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

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Verbeelding, Betekenis en Revolutie

Collectieve verbeelding als een feitelijke politieke kracht is een verwaarloosd onderwerp in de literatuur. In het bijzonder is het verwaarloosd in de bestaande analyses van de Iraanse Islamitische Revolutie (1978-1979). Het hoofdthema van mijn proefschrift behelst de radicale kracht van creatieve verbeelding in de vormgeving van een moderne revolutie door nieuwe interpretaties van religieuze tradities. Ik stel voor dat de revolutionaire verbeelding tevoorschijn komt op een moment dat nieuwe interpretaties van de collectieve, historische ervaringen van een gegeven gemeenschap de mogelijkheid openen van nieuwe machtsverhoudingen. Dat gebeurt door het aanbieden van nieuwe interpretaties van teksten die de ervaringen van het verleden doorgeven aan nieuwe generaties. De politieke kracht van de verbeelding ligt in het feit dat er motivaties voor het scheppen van nieuwe machtsverhoudingen uit voort kunnen komen.

De Iraanse Revolutie van 1979 was een concreet voorbeeld van een moderne revolutie die gedreven werd door een religieuze verbeeldingskracht. Mijn stelling is dat de Islamitische verbeelding verantwoordelijk was voor de inspiratie van de Iraanse Revolutie en nog steeds het politieke leven in Iran beheerst. De bron van die verbeelding ligt in de collectieve zoektocht van Iraniers naar de betekenis van het moderne leven door middel van een creatieve interpretatie van de religieuze en literaire teksten, rituelen en andere symbolische结构en die aan de basis van de Iraanse Islamitische cultuur staan. Dit werk tracht een hermeneutische interpretatie te geven van de radicale verbeelding die de Iraanse Revolutie heeft geïnspireerd en die ook een beeld van de toekomst van de Iraanse natie heeft ontwikkeld.

De primaire reden voor de aantrekkingskracht van de Iraanse Revolutie voor Iraniers was het emancipatoire potentieel ervan en de belofte van een waardig bestaan in de wereld. Aan de ene kant ging het om een verlangen in een geliefde traditie te staan, anderzijds om een waardig bestaan in een vijandige wereld te verzekeren. Islam werd niet alleen voorgesteld als een cultuur, maar ook als een civilisatie wier aanspraak op waarheid met die van de westere beschaving kon wedijveren. In die zin moet de Iraanse Revolutie beoordeeld worden binnen
de context van een politiek van erkenning op het wereldtoneel.

De hier gekozen benadering tracht niet de afhankelijkheid van de revolutionaire verbeelding van socio-economische factoren in kaart te brengen, maar aan te tonen hoe de socio-economische condities begrijpelijk worden gemaakt voor de revolutionaire actoren in termen van de politieke verbeelding. De ideologie die de Iraanse Revolutie motiveerde was niet het product van een bepaalde politieke of religieuze leider, maar geworteld in de politieke verbeelding van generaties van Iraanse intellectuelen en sociale hervormers. Het gaat hier om een ideologie met inherente contradicties die enerzijds geleid hebben tot de institutionalisering van een nieuwe wijze van overheersing en anderzijds tot de kritische beoordeling daarvan.

Een hermeneutische benadering als de mijne gaat uit van de gedachte dat er een verband bestaat tussen de daad van interpretatie en de psychische motivatie die collectieve actie tot stand brengt. Iraniers zijn vanaf het begin van de twintigste eeuw in toenemende mate bezig betekenis te geven aan de moderniteit en gebruiken daar de traditionele teksten voor. De grondleggende categorieën van de Iraanse-Islamitische cultuur, verzameld in heilige teksten, mythen, mystieke poëzie, verhalen, enzovoorts, die tezamen het collectieve bewustzijn vormen, worden tot op de dag van vandaag gebruikt. Deze traditie van interpretatie heeft het verlangen naar een religieuze, utopische revolutie gekweekt.

Nieuwe Islamitische vertogen maakten gebruik van de traditie van interpretatie om modellen van een betere samenleving te ontwerpen. De nadruk daarin op verlangen naar vrijheid en menselijke waardigheid maakt het ook mogelijk een interne kritiek op het geweld en de onderdrukking die uit de Revolutie naar voren gekomen zijn te formuleren. De Islamitische revolutionaire ideologie heeft zich gedeeltelijk ontwikkeld in een pathologisch vertoog ter legitimatie van een nieuwe wijze van overheersing. Inmiddels is er een nieuwe kritische benadering van de revolutionaire ideologie ontstaan die afstand neemt van de velayat-e faqih, de doctrine die een model verschaf voor het instellen van een absolute theocratie.
Collective imagination as a real political force is a neglected subject in the existing literature on revolutions. It is particularly rare in the existing discourses on the Iranian-Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979. The general theme of my thesis is to demonstrate the radical power of creative imagination in shaping a modern revolution through novel interpretations of religious traditions. I propose that the imaginary of revolution emerges in a condition that new interpretations of the collective historical experiences of a given community open up the possibility of new variations of power by offering alternative meanings of the texts that transmit the experiences of the past to present generations. The political force of the imaginary lies in its capacity to become the source of the motivations that drive the community to create new variations of power in the process of reproduction of social reality.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a concrete example of a modern revolution driven by a religious imaginary. My thesis is that the Islamic imaginary was responsible for inspiring the political thought and action, which led to the Iranian Revolution, and which has continued to define political life in Iran ever since. The contention is that the source of the Islamic imaginary should be located in the collective search by Iranians for meaning through creative interpretation of the religious and literary texts, rituals and other symbolic structures, which form the basis of the modern Iranian-Islamic culture. This work therefore attempts to develop a hermeneutic understanding of the meaning of the radical imaginary that anticipated and precipitated the Iranian Revolution, and that has shaped the image of a desired future in the minds of Iranians as a modern nation. As such, it will hopefully contribute to generating a new interest in grasping the meaning of such phenomenon as the rise to power of a religious revolution and government in our “post-modern” world.

Locating the source of the imaginary of the Iranian Revolution in the new interpretations of cultural and symbolic structures will make it clear how this collective movement became meaningful and thus desirable for its participants. The primary source of the attraction of this revolution for Iranians was arguably its emancipatory potentials and promises of a dignified existence in the world. The collective search for meaning in the Iranian Revolution is thus presented in this work as a process of struggle to fulfil a collective need, the need to find a position in the world from which to form a desirable understanding of the self. This process involved the imaginary construction of a dignified identity. It was marked at one and the same time by a quest to assert belonging to an endeared tradition and an attempt to bring that tradition into question in order to secure a dignified life in an inevitably adversary modern world.

The tension arising from the need to be one and different thus became in Iran, as elsewhere in the modern world, a main feature of the reaction to the emerging forms of the global process. In the economic, political and cultural modes of social existence, this tension created contradictory tendencies engaged at one and the same time in affirming local identities while promoting a set of universal human interests. In the sphere of the economy, local initiatives were increasingly directed at offering new interpretations of local traditions in order to make them receptive to the emerging patterns of the global economy. In politics, new forms of nationalism arose through
new connections with the past heroes, myths, religions, while expressing willingness
to belong to a global political hope for universal values of peace and non-violence,
and respect for human dignity. Particular cultures were also asserted in the form of
specific identities that sought recognition.

In Iran, like other modern Islamic countries, the religious tradition of Islam
attracted the foremost assertion of belonging to a particular tradition in the form of the
defence of a cultural identity. But, this cultural defence was more that a local defence
of an indigenous pattern of religious beliefs, sacred symbols, myths and rituals under
threat of extinction by a dominant global culture. In the 1970s, it grew to an
ideological struggle to offer Islam, not only as a culture, but also as a civilisation
contesting truth claims of the rival Western civilisation.

As such, one may situate the Iranian Revolution within the context of the
modern global politics of recognition whereby the desire to win global recognition
became a main driving force of the revolution. The quest for the fulfilment of the
desire for recognition was manifested in Iran in the form of the ideology of a religious
revolution. The religious character of the Iranian Revolution may thus be understood
in terms of transcendental motivations that were created by the ideologisation of the
Islamic political discourse. These motivations generated a powerful political force that
was able to mobilise the population to take action for fulfilling the desire for
recognition. To say this is not to say that socio-economic problems did not concern
the revolutionary actors in Iran; but that these problems themselves found political
meaning in the context of the desires and motivations, which were created by new
ideological understandings of the Islamic political discourse.

Thus, this work does not dismiss the need to establish the socio-economic
preconditions of revolutions, but tries to develop a concept of imagination that would
help illuminate certain aspects of revolutions that escape the empirical analysis of
socio-economic factors. In other words, collective imagination cannot be reduced to
socio-economic factors, but can turn such factors into meaningful ingredients of
collective action. My approach is thus not to examine the dependence of the
imaginary of revolution on socio-economic conditions - which could lead to yet
another conventional account of revolutions - but to demonstrate how these conditions
become intelligible to revolutionary actors in terms of a political imaginary that
motivates revolutionary action.

It will be argued that the ideology that motivated the Iranian Revolution was
the product of the political imagination of generations of Iranian intellectuals and
social reformers, rather than one or another political or religious leader. This ideology
was rooted in the interaction of various religious, philosophical and literary discourses
of power that pervaded popular politics in Iran prior to the fall of the monarchy there.
These discourses were in turn produced out of varying interpretations of the shared
symbolic structures.

The development of Islamic revolutionary ideology in the context of the
competition of contesting interpretations of the Islamic tradition will demonstrate that
the process of transformation of the Islamic faith into a revolutionary ideology in Iran
has been able to create the possibility for the critique of revolutionary ideology. In
other words, my thesis develops an understanding of the Islamic revolutionary
ideology, which tries to expose its inherent contradictions. This ideology will thus be
seen both as a motivational force behind a revolution, which provided the prospect of
a dignified existence in the world, and as a new variation of power seeking to
institutionalise a new mode of domination, which is inevitably subjected to critique.
The understanding of the role of hermeneutical interpretations of the texts of tradition (the historical, religious and fictional narratives) in motivating revolutionary political action is based on the assumption that there is a link between the act of interpretation and the psychic energies that bring collective action to existence. The act of interpretation is thus understood as the means by which human collectivities discover in the texts of tradition meanings that make their existence as distinct collective identities comprehensible to themselves. The texts of tradition, as the repository of human experience, connect particular human collectivities to the general human struggle for recognition. This interconnection between the act of interpretation and such psychic energies as collective desire for recognition forms the condition for the possibility of social change by creating the motivations that make revolutionary action meaningful for its participants.

In this work, the Iranian Revolution is presented as a movement emerging out of the tension between the collective effort of Iranians to grasp the meaning of their historical experience, and their attempt to use this knowledge to produce new variations of power. To put it crudely, thinking of a revolution began in Iran in the early twentieth century. Faced with the imminent force of modernity, Iranians began to act to change their lives by the will to knowledge of their historical experience. The interpretations of the text of traditions provided the means for this connection with the past. But the revolutionary action did not reach its full potential until there appeared a form of belief, a psychic state of mind, which was formulated in the form of an ideological discourse throughout the 1960s and 1970s. It was through this expression of desire in discourse that Iranians returned to self after the detour of the signs and symbols of the historical experience of the past in order to participate in the particular present historical experience to which they belonged.

The foundational imaginary categories of the Iranian-Islamic culture are the main resources to dig for the schemes, which were used by the revolutionary actors in Iran as models for shaping the present into a desired future. These categories are collected in the sacred texts, myths, mystical poetry, narrative histories, fictions, cultural fantasies and public rituals, which have constituted the collective conscience of the Iranian society, and are constantly used as points of reference in day to day life. This collection of traditions contains imaginary categories and yet are perceived to be “authentic” by Iranians even as a modern nation. Whether or not these imaginary categories have historical or logical proof, and whether or not they are recognised by other societies, they constitute the original understanding of Iranians of themselves as a collectivity, and project the image in which this collectivity strives to reconstruct itself.

The assumption that collective behaviour is constituted by meaning is the key to the search for the meaning of the Iranian Revolution. This search is pursued in this work mainly through the understanding of Iran's cultural experience, an experience, which is rooted very deeply in mythology and history, and continues to influence modern Iranians through constant contact with their religious and literary texts, and narratives. This contact is maintained through education, religious and literary pursuits, day to day social and cultural interactions, and the commemoration of mythical and historical events in regular ceremonies and rituals.

The understanding of the significance of religious texts, symbols and rituals in motivating social and political action is achieved through the understanding of the Islamic and specifically Iranian Shi'i culture as a vast domain in the context of which the events were acted out. The Shi'i culture, in this sense, is conceived as the
environment, which set the boundary and agenda of social action and not as a monolithic tradition of thought shaped by certain Shi’i jurists and theologians. It will be argued that the condition of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was constituted by interpretative understanding of the Shi’i Islamic politico-cultural tradition, gradually developed in the discourse of modernist Muslim ideologues. These new interpretations came out of the founding political utopias of the Shi’i Islam, the teachings of religious scriptures, the emotions of religious rituals, the dreams of popular narratives, the aspirations of the mystical traditions, the myth of modern revolutions and the high promises of modern science and technology.

The role of the Islamic ideological discourses in creating the desire for a religious revolution via innovative interpretations of the received memories, narratives, texts and symbolic structures was central in the actualisation of the revolution. These discourses used appropriate symbolic structures to project an alternative reality in opposition to the existing socio-political reality under the monarchical regime. This new condition or alternative reality may be conceived as the environment in which the revolutionary action was played out and from which new forms of political thinking emerged. It was through these discourses and in this constituted environment that the revolutionary actors made sense of their own actions and saw them as meaningful and desirable. It is also through these discourses that new trends of opposition to the limitations of Islamic revolutionary discourse are currently taking shape.

The emphasis on aspirations of freedom and human dignity will thus make it also possible to offer an internal critique of the violence and repression that has been generated in the process of the Iranian Revolution and during its subsequent institutionalisation. To this end, it will be argued that the generation of violence has been due to the tension between the universal aspirations of liberation and human dignity, which has become part an parcel of social consciousness in modern Iran, and the political and religious tendencies that, in their obsession with cultural particularism, have been trying to turn the revolution into an instrument of establishing a new system of domination.

Thus, this work is clearly meant not to be one of fascination with the power of the Islamic imaginary, but one that, while acknowledging its importance, tries to provide a critical view of it by differentiating the religious imaginary, which motivated the Iranian Revolution, from the revolutionary outcome. The significance of this differentiation is that it will enable us to appreciate the emancipatory values, which were inherent in the essence of the revolution, without having to appreciate the values of its outcomes uncritically.

The critique of the violence and repression of the Iranian Revolution will be directed at the dysfunction of the Islamic revolutionary discourse when turned into the discourse of legitimisation of a new mode of domination. It is thus in the process of the institutionalisation of the Islamic revolutionary ideology that violence appeared as a means for repressing the further outpour of the desire for liberation. In the language of psychoanalysis, this kind of ideological dysfunction is understood as pathological. In this sense, collective utopias, created in search of a meaningful existence in the world, become pathological when violence becomes a price to be paid for the gratification of certain collective desires and aspirations at the cost of others. The desire of the Iranian revolutionaries to form a collective identity on the basis of religious faith and national sovereignty became pathological when violence became an instrument for the institutionalisation of this desire.
In the post-revolutionary political discourse, new intellectual ideas have already emerged whose main characteristics is their engagement in interpreting the same cultural symbolic structures used by the Islamic revolutionary ideologues in order to offer a new understanding of politics in a deeply religious cultural context. This major reform movement includes religious and secular intellectuals, reform-minded clerics, various politico-religious organisations and individual writers and activists contributing to various philosophical and literary publications.

This new political discourse is significant due to its manifest attempt to use cultural imaginaries (symbols, narratives and rituals) to develop a peculiar type of secular understanding of politics through a critique of the Shiʿi Islam as a political ideology. This movement is particularly important in its critique of the theory of velayat-e faqih (governance of the jurist) as proposed by the late Ayatollah Khomeini and officially interpreted by the clergy in power as a blueprint for instituting an absolutist theocratic State.

Against the attempts of the official clergy to suppress dissent among the ranks of the believers by issuing accusations of heresy, the new Shiʿi intellectuals, in the tradition of the Persian mystical philosophers, offer interpretative readings of the Shiʿi political philosophy that challenge the current official interpretations of it. The post-revolutionary political discourses are currently playing a significant role in mapping the future political, social and cultural development of Iran. This work will emphasise the dynamism of these discourses in providing ever-new interpretations of the Iranian/Islamic traditions in order to push the boundaries of political discourse beyond the limitations of a mere theocratic understanding of politics.

This work will proceed along a threefold strategy consisting of theoretical, historical, and analytical components. At the theoretical level, it will offer an account of the theory of imagination and the concept of imaginary, which links two traditions of thought, namely the traditions of hermeneutics and critical theory. The theoretical discussion will also deal critically with the concept of modernity. At the historical level, this work will trace the historical development of the political philosophy of Shiʿi Islam in Iran in the context of the competition of various discourses of power, which put forward contesting truth claims based on various interpretations of the same religious tradition. And at the analytical level, It will offer an interpretative-textual analysis of the development of the Islamic revolutionary ideology in the works of the main ideologues of the Islamic Revolution. This analysis will also deal with the new transformations in the Islamic revolutionary ideology in post-revolutionary Iran, which have given rise to an internal critique of the ideology of revolution and its political outcomes.