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Reading Weber in Tehran

By Charles Kurzman

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An unlikely suspect was fingered at the recent show trials of Iranian dissidents: Max Weber, whose ideas on rational authority were blamed for fomenting a "velvet revolution" against the Islamic Republic. "Theories of the human sciences contain ideological weapons that can be converted into strategies and tactics and mustered against the country's official ideology," Saeed Hajjarian, a leading strategist in the Iranian reform movement, explained in his forced confession.

A political scientist by training, Hajjarian "admitted" that Weber's notion of patrimonial government wasn't applicable to Iran. The theory, Hajjarian declared, is relevant only in countries where "people are treated as subjects and deprived of all citizenship rights," which is "completely incompatible with and unrelated to current conditions in Iran."

Hajjarian's coerced denunciation of Weber is ludicrous but unsurprising. Since the disputed presidential elections of June 12, the hard-line government in Tehran has started a broad campaign against social scientists. This crackdown is not altogether new. Over the past decade, one or two prominent social scientists have been arrested each year for supposedly plotting against the state. Those scholars were typically detained for several months and then released after making videotaped "confessions." This year, however, after the surprisingly popular presidential campaign of Mir Hussein Moussavi, and widespread protests over the official results, the number of social scientists in Iranian prisons has multiplied. At least a dozen sociologists, political scientists, and economists were put on trial, and many more have been named in court as unindicted co-conspirators.

The regime's hostility toward social scientists stretches back to the origins of the Islamic Republic. Soon after it came to power Iran's revolutionary government shut down universities and purged the faculty of scholars who were deemed insufficiently Islamic. "Our university students are 'Westoxicated,'" the late leader Imam Ruhollah Khomeini warned in 1980. Too many professors were "brainwashing" their students "in the service of the West," he alleged. A cultural-revolution committee was formed to develop an Islamicized curriculum that it tried to put in place when the universities reopened four years later.

But Iranian universities continued to teach Western subjects, and translations of Western works soon outpaced prerevolution rates. By the end of the 1980s a significant number of Western-educated Iranian scholars had returned to Iran. They were regarded with suspicion by the authorities, who prohibited them from engaging in any open political activity but generally allowed them to pursue their scholarship. At the same time, enrollment at Iranian universities skyrocketed, doubling from 5 percent of the college-age population before the revolution to 10 percent by 1990. It is now over 30 percent, and the growth has been particularly strong in the social sciences. In 1976 there were about 27,000 social-science students in Iran; now there are more than half a million.

"Today," Hajjarian said in his coerced testimony, "state universities, free universities, distance-learning universities, and private universities in every city are busy training students for advanced degrees in these fields, without paying attention to incorrect content." In a speech to university administrators in late August, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, leader of the Islamic Republic, described the popularity of the social sciences as a "worrisome" trend. "Many of the human sciences are based on philosophies of materialism and disbelief toward the divine Islamic teachings," Khamenei said. (In Iran, "human sciences" encompasses both the humanities and the social sciences.) "Instruction in these human sciences in the universities will lead to reservations and doubts in religious principles and beliefs."

Khamenei portrayed professors as "commanders" on the front lines of "soft warfare"—the term that hard-liners in Iran use to describe Western efforts to sway and organize Iranian youth. Professors, he suggested, have a responsibility to teach their students to avoid Western influences, and limit their "specialized discussions" in the social sciences to "qualified persons within safe environments." To do otherwise, Khamenei said, risked "damaging the social environment."

Such rhetoric has fueled calls for a purge of the universities, with special scrutiny on the social sciences. "The human sciences should not be taught in the Western style in the country's universities," Ayatollah Mohammad Emami-Kashani, a senior member of Iran's Assembly of Experts, declared in a nationally televised sermon in September.

Max Weber is not alone in being blamed for the unrest in Iran. Other social theorists, like Jürgen Habermas, John Keane, Talcott Parsons, Richard Rorty, and unspecified feminists and poststructuralists have also been accused of "threatening national security and shaking the pillars of economic development."

What links this group of scholars, it appears, is their belief that an independent civil society, beyond the reach of the state, is necessary for the development of democracy and human rights. This view is particularly pronounced in Habermas's concept of the public sphere: free spaces for the exchange of ideas among autonomous institutions and individuals. Where the public sphere is weak, society is vulnerable to domination by the state—a concern that Habermas borrowed from Weber.

In 2002, Habermas toured Tehran at the invitation of some of his admirers in the reform movement. (In his opening statement, the show-trial prosecutor actually invoked Habermas's brief visit as evidence of a plot to secularize Iran.) While generally approving of Habermas's ideas, many social scientists in Iran have criticized him for relying solely on Western historical experience as the basis for the development of the public sphere. Habermas received an earful during his travels from young Iranian intellectuals who offered an Islamic interpretation of the public sphere. Must a society rid itself of religiosity, as Habermas suggests, in order to develop a "rational" public discourse? Are Western notions of religious tolerance unique to Christianity? Can traditional Islamic institutions, such as study circles and charitable foundations, contribute to the formation of a robust public sphere?

Notwithstanding such disagreements, Habermas's theories are very popular among educated Iranians, many of whom object to the state's intrusion into their private lives. Habermas's lectures in Tehran drew overflowing audiences—possibly the largest crowds that he has ever addressed—and his ideas are at the heart of Iranian political discourse. Former President Mohammad Khatami and his allies made the promotion of civil society one of the centerpieces of the reform movement. His administration, which came to power in 1997, handed out newspaper permits to any publisher who wanted one, in the hope of creating a free press—a strategy that worked until the hard-line judiciary managed to arrest, ban, or exile most of the country's independent publishers and journalists. Khatami's administration allowed Internet cafes to proliferate, as well as private dial-up access to the Internet; today Iranians are among the world's most prolific bloggers.

Since Khatami's second term ended in 2005, the Iranian government has tried to reverse his reforms. But it has not been entirely successful. A survey in 2007 found that 43 percent of respondents were active in at least one civil-society organization, a proportion far higher than in other countries in the region. Beyond formal organizations, informal groups arrange all sorts of activities, including religious pilgrimages to sacred sites in Iraq. These private expressions of religiosity have begun to replace official events like state-run Friday prayers, where attendance has declined by a third since the 1979 revolution.

The expansion of civic life spooks the Iranian government, and this past summer's sweeping election protests deepened its anxiety. The authorities have constructed a paranoid conspiracy theory that links Iranian social scientists to international civil-society activists, whom the Iranian government accuses of trying to foment a "velvet revolution" in Iran similar to recent mass movements in Ukraine, Georgia, Lebanon, and elsewhere. Hard-line Iranian newspapers and Web sites recite every known or imagined contact between Iranian scholars and their European and American colleagues, no matter how benign, including research grants and visiting fellowships at Western universities and private foundations. The indictments in the show trials, and the defendants' coerced statements, have added ever more fanciful layers. Colleagues in Iran tell me to expect an uptick in applications for graduate study in the social sciences in the West this year, as researchers face increasing threats.

Iranian social scientists are being harassed and imprisoned both for their participation in the public sphere and for their study of the public sphere. The Iranian government's goal, it seems, is to undermine not only the institutions of civil society, but the very idea of it.

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