed upon peculiar interpretations of their particular experiences and traditions. In Russia, for example, the social and political order was transformed by the Bolshevik Revolution. This revolution succeeded not only because of its proposals to address the social and economic problems, which had faced the country under the Tsarist regime. Its success was owed equally, if not more, to the ability of Lenin’s party to provide an alternative model for the cultural and political existence of Russia.

The imaginary of the Russian Revolution successfully displaced the imaginary institutions, which the Tsarist regime had established over centuries. It demonstrated how meaningless had those institutions become in their failure to provide what they had existed for, that is, to make Russia in the image of a powerful “world-empire”. Not only were the Tsars losing in wars to their imperial competitors, but also they were failing to even provide bread for their peasant subjects.

The rise of secular nationalism in Turkey also took an ideological path in order to create a moment of pride in the people of a falling empire. Kemal Ataturk was the
agent of this new Turkish nationalism, which in turn influenced the nationalist ideology of Reza Shah in Iran in the 1930s. Contrary to Turkey though, secular nationalism did not grow to the level of an empowering imaginary in Iran after the fall of the Persian Empire. Although, it managed to survive until the late 1970s under the Shah’s military power and the Western support, it was clearly undermined by the ideology of the Islamic Revolution, which grew out of the Islamic imaginary, and created real political pride in the majority of the Iranian population.

The destiny of socialism in Russia and that of secular nationalism in Iran were very similar. The powerful socialist imaginary, which the Bolsheviks produced, was institutionalised basically to give a new momentum to the old project of making Russia a world power, and remained meaningful as long as it sustained its superpower image and its new empire. When it failed to do so, it lost its meaning for existence. It also failed because it no longer was able to present itself as the object of faith of its true believers.

Iranian secular nationalism also strove to build a new national confidence by frequent references to the ancient glory of the Persian Empire, by massive military build-up, by the rising oil income, by the shows of strength in domestic and international arena, and by suppressing politico-religious consciousness. But, at the end, it failed to live up to its promises in almost all of its endeavours. Not only did it fail to pose a strong State in the international sphere, but also it failed to win legitimacy by the producing economic prosperity and national pride.

Perhaps, the reason why the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Shah were so unexpected for the observers, was the neglect in giving these imaginary forces proper credit. Instead, most of the experts were concerned with the apparent domestic stability, economic growth, and military posturing of the Soviet Union and Iran. The Soviet Union was a global superpower and Iran a regional military and economic power. Soviets had challenged Americans and had produced a relatively stable bipolar world order. Iranians too had quietened Iraq over border disputes and were recognised as the island of stability in the Middle East. Going by these indicators, it was natural not to foresee the imminent fall of these regimes.

The sudden fall of the Iranian monarchy and the Soviet Empire could not, therefore, be attributed to economic and military weakness. Otherwise the economists could have predicted their imminent collapse; but they never expected or predicted such an imminent fall. Nor, did the politicians and military analysts show any premonition of what was to come. The roots of the inherent weakness of these regimes were deeply politico-cultural. The forces that created a power strong enough to deposed the Iranian monarchy and the Soviet Empire arose from within the field of the collective imaginations of the people of Iran and Russia respectively. These forces, however, went almost totally unnoticed by the existing political, military and economic analyses.

In Russia, like in Iran, the displacement of religious culture haunted the authors of this displacement. With the displacement of the Orthodox Church as the source of spiritual, artistic, ideological and literary institutions, the Communist imaginary initially succeeded to inspire whole-hearted dedication and literary and artistic creation among many Russians. Just as well, the Pahlavi monarchy enjoyed a degree of intellectual and popular support for a brief period after rapid modernisation and putting social and political constrains on Islam. But, when the Communists desperately failed to sustain their position under the pressure of the requirements of
being a superpower in the cold war period since the 1960s, the Communist imaginary was gradually eroded, and eventually lost its power in the late 1980s. People began to either look back to the church as the source of meaning of life, or to the imaginary of Western economic success, or to the imaginary of Western democracy, or to the Russian nationalist imaginary. The same, it seems to be true in Iran, where the power of the secular nationalist imaginary was eroded by the rising Shi’i-Islamic ideology and other alternatives to the monarchy since the 1960s and led to the fall of monarchy in the late 1970s. (For more detail on the development of Islamic ideology see Chapter 6.)

A similar argument may be applicable in the case of the Western Christianity, where various reinterpretations of the Christian faith in the West have given rise to various imaginary significations over the last couple of millennia. Weber has already laid the foundation of the argument for the import of religious imaginary in the formation of socio-economic institutions. The role of the Protestant ethics in displacing Catholicism was instrumental in providing a different form of economic worldview, which probably initiated the capitalist spirit in North Western Europe and the United States. The diverse reinterpretation of the same Christian texts by different sects has continued to provide for the rationale of maintenance or change of the social and political order in other Christian nations.

The imaginary significations, embodied in institutions such as nation-State, monarchy, republic, parliamentary democracy, common law, etc. have become meaningful to collectivities through reinterpretation of the same original texts. I shall later look at the significance of the diverse reinterpretations of the Islamic scripture in providing for the imaginary significations, which have made the social and political developments in Iran meaningful against the background of international economic and political developments. Of particular importance is the Shi’i reinterpretation of the Islamic faith in both its order-maintaining and order-transforming aspects. The power of these new interpretations in motivating social and political action did not derive from simple references to the scriptures and oral traditions. Rather, the power of imagination to inspire action laid in providing creative readings, and inevitably changed views, of the old texts in the form of new ideologies and utopias.

**Ideology: A Product of the Imaginary**

In discussing ideology as a product of the imaginary, I shall trace the concept of ideology in the main traditions of modern thought. I have already noted Ricoeur’s discussion of the concept of ideology in the previous chapter. He identified three categories of interpretation of the concept of ideology: that of Marx, that of Weber and that of Geertz. In a crude summation, one may suggest that Marx uses the concept of ideology as a systematic distortion caused by class interest; Weber’s interpretation of ideology views it as the basis for claims to legitimacy by any form of authority; and Geertz interprets ideology as an integrative force.

Althusser created a major shift in the Marxist tradition of ideology by using Lacanian psychoanalysis. The post-Lacanian critiques of ideology in general have suggested that there was no social world that could be experienced in an undistorted

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manner. According to these views, “the human subject develops as a configuration of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real orders, which are structured in and by ideology.”

Stressing the unconscious origins of ideology, Althusser attempted to highlight the fictional and symbolic sources of ideology. In his essays “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” and “Freud and Lacan”, he rejected the classical Marxist interpretations of ideology, which viewed it as a reflection of economic base, or a false consciousness. By contrast, he defined ideology as an imaginary structure with the material force to constitute the social world. Ideology is thus defined as “the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of social existence”; and as such, it is “the social cement of human society.”

The real relation of the social subjects to the society is therefore deeply connected with the imaginary productions of the unconscious. Althusser’s account of ideology is significant in its bringing to attention the real power of the imaginary in instigating revolutionary change. Althusser, however, has been criticised mainly for his emphasis on the total captivation of the individual subjects by the symbolic structures and his monolithic views of class domination in the modern societies.

In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have offered a post-Marxist account of ideology within the post-Lacanian tradition. They have argued that the ideological struggles between the forces of domination and resistance in the modern world are fought over the appropriation of certain structures of meaning that can be arrested in a historical episode.

For Laclau and Mouffe, as Elliott has suggested, the ideological forms are subject to constant transformations. “And this is so because what is at stake in all political struggles is whether certain meanings can be made to stick within discourse, or whether such meanings merely fade back into the unconscious.” Moreover, the social symbolic structures do not represent the social reality in a direct fashion. The reality is rather experienced through interpretation of the symbolic.

In a Lacanian fashion, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the role of ideology is to repress the real “lack” of the subject in the modern society. “Relations of domination and asymmetries of power are characterised as hegemonic attempts to fill in this insufficiency of the subject.” It is, therefore, this contingency of the foundations of social order that subjects it to the possibility of resistance and subversion.

And finally Laclau and Mouffe point to the modern social conditions as ripe for the rise of new social movements such as “peace, ecological and feminist movements.” I shall argue in Chapter 4 that the Islamic Revolution can also be considered as a new social movement in the context of the global post-modern condition.

In Geertz’s approach, ideology is seen as an inter-subjective symbolic system, which mediates meanings. For Geertz, “thought consists of the construction and manipulation of symbolic systems”, and cultural patterns are programs providing a “template” or “blueprint” for the organisation of social and psychological processes,

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1 Elliott, A. 1992, p. 163
2 Ibid, p. 165.
3 Ibid, pp. 170-177
4 Ibid, p. 180
5 Ibid, p. 182
6 Ibid, p. 183
much as genetic systems provide such a template for the organisation of organic processes.¹

Ideology as a cultural phenomenon is thus a symbolic system by which all social action is mediated; it therefore is basic to the constitution of socially constructed reality.² According to Geertz, man makes basic images of social order by the construction of ideologies, and through them he constitutes rules and authoritative concepts for using power, hence rendering power meaningful.³

One of the most significant features of ideology in this sense is its function as an integrative force, especially its function in creating an imagined memory of the founding event of a collectivity by ritual re-enactment. One clear instance of this function of ideology is evident in the ritual of annual celebration of revolutions by the nations that have been founded, or have begun a new era in their history through a revolution. Where the founding event of a collectivity is a revolution, therefore, the annual ritual revives an imagined memory of the founding revolution. Evidently this concept of ideology views the function of ideology as parallel to myths. At the same time, the association of ideology with revolution posits it as a modern phenomenon. Here, we are evidently dealing with the persistence of imagination in the form of ideology in order to preserve the integrity of the concept of society as it has been largely agreed on by the collectivity.

For example, in Iran, there was the annual celebration of the CIA-sponsored coup d’etat, which returned the Shah to power in the early 1950’s from exile after the defeat of the nationalist movement led by Dr. Muhammad Mossadeq. The celebration of this event was to emphasise that the restoration of monarchy in Iran was a consequence of the popular uprising of the Iranian people. It was in fact the event after which the Shah began to build his dictatorial style of rule; before that he was not seen as ruling in his own right, his presence totally overshadowed by the towering figure of Mossadeq. (I shall discuss the developments of 1950s in Chapter 6.)

There was also the annual celebration of the Shah’s reforms of 1962 proclaimed by his regime as the “White Revolution”, which did work for a while as a rallying point for the support of the Shah’s authority. This was the case where many of the Shah’s opponents ridiculed the so-called White Revolution as an imperialist plot for making Iran completely dependent on the West.

Similar examples could be given for other modern nations, such as the annual celebrations of the revolutions in France, the former Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Algeria, etc. It is also true that in the periods of social upheavals, the memory of a past revolution can be utilised by political agitators to inspire the imagination of a new revolution. In the case of Iran, this memory came from the Persian Constitutional Revolution of the early twentieth century, the nationalist movement of the early 1950’s, and the 1963 uprising which led to Ayatollah Khomeini’s exile. I shall discuss these issues more fully in Chapters 5 and 6.

As Ricoeur has suggested, the nexus between the three functions of ideology – i.e. distortion, legitimation and integration – may be situated by relating the role of ideology to the larger role of imagination in social life. Imagination can work in two ways: preserve social order by mirroring it, or disrupt order by providing the hope of

¹ Ricoeur, P. 1986. pp. 256-257
² Ibid. p. 258
³ Ibid, p. 259
something new. Ideology in its three roles, therefore, represents an imagination, which has three potentials. It may serve to preserve what it defines as a desirable order; or subvert and disrupt an existing order, which it views as undesirable, or bring back a disrupted social or political system into order.

However, viewing ideology not only as an instrument of social distortion and dissimulation, but also as an integrative force, would mean that all polities would have to become ideological as they strive to become institutionalised. In this sense, ideology would be understood as the image that each society forms of itself for the purpose of representing itself. Thus, every society, every social group and every polity for that matter comes to know itself not through a direct relation to itself, but through the relation that it establishes with its own imaginary representation. According to Ricoeur, “no social group can exist without this indirect relation to its own being through a representation of itself.”  

Necessity of this representation becomes evident when we consider the examples provided above about the celebration of the founding event of a society. In my examples about the ritual celebration of the founding events of a polity, it was not the essential truth or authenticity of these events, which were celebrated, but the mere fact that the society needed to make an image of itself through which it could be represented. No matter how popular or unpopular these celebrations were, they were necessary in providing a mirror in which the society could see an image of itself, albeit distorted.

The irrelevance of essential authenticity of these events and the annual rituals is evident in the fact that they could easily be abandoned following a social or political change. What was essential for these rituals to function as an agency for social integration was for them to be meaningfully related to the collective memories of a given collectivity. As long as this relationship was established through the legitimating function of an ideology, the rituals would serve their purpose. Once this link was broken in the public mind though, it would be almost impossible to preserve the political order as part of the reproductive forces of the society, no matter how authentic the founding event of the polity was. In Iran, for example, there was a quick transition after the Islamic Revolution from the rituals of celebrating the White Revolution to celebrating the memory of the Islamic Revolution, the founding event of the new polity, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The role of these imaginary representations is thus to make each social group or community aware of its own actions not in terms of the structure of the action itself, but in terms of its interpretation, which occurs at the symbolic level. Ideology, therefore, plays a double role: It plays a significant role in social integration through its function in making the existence and practices of each society meaningful for its members. It also plays an even more significant role in the dissimulation of the operation of political power, and hence the stability of the political order.

In both of its roles though ideology presents pathological effects. Its integrative role is fulfilled by giving a semblance of meaning to social ties and actions, thus distorting the complexity of reality through “simplification, schematisation, stereotyping and ritualisation”. Its dissimulative role is accomplished by creating belief in the legitimacy of the political authority. This is achieved, as Weber suggested, through the function of ideology to cover up the surplus claim to legitimacy by every

1 Ibid, pp. 265-266
authority, which always exceeds the belief in the legitimacy of authority on the part of those subject to it.

**Utopia and Its Variants**

Utopia may be understood as a specific type or a variation of ideology, which provides for “the imaginary project of a new society”, and in this sense is diametrically opposed to the concept of ideology as an instrument for preserving the status quo. However, just as the case was for ideology as a distorting force, utopia contains an inherent ambiguity. Although it may provide a meaningful image of an alternative reality, utopia can potentially produce both healthy and pathological effects.

Against the integrative function of ideology, utopia offers its own subversive functions in projecting a new social and political arrangement. As Ricoeur suggests: “Utopia is the mode in which we radically rethink what family, consumption, government, religion, and so on are.”¹ And against the function of ideology to help legitimise the existing political authority by hiding the excessive demand of authority on society to believe in its legitimacy, utopia has the function of revealing the ultimate inauthenticity of any authority.

In his *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim identified four variants of utopia: the chiliastic utopia, the liberal utopia, the conservative or traditional utopia and the socialist or communist utopia. To this may be added the powerful nationalist utopia, inspired by the concept of nation-State. These variants of utopia are all manifested in the form of emotional collective aspirations, inspired by symbolic meanings and in search of transforming the existing reality. According to Mannheim, utopia may be conceived as an “overarching symbolic system, a dominant wish”, a collective discourse, which has more to do with feelings than thoughts, and more importantly, a phenomenon non-congruent with the existing reality.²

Chiliastic or millenarian utopias are guided by transcendental hopes, motivated by religious feelings expressed via symbolic structures; and they inspire revolutions against existing social structures. A distant historical example of activation of chiliastic utopias is Thomas Munzer’s movement in the sixteenth century Europe, and a more recent one the Islamic Revolution of Iran. For Mannheim, the dynamics of chiliastic utopias are “ecstatic-orgiastic energies, energies liberated by the breaching of millennium”; it is an experience opposite of “the mystic’s departure from space and time”, it is God’s kingdom now.³

The figure of the Mahdi as discussed earlier, gave the Islamic Revolution a clear millenarian character. As in other millenarian revolutions, the rituals were also used as a symbolic model to shape collective political action. As such, the Islamic Revolution, despite its modern nature, presented similarities to millenarian movements of the Middle Ages. Millenarian movements, in fact, have a long history in Iran. An important example was the movement, which led to the founding of the Safavid Dynasty in the sixteenth century.⁴ (See Chapter 5 for more details.)

The preservation of millenarian characteristics in modern revolutions could be taken as an indication that revolutions, notwithstanding specific symbolic expressions

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¹ Ibid, p. 132
² Ricoeur. P. 1986, p. 274
³ Ibid, p. 277; a more negative interpretation of the ecstatic religious feelings and the orgiastic energies that they release is presented by Wilhelm Reich in his *Mass Psychology of Fascism*.
⁴ This theme has been taken up by S.A. Arjomand in his book *The Shadow of the Hidden Imam* (1984).
and historical contexts, are basically driven by universal human needs. The need for justice, the need for equality, the need for self-assertion, the need for aggression and the need for autonomy have been variously suggested as part and parcel of these universal human needs. To these may be added the universal human need for meaning, or as Geertz has put it by “the need to live in a world to which (one) can attribute some significance.”

The conflict of the Liberal utopia with the existing order was in the name of an idea, the notion that rational thought, reason and knowledge can change the society denying sometimes the real sources of power in money, violence and other non-intellectual forces. The period of Enlightenment right up to the French Revolution was the high point of this utopia. Reason arising from the Enlightenment became the utopian bearer of radical protest against the existing reality, which was dominated by the court and the religious establishment. The nationalist utopia - a product of the eighteenth century Europe - aspired to collective power of the State, and the proud identity that went with it. (See Chapter 4 for more detail.)

The conservative utopia emphasised the notions of folk, family, etc. investing in the past the authority to nourish the present and the future; hence, its attachment to tradition. And finally, the socialist utopia is a combination of other forms of utopia. It borrows the sense of break with history from the chiliastic utopia, the sense of progress from the liberal utopia and the sense of determinism from the conservative utopia.

The utopian project, however, has to open up itself to pathological possibilities, which arise from its very function to expose the arbitrary foundations of any system of legitimacy. As such, it may be seen as a “mad dream”, which is directed toward “nowhere”; a dream which inspires a leap into future but covers up the nostalgia for a perfect past or a “lost paradise”. Hence the tendency in those led by the spirit of utopia to engage in actions, which disregard the necessity of incremental work to approach the ideal, and which oscillate between all and nothing.

Ricoeur understands utopia as an imaginative variation of power, which introduces a sense of doubt about the existing power structures, a sense that shatters or suspends the obvious assumptions about the nature of power. However, this transcending power of utopia, which has not been experienced except in imagination, persists only so long as the utopia is not realised. Utopia, therefore, can survive only in opposition to a dominant power structure; its realisation, in terms of its victory and institutionalisation, is in fact the beginning of its demise. As such, it has to keep its distance with reality.

**Ideology, Utopia and Millennia**

Although one may consider utopia as a particular variation of the general category of ideology, but it has to be identified as a distinct phenomenon which derives its reality from the sphere of ideal. It exists as a real field of energy, an objective force behind collective action, only while it has not been realised in a strictly real or objective sense. As such, it performs the function of a counter-ideology, a

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1 Geertz, C. 1975, P.169
2 Ricoeur, P. 1986, p. 277
3 Ibid, pp. 279-286
millenarian hope. And it is in this context that its pathologies also differ from the pathologies of ideology.

Whereas, ideology becomes pathological when it turns into the instrument of legitimation of a political order, utopia becomes pathological when it turns into a mere frustrated nostalgia for a perfect past, or a desperate act of destroying the present without the hope of building a future. It is in such conditions that the millenarian hope, which could be a source of motivation for creating a desired future via empowering interpretations of the past, could turn into a desperate entanglement in a past without a future. According to Ricoeur: “Utopia tends toward schizophrenia in the same way that ideology tends toward dissimulation and distortion.”\(^1\) It is, perhaps, from the fear of such pathologies that revolutionary actors, as the bearers of a millenarian hope to alter the social and political order in a given society, try, for practical purposes, to create a balance between the two imaginary practices: ideology and utopia.

Every revolution has its utopian fighters, who strive to shatter the ideological guises of the illegitimate authority, as well as its ideologues, who try to use the integrative power of ideology to establish a new order far from, and some times, in contradiction with the original utopian project. The ideology of legitimation of a desired order would lose its productive energies if it became sedimented into rigid structures of domination. Just the same, the utopian project of a desired future would lose its motivational force and its impetus to action if it were not prepared to appreciate the real value of compromising some of its ideals to achieve incremental change.

This argument is clearly applicable to the case of the Iranian-Islamic Revolution of 1979, whose project to set up a perfectly just order have apparently resulted in the establishment of what seems to be the first post-modern theocratic regime. But, the appearances may prove to be illusive, as they conceal the intricacies of the real situation. This concealment is perhaps the consequence of two extreme tendencies. In one extreme, there are the attempts of the ideologues of legitimation at severing the post-revolution power relations from the original ideals of the revolution. And in the other extreme, there are the aspirations of the nostalgic utopians for a permanent revolution. The dynamic nature of the developments in the post-revolution Iran may thus be understood more deeply somewhere in between these extremes.

The Islamic Revolution began with the utopia of a perfect future inspired by the millenarian hope for the return of the promised *Mahdi* under the guidance of the ideological disciplines, developed in the context of the *Shi‘i* political philosophy. The collective memory of the past thus motivated an action, which went beyond an attempt for a mere reproduction of the past. In time, in parallel to the attempts of those revolutionary leaders, who wished to impose strict theocratic limitations upon the possible forms of the emerging political order, the revolution produced new modes of resistance to the new modes of domination. As such, those members of the new political elite, who attempted to tame the ideology of revolution by turning it into an instrument of oppression and totalitarianism, have already provoked movements of resistance. I shall demonstrate later how these new struggles for resistance, while remaining committed to original hopes of the revolution, have refused to give in to new modes of domination.

\(^1\) Ricoeur, P. 1994, p. 134
The life and death struggle against new modes of domination should thus not be dismissed as a form of factional fighting within the power structures of the Islamic Republic, as it is being waged over such fundamental issues as social justice, political pluralism, religious freedom and civil society. Ideological sedimentation is still a real possibility, but so are the formation of a civil society and the rise of democratic freedoms within the structures of the Islamic culture. The destiny of this struggle is yet to be determined as the struggle is still going on. As such, there is still a chance to have the utopian dreams come true with limited pathological consequences in the context of the limitations of the real existence. There is also a real chance that the ideological and utopian pathologies undermine the chances of a better future for Iranians.

This fact may support Ricoeur’s troubling assertion that the social imaginary can be reached “only through the figures of false consciousness”. Hence, he argued that a degree of social pathology might be necessary for social change, when it “brings to light the sclerosis of worn out institutions.” This assertion, therefore, should be understood in the sense that a desired degree of pathology would still allow the utopian dreams for a better social and political order to survive, and that it would not destroy the possibilities of the rise of new forms of resistance to relations of domination. By the same token, the new revolutionary regimes would not have to fall in the trap of ideological sedimentation if they remained open to the need for further change.

The dynamic nature of social and political development in Iran after the revolution, therefore, should be seen in a new light. They should be understood not as a sign of the institutionalisation of a rigid theocratic regime, but as the continuation of the struggles of Iranians to create a balance between the ideology of legitimation of a new order and the utopia of a better future. This sometimes sad and sometimes happy reality has been also evident in the destiny of other so-called Third World revolutions.

The utopian ideals of the revolutions of the so-called Third World societies have, almost without exception, been compromised with the institutionalisation of the regimes, which came out of these revolutions. The utopian imaginations of these societies were inspired mainly by their incongruity with the Western dominance since the colonial period. These utopias, were mostly expressed in the form of religious, socialist or nationalist chiliasm, and invariably set out to shatter the existing reality by questioning the dominant pattern of international power structure.

The first attempt to realise the socialist utopia was made by the Bolshevic Revolution, and the Chinese Revolution marked the beginning of the era of socialism in the Third World. The Third World utopian revolutions created such an ecstasy that even those Western intellectuals, who felt confined by the imposing matter-of-factness of the victory of reason in the West, began to look to the Third World for liberation. Intellectuals like Debray, Marcuse, Camus, Sartre, Fanon and Foucault were thus fascinated by the Chinese, Cuban, Algerian, Vietnamese and Iranian Revolutions. But, almost all of these utopian eruptions, which had put up genuine claims on behalf of the oppressed and offered alternatives to the existing power structure, once in power, gave rise to fierce ideological struggles to find a balance between the revolutionary ideals and the need for new ideological legitimations.

1 Ibid, p. 134
It was in the context of these struggles that most revolutionary regimes turned to oppressors of sorts themselves. The realisation of their utopian dreams entailed institutionalisation of the ideals into new forms of power relations, which ultimately tilted the balance toward one or another extreme. As such, in most cases the balance was lost either in favour of new ideological formulations for the legitimacy of new power structures, or in favour of the persistent images of the ideal future in the form of aspirations for a permanent revolution.

I have already spoken of the conservative tendencies of ideology, which is marked by its bias against change. Well, the institutionalisation of utopia would also lead to conservatism of an entrenched ideology, and would diminish its function as an identity forming force. But, free from entrenched power structures, utopia would remain an instigator of social change, because, as such, it lacks the ideological function of legitimisation of the existing order. It is in this context that the utopian imaginary of revolution offers the revolutionary population with the hope for an ideal society.

Thus, a revolutionary people could potentially imagine a society in which collective identity and change would coexist, and in which there would be little, if any, need for construction of a fixated identity, whose preservation was tightly linked with the absence of conflict and change. A society, which would offer both "identity and alterity", or as Henri Desroche has put it in his The Sociology of Hope, "a new way of being the same and other". A form of being that celebrates conflict as a source of change alongside the need for legitimacy and stability.

### Ideology, Morality and Identity

The symbolic structures, which confirm the unity of a group, may not be as effective if there were not symbolic structures that separated the group from others, hence the need for symbols of identification and exclusion/inclusion. I have already spoken of the integrative role of ideology. But, as the imaginary creation of the symbolic structures, ideology has an additional function: the function of constituting identity. In fact, one may argue that social integration is a prerequisite of the formation of collective identity. Yet, this very constitutive nature of ideology, according to Habermas, gives it the potential to become pathological under the pressure of its function to legitimise authority. This position, in its synthesis of the Marxian and Weberian concepts of ideology, offers a critique of the oppressive orders, which thrive on ideological legitimacy.

In this perspective, the identity that was forged for Iranians by the Pahlavi regime was based on a repressive interpretation of the memories of the ancient Persian culture. As such, although it gained a relative success in inspiring a sense of belonging and purpose, it eventually led to a state of crisis of identity. This situation, which posed a real threat to the Shi’i religious establishment, was sensed by Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers to its full extent, and most probably motivated their push against the Shah’s regime and for a return to a national identity based on Islamic values.

The identity crisis, caused by the ideological apparatus of the Pahlavi regime, was thus a consequence of pathological nature of ideological legitimacy of the regime. This pathological nature became evident as the regime moved to block social and political development of the traditional and modern forces, which offered alternative
views of a desirable polity. Like other regimes based on ideological legitimacy, therefore, the Pahlavi regime had to end up gagging the voices of dissent for its own survival.

But, in their struggle against the Pahlavi regime, the protagonists of change in Iran successfully provided alternative symbolic forms as the basis for an alternative reality, and hence an alternative identity, an identity, which was believed to be consistent with the desired order of things. With the rise of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic, this alternative identity structure in time proved to be more acceptable to the Iranian people than the identity propagated by the monarchical regime on the basis of pre-Islamic symbolic codes.

However, there have been serious pathological aspects to the symbols of identity, which have figured in post-revolutionary Iran, particularly along Islamic and non-Islamic lines. Following the Qur'anic verse: “Be compassionate with the believers and uncompromising against the infidels”, certain extremist interpretations were developed that applied strict and arbitrary codes of behaviour to the public at large. The Qur'anic concept of “infidel” was so narrowly interpreted that most of the people of Iran did not qualify as Muslim believers unless they followed the strict codes of public piety, codes that were being developed by highly emotional and in many cases vindictive revolutionaries. As such, Muslim zealots, who had barely come out of the revolutionary heat, and carried an excessively emotional resentment toward Westernisation under the Shah, began to mistreat those, who would not abide by the new rules. And thus, they alienated many committed believers by branding them as non-Muslim. Many of those, who were left outside the official interpretations of the Islamic morality, were treated with a total lack of compassion. Certain codes were revived or developed for how to dress, how to appear and how to behave in the public in order to identify with the perceptions of the revolutionary zealots of the true Islamic norms of morality.

For women, the rules were specifically harsh, particularly in the enforcement of the hejab, this Qur'anic concept, that implies chastity and abstention from outrageous exhibitionist behaviour, was interpreted to mean a specific fashion of veiling with roosari (scarf), chador or maghna 'eh, and wearing loose garments. There was an infamous line bandied around jokingly about the enforcement of hejab: “Ya roosari, ya to sari”, which meant “either the scarf, or the blow on the head”. There were restrictions for men as well; for example, wearing beard and wearing long sleeves were interpreted as the sign of chastity and commitment and a close shave or putting on a tie as the sign of infidelity and immorality. Both sexes were prohibited from mixing with each other in the public, even from talking to or looking at each other, and drinking or possession of alcohol was outlawed. Those in employment were required to attend mass prayers and use acceptable norms of speech and otherwise lose their jobs. Such symbols of identity were perceived to objectify abstract private convictions by uniform codes of public piety, and those in breach of these codes were initially very harshly dealt with, as for example the stoning of the adulterous and the flogging of the drunk. In time, the intensity of the enforcement of the codes of public piety has been relaxed a little, but there is yet a lot to be desired in this area. Some of the measures taken in enforcing the parochial and arbitrary rules of public piety were so harsh that their victims may deserve compensation or at least official apology.

The process of enforcing the uniformity of public behaviour was arbitrary because it was fuelled by an intense desire on the part of certain social groups to
impose upon others a specific interpretation of the essence of Islamic piety and chastity. The imaginary origins of these interpretations were muted by the conventional structures, which were constructed constantly on imagined abstractions. As many Muslim thinkers, including some of the ulama, have suggested, the essence of the Islamic morality is based on the Qur'anic message of peace, understanding, and human compassion, which are inherent in Islam, even in the word Islam itself, which implies peaceful surrender to God. They insist that this message should be extended not only to the Muslim believers, but also to the non-believers.

At the public level, the great Islamic philosophers and mystics have gained popular respect because of their objections throughout the Iranian history against the excessive use of force in implementing narrow human interpretations of Islamic piety in the name of the word of God. In this vein, they even criticised the State and religious establishment for their excessive and pretentious use of the Islamic hodud (punishments). The most that has been allowed by the free-thinking Muslim social reformers is peaceful indoctrination of the public about the Islamic moral values based on understanding of cultural differences.

In principle, piety in Islam has been understood as a matter of private conviction and refraining from behaviour that would insult the public sensitivities. The extremist post-revolutionary interpretations of how such an end is to be achieved have entailed numerous instances of atrocity against the public, which violated the compassionate and peaceful Islamic values in the name of Islam. Yet, at present it has been recognised that it is essential for the survival of the Islamic government to rationalise the interpretations of the Islamic concepts of morality in a way compatible for the requirement of civil society, which the Islamic Iran claims to be. As many high ranking political ulama, such as the new president of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Muhammad Khatami, have expressed, civil society is totally compatible with the essence of Islam as a religion of peace. It is increasingly being recognised that the Islamic values are not to be respected profoundly by the public if they are not presented in sharp contrast with the inhumane ways that they were applied in the past.

Many modernist Muslim theologians, politicians, intellectuals and artists have insisted that in the area of the moral conduct of the society, there is an urgent need for the reinterpretation of the Islamic symbolic structures distinct from the traditional conservative interpretations. Just as Islamic political concepts had to be reinterpreted by courageous personalities, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, in order to tackle the exigencies of time, the Islamic moral concepts need creative innovations by brave and credible Islamic leaders. There is little doubt the Islamic revolutionaries were successful in their attempt to change the symbolic models of social order inherited from the last regime because they offered new interpretations appealing to the people, rather than being imposed upon them. The same argument logically applies to sensitive case of public morality, which is fundamental to social order.

**Competing Imaginaries**

As already noted, although utopia, as a system of collective imagination, is essentially a futuristic concept, it almost always is inspired by the collective memory of the past. Mircea Eliade’s examination of cargo cults, and its further development by Henri Desroche, would support this claim. It goes to show that, in these cults, the “new era” is identified by an archetypal return to the past, and by nostalgia for lost
paradises; but invariably, it is the future that is in the community or public mind when these archetypes of the past are invoked. The present generation must lament a lost paradise in order to get inspired to design the future and empowered to build it.

For the slave, the lost paradise was the time of free life before slavery. For the serf, it was the time of “village consciousness before the grip of feudalities, the time of nomadic life before sedentary agriculture.” For the radical liberal, it was “the time of good savages before the time of mediocrities and evils of civilisation.” For the colonised, it was the time before colonisation; for the socialist, the time before the division of labour; and for the believer it is the time of the earth without evil, “the time of Eden before sin”

In modern Iran, there was in existence a spectrum of these imaginaries. Or, to put it differently, there were fragmented elements of a powerful collective imaginary yet to be shaped. There was an anti-colonialist imagination, which had been shaped predominantly around the resistance to the British and Russian colonialist push. (See Chapter 4.) There was the imagination of a return to relaxed village life, which had been deeply disturbed by despotic States and the feudal lords. There was the Shi‘i imaginary of the early days of the rise of Islam, an Islam believed to have been deviated from its true path by the Umayyad Caliphate. There were also new interpretations of the memories of the modern atrocities against the faith by the modernising Pahlavi State. (See Chapter 6.) And, there were utopian hopes for the realisation of the nostalgic dreams of the past in the future under the banner of the Mahdi.

There were also the liberal, nationalist and socialist imaginaries. The liberal and nationalist imaginaries were shaped around the ideas of the secular intelligentsia of the early twentieth century Iran, which were in turn deeply influenced by the humanist ideas of the European Enlightenment. (See Chapter 5.) And the socialist imaginary was forged predominantly around various versions of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

What happened in Iran was that all these various imaginaries competed with each other in providing conflicting interpretations of the past in the form of specific ideologies or utopias to guide the present and, hence, the future. In doing this, they had to establish a dialogue between the foundational traditions of the people and their present existence. In the Iranian mythology and history, there were numerous fictional as well as factual events and figures both Islamic and pre-Islamic, which were tapped into by various ideologues in order to produce new discourses of action. In competition with each other, the revolutionary ideologues of various persuasions attempted to establish a dialogue between the past and present, which selectively revived the collective memories of the people, and made these memories of the past apt for the creation of imaginaries of the future. But, it was the Islamic ideologues that eventually won this political, ideological and intellectual battle.

The secular nationalist ideologues, particularly those sympathetic to monarchy, invoked the Persian mythologies, such as the legend of King Jamshid. Jamshid was a pre-historic figure who was imagined to be the founder of Persia as a prosperous and peaceful civilisation, where people lived in absolute happiness, and where the world was filled with light. But, this legendary happiness was not immune to evil. The villain in this fiction was the infamous Zahhak with his brain-eating snakes, who overthrew Jamshid in conspiracy and plunged the people into misery and

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filled the world with darkness. This story, beautifully told by Ferdowsi in his *Shahnameh*, reaches its climax when Jamshid’s son Fereydoon, who was held in bondage by Zahhak, is released and returned to the throne by the uprising of the people under the leadership of the blacksmith-turned-revolutionary Kaveh.

According to *Shahnameh*, after the demise of Fereydoon, the era of the kings of absolute goodness ends, and therefore the ground becomes broken for the emergence of the epic hero Rostam, who is another frequent referent for the nationalists and monarchists. But something that the monarchists try to conceal is that the legend of Rostam, which had also come into the collective memories from mythologies whose origins were hidden in the fictions of antiquity and pre-history, represented the loss of hope in the kings as saviours of the people. Rather, the collective hope of Iranians for protection against foreign and domestic atrocities was now invested in Rostam, who although at the service of the kings, would from time to time come into conflict with them over their unwise and unjust domestic and foreign policies.

The monarchists also fictionalised the figures of Cyrus, the great, and Darius, the king of kings, out of the historical shadows of the pre-Islamic glory of the Persian Empire. These figures were particularly celebrated by the *Pahlavi* regime in a systematic move to repress the collective memories of the Islamic narratives. They were celebrated for both their military power which had made possible numerous conquests and had led to the establishment of a powerful empire, and their wisdom and justice in dealing with the people under their domain. A lot is made, for example, of the ancient scrolls and artefacts that represent the love of freedom on the part of these kings, and the compassion with which they had treated their defeated enemies. For example, frequent reference is made to the bill of human rights issued by Cyrus, the great, after the conquest of Babylon and the grant of freedom to the Jews, who were put in bondage by the Assyrians. There are also references to the archaeological findings that indicate that these great kings, contrary to the prevalent traditions of slavery, paid the workers who built huge monuments, such as the Persepolis.

In contrast with the nationalist and monarchists, the Muslim ideologues invoked the Islamic legends, texts and figures. I have already noted the significance of the poetics of the *Qur’an*, the figures of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Ali and Imam Hussein, and the legends of Karbala and the *Mahdi*, which had made their marks on the memories via the emotional reminiscences of the Shi’i Islamic history and mythology. I shall return to these Islamic symbols later on. In addition to the purely religious symbols and narratives, the Muslim ideologues also invoked the figures whose memory had come out of the tradition of mysticism. Conspicuous examples in this regard were the figures such as Hallajj, Sohrevardy, Hafiz and Mowlavi that were at the same time historical and mythical. The appeal of such figures was due to the mysterious effect of the mystical tradition on the minds of the modern Iranians. Their popularity did not derive from their personalities, as there was only scant and mostly fictional biographical information about them. Their influence came from their mystical poetry and prose, which were endeared almost at the level of the sacred texts. They were thus amenable to various, and at times conflicting, interpretations not only by the Muslim ideologues and the Sufi orders, but also by the modern writers, artists and other intellectuals. Even some Western intellectuals took interest in the tradition of Persian-Islamic mysticism.
Hallajj, the mystic, for example, was studied by Westerners such as Louis Massingon, who, following the interpretations of many Iranians, saw Hallajj as a saintly figure with supernatural powers. From supernatural powers there was not a long distance to magic and sorcery of which Hallajj was also accused. Even the leftist writers were not immune to the influence of mysticism. Professed Marxists, such as Ali Mirfetros and Ahmad Shamlu, for example, had to submit to their unconscious drive to connect themselves to mystical figures, such as Hallajj and Hafiz. Strongly influenced by his political consciousness, Mirfetros portrayed Hallajj as a revolutionary figure with materialist views. These opposite readings of Hallajj was similar to the divergent interpretations of, for instance, Hafiz, who was considered as a true believer by the contemporary Ayatollah Motahhari and as an atheist by the modern poet Ahmad Shamlu. (See Chapter 6 for more detail.) Interestingly, these opposing interpretations were canvassed in the 1970s by the political activists of various political persuasions in justifying their specific ideological positions. The effect of such interpretations was crystallised in certain imaginaries, which incorporated selected fragments of the writings of these mystics in order to produce new discourses of action against the old regime.

Madness and the Collective Imaginary

Once an imaginary is internalised by a group, it, in many ways, takes possession of the souls of the individual followers of the group, and henceforth would be religiously pursued. Interestingly, this effect is not limited to religious groupings; it extends to the atheistic groups as well. The effect in certain instances borders on nothing short of madness or possession by spirits.

Madness, as Foucault has observed in his *Madness and Civilisation*, had not been considered as pathological before the age of reason, but, in many instances, as possession by evil or even angelic spirits. Durkheim is also quoted as writing: “Under the effect of the collective force, they (people) are sometimes overtaken by a real delirium, which incites them to acts in which they do not recognise themselves.”

Collective actions of the revolutionary crowd may also be seen as historical dramas under the effect of collective imagination. What Neil Smelzer has called “collective behaviour” in his *A Theory of Collective Behaviour*, such as panics, crazes or fads, are among other apparently erratic and dramatic actions under the influence of collective imaginary constructions. So are the crowds, like lynch mobs, at a lower moral scale. Although the revolutionary crowd cannot be reduced to lynch mob, as Taine and Le Bon would have us to believe, but they share with it the general characteristics of the crowd.

Gustav Le Bon laid too much emphasis on the role of contagion in the spread of the crowd behaviour. But, he proved to be an astute observer in suggesting that the process of understanding for the members of the crowd went not through reasoning, but through impressing images on the crowd’s mind. Le Bon believed that individuals would lose their personal identity when in the crowd, and as such would be overcome by the unconscious collective instincts and images, which, for him, meant “a descent on the ladder of civilisation”.

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1. Ibid, p. 151
Eric Hoffer also observed in his *The True Believer* that under the influence of the collective force of a mass movement, the troubled souls get exalted by finding themselves a part of a common cause, and by getting absorbed into “a closely knit and exultant corporate whole”.\(^1\) Earlier, Georges Sorel had already argued that it was difficult to mobilise the masses with purely rational principles, hence his emphasis on the symbolic role of myth in arousing emotional responses in the mind of the people, which would create in them sentiments of courage, enthusiasm and sacrifice.\(^2\)

According to Desroche, “collective deliriums” and instincts have their own logic, which in Durkheimian terms, are that of “hot societies” as against the logic of reason, which functions in “cold societies”.\(^3\) For him, societies that have entered “universal history” and those that are still emerging from the traditional world are entangled in a universal dilemma. They always have to put up “resistance against dominating societies of universal history”, and at the same time agonise over their own entry into history.\(^4\)

In Iran, crowd deliriums, which bordered on madness, operated both when people were required to sacrifice their lives during the revolution by going in front of the troops and tanks barehanded, and when they had to make the ultimate sacrifice in the war with Iraq. Although some groups, such as the *Mojahedin* and *Fada'ian*, could provide *imaginaries* for which the leftist true believers were prepared to sacrifice lives and possessions, they were immensely outscored in this regard by the Islamic true believers under the influence of the radical clerical leaders, such as Ayatollah Khomeini. (See Chapter 6 for more detail on the genesis of the Islamic ideology of revolution.)

Iran, like many other Third World societies, also encountered a dilemma over entry into the “universal history” from its traditional world. As a deeply religious society, it was in an intense and essential struggle with both the Western dominance and its own dependence on a Western-type economic and industrial development. In this struggle against the external domination and internal degeneration, Iran, as a newly emerging society with a heavy baggage of traditions, got possessed by an imagined spirit from its past, which was activated in an explosive eruption in search of a meaningful future.

The revolutionary eruption in Iran demonstrated many features of the kind of collective religious possession that Desroche has described. “Prophets (arose), adorcisms (were) celebrated, improbable messages (were) given, rites (were) carried out in which spirits and bodies (seized) of each other and (exhaled) each other, unknown languages (were) uttered, trances (became) contagious, marches, processions, and parades (got) on the way, ... fabulous histories (tacked) a re-imagined past into an imaginary future, ... a sublime and disjoining festival (led) to the enjoyment of sacrifices, ... the world (became) other, an old world (went) away, a new world (enveloped) one with the magic of its presence.”\(^5\)

One who has experienced the moments of collective ecstasy during riots or revolutions does not fail to appreciate this depiction of collective behaviour. There is no denying that economic, political and social problems have frequently caused discontent and conflict that have led to struggles of the poor, the disenfranchised, and the repressed against the capitalist, the oppressor and the elite throughout human

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1. Hoffer, E. *The True Believer*, N.Y., Mentor, 1958, p.44
3. Desroche, H. 1979, p. 151
4. Ibid, p.151
5. Ibid, p.152

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history. But, the point is that no struggle could have taken place unless it was emotionally stirring and ecstatically inspiring for the social actors. Nevertheless, the high emotions and ecstatic inspirations that motivate the revolutionary eruptions are effective because they are symbolically mediated and meaningfully interpreted by what is constructed from the past.

Conclusion

So far, I have tried to develop a theoretical argument, which links the Iranian Revolution of 1979 with the collective imagination of Iranians as a cultural collective. I have particularly emphasised the role of symbolic structures within the cultural domain in providing the raw material for creative production of new imaginaries, which would in turn provide models for conceiving a desired future and performing action to realise it.

In this vein, I have also argued that the Islamic Revolution was an expression of the aspirations of Iranian nation to seek freedom from the alienating modes of domination at the local level by overthrowing monarchy as the historical symbol of oppression. Iranians sought to negate the cultural and ideological hegemony of the monarchical system in order to institute a new culture which they perceived to be of their own making and with which they felt a deep sense of affinity. Although they returned to the remote past to create this new cultural identity, they did not adhere to traditions as monolithic structures transported from the depths of history to the present. Rather, they embarked on a massive project of reinterpreting the past traditions in order to create a modern identity in the modern world.

However, if the identity that they sought to establish was to be meaningful, it had to be shaped in interaction with the global developments that have marked the human development since the rise of modernity in the West. Within the context of the world capitalist system, Iranians registered the steady decline of their position as a nation from the status of a “world-empire” to a peripheral State dominated by the powers in the core capitalist States of the “world-system”. They sensed particularly since the nineteenth century that the weakness of the ruling dynasties had turned Iran into a virtual colony of the West. Most dramatically, they sensed that since the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty, the modernisation of Iran according to Western recipes had threatened the very symbolic structures that they perceived to contain the hope of restoring their sense of collective identity, dignity and pride. The endeared Shi‘i faith and the religious narratives and symbolic structures thus turned into repository of potential utopias of resistance and liberation.

The role of the religious leadership was particularly important in developing an ideology of revolution that was not only a local panacea, but also the recipe of a total salvation. The ideology of the Islamic Revolution thus called for the overthrow of the monarchical regime as a stepping stone for the defence of Islam and Iran against the global onslaught of the Western ideology of modernity. The Islamic Revolution was a new social movement of global proportions that marked the reaction of a peripheral cultural form to the crisis of modernity. Its rise was concurrent with other new social movements since the 1960s with the dominant characteristics of the post-industrial or post-modern condition. (In the next chapter, I shall discuss the post-modern characteristics of the Islamic Revolution.)
Now that the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the institution of Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of *velayat-e faqih*, as the core concept of the Islamic Republic of Iran, are upon us, what seems essential is to evaluate the democratic and repressive potentials of Khomeini's thesis. Such evaluation will have to take account of various possible interpretations of his thesis in the post-Khomeini era; a subject that has rarely been seriously studied. (See Chapter 8.) It is also important to appreciate the role of contemporary Islamic political discourse at the global level.¹

This political discourse is significant in addressing three important global issues: First the issue of the conflict between the Western and Islamic cultures. The modern Islamic hermeneutics points to the commonality of the religious origins of the Western and Islamic civilisations by mirroring the Christian and Jewish hermeneutics. Second the issue of the political conflict of Islam and the West. The modern Islamic discourse points to the necessity of a communicative rather than military interaction between Islam and the West. It provides a native political paradigm for the Muslims with which they can enter a constructive political and cultural dialogue with the West. And third the issue of global immigration and social conflicts caused by multiculturalism; the modern Islamic cultural discourse addresses the attempts to construct a global cultural pluralism within which no one culture may be permitted to bring others under its hegemony by claiming exclusive access to Truth.

¹ Ibid, pp. 148-149