



Ramin Jahanbegloo, Danny Postel

Ideas whose time has come

A conversation with Iranian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo

"For me as an Iranian philosopher, thinking differently is a form of going beyond the challenges of my daily life in Iran. It's an opening up to the world which goes hand in hand with the act of being free." Until his arrest in Tehran in April 2006 on charges of spying, Ramin Jahanbegloo was active in bringing numerous prominent Western thinkers to Iran. On his release in August, Jahanbegloo made a public statement in which he admitted playing into the hands of Western bodies seeking to prepare the ground for a "velvet revolution" in Iran and announced his withdrawal from the international intellectual stage. His admission is widely understood to have been the result of pressure from the authorities including the bail condition of family property. In an interview conducted via email in January and February 2006, he talks about some of the thinkers whose work has been influential to the liberal movement in Iran, including Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, Noam Chomsky, and Antonio Negri; about the failure of Iranian Marxism; and about the different strands in Iranian political philosophy today.

Danny Postel: You've talked about a "renaissance of liberalism" taking place in Iran. Can you talk about this "renaissance"? Where does liberalism stand in Iranian intellectual and political life today?

Ramin Jahanbegloo: Sartre starts his essay "The Republic of Silence" in a very provocative manner, saying, "We were never more free than under the German occupation." By this, Sartre understands that each gesture had the weight of a commitment during the Vichy period in France. I always repeat this phrase in relation to Iran. It sounds very paradoxical, but "We have never been more free than under the Islamic Republic". By this I mean that the day Iran is democratic, Iranian intellectuals will put less effort into struggling for the idea of democracy and for liberal values. In Iran today, the rise of hedonist and consumerist individualism, spurred by the pace of urbanization and instrumental modernization after the 1979 Revolution, was not accompanied by a wave of liberal measures. In the early days of the Revolution, liberals were attacked by Islamic as well as leftist groups as dangerous enemies and betrayers of the Revolution. The American hostage crisis sounded the death knell for the project of liberalism in Iran.

But in recent years, with the empowerment of Iranian civil society and the rise of a new generation of post-revolutionary intellectuals, liberal ideas have found a new vibrant life among many intellectuals and students. The ideas and sensibilities that comprise contemporary Iranian liberalism were more or less formulated by intellectuals such as Muhammad Ali Furughi a century ago. Furughi's writings and translations of that period were mainly discussions of the basic norms of constitutionality and pillars of modern thought. For example, in a text called *Huquq-e Asasi Ya'ni Adab-e Mashrutiyyat*, published in Tehran in 1907, he wrote:

The government has two powers: first, the making of laws, and second, the execution of laws. If the powers of legislation and execution remain in the hands of a single person or a single group, the conduct of government will result in despotism. [...] Therefore, government is constitutional only when it has separated these two powers from each other and invested them in two separate groups.

The idea of separation of powers is one of the key concepts of Iranian liberalism today. For all those who support the idea of a referendum on and reform of the Iranian Constitution, the concept of "separation of powers," and not just "separation of factions" (as we have today in Iran), is essential.

But there is more to this, because Iranian liberalism is perceived by its supporters in Iran today as a more critical project than it was in Furughi's time. For the generation of intellectuals and politicians in the 1920s and 1930s like Furughi, Taghizadeh, Jamalzadeh, and others, liberalism was a technique of progress, something to be activated as a universally executable programme, irrespective of the local contours of culture. They regarded liberalism as a system of protocols that, when enacted by policy-makers, ensured the creation of institutions that enshrined the rule of law, and generated a rationally organized and governed public life. But the species of liberalism that has taken hold in Iran today, though it is complementary with the traditional wave of liberalism in Iran, is distinctive and decidedly original.

Thanks to the recent discovery and translations of the schools of liberal thought dominant in the Anglo-American world, as found in the works of Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, and Karl Popper, and an appreciation of older traditions of liberalism (Kantian, Millian, or Lockean), a new trend of liberalism has taken shape among the younger generation of Iranian intellectuals. Iranian liberals today do not deny that the liberties appropriate to a liberal society can be derived from a theory or stated in a system of principles, but their view of a liberal society is related to a view of humanity and truth as inherently unfinished, incomplete, and self-transforming. The principles of Iranian liberalism cannot be grounded in religious truth, because the very idea of free agency, as it is understood today by Iranian liberals, goes against any form of determinism (religious or historical).

In a country like Iran, where the logic of the theological-political is still absolute and where there is a single master-value, the principle goal of liberals is to fight for the idea of value-incommensurability that affirms a pluralism of ethical values and different modes of being. This is to say, the chief task of Iranian liberalism is to establish the proper balance between critical rationality and political decency. The lack of liberalism, symbolized by the rise of unreasonable and violent radicalism in the Iranian Revolution (both on the Left and the Right), committed a huge injury to our commonsense ways of political thought and political action, and led to deep confusion about questions of moral responsibility and collective human solidarity based on individual self-creation.

In more concrete terms, against the revolutionary model of citizenship, a new model of citizenship is suggested by Iranian liberals who work as human rights activists, NGO organizers, intellectuals, and students — a model defined in terms of the empowerment of Iranian civil society, the expansion of human solidarity, privately pursued projects of self-creation, moral education of the public, and the development of the vocabulary of liberal democracy. The

insistence of Iranian liberals on the concept of "civil society" as a space which stands in necessary opposition to the state is a check on the arbitrary and authoritarian tendencies in Iranian society. The creation of many voluntary associations, independent journals and reviews, and social and cultural NGOs as a genuinely participatory arena of civic engagement, deliberation, discussion, and dialogue has played a crucial role in the promotion of civil society in Iran. As such, Iranian civil society remains an important site of dissent and a battleground for Iranian liberals who try to bridge the gap between the formal structures of democratic governance and the cultural, social, and economic conditions for the realization of democracy in Iran.

DP: The work of Jürgen Habermas is quite popular in Iran today. Can you talk about his visit to Tehran in 2002 and the effect it has had on the Iranian intellectual scene? Why do you think his ideas have caught on with Iranian students and intellectuals in the way they have?

RJ: Habermas's visit to Iran was a huge success. He was treated in Iran the way Bollywood actors are treated in India. Wherever he went or lectured, he was encircled by hundreds of young students and curious observers. This same phenomenon happened again when Richard Rorty visited Iran in 2004: around 1500 souls came to his lecture on "Democracy and Non-Foundationalism" at the House of Artists in Tehran. Habermas's visit to Iran was an important event in the process of democratic thinking and dialogue among cultures. As Victor Hugo says in *Histoire d'un crime*: "One can resist the invasion of an army, but one cannot resist the invasion of ideas whose time has come." The time of philosophical ideas have come in Iran. Today in Iran, philosophy represents a window on Western culture, on an open society, and on the idea of democracy. This is the reason why Habermas, Rorty, Ricoeur, Berlin, and many others are relevant in Iran. Most of the intellectuals in Iran today are struggling against different forms of fundamentalism, fanaticism, and orthodoxy. Habermas is considered the inheritor of the Frankfurt School's intellectual tradition that from the very beginning questioned all orthodoxies and authoritarianisms.

Actually, Habermas is the extension of a tradition represented by figures such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm, and Benjamin, who are all very well known in Iran. Today in Iran, those who are interested in Critical Theory focus a great deal on the works of these thinkers and there is a network of readers of the Frankfurt School who are also engaged with Habermas's work. Of course, Habermas's work is difficult to understand and it takes years of ongoing study to catch the nuances in both his theoretical and political writings. But the difficulty does not stop Iranian scholars and intellectuals from reading Habermas and translating his work.

I think there is also another reason why Habermas is so popular in Iran. It has mainly to do with the fact that with the failure of Marxist-Leninist movements in Iran and a new interest in Marx and Hegel, a younger generation of intellectuals and scholars are interested in rediscovering these thinkers from a new angle. The popularity of Habermas has also to do with the fact that he sees himself as a nexus in which Marxist thought is reformed, transformed, refined, improved, and brought forth to a new generation. Habermas's theory of communicative action derives largely from Marx but involves a systematic rethinking of Marx's ideas. Last, but not least, I think that Habermas's positive assessment of the Enlightenment and his insistence on its democratic potential finds its true place in the lively debate between the two concepts of tradition and modernity in contemporary Iran. What interests many Iranian intellectuals in Habermas's philosophy is his notion of "theoretical enlightenment" and the

possibility of translating it into practical enlightenment. Habermas's advocacy of what he calls post–metaphysical thinking is of great relevance to Iranian intellectuals today.

I think Habermas sheds new light on the problem of democratic agency through a new reading of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Weber. I teach Hegel in Iran and I have made great use of Habermas's work in my Hegel scholarship. I think Habermas's reading of Hegel reinforces his approach to the philosophy of history, but it also consolidates his defence of the Enlightenment project as modernity's self–understanding. This goes hand in hand with Habermas's reading of Kant, which is based on Kant's essential insight that there is no fundamental gulf between thought and reality; that thought and reality are intertwined in a primordial relation. Habermas's discourse theory appropriates the Hegelian theme of "recognition" and takes it a step further. Mutual recognition, understood as the mutual recognition of each other as free individuals, is a minimal condition in the Hegelian as well as in the Habermasian theme of recognition. Habermas transforms the original theme of the Hegelian master–slave dialectic into a communication–theoretical theme of recognition. I think that Habermas's Kantian view cannot be maintained without his explicit endorsement of Hegel's concept of "Sittlichkeit" and his dialectic of society and freedom, even though Habermas categorically rejects an objective teleology.

This brings me to Kant and Habermas. As you might know, Kant is a very popular philosopher in Iran and there were several celebrations in Tehran for the 200th anniversary of his death in 2004. Well, like for Hegel, Habermas's recasting of the Kantian principle of autonomy and its political implications shows how public reason lies at the heart of democratizing processes and is decisive to the survival of non–authoritarian political, social, and economic institutions in our world. And you can see how Kant — and Habermas's reading of Kant — can be helpful in reformulating and re–elaborating a new democratic thinking in Iran. Habermas via Kant offers Iranian intellectuals and civil society activists a model of democratic agency and political thinking that avoids two unattractive alternatives: that of rooting politics in personal preferences for authoritarian personalities and that of eliminating the universality of ethics in the name of a revolutionary break.

DP: Hannah Arendt is also quite popular in Iran today. What can you tell us about this?

RJ: Arendt's work is well known in the Iranian intellectual sphere. Her ideas have been not only closely studied but acutely felt by many Iranian scholars. Three years ago I organized a series of ten nights on contemporary thought; the first lecture considered the life and work of Arendt. Arendt's work speaks in a vital way with new perspectives and new political and philosophical needs that have emerged among the younger generation of Iranian scholars and researchers. In a young and troubled Iran in search of a new intellectual culture, there is a serious desire to explore Arendt's oeuvre. If Arendt's contribution to political thinking finds an important place in Iranian civil society and among Iranian intellectuals, it is mainly because her thinking shows us how to recover the meaning of the public world. I believe that Arendt's popularity in Iran after the Revolution of 1979 is due to the fact that many among us saw a similarity between our experience of living with political violence and totalitarian ideologies (whether Islamist or Marxist–Leninist) and her own alienating political experience as a Jewish refugee who was excluded from participating in public life.

This is the main reason why the first translation of Arendt published in Iran was *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Many Iranians had no idea in 1979 what a totalitarian state was, because most of us were in no way affected by the experience of Nazism or Communism. Actually for a long time the Iranian Left dismissed the claim that Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were a form of totalitarianism. This reminds me of what Arendt formulates beautifully in her book. She says that "While the totalitarian regimes are thus resolutely and cynically emptying the world of the only thing that makes sense, they impose upon it at the same time a kind of super sense which the ideologies actually always meant when they pretended to have found the key to history or the solution to the riddles of the universe."

I think Arendt's work on totalitarianism is key to showing us that evil is an important problem in everyday politics and that it has the possibility to emerge at any time and in any place. I believe that many have experienced in Iran what Arendt describes in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* as "the anti-political principle." It is the end of ethics in the political realm and the unlimited degradation of civic morality. In 1979 the abyss between men of civility and men of brutal deeds was filled in Iran with the ideologization of the public sphere. One saw the breakdown of the old system, followed by the failure of political liberalism and the formation of the ideologies of 1979. One can say that when common sense breaks down or becomes impossible, hopelessness and resignation set in; people lose the capacity for action and despair over their ability to influence things.

If the Iranian revolution of 1979 showed us that "anything is possible," Arendt on the contrary helped us to understand that thinking is an ongoing process which reclaims our capacity for action. I believe that Arendt's phenomenological reconstruction of the nature of political existence appealed to many of us as a way to uncover the ordinary character of political experience that has for the most part been forgotten in Iranian politics. Reading Arendt in Tehran reminds us continuously of the fact that freedom is "the ability to begin," and therefore civil society is a domain where people, in their collective plurality, remember who they are.

Another important fact that I think many of us have learned from reading Arendt is that pure action is free from everything because it is for the sake of the future. It is the eruption of freedom everywhere and in every situation without a political affiliation. Freedom is interruption and also beginning anew. Therefore, freedom is possible even in a world of secret police and of the rule of autocrats. Freedom is a universal human possibility. The space of public freedom is in essence finite, but the light of life that shines on the public realm can always begin something new. In a country like Iran, where you have a vibrant civil society, the most unlikely things happen on the margins of politics. What enables men and women, young and old, in Iranian civil society to bear life's burdens is the permanent challenge of keeping the free deed alive.

The point is that the taste for freedom and the experience of freedom can derive only from the diverse forms of participation in common concerns and community-engendering values spelled out in terms of a network of independent associations and institutions. Arendt discusses this in *On Revolution*, which was also very popular in Iran. If I am not mistaken in my reading of Arendt, I would say that her idea of "revolution" poses a big challenge to all those who continue to believe that revolution belongs to the realm of necessity in our world. The tragedy of modern revolutions, according to Arendt, is that what is actually revolutionary is the failed attempt to

establish a political space of public freedom. This reminds me of what Malraux says in his novel *L'espoir*: "the revolution came to play the role which once was played by eternal life; it saves those who make it." Well, I think that Arendt shows us very clearly that at the end this salvation in its purest form descends into restoration or tyranny, because all revolutions are simple hiatuses between liberation and the constitution of liberty.

DP: Why, in your view, are Iranian intellectuals and students generally not attracted to Marxist thinkers and ideas? Why do you think they tend not to be engaged by political currents like the anti-globalization movement or anti-imperialism?

RJ: It is not necessary to explore very far to find the reason for this lack of attraction to Marxism in Iran today. In Iran, the number of "Marxists" was always a hundred times greater than the number of people who had actually read and studied Marx. This is the main reason why Iranian Marxism had so much trouble making sense of the Iranian Revolution. The Tudeh Party (Iranian Communist Party) and the leftist groups in Iran have no explanation today for their political and ideological struggles against liberal and democratic ideas in Iran. Most of these Marxist groups supported the anti-democratic measures taken against women and against Iranian liberals. Most of them, not to say all of them, supported the hostage-taking at the American embassy in Tehran. Some of them even backed the hard-line clerics in the elections and contributed to the Jacobinization and Bolshevization of the Islamic Republic.

Now, I ask you the question: what do you think is left of the Left in Iran? Nothing! Some live in exile around the world. Some are doing business in Iran. Some have become collaborators. A few are good scholars who teach in American and Canadian universities. Many lost their lives and will never be back among us. I salute their courage, even if I think that they were totally wrong in what they did. Those Iranian Marxist-Leninists who continue to follow their traditional line of thinking have become more of an anthropological curiosity, because they continue to hide behind their mystifying appearances, whether political or other. These people continue to regard their point of view, after all their political and intellectual failures, as a privileged theory, because they believe that it represents the point of view of the proletariat and the proletariat is the class which realizes the passage to the true history of humanity.

There are two problems here: first, no vision of history, even if it represents the view of "the last class of history" that can bring an end to all action and discussion on and in history. Second, there is really no organized proletariat in Iran and the action and self-awareness of the working class in 1979 did not take shape in the direction of a socialist revolution; on the contrary, it was clearly in favour of the Islamic revolution. Actually, the equation was quite simple for the Iranian proletariat in 1979: "They [the Islamists] believed that there is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is his prophet; while the Communists believed that there is no God, and Karl Marx is his prophet."

The heyday of the Marxist intellectuals in Iran was over as soon as the Islamic nomenclature was firmly entrenched in power. Despite the great extent of its influence, Iranian Marxism did not succeed in the realm of great intellectual achievements.

Marxism's intellectual failure in Iran today can best be illustrated by the new attitude that one finds among the younger generation of Iranian intellectuals.

The methodological position of the new generation of Iranian intellectuals is characterized by two main philosophical attitudes: the extension of anti-utopian thinking on the one hand, and the urge for a non-imitative dialogical exchange with the modern West on the other. To my mind, this problem of achieving modern conditions for rational criticism is in direct opposition with the tradition of Iranian Marxism. First, because new thinking in Iran rejects any pre-given consensus as a foundation, whether traditional authority or a modern ideology. Second, because it calls for an institutionalization of the public debate in the form of rational argumentation. Therefore, the real dividing line which runs between the younger generation of Iranian intellectuals and the previous ones represented especially by the Left is between the preachers of grand narratives and monistic utopias on the one hand and the admirers of dialogue and value pluralism on the other. The point is that the new Iranian intellectual is no longer entitled to play the role of a prophet or a hero. He/she is in the Iranian public space to demystify ideological fanaticisms and not to preach them. Today in a society like Iran where there is a systemic deliberation deficit, the sentimental leftist view of the intellectual as a vanguard(ian) of Marxist ideology is inadequate to the new Iranian reality.

In short, what all this means is that the new Iranian intellectual has finally returned to earth, to the here and now, after decades of ideological temptations looking for salvation in eschatological constructions. In other words, Marxism is no longer considered as a valid or sufficient theory for the explanation of social and political reality in Iran. In fact, it is precisely the new social and cultural situation in Iran that has occasioned the younger generation to reconsider the method and the philosophical validity of Marxism in Iran. The re-examination of Marxism that is taking place does not occur in a void. Many have arrived at the point where they feel the need to choose between the ossified Marxism of the past and the project of radical change of Iranian society. We can call this process of re-examination a "pragmatic reaction" to the failure of what many considered to be "progressive" on the grounds that it would solve society's ills. In fact, not only were the ills not solved, but Iranian Marxism became an ill itself. I am reminded of what John Kenneth Galbraith once said about Milton Friedman: "Milton's misfortune is that his policies have been tried." Well, the misfortune of Iranian Marxism is that it has been tried. And it failed.

Concerning anti-globalization movements in Iran, as you know, like elsewhere, anti-capitalism has turned into anti-globalization among the left-wing groups. Most of the anti-globalization groups in Iran are those who mourn the downfall of the Soviet Union as a countervailing superpower, but you also find the critics of globalization among the Islamic groups close to the government. This has to do with the fact that the main source of anti-globalization sentiment is the resentment toward US military and economic hegemony. There is also a third group of young intellectuals who seem to be very much influenced by the works of Derrida, Foucault, Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek. The heavy influence of these authors on some Iranian students takes often nihilistic overtones that you can find expressed in articles in Iranian journals. On the other hand, you can find some democratic universalists and cosmopolitan intellectuals in Iran, like myself, who do believe that since globalization will not fully ensure the advancement of positive social agendas, we need to empower civil society in the domestic sphere, as it represents a countervailing power and prospects for better governance.

DP: You referred to Marxism's intellectual influence in Iran. What exactly has been the extent of that influence?

RJ: I think it is as necessary to understand why Marxism succeeded in influencing Iranian intellectual life as it is to understand why in the end it lost out in the 1979 revolution. There can be no doubt that Marxism and the Marxist movement registered spectacular successes in Iran despite not finally succeeding. There is also no doubt that Marxism has received a devastating political and ideological setback in Iran as elsewhere. Iran never had a working class comparable to the European proletariat of Marx's time. Marxism was propagated in Iran by the upper middle class and rich families, who were politically against the Pahlavi regime and intellectually the most prepared to embrace new ideas and to implement them in the Iranian social sphere. From the 1930s until the end of the 1960s Marxism was the doctrine that provided the Iranian elite with an intellectual grounding for a rupture with Islamic traditions. Despite this vibrant interest in Marxist ideas — which in the 1970s turned into a cult for guerrilla warfare, Latin American style — very few Iranian Marxists had read Marx or were versed in the philosophical literature of western Marxism, such as the Frankfurt School, Gramsci, Korsch, Lukacs, and so on. These were too complicated and, in any event, little known. If you looked at the books, pamphlets and political tracts of the Iranian Marxist groups inside and outside Iran, you would be horrified by the low level of philosophical knowledge and by the Stalinist tone and content of the writings. Strangely enough, Marxism was able to find a significant place in the hearts and minds of many Iranian intellectuals for more than four decades.

It's interesting to note that the influence of Marxism and the activities of the Marxist political groups in Iran fluctuated in direct proportion to changes in the Iranian nationalist movement and the influence of American diplomacy in the region. The political and philosophical failures of the Iranian nationalist movement headed by Mohammad Mossadegh after the coup d'etat of 1953 helped put wind in the sails of Iranian Marxism, which presented itself as the vanguard philosophy of the revolution. Also, events such as the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Cuban Revolution and the Vietnam War were influential factors in the spreading of Marxism among students and intellectuals in Iran. Lenin, Stalin and Mao were far more influential than Marx in shaping the consciousness and work of those in the Iranian Communist movement. Most of the members of the Iranian Communist Party considered (and some continue to this day to consider) Stalin as a great hero.

Most important of all was the lack of sufficient awareness among most Iranian Communists about the force of religion and the strong social networking of the Islamist groups in Iran. What the Iranian Communists lacked was an appreciation of Islam as an important social–historical factor in the formation and consolidation of the Iranian masses. Iranian Marxists, despite their ambition to be close to the masses, never spoke the language of common people; they were hopelessly out of tune with the traditions and idioms of the people. This got in the way of their progress as a revolutionary force, but not necessarily as intellectuals. They ended up after the 1979 revolution as unhappy intellectuals with no political party. This reminds me of Brecht's line: "Unhappy the nation that needs heroes." Maybe I could add in the context of what has been said: "Tragic the movement that cannot have the heroes it needs"!

DP: You mentioned the urge in Iran for what you call a "non–imitative dialogical exchange" with the modern West. This brought to mind a passage

from an essay by our mutual friend Fred Dallmayr, in which he observes that there are often "more vibrant resonances" of European thought in a place like Iran than in Europe today. "This does not mean," he writes,

that European perspectives are simply disseminated across the world without reciprocity or reciprocal learning. Nor does it mean that local origins are simply erased in favor of a bland universalism [...] What it does mean is that landscapes and localities undergo symbolic metamorphoses, and that experiences once localized at a given place increasingly find echoes or resonance chambers among distant societies and peoples." (*Small Wonder: Global Power and its Discontents*, p. 115)

Is this the sort of thing you have in mind when you talk about a "non-imitative dialogical exchange"? **RJ:** I am happy to see that you quote Fred Dallmayr in relation to my idea of "non-imitative dialogical exchange." Fred is a colleague and a friend with whom I have had many fruitful exchanges. We share a deep interest in Gandhi and India. I agree with Fred's view of a global or cosmopolitan discourse conducted along non-hegemonic lines. His idea of an alternative model of cosmopolitan interaction, inspired in part by Oakeshott's linkage of conversation with inter-human friendship, has been very helpful for my own formulation of the idea of "democratic universalism." As you might know, in my debate with Richard Rorty during his visit to Iran, I suggested a distinction between two concepts of "universalism": a "soft" universalism and a "hard" universalism. "Soft" universalism provides us with a theoretical framework for various possible versions of moral life without being founded in a fixed idea of the self. In other words, "soft" universalism or what we can call "democratic universalism" provides a universalistic criterion by which we can scrutinize the principles of action that we might seek as basic to our lives, activities and institutions. Soft universalism does not force us to choose, but offers us reasons and arguments for adapting principles that we would adapt. In other words, soft universalism applies the universal right to reciprocity in a world of plural values in order to allow people with different values to accept one another. Unlike "soft" universalism, "hard" universalism is in search of uniformity and homogenization, because it does not accept the principle of cultural pluralism.

For many, the paradox of the human rights corpus is that it seeks to foster diversity and difference, but does so only under the rubric of Western democracy. In other words, it says that diversity is good so long as it is exercised within the Western paradigm of liberalism. As a result, the centre of the debate turns around the argument over whether or not Western democracy should be considered as a universal principle. Today in our world, Western democracy is challenged by religious fundamentalists and by nihilistic groups on the grounds that it represents a form of political imperialism or hegemony. Well, I believe that even if democracy is not as easily spread or as deeply rooted as many American thinkers and politicians have assumed, there is no shadow of doubt that each democratic process is a potential ally in the struggle against the challenges of our century such as ethnic and religious conflict, terrorism, poverty and environmental degradation. This is why I think that the idea of "democratic universalism" could be the best way of having a non-hegemonic implementation of human rights in countries where individual freedom is not the most fairly distributed thing.

This goes hand in hand with the idea of a "non-imitative dialogical exchange" through which I suggest an intellectual discourse for redefining communities and individual-community relationships in a pluralistic way. I also refer here to Todorov's concept of "transculturation", which is very different from "acculturation". Transculturation is entering and living in another culture without necessarily appropriating its mode of being. Transculturation is the inclusion of new elements in an existing culture. It is the ability to grasp other traditions and to incorporate them into one's own system of thought.

Dealing with modernity in a dialogical way is having the right to speak back to it. And this response becomes in effect a part of the process of modernity itself. Therefore, a dialogical engagement is an open-ended process where the meaning is not located outside the subject but is situated in the intersubjective relation of the two cultural subjects who are in dialogue together. In the model that I am outlining, the subjects of the dialogue add to each other's identity in and through the dialogical exchange. A dialogical exchange among cultures is the only way in which our ignorance of other cultures and civilizations can be aired, our biases challenged, and our knowledge expanded. A dialogical exchange is the only way to negotiate different interpretations of the world without imposing one interpretation on others. So we are talking here about an exchange between two conscious partners based on a respectful confrontation of their experiences and the knowledge of the process.

So, there is no imitation in a dialogical communicative interaction between two cultural agents. I think countries like Iran, Turkey and Egypt deserve to be analyzed as societies which have imitated modernity for a long period of time instead of having a critical exchange with it. The result of this uncritical exchange with modernity has been the total subjection to different modes of instrumental rationality with no emphasis on the critical driving force of modernity which are, in Kantian terms, "escape from tutelage" and "public use of reason."

Modernity is fundamentally about the reflexive making of history, and in this process the struggle for mutual recognition occupies the most important place. This struggle for mutual recognition arises from a dialogical exchange, because it is a mutual desire of respect. So it is accompanied with a demand that a person be culturally esteemed for his or her own sake. Of course, it is important to refer here once again to the concept of democratic universalism, which holds that there is an underlying human unity that entitles all individuals to basic rights regardless of their cultures. I will put forth the view that neither hard universalism nor cultural relativism is sufficient in coping with the increasing variety of human ontologies. That is to say, we have to look for a universalism that is founded on all human experiences of history rather than only on Western values. This is only possible through large-scale cultural encounters. Taking into consideration the ontological impact of these encounters, an outsider's judgment and discussion of local violations of human rights cannot be criticized as unwarranted ideological interference.

DP: You mentioned a number of contemporary European thinkers in whom there is interest among some young Iranians today: Derrida, Foucault, Agamben, Badiou, Zizek. Does Antonio Negri also belong in this group? I know that you brought him to lecture in Iran last year -- which I found interesting, given your views on Marxism. Writing about Negri's reception in Iran, Nina Power, who was there, commented that his ideas were generally regarded as "oddly tangential to [Iran's] most pressing concerns". Negri's "concept of radicalism," she noted, appeared to possess "no frontal relation to

the constraints of the existing order" in Iran. If anything, she observed, Negri's message appealed more to the religious hard right. "If there is to be a new Iranian revolution from below," she concluded, "it is unlikely to take the form of a plebeian carnival or quasi-Biblical 'exodus'." This sounds entirely consonant with your own thoughts on the failure of Marxism in Iran. Isn't it?

RJ: I know Negri from the time I was living in Paris. We are now close friends and I have been reading his writings with great interest, especially his work on Spinoza. I think there is nothing strange in appreciating Isaiah Berlin and Negri at the same time. This maybe has to do with the fact that I consider myself a politically moderate and non-violent person, but a philosophically radical-minded person. I think philosophy is not only having a true sense of reality (as Hegel says: "Philosophy is its own time raised to the level of thought") but also knowing how to resist it. Philosophy is the daily practice of dissent at the level of thought. Being a true radical is having the courage to think and to judge independently.

As I told you before, what sounded fake to me in Iranian Marxism was that it was supposed to be a revolutionary philosophy and yet it produced ultra-conservative elements in Iranian society, who knew how to grow a Stalin moustache or put on a Che Guevara beret, but had retrograde ideas on social issues like women's rights or children's education. You can see the best example of this in the political attitude of the Marxist-Leninist groups in Iran regarding the first demonstration of women against the Islamic regime. Therefore, to make my point I would add that being a radical today has nothing to do with slogans, but has to do with the process of thinking differently. On this matter, Negri reminds me very much of Cornelius Castoriadis, whom I knew very well during my years in France. They both represent a generation of men of character and integrity who speak truth to power. I think despite the fact that many continue to consider Negri as somebody who, according to the former Italian President Francesco Cossiga, "poisoned the minds of an entire generation of Italy's youth," Negri is a radical mind that we need in the context of today's world. I think Negri and Hardt's *Empire* was wrongly characterized by many as a mystical and romantic invocation of a decentred postmodernist and post-imperialist world. Unfortunately, most people missed the important point of the book that is the discussion of the biopolitical context of empire. According to Negri and Hardt, the production of capital converges ever more with the production and reproduction of social life itself and it becomes ever more difficult to maintain distinctions among material labour and what they call immaterial labour. Those who are familiar with the works of the French philosopher Deleuze know that theoretically speaking Hardt and Negri situate themselves in the line of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. One might not agree with the conclusions of Hardt and Negri's book, but one can say that *Empire* is a work of visionary intensity.

Maybe this is the main reason I invited Negri to Iran. His presence and his lectures had a great impact. For those of us who live and work in Iran, every visit of a prominent intellectual figure is a breath of fresh air that gives us the oxygen necessary to continue thinking differently. In Iran today, "intellectualism" is an accusation often concomitant with that of "being pro-Western," a deviation from the official line. Therefore, inviting intellectuals like Negri, Rorty, Habermas, Heller and Ricoeur is a way of crossing borderlines without leaving the country. It is a way of bringing into Iran the voices of other cultures so as to further cross-cultural dialogue.

DP: You mentioned your debate with Richard Rorty. What was the debate about?

RJ: The first time I met Richard Rorty was during my visit at Stanford. I was giving a lecture there and took the opportunity to meet with him. At the end of our meeting I asked him if he would be interested in visiting Iran and giving a few lectures. He kindly accepted and I organized his trip for June 2004. I thought it would be more interesting to have a debate with him rather than just having him lecture. So I asked Daryush Shayegan, an Iranian philosopher, and George McLean, Professor Emeritus at the Catholic University of America, who was invited by another Iranian institution, to join us on a panel. More than 1500 people attended this event at the House of Artists in Tehran. Shayegan's presentation was mainly based on the idea that secular democracy now seems inevitable in the Islamic world, given the widespread rejection of revolutionary ideology and the diffusion of sentiment in favor of human rights. McLean's remarks were to do with democracy and inter-faith dialogue. Rorty's intervention was based on his idea of "post-democracy".

According to Rorty, the golden age of bourgeois liberal democracy is now coming to an end. It lasted two hundred years, and it was good while it lasted, but we can no longer afford it. People are nowadays being easily persuaded to surrender their freedoms in the interests of "homeland security." As you know, Rorty dismisses the traditional aspirations of political philosophy. Unlike thinkers such as Locke, Kant, and the early Rawls, who sought philosophical principles which could provide the theoretical groundwork for a liberal-democratic political order, Rorty insists that liberal democracy can get along without philosophical presuppositions and that democracies are now in a position to throw away the ladders used to construct them. In his speech, Rorty came back to his idea that an attempt to ground democracy is futile because it is couched in an obsolete and naïve philosophical paradigm. In line with his anti-foundationalism, he argued that there is no way to reconcile universal and particular epistemological justifications. He directed our attention to the manner in which an anti-foundationalist position can yield ethical claims. Anticipating charges of cultural relativism, Rorty came back to his ideas on "human rights culture" and maintained that the claim that human rights are morally superior does not have to be backed by positing universal human attributes. I then presented my reply in an effort to elaborate the idea of a democratic universalism.

Considering Rorty's argument that the degree to which a "human rights culture" is likely to be persuasive depends directly on the degree of humility with which it is presented, I tried to show that Rorty's light regard for the political and lack of interest in the institutional conditions for realizing ethical ideals could present problems on the issue of human rights in the exchange between cultures. My point is that for many people in non-Western countries, the human rights corpus as a philosophy that seeks the diffusion of democracy and its primary urgency around the globe can, ironically, be seen as favourable to political and cultural homogenization and hostile to difference and diversity. As a result of this point of view, you can find many Iranian or Indian intellectuals who see universalism as the product of European history and challenge it as a form of political imperialism or hegemony.

As a non-Western intellectual who believes firmly in the ideas of democracy and human rights, I have been tempted through my readings of Rorty and because of my own experience as a civil society actor to seek a way out of this dilemma by finding a balance between the values of cultural rootedness and a

sense of belonging, on the one hand, and the idea of shared, cross-cultural, universal values. Uneasy with the way Rorty seems to put discussion of the political on hold, I suggest in a very humble manner my distinction between two concepts of universalism. As I mentioned previously, "soft" universalism, unlike "hard" universalism, does not force others to choose, but offers them reasons and arguments for adapting principles which they might adapt. That is, "soft" universalism applies the universal right to reciprocity in a world of plural values in order to allow people with different values to accept one another.

I see "soft" universalism as the only hope for promoting democracy in non-democratic cultures. This relies on conscious cross-cultural learning and understanding. When cross-cultural learning can enable us to internalize democratic values, the possibility of moving in and out of any value system is preserved. In this situation, individual responsibility replaces particular values as the focus of concern. So we are talking here of universal values within a global democratic sphere. I think it would be extremely dangerous to have a dialogical exchange among cultures without a structure of shared universal values. In other words, I do not believe in international relations without an international ethics, especially in situations of power, violence and crisis. But going back to Rorty, I believe that his take on the desirability of human rights free of claims to their naturalness is an open-ended debate. But it certainly requires a long process of political and cultural argumentation and persuasion, one which many non-democratic societies, like ours, cannot afford for the time being.

DP: Is there interest in Noam Chomsky and Edward Said in Iran today? As someone who has interviewed Chomsky more than once, do you sense that his political outlook speaks to the contemporary Iranian situation? When you brought Fred Dallmayr to Tehran, he lectured on Said. What sort of response did he get from his Iranian interlocutors? Do the perspectives of Chomsky and Said — so paradigmatic in Western academia today — resonate in the Iranian context you have described?

RJ: Both Edward Said and Noam Chomsky are very well known in Iran and some of their books have been translated into Persian. I have met Chomsky four times and each time we had an interesting conversation on subjects related to the Middle East. Reading Chomsky and listening to him has always been very inspiring to me. As for Edward Said, I met him for the first time in Paris in 1996. I was introduced to him by Pierre Bourdieu and the Seuil publishing house. We had a long chat and I asked him if I could make a recording of my conversations with him. He kindly accepted and I later published my conversation with him in a book in Iran.

Through Said, I have met many other interesting people who were either his friends and colleagues at Columbia or were simply his readers and followers. I have invited some of them to Iran. Among these, Ebrahim Moosa, Eduardo Mendieta, Ashis Nandy, and Fred Dallmayr were invited in two different colloquiums in 2002 and 2005, the latter a colloquium on Said organized at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tehran University. Fred Dallmayr and the other participants presented papers on different aspects of Said's life and work and they were all well received by the Iranian students. My contribution to this seminar was on "[Edward Said's Conception of the Public Intellectual as Outsider](#)", which was published a year later in the *Radical Philosophy Review*.

The colloquium on Said was a premiere and it created a new wave of interest in him and his writings. Many of his later writings are now getting translated. It would not be an exaggeration to say that for Iranian intellectuals in particular and the Iranian learned public more broadly, Chomsky and Said are both considered as towering figures of contemporary intellectual life. This fame is not only due to their moral courage and intellectual audacity in facing the challenges of our world, but also because of their deep influence on Middle East politics. Were Said still alive, he would be amused to know that he was being read, translated and remembered in a country like Iran. But one must not forget that Said believed in the universality of ideas even as he understood the importance of a location for their application. So he would have been against any misinterpretation or misuse of his ideas and writings by Islamic fundamentalists.

And this goes also for Chomsky. In one of my conversations with Chomsky, he makes clear his belief in the universality of human rights. Of course for Chomsky the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not perfect and can be improved, but is a reasonably good expression of principles that people around the world accept. Chomsky stresses that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was put together from many different cultures that were not Western imperialists. So there is a real universal aspect to this Declaration. In other words, according to Chomsky, the principles of human rights are reasonable principles because they express the consensus that most reasonable people would agree to. So, one can say that both Chomsky and Said defend a sort of non-hegemonic and democratic universalism. This is another reason for their status in Iran.

But I should add that Said and Chomsky are not only respected among Iranian intellectuals because of their radical and anti-conformist attitudes, but mainly because of their struggle against extremism and authoritarianism. For us, their struggle is a struggle against embedded prejudices of all kinds and against institutions (religious and non-religious) that aim to enslave people. I think that Said and Chomsky are also important to us because their intellectual task has been a perpetual struggle against the negative role played by the media in sidelining and covering, if not altogether eliminating "undesirable" news. I think Said and Chomsky represent good examples of intellectual integrity and responsibility. Their continuous struggle and hard work is a testimony to the role of the intellectual in today's world and the intellectual's position as an "outsider" but also as a critical traveller of cultures and traditions in the age of the global village. Today the struggle of intellectuals in Iran is not only a quest for pluralism, but also a vital quest for ethical truth and human dignity, situating the intellectual endeavour in its responsible context. To have a free spirit and to be an unrelenting force for integrity is not a simple task for those who are confronted with lies on a daily basis. Few figures have been able to bring together the radical denunciation of cultural and political hegemony with such a deeply felt commitment to democratic universalism as Said and Chomsky. Today reading Said and Chomsky in Tehran is like living life at the edge. It is risky, but full of excitement and exhilaration. Not only because they challenge us continuously through their writings but because they ingrain in us the value of intellectual integrity, which is of the essence in the most challenging of situations.

DP: You have expressed a deep respect that you and other Iranians feel for Chomsky and Said in broad terms, as intellectuals. But I want to focus for a moment on the political *content* of their ideas. Let me rephrase my question this way. You've painted a picture of a liberal renaissance in Iran today, of an

intellectual landscape in which liberal thinkers and ideas, generally speaking, hold more sway than do radical/Marxist ones; a milieu in which the language of democracy, rights, and pluralism has a deeper resonance than does the language of anti-imperialism, anti-globalization, and anti-capitalism. Although you're certainly right to emphasize the universalism and humanism of both Chomsky and Said, there's no avoiding the fact that the central issue around which their political writings revolve is that of imperialism. Anti-imperialism is not the animating spirit or the central issue for Iranian liberals, whereas anti-imperialist and Third Worldist motifs formed the core of the Iranian Marxist paradigm, which — as you pointed out earlier — was a failed project that the younger generation of Iranian intellectuals largely rejects. Given this, it would seem to me that Chomsky and Said, as paradigmatic figures of anti-imperialist thought, would have less direct *political* relevance in the context of the Iranian liberalism. Is there not something of a tension or disjuncture here, between the liberal-democratic-pluralist project and the radical anti-imperialist one?

RJ: One can be a liberal and be anti-imperialist. As you know, there is a tradition of anti-imperialist liberals in the West. Classical liberalism was stridently anti-imperialist. English liberals denounced British empire-building. By reading J. A. Hobson's book *Imperialism: A Study* (first published in 1902) you could find a Fabian line of criticism of the British Empire. The book is partly a response to the Boer War and it was very influential on Lenin, who regurgitated Hobson's ideas with a Marxian twist. Hobson says very correctly that "Imperialism is a depraved choice of national life, imposed by self-seeking interests." The classical liberal sociologist William Graham Sumner was also a strong anti-imperialist who explained 20th-century US foreign policy quite clearly when he wrote:

We were told that we needed Hawaii in order to secure California. What shall we now take in order to secure the Philippines? No wonder that some expansionists do not want to "scuttle out of China". We shall need to take China, Japan, and the East Indies, according to the doctrine, in order to 'secure' what we have. Of course this means that, on the doctrine, we must take the whole earth in order to be safe on any part of it, and the fallacy stands exposed. If, then, safety and prosperity do not lie in this direction, the place to look for them is in the other direction: in domestic development, peace, industry, free trade with everybody, low taxes, industrial power.

So one can talk about an anti-imperialist liberal tradition in the West, even if it was weak in its institutional continuity in a country like the United States. If we turn to contemporary Iranian history, we see clearly someone like Mossadeq, who was *both* a liberal and an icon of anti-imperialism in the developing world. By blocking liberal, secular nationalism in 1953, the Americans unwittingly played an important role in ensuring the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in that country a quarter of a century later.

Now to get back to Said and Chomsky and how I think they can be read and practiced by Iranian liberals, let me quote a line from the American judge Learned Hand that I have always liked and cited: "The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right." I think this is the best way of being a liberal today. There is a difference between this mode of thinking and neo-liberal thought. To say that reality and truth are the sole properties of Western liberalism is ideological demagoguery. To me being a liberal means

having more of a moral predicament than a political mandate. So one cannot be a critical liberal and put imperialism before pluralism. And when I say pluralism, I mean a non-dominative exchange. This means that by positing a universality of human experience, we should stand outside the constraints of political and financial dependencies. So what Said elaborates as "outsiderhood" in his thinking is an important cornerstone not only to a cross-cultural dialogue, but also to the situation of critical marginality that an intellectual should have. I agree fully with Said that being an "outsider" does not mean cultivating one's garden, but rather experiencing life as an "unstable cluster of flowing currents".

So I situate myself on the side of people like Said and Chomsky, as someone who stands at a distance from a tradition, in order to be able to develop his critical capacities in regard to that tradition. This is how one can be a liberal pluralist and a secular humanist and be at the same time an anti-imperialist. It has to do not only with creating an alternative narrative but also resisting the hegemonic narratives that block us from forming and consolidating this counter-narrative. I think Empire is not merely a political relationship of power and domination, but revolves around the power to control the other's state of mind. Therefore, the job of a critical intellectual is neither to accept the dominion of another culture, nor to get swallowed by a nativist politics of identity that ends up with a culturally relativist or fundamentalist attitude. This also means that fighting for democracy and values such as pluralism in a country like Iran or Iraq does not necessarily mean accepting the American way of life. This is a fact that Americans have become aware of very recently. The truth is that what America has to say about other people and other cultures is now challenged by those people themselves. I think the phenomenon of "American exceptionalism" is in itself a major obstacle to a just and equal cross-cultural dialogical exchange. Arabs, Turks, Iranians, Indians and many others are no longer living on the "periphery" of history, because there is no longer any one center anywhere; we have all become centres.

DP: Although you, Ramin, value and derive insight from the work of both liberal-pluralist thinkers like Berlin and radical anti-imperialist thinkers like Said and Chomsky, are Said and Chomsky as popular among Iranians today — young Iranians in particular — as are Berlin and Habermas?

RJ: You are absolutely right about Berlin, Popper, and Habermas being more popular in Iran than Said and Chomsky. This is mainly due to the fact that philosophy has become fashionable among Iranian students. It is surprising to see the level of interest of Iranian youngsters in philosophy. Even in some recent Iranian films you can see the main characters reading philosophy books written by contemporary Iranian or western philosophers. I have personally organized seminars on Hegel and Kant in Yazd, Isfahan, and many other urban areas of Iran. I am always amazed to see the level of interest of Iranian youth in philosophy. I think this is because philosophy is experienced as a mode of resistance against political ideologies and religious dogmatism. Reading philosophical texts in Iran today is like reading Patocka and Husserl in Prague in the late 1970s. So no wonder Berlin, Habermas, Rorty, Foucault, Derrida, Ricoeur, and others are far more popular than Chomsky. What interests Iranian youth in Chomsky and Said is their critique of American foreign policy in the Middle East. But as I mentioned earlier, Iranian students have other ideas in mind. Their discussions turn around concepts like democracy, pluralism, civil society, tradition and modernity, religious tolerance, and the like.

As for the intellectuals, they are not a monolithic group. In regard to philosophy and philosophical readings, one can identify three tendencies in their discourses. The first tendency is secular. Secular intellectuals do not attempt to promulgate any ideologies or to struggle for the establishment of an Islamic democracy in Iran (as do the religious reformist intellectuals) and yet they undermine the main philosophical and intellectual concepts of the established order. Among them you have post-revolutionary intellectuals, such as Javad Tabatabai, Babak Ahmadi, Hamid Azodanloo, Moosa Ghaninejad, and Nasser Fakouhi, who are in their late forties and fifties, and who can be referred to as the "dialogical intellectuals" (in contrast with the revolutionary intellectuals of the 1970s and early 1980s). In other words, for the secular intellectuals, the concept and the practice of dialogue provide an ontological umbrella for all political and cultural meanings and understandings. The very objective of this "culture of dialogue" is to move beyond seeing the other as an "enemy" who must be terminated either as an individual or as a social class, and to promote a full acknowledgement of the other as a subject. In this case different intellectual attitudes are asked to co-exist side by side to find an intersubjective basis for their encounter with modernity and democracy. This move away from master ideologies is echoed by a distrust of all metaphysically valorized forms of monist thinking. Unlike the previous generations of leftist and religious intellectuals, what the critical engagement with modernity has taught secular intellectuals in Iran is to be at odds with both *fundamentalist politics* and with *utopian rationalities*. The secular intellectuals are mainly influenced by Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Berlin, Hayek, Popper, Foucault, and Ricoeur.

The second and third tendencies are both based on religious thought, but are divided by political and epistemological differences. On the one hand, we find the reformists and on the other hand we find the neo-conservatives. The reformist group is represented by figures such as Abdolkarim Soroosh, Mohsen Kadivar, Alavi-Tabar, Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, Mojtabeh Shabestari, and many others. The unifying trait of these intellectuals is their attempt to reconcile Islamic thought with democracy, civil society and religious pluralism and their opposition to the absolute supremacy of the Supreme Guide (*velayat-e faqih*). The rise of religious intellectuals can be followed through the writings of Soroosh. Soroosh's main idea is that there are perennial unchanging religious truths, but our understanding of them remains contingent on our knowledge in the fields of science and philosophy. Unlike Ali Shariati, who turned to Marxism to bring a historicist perspective to Shiite thought, Soroosh debates the relation between democracy and religion and discusses the possibility of what he calls "Islamic democracy". What Soroosh, who's now living in England, has been trying to do during the past decade is convince his fellow citizens that it is possible to be Muslim and to believe in democracy. Soroosh stresses that there are two views of religion, a maximalist and a minimalist one. In the maximalist view, according to him, everything has to be derived from religion, and most of the current problems in Islam come from this view. But the minimalist view implies that some values cannot be derived from religion, like respect for human rights. For Soroosh the maximalist view of religion has to be replaced by a minimalist view, or else the balance between Islam and democracy is not possible. Thus for Soroosh a democratic Islamic society would not need any Islamic norms from above.

Mojtabeh Shabestari is among the rare religious intellectuals in Iran who has challenged the monistic view of Islam. According to Shabestari, the official Islamic discourse in Iran has created a double crisis. The first crisis is due to the belief that Islam encompasses a political and economic system offering an

answer relevant to all historical periods; the second crisis is entailed by the conviction that the government has to apply Islamic law (*shariah*) as such. These two ideas have emerged, according to Shabestari, in relation to the Islamic revolution and the events that followed it. But the fact is, according to Shabestari, that Islam does not have all the answers to social, economic and political life at all points in history. Also, there is no single hermeneutics of Islam as such. Therefore, the relation between religion and ideology is simply unacceptable and leads to the desacralization of religion. Strangely enough, the reformist intellectuals have also been influenced by thinkers such as Kant and Popper (but less by thinkers such as Foucault or Derrida).

Unlike the reformist intellectuals, the neo-conservative intellectuals in Iran are in favour of the absolute supremacy of the Supreme Guide and against concepts such as democracy, civil society and pluralism. This movement includes figures such as Reza Davari Ardakani, Qolam-Ali Haddad Adel, Gholam Reza Awani and Mehdi Golshani. The famous personality among these is Reza Davari-Ardakani, an anti-Western and anti-modern philosopher deeply engaged with the work of Martin Heidegger. Davari-Ardakani, unlike Soroosh, takes some of the features of Heidegger's thought, mainly his critique of modernity, and frames it in Islamic terms. He rejects the Western model of democracy, which is based on the separation of politics and religion. The president of the Iranian Academy of Science, Davari-Ardakani could be considered the philosophical spokesman of the Islamic regime. There is a temptation among the conservative intellectuals to find an affinity between Heideggerianism and Islamic thought. We thus find no readings of Said, Popper, or Berlin among this last group. Even those like Haddad Adel (the president of the Iranian parliament) who are interested in Kant make no hay of his moral and political writings.

So it is safer to say that there are varied intellectual currents in Iran and there are multiple readings of the Western canon. This actually creates an opportunity for pluralism in the Iranian intellectual arena, which has been absent for many decades because of the cultural agendas pursued both by the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic. But it had also to do with the ideological predominance of the Marxist and Islamic ideas among Iranian intellectuals in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This ideological predominance has posed both philosophical and practical problems today in Iran.

DP: What, if anything, can liberals outside of Iran do to support Iranian liberals? There are many who argue that Iran's issues are internal and that western "outsiders" should stay out of them (a view shared by both Islamists and many Marxists, it's worth noting). When I interviewed Shirin Ebadi, she firmly rejected this position and expressed a desire for "human rights defenders [...] university professors [...] international NGOs" to support the struggle for human rights in Iran. "All defenders of human rights," she said, "are members of a single family." "When we help one another we're stronger." As an internationalist and a universalist, what are your thoughts on this question?

RJ: I fully agree with Shirin Ebadi on this issue. Of course, as you know, this intellectual attitude is not new. It goes back to the 18th century. I always take pleasure in reading and teaching Thomas Paine, the great British-born liberal who writes in his pamphlet *Common Sense*: "Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia, and Africa, have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mind."

Well, one can say that the violation of freedom and democracy and disrespect of individual liberties in different parts of the world continue as in Paine's time. Since the idea of human rights transcends local legislation and the citizenship of the individual, the support for human rights can come from anyone — whether or not she is a citizen of the same country as the individual whose rights are threatened. A foreigner does not need the permission of a repressive government to try to help a person whose liberties are being violated. Because insofar as human rights are seen as rights that any person possesses as a human being (and not as a citizen of any particular country), the reach of the corresponding duties can also include any human being, irrespective of his or her particular citizenship.

So I am a human rights universalist, but I do not think that one can enforce human rights and liberal values through violence or military force. I am, however, for humanitarian intervention, as it is practiced by human rights activists and NGOs around the world. The universality of human rights should not be turned into a double standard. Human rights provide us with a standard of conduct which no one can now ignore. Human rights are primary core values of human civilization. They are far from being perfect, but they are the cornerstones of our daily struggle for human dignity around the world. Protecting human dignity is not only about protecting oneself from violence but also defending the other.

So there should be firm grounds for moral objection when people's rights are violated in another society. For me one of the essential problems today is to promote cross-cultural harmony. For relativists, as Clifford Geertz has argued, "humans are shaped exclusively by their culture and therefore there exist no unifying cross-cultural human characteristics". I think this is to say that there are no ultimate standards of right and wrong by which to judge cultures. If this becomes true, we all turn into passive spectators of naked violence happening in front of our eyes. Of course I don't think religion can be used to judge our actions as right or wrong, because religion provides us with a fixed moral philosophy. But there are ethical standards that transcend political actions in international relations. I think there should be an equal submission of all to a minimal set of universal ethical rules. This is how the struggle for the liberal values of pluralism and negative liberty can join the universal values of critical cosmopolitanism. It is a route that leads from Kant's idea of a universal history from a cosmopolitan point of view to Fred Dallmayr's vision of "our world". Values and norms do not remain unaffected by what I regard as cross-cultural exchange and learning. There is no one way of life suitable to all individuals around the globe, and reasonable people therefore can and must have reasonable discussions and arguments about human values as they are practiced in different cultures. This means that against moral relativism and hegemonic universalism from above we can build a cosmopolitan democracy from below. In other words, we have to take up the challenge of defending the classical values of liberalism by promoting the spirit of cosmopolitanism and tolerance for diversity. After all, cosmopolitanism in essence means opening to others, accepting differences and living with plurality. But it also means going beyond one's own national prides and prejudices and giving allegiance to humanity.

I'm not talking about a universal culture that situates itself against particular experiences of local cultures. But it is a middle way between neo-liberal universalist interventionism and particularist identity positions. I think liberals around the world can join Kant and say with him that the global public sphere is the place in which the private interests of members of global civil society

can be reconciled with the universal moral obligations of membership in a "kingdom of ends", a kingdom in which individuals and relationships are treated as ends in themselves, and not simply means to other ends. That is to say, no one can pretend today in America, Europe or the Middle East to believe in liberal values and not have a sense of solidarity with individuals who are fighting for their dignity. We need to think hard about the meaning of solidarity. Solidarity is not about supporting those who share your precise view of politics. It's about supporting those who struggle against injustice and violence and who fight for democracy. The real hope for democrats in Iran is that this sense of the word "solidarity" be understood by humanists, liberals and cosmopolitans around the world.

DP: You have made a most eloquent intellectual case for a cosmopolitan perspective. But let me ask you on a very practical level: what can we liberal internationalists and democratic pluralists living outside of Iran do, concretely speaking, for our Iranian counterparts? How can we be of assistance to you in your struggle?

RJ: I think the first thing to do is to recognize the fact that there are democratic pluralists in Iran fighting for democratic values and civil liberties. Their struggle for the empowerment of Iranian civil society goes beyond a simple act of contestation. The process of democratization in Iran is a day-to-day challenge which is not only political, but also social and cultural. Democracy is not a place where you sit and relax for the rest of your life. It is about responsible civic participation and intellectual integrity. So without this sense of responsibility I don't see how we could manage to have a strong civil society wherein people find their confidence in speaking and acting.

Pascal used to say that, "We are usually convinced more easily by reasons we have found ourselves than by those which have occurred to others." This is very true of our situation in Iran. The actors in Iranian civil society need to find their own logics and practices of togetherness rather than those imposed on them. But this cannot be done without intellectual maturity. Maturity is the condition of possibility for pluralism in Iranian civil society. I am referring here to the Kantian idea of moral responsibility based on intellectual maturity. As you know, Kant defines immaturity as one's inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. In other words, the public use of reason is the true condition of democratic life. Therefore, our aim in Iranian civil society is to create a horizontal line of critical reasoning in the public sphere.

I sincerely believe that finding a place for philosophical debates in the Iranian public sphere today is the highest level of political maturity. This is how our counterparts in the West or the East could be helpful. I have been trying to invite writers, philosophers and scholars from different parts of the world here in order to help them understand Iran but also to open up intellectual discussions with them on subjects that are of great interest to us. Iranian students are eager to know more about Western cultures and are curious to discuss their views on religion, democracy, philosophy and culture with western intellectuals. What they ask for is not sympathy but empathy. They have an eagerness to learn from others and through this learning to become more mature. What remains most fundamentally true is that "empathy" as opposed to "apathy" is the most desirable, even the definitive, philosophical state in our struggle for political maturity. A civil society like ours which is experiencing an alternative form of togetherness on a daily basis requires empathy and solidarity. Empathy is for us the condition of belonging to a

global public sphere.

Consequently, we cannot undergo a process of redefinition of our political self without having created this situation of empathy with others. It seems clear that in our philosophical quest for maturity we need to address the question of empathy in the sense of what Husserl called "experiencing someone else". This is where your notion of "solidarity" finds its true meaning. If we understand by "solidarity" getting involved with another's community to create change, then the best form of solidarity with Iranian liberals is to engage in a comprehensive and empathetic dialogue with them. Liberal ideas are new to a country like Iran. They are only 100 years old. To internalize them, Iranian civil society needs to know them better. This cannot be done by violence or by exporting ideas. We need to have more debates among us. Internationalism, liberalism, and democracy are powerful concepts and have indeed begun to dominate all of the debates within Iranian civil society. But we need to examine them together critically. This is where the concept of maturity links up with that of solidarity. Solidarity does not mean charity, it does not mean intervention and it cannot be reduced to altruism. Rather it is something which grows out of an understanding of common responsibility. It is in our common responsibility as liberals to help Iranian civil society grow.

DP: You have said that, "[l]iving in Iran is living at the edge and struggling as an intellectual is like walking on a tightrope." Can you explain this?

RJ: The work of an intellectual requires living on the edge. This is the only way the essence of life can be grasped. This is even truer in a challenging country like Iran. Do you remember the epigraph to Somerset Maugham's great novel *The Razor's Edge*, taken from the Upanishads: "The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path to Salvation is hard." I suppose what I am trying to say is that you get used to living with challenges in a society where there is no such thing as a plain and simple life. Life is not easy when you have to live morally in the face of untruth. Maybe intellectuals in Iran have learned to face a life of challenges because the challenge of truth is more crucial to their existence than it is to others. I believe one cannot be a friend of truth without living on the edge. But to do that one has to be gripped by the idea and the passion that life and thought are one. If thinking and aliveness become one for us then certainly we can reach the conclusion that living a challenging life in Iran is a meaningful process. For me as an Iranian philosopher, thinking differently is a form of going beyond the challenges of my daily life in Iran. It's an opening up to the world that goes hand in hand with the act of being free. I think this internal dialogue with oneself — listening to one's inner voice, as Gandhi used to say — but also having an acute sense of the world, could be a quest not only to understand the meaning of our world, but also a ceaseless and restless activity of questioning on the nature of the evil that one has to confront in political life.

In Iran we have grown accustomed to living with political evil but to not thinking about it. I think today more than at any other time our mode of thinking and our mode of judging in Iranian society have a crucial role in determining where Iran can go from here. Thinking democracy and establishing democratic governance in a country like Iran is not an easy task. Unlike what people think, it is more than a simple political enterprise. The challenge here is to focus on the process of democratic consciousness building that can provide continuity to the political structures of democracy by way of contrast with our authoritarian traditions. This is where philosophical thinking comes to our aid as a grammar of resistance to the tyranny of tradition. This

does not mean that I consider the tremendous body of traditions in Iran as mere errors of the past. It means that our political and social traditions are acceptable as long as they enable us to think freely. We may find ourselves at home in our traditions, after all. But we need to distinguish between a false sense of belonging and respect for a common space where the plurality of voices can be realized.

I must admit that I am in fullest sympathy with a mode of thinking that would bring intellectuals into struggle against thoughtlessness and acceptance of things as they are, and speaking and acting by appeal to authority, to tradition or to personal loyalty. Here, I believe, lies the deep paradox between living in and for truth and the commitment to a culture where one can feel at home. Thanks to western traditions of thought, I learned to think philosophically and politically, but I have refused systematically, during the past 30 years of my intellectual life, to abandon the Iranian question as the focal point of my philosophical and political thinking. An independent and critical thinker in Iran who takes responsibility for the marginal status thrust upon him is like an acrobat walking on a tightrope.

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