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Complexity of political communication in Iran

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I

The growing concern over Western parochialism and intellectual hegemony in academia and repeated calls for its internationalization have managed to unsettle a number of assumptions and propositions, while calls for 'de-Westernization' and in recently 'decolonization' raise more complex issues. Many have probed the epistemological limitations of 'de-Westernization' and 'decolonization' as they are being applied to Media Studies. Even if we accept some of the political and intellectual intentions, clearly a more nuanced approach to the study of the media and political communication in what is often referred to in a highly condensed manner as the 'global South' is required – not least because of how such rhetoric has been adopted by an authoritarian state such as Iran in its actual political struggles against Western hegemony. While the specific focus here will be the media environment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, some of these ideas and concerns are equally applicable in other locations where authoritarian states prevail.

What is often lost in this general attempt to free media (and political communication) from the straitjacket of Western media theory is any definition of the 'West' and 'decolonization'. 'De-Westernization', a problematic term, seems to assume a single, homogenized and unified West. Equally problematic, the 'non-West' is too readily established as a known and knowable entity. Equally, and in relation to the formation and the role of the state in post-colonies, one must be aware of sweeping historical generalization based on a singular colonial/postcolonial axis. Decolonization was certainly an historical transformation, but we need to consider this distinction along many others, including the balance of forces and the interests of the ruling classes in different countries to gain a more coherent and comprehensive knowledge of the state and the formation and function of the media. The slippery term of 'decolonization', or what has come to be known as 'decoloniality', not only obscures not only the very complex nature of colonization and the very fact that many countries colonized were different, but also prevents us from seeing similarities between countries that were colonized and those that were not (such as Iran), as well as the differences between those that were colonized (Ahmad, 1995). The clear differences between India and Pakistan, originally part of the same country before partition, or South Africa and Ghana, urges urge us not to see 'colonialism' and 'decolonization' as a transhistorical subject. What is needed is an historically specific and detailed focus on the

formation, development, role and nature of the state in 'the rest'. This is not to give way to the cult of 'heterogeneity' so beloved of 'post' theories, for it is not colonialism, but the history of capital and the integration of peripheries into the global capitalist system should be the basis for generalization.

As Matar highlights in the introduction to this volume, moving beyond Eurocentric assumptions about the Middle East and North Africa region and diverse forms and functions of political communication 'demands a critical engagement with what we might call continuous meaning-making productive labour of and by ordinary people within and beyond these structures as well as with other terminologies in relation to the field – decolonizing, internationalizing, de-Westernizing.'. Despite the hysteric response of conservative media and politicians to decolonize the university/curriculum by students and what have they labelled as students attacking 'stale, pale and male universities', senior managers at higher education institutions have turned decolonization into an action point. And it is not just the university or education that needs decolonizsing but drag, hipster, museums, self-care and multiculturalism. Some academics, for example Tuck and Yang, had already warned about decolonization turning into superficial buzzword and a metaphor (2012) and others such as Moosavi, have warned about the danger of 'decolonization without decolonizing' (2020). The case of Palestine remains a significant test for universities and academia's commitment to decolonization, and as attempts to silence staff and students at universities in the United States and Europeans countries intensify, we need to ask what commitment to decolonization can remain silent about one of the last bastions of colonialism and an act of genocide against Palestinians as witnessed in Israel's latest war against Gaza.

Priya Gopal has argued that '"decolonization" is the process which signifies the end of rule by a foreign power and the recuperation and/or formation of an "independent" entity, usually a nation-state, through a process often referred to as a "transfer of power"' (2021: 881). But how such a transfer of power, or to be more precise, an anti-colonialism that fought hard to decolonize lands, compares with the modest task of tinkering with courses and adding few works by non-European authors to reading lists, and what implication this might have for a more nuanced and better understanding of communication and political dynamics in the region. 'Decolonization' has been and remains relevant to all universities for intellectual and pedagogical reasons, not least in the often- cited and celebrated works by many academics, including Edward Said's (1978) critique of Western literary traditions linked with imperialism. However, decolonizing any university cannot, and should not, be about cultural requirements of transnational corporations that no longer can afford the cultural parochialism of an earlier day. Gopal also reminds us that 'the terrain of decolonization was a constitutively contested, even fractious one in which competing visions of post-colonial entities jostled for a hearing and for primacy' (2021: 881). As such, it 'was not reducible to one set of elites handing the levers of

state to another. The targets of critique were also varied and included both native tyrannies and nationalist elites as they were colonial rulers, just as much indigenous capitalism as foreign firms' (2021ibid). How are such wider considerations of decolonization relevant for decolonizing the university? What is the history of media scholarship against imperialism and in solidarity with anti-colonial movements, and what later came to be known as Western bias in media studies teach us about the moments and movements for decolonization?

In raising the question of history of media scholarship, in particular the scholarly engagement with non-European experiences, it is crucial to highlight that decolonization as an intellectual and political endeavor is not new. The period between the end of the Second World War Two and the emergence of neoliberal states was marked by two significant factors: the first is that this was a period of economic boom and prosperity that enabled and maintained welfare systems. The second is that in this period the world witnessed the rise of anti-colonial, anti-imperialist struggles, and liberation movements. Internationally, many of the movements for liberation and independence either became co-opted into the structures of capital and/or were defeated. This political retreat coincided with the onset of economic crisis. By the 1980s, a shift to the Right in politics occurred at the same time as attacks on the welfare aspects of the state. Each of these moments have had a profound impact on universities.

The relevance and centrality of media for anti-colonial struggles have been recognized by various activists and authors. In fact, one can start from the period in the aftermath of the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' and a specific demand to 'internationalize' the focus of media studies beyond its heavy North Atlantic history and its strong focus on the role of media in supposedly functioning democracies, especially those in Europe (Downing, 1996). The aim of this call was to take seriously the development of media beyond this geography and to acknowledge its different dynamics – of development, institutionalization, practice and content – elsewhere, particularly across Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Without doubt, one of the reasons for the calls to internationalize media studies has to do with the effects of global capitalism and the expansion of a transnational student population into higher education, predominantly from the Rest to the West, despite the despicably high costs. How could 'we' continue to ignore the places whence they came from or continue to talk about 'their' experiences as if identical to ours?

Not long after, 'de-Westernization' has become a serious analytic approach in Media Studies (Curran and Park, 2000; Wang, 2011). But the term is often simply understood to be politically progressive and opposed to Western domination, and it is not just the media, but also audiences, internet, film, critical security studies, health planning and even the Gospel that have become the focus of 'de-Westernization'. That this analytic category and disciplinary frame is itself the outcome of Western theorization is frequently overlooked, so that even in the attempt

to escape the 'West', it is continually reinscribed in a hegemonic manner. Indeed, we might argue that it appears there *is* no escape, no 'outside' in which to find a refuge. The decolonization trend in some respect carries the burdens of previous framing/tag of this dilemma, and the frequent exclusion of non-Western voices (and sources) even in progressive analysis of global affairs and developments remains a sore problem. For example, in her list of twenty-five25 thinkers for the twenty-first century, Mackenzie Wark (2017) could not think of any possible contributions to the 'general intellects' emanating from India, China, Latin America, the Middle East or Africa. Zizek's hastily crafted book, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (2012) included a chapter on Arab revolutions but not a single academic from the region was cited. Such provincial and narrow 'idolizing' of intellectuals has prompted Hamid Dabashi (2015) to provocatively ask '*Can Non-Europeans Think?*'.

Dabashi's rhetorical question has a clear answer – in the field of political communication the struggle for liberation and the media had always been intertwined. Examples abound: there is Fanon's *'This Is the Voice of Algeria'* (1959); Che Guevara's short piece entitled *'Propaganda, Information, Training and Indoctrination'* (1961); Amilcar Cabral's *'The Role of Culture in the Liberation Struggle'* (1971); Renato Constantino's *'The Mis-Education of the Filipino'* (1971); Alexander Sibeko's *'The Underground Voice in South Africa'* (1977); Sebastiao Coelho's *'Information in Angola: Perspectives'* (1976), and others. Many of these works were gathered and published in a two-volume collection edited by Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub not under the banner of 'dewesternizsation' but under the title of *Communication and Class Struggle* (1979). Mattelart had previously co-authored the much criticized and yet celebrated *How to Read Donald Duck* (1973); *Mass Media, Ideologies and the Revolutionary Movement* (1980); and *Transnationals and the Third World: The Struggle for Culture* (1983). In the case of cinema there was the fascinating manifesto, Towards a Third Cinema (Solanas and Gettino, 1969); For an Imperfect Cinema (Julio Garcia Espinosa, 1969); Manifesto of the Palestinian Cinema Group (1972) and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, The Cinema and the Revolution (see, Dickenson, 2018) and many more. These interventions came not as a box-ticking exercise by universities senior management team, but out of the direct struggles against colonialism that inspired large communities across the world.

II

One of the numerous effects of recent popular uprisings in the Middle East has to do with changing perceptions about the region. The region has too often been perceived as being in the grip of an authoritarian spell that had slowed down the flow of time. The myth of authoritarian survival in the region is so deep and strong that the uprisings often come as a shock. One colorful description of the Arab revolutions in 2011-—12 was 'Arab Awakening' which considering the long struggle for democracy in the region begs the question of who was

sleeping. The uprisings indeed resulted in some changes in regimes but did not bring about regime change, with the failure equated with the '*Islamic* failure to democratize' (Massad, 2015) and the myth of 'Islamic' exceptionalism. Needless to say that this myth presumed inability of significantly large populations of the world to embrace democracy is hardly 'exceptional'. As far as the media are concerned, the situation is as dire as before, if not worse.

The usual suspects are still listed by various organizations as 'Enemies of the Press': Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirate, Syria, Iraq, as well as Turkey which until recently was being flagged as a template and a role model of democracy for Muslim majority countries. The picture is further complicated particularly by contemporary digital media, which is less regulated, more secretive, increasingly powerful and being utilized by state actors in ways antithetical to the democratic claims central to the legitimation of liberal democracies (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018). In the Middle East in particular, yesteryear fascination with 'Facebook and Twitter revolution' is now replaced with fascination with technologies of shock and awe, fake news and misinformation. Commentators who began entertaining the possibility of 'reconsidering' the robustness of authoritarianism in the region have shifted back again to confirming the exceptionalism of the region – the Middle East is still viewed as democracy's other.

The old polarity of the cold war and the assertion that democracy is essentially capitalist raises an uncomfortable question about the relationship between capitalist development and democracy in general and in the Middle East in particular. In rejecting this polarity and highlighting democratic resources of a wider stream of socialism, Norman Geras provocatively argued that 'if actually existing socialism has nowhere been democratic, this is bad not only for socialism, it is bad also for democracy. For the thing can be turned around: democracy is everywhere capitalist' (1994: 93). Bill Warren, a left- wing British author, was an example of a those who were convinced the struggle for socialism was without democratic resources. In a book entitled *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism* (1980) he suggested that 'Capitalism and democracy are linked virtually as Siamese twin'. Elsewhere in the book he praised the impact of imperialism not only for bringing industrialization and development to what is now referred to as the global south but also profound cultural changes which include the important connection between capitalism and democracy. Even much grander and influential figures such as Nicos Poulantzas characterized parliamentary democracy as the 'normal' regime in the capitalist state (1976), labelling non-democratic states, whether fascist, Bonapartist or military dictatorship as 'exceptional'. Had Poulantzas included any empirical data beyond metropolitan states he probably would have reconsidered his thesis. If we begin to move away from Eurocentric nationalism and think about capitalism as a global system, or to be precise as imperialism, and take into consideration the majority of capitalist states, it is easy to see capitalism not as a Siamese twin of democracy, but a system of political coercion and economic destitution. In the Middle East, the power of capital comes out of the barrel of a gun.

We can trace the analytical problem about the relationship between capitalism and democracy to the wider problem of the origin and expansion of capitalism, and in particular what Kamran Matin has labelled as 'the specific line of causality and sequence of capitalist socioeconomic and political development' (2012: 38). This specific line of causality is central in certain evolutionary views of history as a sequence of steps and progress towards greater freedom. It is precisely for this reason that the Middle East has been regarded as exceptional and some kind of transgression of the 'law of history.'. A specific line of causality and sequence of capitalist socioeconomic and political development also informed the modernization school which saw the transformation in what is now indiscriminately called the 'global south' as unproblematic and mechanical, changing societies in the process from static, agricultural, and primitive to dynamic, industrialized, urbanized, and rational nation-states. Yet in most cases, and in particular in Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958), political participation was never a priority. As Peter Golding has pointed out, Lerner was careful to place 'institutions of participation (e.g. voting)' at the end of causal chain – nothing being worse than unready electorate. (1975: 45). The 'development' of course did take place, and now the region and its media are totally unrecognizable from what it was in mid-20th twentieth century and yet democracy is as elusive as ever despite explosion of media in quantity and in political terms.

What light does the current situation in the region shed on Warren's claim that 'capitalism and democracy are linked like Siamese twin'? Capitalism has of course arrived in the region, with vengeance, and yet we cannot name a single country in the Middle East where parliamentary democracy is a normal and stable form of capitalist state. In fact, it is safe to argue that the more the Middle East is integrated into global capitalism the more authoritarian its political systems have become. As Timothy Mitchell (2011) has argued, the existence of 'Western democracy' has been dependent on an undemocratic Middle East. Imperialism is a central issue here and, in this case, we are not, as it is customary now, speaking of two systems, modern versus traditional or capitalist versus pre-capitalism, but one system: imperialism. 'The metropolitan/democratic state and the peripheral/despotic state constitute a dialectical unity in the system, because each is necessary, in its own space, for maximization of the accumulation process. And it is not difficult to fathom why the typical peripheral state must be despotic.' (Ahmad, 1996: 31).

Benjamin Barber (2010) has offered a reworked and revised version of the two systems: jihad versus McWorld. According to this rather popular narrative we are now live living in an era in which the good and globalizing power of capitalism (McWorld) are challenged by the regressive forces of Jihad. However, as Mitchell has pointed out this is rather misleading for, we '"live in an age, to adopt Berber's nomenclature, of "'McJihad"'. It is an age in which the mechanisms of what we call capitalism appear to operate, in certain critical instances, only by adopting the social force and moral authority of conservative Islamic movement' (2013: 203). At the time in

which many Western states and in particular United States of America are investing a massive amount of money to study, understand and tackle 'radicalization' and 'jihad' (Kundnani, 2012) it is crucial to remember that Islamism do not just arise from below, but are supported from above and, in particular, by the United States. Metropolitan states have been more than complicit, and, as a general rule, the more secular regimes in the region have been more independent from the United States.

Another crucial and related factor in the obvious disconnect between capitalism and democracy in the region is the role of arm manufacturers (alongside oil companies). Their profit depends on political arrangements in the Middle East. For some writers, such as Harris (2016), militarization has been the overriding factor determining the trajectory of the region. According to him, since the 1970s the region has been in almost a permanent state of war of which he identifies at least three varieties: national-expansionist project with US support; national expansionist project without US support; conflicts in which social discontent has combined with national anger. The project of 'exporting democracy' to Iraq and elsewhere has shamelessly presented the might of US military power as an agent of democratization. The permanent state of war in the region has now turned into one of the biggest, longest and barbaric wars in modern time, the Israeli war against Gaza which began in October 2023. Imperialist interventions rather than acting as a catalyzer for democracy delay the fall of dictatorship. As such the high expenditure of GDP on the military in the region, remains amongst the highest in the 'global south', with only a few countries matching this level of military expenditure. What is distinctive about the Middle East is exactly related to such figures which stem from its particular colonial legacy, which in the view of Henry (2003) has continued to paralyze it.

This reality makes the stark absence of scholarly discussions of war and military interventions as important factors and categories in the mainstream political communication literature surprising. This is not to suggest that war itself is absent in communications journals and books. Far from it. There are scores of books and articles that examine the relationship between media and war – even a cursory search will yield an extensive reading list on this very subject. In a rapidly segmented field of media studies there are even journals dedicated to this very issue under the broader title of 'conflict'. The point and the interest here is much broader, however. In recent years, political communications scholars have produced important work that has tried, to 'rethink', 'revisit' and 'reconsider' the interactions between media and democracy (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018; Blumler and Coleman, 2015; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Scheufele, 2000; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). However, what is missing is a consideration of war as central in any reassessment or reconsideration of democracy itself. This is crucial since militarism and war are 'no longer a mere consequence but also a motor of historical development' (Balibar, 2010: 13).

Blumler and Coleman (2015), in their fascinating analysis of the relationship between democracy and media, argue that the old model of analysis of political communication systems is desperately out of date and propose revising some of the foundational concepts of political communication scholarship. However, while they highlight some of the most important changes and transformations including technological development, the interplay between the secular and the sacred, and so on, there is little discussion of the relationship between war and democracy at both a national and international level. Blumler's earlier work co-authored with Kavanagh (1999) evaluates what they describe as 'the third age of political communication' and examines a system which is full of tensions, sets new research priorities, and re-opens long-standing issues of democratic theory' (199:209). The article looks at various stages of political communications in the post-war period, which is a somewhat misleading label in an era of permanent war. But it fails to mention war as a subject of political communication.

Other leading figures in this field have invariably examined the 'destabilizing' impact of the internet (Dahlgren, 2005) and yet have said nothing about destabilizing impact of wars for democratic life in democracies or for democratic aspirations of people elsewhere. Bennett and Pfetsch's most recent contribution to rethinking political communication, highlights the crisis of legitimacy in many democracies and points out that the previous assumptions about a 'broadly inclusive and well-functioning public sphere' only 'made sense for most democracies in Europe and North America in the last half of the twentieth century' (2018: 243). However, that war is a significant disruptive factor is curiously missing from their rethinking. There is therefore an urgent need to offer some correctives in our thinking about media and democracy. If 'war is the continuation of politics by other means', should it not be central in any discussion of political communication?

The absence of war as a central concern for political communications can perhaps partly be explained by the existing narrow focus on what French intellectual Jacques Ranciere has described as a 'pure' form of politics in which politics is stripped to its abstract form and handed over to 'government oligarchies enlightened by their experts'. Politics is then freed from domestic and social necessity and 'is tantamount to the pure and simple reduction of the political to the state (*l'etatique*)' (2012: 36). However, we know all too well that despite increased challenges to the state's monopoly of war by non-governmental forces, it is mostly states that wage wars and it is their 'enlightened experts' (including inside the media) that are tasked with justifying the most 'unjust' wars. War remains the 'purest' form of politics in which citizenship is weakened (and where even citizens are stripped of their rights) and in which the very idea and practice of democracy is overshadowed in the climate of 'emergency' and the need for 'national unity'. There is a dialectical relationship between the unexportability of democracy to the less 'enlightened' and the attack on the very idea of democracy in Europe and North America. To understand what Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) have called the 'disrupted

public sphere', we must question assumptions about an inclusive and well-functioning public sphere in the light of a much broader political and geographical context. One important task of problematizing political communication is to put the continued legacies of colonialism and imperialist intervention at the centre of discussion about the contexts and operations of the media (old and new) in the region.

III

The paradoxical nature of the state, too, demands some historical depth to address the gaps in political communication. In Iran, the revolution of 1979 remains problematic, both theoretically and politically, and the perceived 'trans-class' and 'religious' nature of the revolution has been the main source of confusion over the precise nature of the state that replaced the monarchy. Gilbert Achcar (2004) has described the Iranian revolution as a 'permanent revolution in reverse,', something that started with such emancipatory potential, and could have grown over into a socialist transformation, but instead produced a strange polity and state. Although the revolution without doubt had an emancipatory character, elements of counter-revolution were clearly visible from the outset. The tension between the revolution and the counter-revolution, and the existence of multiple sovereignties, aspirations, and power contentions, calls for an analytical distinction between the Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic (Moghadam, 1989).

The paradoxical nature of the state that came to power in 1979 is reflected in the political system that combines elements of Islamic tradition and innovations with Iranian nationalism and a modern state structure. The Iranian constitution, as Schirazi (1998) suggests, is also a contradictory and compromised legislation that, even while it lists some democratic principles, effectively subordinates the peoples' will to the clerical establishment via institution of *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the supreme jurist). This invention, however, and for the first time in Shia history, concentrated power, and legitimacy of guidance (*marja'iyat*) in the hands of a single person. The 'vaticanization' of Shia structure, so to speak, was against the historical pluralism of the clerical establishment, and it came as no surprise that many Grand Ayatollahs distanced themselves from the concept. (Behrooz, 1996). The power of *vali-e faqih* (supreme leader or jurist) is unlimited – he appoints the head of judiciary, the clergy members of the powerful second chamber (*Guardian Council*), commanders of all armed forces, as well as the leaders of two of the most important communication channels in Iran: imams of the Friday prayers and the director general of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). He is also the custodian of two of the most established and powerful media organizations, *Kayhan* and *Etella't*. Azimi has argued that,

> The segmentary constitution of clerical politics and the polarity of loci of power inevitably created some scope for political debate, but civic and social liberties

remained severely circumscribed. The prevailing character and configuration of governance required that the ruled be treated as subject rather than citizens; the ideal of a self-confident citizenry, imbued with civic pride and recognized as such by the rulers, remained elusive. (2009: 413–414).

The formation of the Islamic Republic in Iran and its cultural policies that has have generated and exercised systemic violence against a large section of its own population recall what Bloch (1977) had dubbed as nonsynchronicity, the existence of past in the present, and the presence of something which appears out of time and out of synch with Now. The 'Islamism' of the Iranian state is an example of those ideologies, that even though they are brought to the surface by socioeconomic crisis, are embedded in a much deeper and older source and heritage. The central argument in Bloch's analysis is the persistence of a problematic character of a past, the '*declining remnants* and, above all, uncompleted *past*, which has not yet been "sublated" by capitalism' (1977: ibid.31).

At the regional and international levels, Iran is currently embroiled in a number of international conflicts, with a range of countries aligned in opposition to it. Looking merely at Iranian international relations within 'its' region, Iran is heavily involved in conflict in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. It has been a vocal supporter of a Palestine and a loud critic of Israel. Indeed, as we saw in April 2024, tensions between Iran and Israel rarely dissipate and they rumble below the contentious nuclear discussions (JCPOA, discussed below), albeit that Iran is a signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) and eschews the development of such weapons whereas Israel is a known nuclear power and not a signatory to the NPT. Beyond its geographic neighborhood, Iran has been locked in an antagonistic relationship with the United States since the 1979 revolution and hostage crisis that has often only narrowly avoided outright military conflict. The successful negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the P5+1 in July 2015 was seen as a significant breakthrough in Iran's diplomacy with the West. Former US President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA in May 2018 and reimposed sanctions, a move condemned by the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Around forty US military bases beyond 'its' region actually surround Iran in 'its' region (Piven, 2012).

Some of Iran's nuclear scientists have been murdered inside the country, state-sponsored killings that have received little publicity or analysis from Western media. Joe Biden, the 2021 elected Democratic president, has not reinstated the JCPOA (despite pressure from the EU and elsewhere) and has not eased any of the economic sanction against the country. Indeed, the increasingly friendly relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia (and other oil-rich states in the region) as well as the maintenance of financially supportive relations with Israel do not suggest any thaw with the Islamic Republic, which is equally intransigent in its stance. In

2021-–22, the sale of highly sophisticated drone equipment for Putin's war in Ukraine shows the emerging alignment of the Islamic Republic. Thus, at the level of state activities, it is comparatively easy to understand the political extension of Iran into its wider neighborhood and beyond – and the occasional hand of external states around and inside the country.

Inside the country, the state and the nation are often each other's nemesis, locked in fierce political confrontation. This has been the defining pattern of Iranian history, both before and certainly after the 1979 revolution. The Iranian state, like others, remain remains a contradictory entity and sites of struggle for competing interests. The complicated factionalism inside the Iranian state, from 1979 to date, has always allowed for competing views from different factions and opened spaces for dissenting independent voices. This was highly visible in the diversity of the press immediately after the revolution, of course, but also in the heydays of reform movement in late 1990s up to 2009 uprising against what was effectively an electoral coup. That struggle has continued in different shapes and forms, and in much more diverse ways, including in media.

While much can be argued here, one need only look at the debates after the consolidation of power by the current ruling elites in the 1980s, for example the debate over video, or satellite, the press law which sparked the student's protests in July 1999, the struggle over the control of the internet, etc. (Khiabany, 2009). The state's march towards consolidating its power and homogenizing its rank has been bloody and brutal which also includes the execution of the first director general of the Islamic Republic Broadcasting; forcing the first president of the republic and the proprietor of *Enghelab Eslami* newspaper into exile; to the prosecution of a number of ministers, officers and attorneys who owned and controlled a significant number of newspapers before, during and after Khatami's presidency. It is crucial to remember that here the focus is on cases which are about those individuals and media outlets that were affiliated to with the Iranian state. The treatment of oppositional voices such as national and religious minorities, writers, artists, women's organizations, students, etc. remains one of the greatest tragedies in the history of not only the Islamic Republic, but of modern Iran.

An additional point to consider is that the media, social media included, contains not only a wide range of 'users', but also protagonists and producers of ideas and contents. The online environment is not exclusively the stomping ground of amateur intellectuals (to use Said's famous description). There are various groups that are representative of their class and of their knowledge. Their level of intervention is varied, historically shifting, and is dependent not only on the material resources but also on their location in geography and in politics. Not all that occupy spaces in online and offline media do so to challenge or bypass the state wall of censorship. The central Iranian state and various factions have a strong presence and own, publish, mobilize, demonize, bully, gather and control date, etc. For some, in particular the sons

of key figures in the state (*agha zadeh ha*), Instagram has become the space to show off their wealth and lavish lifestyles. The protests that erupted in the winter of 2017 were not just facilitated by social media but were a reaction and anger to the staggering inequality that was flaunted on social media (Faghihi, 2018). We might also want to consider the increased relevance of the internet to the Iranian economy. The shutting down of the internet in the 2019 November protests cost the Iranian economy an estimated $1.5 billion (Kalbasi, 2019), exposing the failure to recognize and consider the complexity of the logics, dynamics and strategies of the state.

Clearly, the Iranian state, like all other states, is at its most governmental *within* its borders. Iranians living in Iran are required to pay taxes, abide by all laws – including those relating to censorship, hijab, sexual behaviour, etc. Those individuals who question the actions of the state may feel the full force of the law through executions, imprisonments, censorship, travel bans and more (Sreberny and Torfeh, 2013). Many activists – trade unionists, women's groups, minority groups – as well as filmmakers, writers, journalists, editors, bloggers, poets, theatre directors, cartoonists, musicians and others have experienced the repressive hand of the Iranian state (Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010). In the aftermaths of Jina (Mahsa) Amini killing in September 2022 and the start of Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, which became more violent and extreme.

However, the space of *Iran*, and thus of Iranian politics, has become elongated because of the out-migration of a substantial 'diaspora' since the 1979 revolution. Over four million people, including some of the most highly educated 'brains', have become dispersed across many different new host countries. These diasporic communities are neither post-national nor transnational. Rather they are treated, as Moallem (2000) has suggested, as the 'excess of the nation–state', often encountering both forms of racism in the host country and exclusion by 'their own state'. Access to new national locations is increasingly highly constrained. Over the past few years, the diaspora has been given the right to vote in Iranian elections – yet the counting of votes often seems too fast to include that opinion – and it broadcasts and messages back to fellow Iranians and the Iranian state. The diaspora's solidarity with and extension of popular activity on the streets of Iran in autumn 2022 has become crucial in the unfolding dynamics of change.

The Islamic Republic has used various approaches to persuade, cajole and enforce its positions vis-à-vis its citizens and these have a reach far beyond the confines of the territory of Iran. The long arm of the state can reach out across borders to punish Iranians who live *outside* Iran. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, the Iranian state has been involved with at least 162 extrajudicial killings of political opponents in nineteen19 different countries around the world, including in France, Sweden, Austria, Germany, the United States, Japan,

Turkey, and Switzerland. High-profile killings include the assassination of leaders of oppositional political parties, writers, entertainers, journalists, and activists. State violence against non-resident Iranians has taken many forms *inside* the country. Over the past few years, Iranian state activity has included the arrest of dual nationals entering the country to visit family or attend educational or cultural events, often for these individuals to be used as a pawn in negotiations with their new host country. Since 2015, more than thirty30 people with dual nationality have been arrested in Iran, including students, lawyers, academics, and charity workers; the majority detained in recent years have European citizenship.

Furthermore, the Iranian state, like most other states, is very active in mobilizing politico-cultural support *beyond* its own borders. International media influence is important. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) broadcasts to foreign audiences through four international news television channels, six satellite television channels and thirty30 radio channels broadcasting in thirty-two32 languages that include English, Arabic, Hebrew, Armenian, Turkish, Russian, Bengali and Japanese. Its *Jame-Jam* network (comprising three channels for Europe, America and Asia) also broadcasts specifically to the Iranian diaspora. Press TV, an English-language channel with offices in London, actively asserts its critical journalism vis-à-vis British politics; it recently added French news coverage to its portfolio. However, while the Iranian state is active in international broadcasting, it does not like being the target of such broadcasting from others. The sensitivity of the Iranian state against what it calls 'soft war' (Sreberny, 2013) is evident in its long-running hostility towards outside broadcasters including BBC Persian which was established in 2008 and aimed at Iranians inside Iran (Sreberny and Torfeh 2014).

IV

The September 2022 popular mobilization, triggered by the death in custody of a young woman, was the largest such street-based action since the revolution itself. Within days, its key slogan 'Zan, Zendegi, Azadi' gained international recognition. Instagram, supposedly shut down, offered instant photography and video of street demonstrations and sites for the sharing of new art works. Global celebrities were revealed to have Iranian spouses. Canada and the UK sanctions sanction the movement of IGRC individuals. And the country continues to burn.

The Iranian uprising in 2009 showed how the very technologies invented for commercial and military purposes can also produce the unintended spin-off effect of social movement, creating an intense tug of war between nation and state (inside and outside Iran). In 2017, we witnessed another uprising which shook and targeted the entire of the Iranian state. Since then, we have also witnessed waves of protests by truck drivers, successive sit-ins by teachers, strikes by workers in Khuzestan (Jafari, 2023), not to mention the stunning and courageous acts of 'Daughters of the Street of Revolution'. (Afary and Anderson, 2023). Another uprising erupted after the hike in petrol prices in 2019. Without doubt social media played a role in informing,

connecting, mobilizing, and generating national and international solidarities, hence the significant backlash and renewed censorship of social media platforms. The shooting down of the Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 by the Iranian military triggered protests from late November 2019 through January 2020, despite the state shutting down the internet, disrupting satellite signals and brutal repression, revealing the complexity of the social and political dynamics in Iran. The women-led mobilization of September 2022 continues despite the use of rubber bullets and live ammunition, despite arrests, imprisonments, and deaths. It continues despite the state's periodic shutting-down and slowing of the internet, its blocking of many social platforms and the regime rhetoric that it is foreign agents who are driving the movement. The state and the nation are raging again.

Contrary to much that has been written in recent decades, globalization and neoliberalism have not made the state irrelevant or caused it to disappear from the communication landscape. Indeed, in many places the state has become more concentrated, more hierarchical, more centralized, more militarized, sometimes less visible but just as fierce in its articulation and brutal defence of the existing order and social relations. The state, all over the world, also remains messy, contradictory, self-denying, and opaque. Iran is no exception. Censorship is only one function of the state, albeit an important one in the case of Iran. The state is also a patron, an entrepreneur, rule-maker, data collector and controller, a bully, and a propagandist (Davies, Fenton, Freedman and Khiabany, 2020). The central Iranian state has played and continues to play a major role in defining 'national culture', promoting certain traditions and heritage and discarding/marginalizing/demonizing other histories, traditions, and aspirations. The Iranian state, rather unexceptionally, continues to own, legislate, regulate, subsidize and, of course, suppress the media.

The massive amount of engineering required to maintain the appearance of a monolithic Islamic totality suppresses the recognition of internal diversity, not only across a world religion such as Islam, but within a single polity such as the Islamic Republic. Middle Eastern regional exceptionalism opts for a fragmentary mode of analysis and produces culturalist narratives that ignore the broader context of cultural production in particular and capitalist modernity in general. By choosing to focus on 'culture', these narratives not only fail to tackle the question of *whose* culture, thereby ignoring the fact that culture has always been a site of struggle, but they also separate the question of the 'everyday' from the question of political economy. That danger runs through all simplistic articulations of de-Westernization and decolonization, as manifest perhaps in notions of 'Asian values' or Hindutva as the expression of Indianness; thus, the Iranian case is merely an illustration of politico-cultural issues that have to be addressed in many parts of the world.

Culture, as Ahmad (2004) has argued, is not just about the past and inheritance, but also about the future (the generation of meanings) and societies are always contradictory totalities of practices, struggles and disputes over imaginings of the future, as well as narratives of the past. Eurocentrism as an intellectual tradition emerged not just in Europe, but in *capitalist* Europe. The spread of Eurocentrism has accompanied the global spread of capitalism. By diverting criticism of capitalism to criticism of Eurocentrism, shifting attention from political economy (the political, economic and social) to culture, and replacing equality with identity, the advocates of Islamic exceptionalism reveal their own ideological limitations. The challenge to Eurocentrism must take place not just on the site of culture. The rhetorical politics of the imperious binary of the 'West/Rest' suggests that nothing 'positive' stems from the former, but also that the 'Rest' is always benign and progressive. Is it not more important to pay attention to real politics and the shape of power relations on the ground within societies and across international boundaries? The challenge for social analysts is to find a conceptual footing between imperialist intervention on the one hand and non-Western exceptionalism on the other, a critical 'Third Voice' that goes beyond the binary divide.

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