

Reading Postel on Tehran

Iranian people are left alone to face their repressive regime because the left feels uncomfortable about siding with Washington

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A review of "[Reading Legitimation Crisis in Tehran](#)"

by Danny Postel

Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago.

How do you explain the silence of the US progressives on the human rights violations in Iran? Why doesn't the struggle for liberation in Iran resonate with those who are otherwise concerned with justice and freedom in the world?

Danny Postel sets out to answer this difficult question in his latest insightful book, [Reading Legitimation Crisis in Tehran](#).

Postel's daring analysis carries significant political risk, as we live with increasing threat of a new war; arguments against the regime in Tehran are not taken lightly by our liberal colleagues. Every political analysis of this kind is suspect of aiding George Bush until proven otherwise. This is precisely why I care about the questions Danny Postel attempts to answer. I spent most of my youth activism protesting alongside of my liberal colleagues, supporting people's movements in South Africa, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. There was much to protest when I arrived in the United States as a young student in 1982. I still remember much of the deplorable policies of the Regan administration, of constructive engagement with Apartheid in South Africa, an illegal, undeclared and covert war against Nicaragua and support for the death squads in El Salvador and Guatemala. There may have been a few other causes for which we protested, went on strike, gave speeches or did sit-ins. But these few certainly stand out in my memory. Late in the Regan years, came the Iran-Contra scandal and with it the bankruptcy of the united front of the bad guys, from right-wing conservatives (the word Neo-con was not part of our progressive vocabulary yet) in US to Contras in Central America and Mullahs in Iran and the thrill of watching Ollie North sweat during the hearings that tattooed the phrase "I have no recall" in the collective memory of Americans.

But what about my own recall? As I was reading Postel about the progressive American attitude toward Iran, I tried to remember my liberal colleagues in the 80's and think hard about their objections to the Regan policies. Were they opposed to the constructive engagement with a regime that practiced Apartheid or did they oppose Ronald Regan as the embodiment of anti-communist and imperialist values? Why did they object to the hidden negotiations with Mullahs and the arms for hostage deal? Did they find dealing with a terrorist regime in Tehran objectionable? Or was it the hidden nature of the transaction? Did they hate it because the proceedings were spent on battling Sandinistas

or would they condemn any such deals with a terrorist state regardless of how the profit is squandered? Did they find the regime in Tehran objectionable after all?

I ask these questions because in retrospect and as I read again the writings of those days, I find disturbing facts that establishes patterns for what Postel is writing about. I find these patterns useful because they undermine the first-line defense of our left-liberal colleagues who argue, in responding to Postel, that their attitude toward Iran is a product of the particularities of history. Let me quote a simple but common argument I have picked up on the net:

"And yet, I know perfectly well that criticism of Iran is not just criticism of Iran. Whether I want it to or not, it also provides support for the Bush administration's determined and deliberate effort to whip up enthusiasm for a military strike. Only a naive would view criticism of Iran in a vacuum, without also seeing the way it will be used by an administration that has demonstrated time and again that it can't be trusted to act wisely. So what to do? For the most part, I end up saying very little." (Kevin Drum)

I find it useful to look back and see no outspoken criticism of massacre of Iranian left in prison in Tehran in 1987 or widespread atrocities that were committed during years of Clinton administration. Worse yet, I look back and try to remember if we cared at all, in those years of student activism, about the Solidarity movement in Poland. My recall is disappointing. I even vaguely remember Regan's popularity with my Polish friends. It was the right wing anti-labor Ronald Regan and not us the progressives, who championed the cause in Poland. Why didn't we care about the atrocities against the Solidarity activists? Were my leftist friends worried about a US military invasion of Poland? I think not.

Once the excuse of the historical necessity is rejected and a repeated pattern emerges, one must look for structural defects in the progressive vision to explain this dilemma. Here, Postel considers some of the following:

-Lack of knowledge about a complex society like Iran prevents the left from criticizing the clerical regime.

This argument was first expressed by Jeremy Brecher, who writes:

"Normally, the global peace movement and political left would respond to repression by an authoritarian, theocratic regime with outrage and protest. But so far there has been a deafening silence. The reason is probably not that peace activists don't care about democracy and human rights when they are trampled by opponents of America. More likely there is wariness about intervening in a complex, multiplayer drama in which the left could have an impact contrary to what it intends."

Postel agrees with the complexity of Iranian situation but dismisses it as a sole reason for the silence of the left. He points to Bosnia as another example of a complex situation where the complexity was not an obstacle for solidarity with the victims. But those who

advocated for Bosnian human rights violations for nearly six years and watched with frustration the massacre of Bosnian people may disagree with him.

Bosnian example aside, the notion of complexity as an excuse for lack of solidarity needs to be challenged. It is difficult to believe that societies such as Iran, Syria, Libya, and Poland –to name a few-are in some mysterious ways more complicated, multilayered, and tricky to understand than Chili, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. I can take the example of Chili, its vibrant multilayered civil society and massive economic development under Pinochet regime and compare it with semi-nomadic traditional societies of Syria and Libya. But even a comparison of complexities between Chili and Iran will not yield very clear results. It seems that the American progressives never got confused in the case of Pinochet but had significant problems coming to term with atrocities committed by Ayatollah Khomeini. There is a sense of “moral clarity” –to use the conservative vocabulary-about Pinochet but not Khomeini, given that both had complex multilayered societies to which our progressive activists had imperfect access to. This unsatisfactory justification drives Postel’s second point:

- The centrality of anti-imperialism in the left-liberal worldview prevents them from criticizing the anti-US tyrants.

Here Brecher’s article provides the first evidence for such centrality when he poses the dilemma:

For the global peace movement and the left, this situation presents several interlocking dilemmas. How is it possible to promote human rights and democracy in Iran without strengthening Washington's drive to dominate the world in general and the Middle East in particular?

And the answer is expressed clearly in terms that establish the anti-imperialism centrality:

The problem is in some ways parallel to that faced by the international peace movement in the 1980s, when repression of nonviolent antiauthoritarian revolts in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe coincided with aggressive U.S. military expansionism.

Brecher goes on to argue that:

It is always a temptation for the peace movement and the left to soft-pedal our critique of such regimes out of a feeling that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." It is particularly hard to find a balanced position when Washington is utilizing the flaws of those regimes it opposes to justify aggression against them while ignoring the equal or greater crimes of regimes it supports.

Postel restates this particular point at length and argues similarly:

“...What happens, though, when people are struggling against tyranny and repression, but the tyranny and repression are not being perpetrated by the Empire or its proxies, not

only not perpetrated by the empire or its proxies, but to take the case of Iran today, the regime in question is a sworn enemy of the US empire?...Let's face it: it's just plain uncomfortable for leftists to say anything that sounds like it could come out of the mouth of George Bush or Paul Wolfowitz."

But let's face it: when we are engaged in self-criticism, we always run the risk of soft-pedaling as well. If the left is ready to admit to a blind spot it must do so without resorting to Washington as a justification its shortcomings.

There is a long history for the discourse that Brecher and Postel have engaged in. The Islamic Republic has shamed the leftists for their support of his agenda for many years and Michel Foucault doesn't get the lion share of this blame. One quick look to the progressive publications in 1979 will demonstrate my point. Take the case of Mother Jones. In 1979 an article about Iran and Khomeini reads:

What kind of state might result if Khomeini or his followers take power? As someone who has talked with him at length, I believe that, when Khomeini speaks of an Islamic state for Iran, it is a Shi'ite scholar's way of saying that he wants a good state in Iran. His concept of a good state includes democratic reforms, freedom for political prisoners, an end to the astronomical waste of huge arms purchases, and a constitutionalist government.(From "The Iranian Hundred Years' War" By Eqbal Ahmad April 1979)

Soon after the victory of revolution, Khomeini begin building of the Islamic State. Mass executions were to follow. A year later Mother Jones reflected in the following article:

The Left is always better at seeing what leads to revolutions than at seeing what may follow them. A case in point: Mother Jones on Iran. A year ago this month we published a piece that, despite a good analysis of the shah's overthrow, now seems embarrassingly nearsighted about his successors.... Why was our perception skewed?

As we look at it now, it seems that we momentarily donned an all-too-familiar set of blinders. Since World War II, much of the Left's work in the United States has gone--quite rightly--toward opposing U.S. support of various corrupt dictators: the shah, Thieu, Somoza and so on. But too often we automatically assume that any movement that vigorously opposes one of these tyrants is going to turn out pretty well. And, having been politically nurtured in the universities ourselves, we tend to be immediately sympathetic to militant-sounding student activists overseas. Victory to the Heroic People--of in their Liberation Struggle! (From an Editor's Note April 1980)

In 1980, the left blames the unpredictability of post-revolutionary circumstances and in 2006, the unpredictability of the consequences of their own actions, to excuse their solidarity with the oppressors. The self criticism takes a similar pattern each time, blaming external factors, the unpredictability of circumstances or US hegemonic dominance.

But one needs to be more self-reflective and to look inward and scratch beyond the surface to see why the left is driven by an anti-imperialism impulse and not a democratic human rights vision.

I propose that the centrality of the anti-imperialist impulse is due to the ascendancy of the Leninist influence on the progressive worldview. A revolutionary anti-American brand of Leninism has replaced the traditional Marxist vision-one that celebrated the domination of the tribal-feudal societies by the western bourgeoisie-and has further evolved to a malignant anti-American attitude that justifies supporting of any anti-American tyranny. This is partially a reaction to the fall of Soviet empire and a seemingly “uni-polar” world where at first glance United States plays the role of the lonely super power.

The reality commonly eludes ideology as is the case here. The world remains far from uni-polar and emergence of new blocks of power, Russia-China-India on one hand and Europe on the other, not to mention the anxious rebirth of the Imperial Islam with all its claims and aggressions, assures us of a complex world far from the black and white Leninist fantasy that has captured the progressive imagination for almost half a century.

The Leninism of the third world grows out of a frustrated and failed nationalism, blinded by a conviction that there was a glorious past which now must return -whatever the price may be- along with blaming the west (the America), the successful rich nations for the time lost and present misery.

That such worldview finds a strong foothold among Iranian or Palestinian intelligentsia is not surprising. The enigma is the lure of Leninism for the middle class progressive Americans of the 21st century. The mystery is that it carries so much power that distorts the intellectual identity and drains all faculties of reason drawing out this painful confession in protest from Postel: “we know what we are against but what are we for?”

What is most corrosive about the dominance of Leninism is its impact on the ethics of the left. With Leninism comes a shrewd flexibility of a modern prince, one that seeks power and is willing to lie about history or compromise principals, and censure or eliminate opponents.

There are other obstacles to progressive visions that are not mentioned in the Postel’s great read. These factors that shape the intellectual culture of the left and their blindness of toward Iran are rarely exposed or analyzed by the progressives:

Manipulation of Media in Tehran

The main source of daily information for the left and progressives are liberal reporters who are able to report from Iran. These reporters are tightly controlled and manipulated by the office of Ministry of Intelligence in Tehran.

Media control in Tehran has a long history. The old regime controlled the content of all daily papers and TV and Radio broadcasts until the early days of the revolution. Both international and domestic Media played a critical role during the 1979 revolution. Khomeini and other clerics were well aware of the power of media and sought to control it soon after the victory. One of the very first victims of the post revolutionary censorship was Iran's independent daily "Ayandegan". Khomeini personally appealed for the closure of the paper at the height of his popularity. The secular activists staged a protest and nearly 100,000 young men and women came out in the defense of the paper to the street. Khomeini retracted initially but few days later the revolutionary guards confiscated the paper and shut it down. The censorship soon eliminated all free and independent press. By 1981, less than three years after revolution, all independent press was eliminated.

Once the monopoly over the domestic media was consolidated, the Islamic Republic moved on the foreign reporters. Granting visa became one of the primary forces for control. Many faced "conditional short-term" visas. If they were compliant and did not report damaging stories their visa was renewed. Otherwise they were expelled. Once entering the country they were required to have a translator. The translators were assigned by the Ministry of Culture and Guidance. All translators worked closely with the Ministry of Intelligence and played an important role in arranging the "right interview", showing the reporters the "street scenes" that conveyed the people's positive sentiment about the Islamic State. Reporters are also pressured to stay in the hotels that are assigned by the State. Their rooms and communications are closely monitored.

Iran of the 1980's was witness to one of the darkest decades of human rights violation in Iran. By the end of 1980's several thousand leftist political prisoners were executed and buried in mass graves. Torture, kidnapping, murder of the activists was widespread and the repressive apparatus of the Islamic state was in full swing. None of these stories reached the progressive intellectuals and leftists in the west. The Europeans were busy making money in their lucrative deals with Iran and state run radio stations of Germany, France or England had little incentive to expose the violent crimes of the regime. American media was in dire need of access. The liberal reporters who gained admission would play the game and remained cautious.

The control and manipulation of foreign press goes on today and is a very familiar story for those who have lived in former Soviet dominated regimes. Little has been reported on the regime's systematic manipulation of press but to the "trained eyes" the stories that reach American media often carry the mark of the Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. The foreign reporters who get to hear the confessions of a prisoner who can not meet with his lawyer or his family but freely speaks to the foreign reporters to tell them how much he hates George Bush for trying to help his cause, the people who gather in front of voting booths to tell reporters how free the election was, the crowd who gathers in front of reporters hotel to voice their support for nuclear energy, all appear too often on the pages of some of the most prestigious newspapers in this country.

Not all foreign reporters have remained complacent. On many occasions reporters were expelled from Iran for reporting forbidden stories. At least on two occasions, Geneive Abdo and Dan De Luce, both Guardian correspondence, exposed regime's control measures after their deportation.

Iran's oil money at work in US

Iran has constructed one of the most credible lobby groups in Washington since the 1979 revolution. The Iran lobby is sophisticated and credible. They seek their constituencies primarily among the left and liberals but spend money on the conservatives as well.

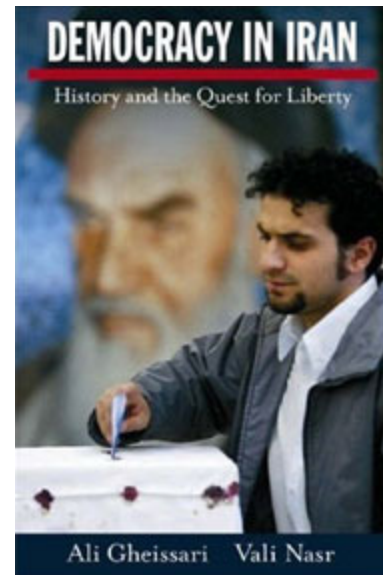
They are a heterogeneous but well coordinated group. They have recruited young Iranian-American professionals who have never lived in Iran, feel disconnected from their roots and believe their motherland has been unjustly demonized, the entrepreneurs who want lifting of the sanctions to get back in before their European competitors, the Middle East academics and Iran researchers who are worthless without access to Iran, and medical & agricultural exporters, importers and oil and gas companies who seek business as usual. This lobby group has the combination of wealth, savvy and political influence to build the illusive image of an Islamic Democracy for one of the most oppressive and corrupt dictatorships in the world.

The Iran lobby will be exploiting the antiwar sentiment, the Iraq failure, and Bush administration's lies and inconsistencies to hide crimes committed by the regime in Tehran. The seemingly progressive protests of the war will not voice any support for democracy and human rights in Iran. The idea of regime change will be presented as a neo-conservatives design on Iran.

Reading Postel's book in these days when the danger of another war looms is most important because the left has remained complacent about the atrocities of the Iranian regime. Even the Iran petition signed by Noam Chomsky and other prominent leftist intellectual recently is void of any actions against the Iranian regime. It states:

We too would like to see a regime change in Tehran, but one brought about by the Iranian people themselves, not by Washington. For 26 years Iran has been ruled by a repressive theocracy. Behind the formal trappings of democracy, real power is held by an un-elected oligarchy of clerics; all electoral candidates must receive their approval, and their authority is enforced by gangs of religious thugs....etc

At the end, the Iranian people are left alone to face their repressive regime because the left feels uncomfortable about siding with Washington. Reading Postel's book is timely



since war or not, unless there is a strong show of solidarity with Iranian people and against the regime in Tehran, the repression will go on. In the absence of a global progressive coalition for a regime change in Iran, the left continues to focus on what is most comfortable, opposing the Empire and once again betraying the Iranian people in their struggle against tyranny.