

# Embracing death: the Western left and the Iranian revolution, 1978–83

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## Abstract

The Iranian revolution of 1978–83 was a disaster for Iranian leftists, who, having worked for the overthrow of the Shah, soon found themselves being persecuted by the hard-line followers of the Ayatollah Khomeini. This paper looks at the response of Western leftists to the unfolding of the revolution, considering, first, to what extent Marxist and class-based analyses helped explain the revolution and, second, why so many Western leftist groups and individuals defended the Khomeini faction even as it moved against secular leftists and liberals. It concludes that an uncritical identification with Khomeini's declared 'anti-imperialism' distorted the views of those who would ordinarily have opposed his regime on class grounds, and that such a misreading was aided by an inadequate distinction between bourgeois democracy and dictatorship.

Keywords: Iran; Iranian Revolution; left; Marxist; imperialism; Foucault.

## Introduction

At the close of the 1970s, a coalition of middle-class intellectuals, bazaar merchants, students, workers (white- and blue-collar), left-wing activists (including guerrilla groups) and Muslim clerics forged a largely unarmed cross-class mass movement that would within the space of eighteen months bring down one of the world's most powerful and well-armed dictators, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran. Over the next four years, Iran's post-revolutionary power struggles saw the steady ascendancy of a hard-line

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‘fundamentalist’ clerical faction loyal to the man widely recognized as the revolution’s spiritual leader, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This consolidation of power in the hands of one narrow and unrepresentative faction was achieved largely through a systematic campaign of terror and intimidation against former allies in the anti-Shah campaign, especially secular leftists and liberals. By 1983, Iran was dominated by a regime far more backward and repressive than its predecessor, largely cut off from the world, governed on supposedly Quranic lines, and with all secular opposition cowed or in exile. Yet this had been considerably assisted by the insistence of some secular leftist forces in Iran – in particular the communist Tudeh party and the former guerrillas of the Fedayeen (Majority) – that the Khomeini faction was objectively progressive. The faction’s anti-imperialist and revolutionary rhetoric won it leftist support even as it moved against these one-time allies.

There is a solid body of material specifically devoted to the Iranian left’s fate at the hands of the hard-line clerical forces (Behrooz 1999; Moghadam 1987; Mirsepassi-Ashtiani and Moghadam 1991; Zabih 1986). What has not been so well explored is how the Western left – Marxist, socialist and liberal – interpreted the revolution. Like their Iranian counterparts, most, if not all, Western leftists welcomed the fall of the Shah, who was widely considered to be a far-right tyrant whose subservience to the interests of Western capital had impoverished his people. But within weeks of the Shah’s fall, some of those same Western leftists were expressing cautious concern about the direction of Iran under its new Islamic leadership. As in Iran, subsequent years saw many Western leftists reject the regime, yet others defended it to the bitter end.

### **How the Western left responded**

The Western left’s response to the revolution centres on two questions:

1. To what extent could a Marxist or class-based analysis help to determine what actually happened in Iran between 1978 and 1983?
2. On what basis could secular leftists support a self-styled theocratic regime?

#### *The search for a class analysis*

The trans-class and ‘religious’ nature of the Iranian revolution set a challenge for Marxist theorists – academic and activist alike. ‘There is no shortage of academic writers on Iran with Marxist commitments’, Sami Zubaida (1993: 68) wrote, ‘but to my knowledge they have confined themselves for the most part to programmatic statements about the desirability of class analysis, and then proceeded with accounts and analyses which use “class” in a descriptive sense rather than as a rigorous Marxist concept.’

The social circumstances giving rise to the revolution were certainly seen as explicable along Marxist lines. After two decades of rapid modernization in the form of the Shah's 'White Revolution' and the post-OPEC acceleration of oil revenues (which had covered up inefficient and unproductive sectors in the Iranian economy), strains were beginning to show. 'Iran', wrote Fred Halliday, 'more probably than any other country in the world, exemplified the classic recipe for social revolution, namely rapid social and economic change combined with total political immobility' (1978b: 1). But 'the seemingly almost universal participation of Iranians of all classes and groups in the revolutionary movement' (Bakhash 1991: 1489), and its apparent 'Islamic' form, posed difficulties in determining in whose interests the revolution had been fought.

Who were the players? Ervand Abrahamian's analysis of the Iranian revolution has been compared to George Lefebvre's analysis of the coming of the French Revolution 'in which protests by the middle class and the intelligentsia are joined by the urban working class and then widen into a general rebellion against the old order' (Bakhash 1991: 1490–1). Abrahamian (1989: 75) argued that the revolution had been fought in the interests of a section of the middle class, while the general population – 'especially the intelligentsia, the industrial working class, and the landless rural masses' – continued to suffer. This became obvious after the revolution, he wrote, when the term *mostazafin* (the dispossessed) 'was broadened to include not only shopkeepers and small merchants, but also commercial farmers and wealthy entrepreneurs supporting the revolution... [Khomeini] now argued that the "middle class"... had always formed the very foundations of the Islamic Revolution; that "Islam, the *ulama* and the bazaars were inseparable"'.

Trans-class participation in the revolution and the subsequent blurring of class definitions help explain why many Marxists – academic and activist – had found themselves theoretically adrift in 1979. Abrahamian had long taken great care in his analysis of the Iranian middle classes – his *MERIP Reports* account (1978: 4) of the challenge to the Shah offered considerable detail on the salaried and *bazaar* factions, their membership, their aspirations and their reasons for rejecting the Shah. But his was a rare example. Even Halliday (1979: 41) initially presented an overly simplistic account of class interests. While his observation that the capitalist nature of the Iranian state defended and extended the interests of the bourgeoisie was no doubt technically correct from a Marxist perspective, this told us little about the workings of the Iranian economy where key sections of the bourgeoisie – i.e. *bazaar* and landowners – were under attack from the state in the interests of big capital/state capital in the name of modernization. To say, as Halliday did, that the Iranian bourgeoisie's interests 'are defended by the Pahlavi state' was simplistic, as he later (1987: 31) acknowledged in an interview with an émigré Iranian Marxist journal, *Zaman-e Nom*.

This simplification could also be seen in the work of Nikki Keddie (1983: 589–91), who, while drawing heavily on non-Marxist theorists of revolution such as James C. Davies and Crane Brinton, concluded that the Marxist formula ‘without any of the elaborations or modifications added recently’<sup>1</sup> was the closest socio-economic revolutionary model for Iran’s experience in the late 1970s and early 1980s. ‘This formula, in essence’, she wrote, ‘postulates that revolution occurs whenever the relations of production – particularly the control and ownership of the society’s basic means of production – have changed beyond the ability of the old forms of political power and state organisation to subsume the new economic order.’

Yet this did not appear to be the case in the Iranian revolution. Her chosen discontented – workers, the ‘subproletariat’ and Iran’s *nouveau riche* – did not represent a common interest against ‘the autocracy’ nor could these disparate groups be seen as representing the ascending mode of production. As Shaul Bakhash correctly noted, ‘Keddie flirted with a class analysis but ended up depicting a situation in which all classes were discontented with the Shah’s rule’ (1991: 1491).<sup>2</sup>

Houchang E. Chehabi (1990: 21–2) offered perhaps the most detailed analysis of Iran’s class structure, arguing that the population divide was based not on the organization of production, but rather on cultural Westernization, the division being traditional versus modern. The overwhelming bulk of the population – *bazaarii*, the traditional middle class such as industrialists with *bazaari* roots, peasants and most workers – were in the first camp. Government officials, army officers, modern entrepreneurs, professionals, teachers and perhaps the oil workers made up the second camp. Some of the latter were allied with the Shah, but most were not. For Chehabi (1990: 24), the material benefits of selective Westernization created a politics of resentment, and ‘during the late 1960s and early 1970s the resentment of the traditional segment of society overtook the legal, constitutionalist objectives of Nationalists, leftists and liberals, all members of the modern segment, as the main centre of opposition against the Shah’.

Amorphous definitions of the bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie abounded. ‘“Petite bourgeoisie” becomes a category which is socially elastic and politically malleable, which explains the ubiquity of its reference in Third World contexts’, wrote Zubaida (1993: 73). ‘In fact this category in its catch-all application has little, if any analytic value.’ This was particularly obvious in the writings of the activist left, where the term ‘petit bourgeois’ was more a simile for weakness than a descriptive category, applied to virtually all unfavoured players bar the supposed proletariat.<sup>3</sup> The cross-class nature of the uprising had also prompted the discovery of hitherto unrecognized socialist virtues among the *mostazafin*, primarily those who would ordinarily be considered by Marxists to be the *lumpenproletariat*, giving a ‘left’ cover to forces potentially attracted to reactionary and decidedly anti-socialist policies.<sup>4</sup> Ali Rahnama and Farhad Nomani (1990: 6) argued that one of the regime’s greatest successes was

its ability to 'put across the idea that the *lumpenproletariat* that supported it were the real representatives of the people'. The implications of this were central to the Western left's misreading of the regime's revolutionary credentials.

**Ideology vs. class** For Mansoor Moaddel (1992: 358–9), a Marxist interpretation of the Iranian revolution made sense only in combination with organizational models.<sup>5</sup> 'The connection between religious opposition and class politics under the Pahlavis provides some support for a Marxian model', he noted.

Given that period's heightened interest in the precise relationship between ideology and class interests, largely following on from the work of Gramsci, Althusser and Poulantzas, the 'Islamic' form of the Iranian revolution raised profound questions.<sup>6</sup> 'The Iranian revolution, more than any other', wrote Eqbal Ahmad (1982: 295), 'underlined the correctness of...Gramsci's argument on the autonomy of culture.' Whether Gramsci would have welcomed the particular form of the revolution is another matter; as David I. Kertzer has noted, Gramsci did not see religious views as autonomous from political interests, and – in his studies on religion in his native land – there was little room for cultural relativism.

Gramsci's vision, like that of Marx and Engels, is of a future where socialism will supplant Catholicism. He clearly does not foresee co-existence... Socialism is superior to Catholicism (and religion in general) in both an intellectual and an evolutionary sense... Any position holding that socialism and Catholicism are reconcilable, that one can be both a Socialist and Catholic at the same time, stems from a gross misunderstanding of Marxist theory.

(Kertzer 1980: 114–15)

Michael Gordy, a French Althusserian, explained away any apparent difficulties in reconciling ideological practice with historical materialism by noting that Althusser had previously shown (in *Reading Capital*) that automatically linking the mode of production with ideology was a Hegelian misreading of Marx. Like Keddie and others, he took refuge in a multi-causal explanation. The inequitable products of the Shah's programme of modernization had, Gordy wrote, driven the masses towards an Islam that functioned as a nostalgic reminder of 'their old way of life, a way of life which, relatively speaking, was a happier one' (1983: 14). Combined with the particular circumstances that had repressed secular politics while allowing the mosques to function as meeting places, 'when the dislocations resulting from economic practice increased, and the contradictions within the political practice supporting those dislocations became more explosive, armed struggle became inevitable and Islamic ideology was the obvious site for its occurrence'.

**Marxist blind spots** Some analysts (Bakhash 1991: 1485–9) have argued that blanket and simplistic condemnation of the Shah's modernization programmes (such as the White Revolution) rendered leftist critics such as Halliday and Keddie ill-equipped to foresee the likely role of religious forces.

Halliday dismisses the White Revolution as a pretence by the Shah to pre-empt another Cuba. The frustration of the Shah's plan, however, was not secured by a working class striving for real revolution against the sham of reformism so much as by religious fundamentalists who perceived in Westernising tendencies a severe threat to traditional values in general and to the economic security of the Islamic intelligentsia, the *'ulama*, in particular.

(Homan 1980: 674)

Halliday (1979) certainly did initially underestimate the religious factor. 'The folk heroes and leadership of the Islamic resistance', observed Homan, 'are defined by Halliday in secular terms: Ayatollah Khomeini is presented as a leader in the bazaar, and the *'ulama* as a faction of the intelligentsia.' However, between the completion of his *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* and the fall of the Shah, Halliday (1978b) had submitted a paper to the Middle East Sub-Committee of the British Labour Party's National Executive Committee that offered a far more layered appraisal of the different factions within the religious camp, challenging claims that Islam was inherently progressive, although it tentatively accepted the sincerity of Khomeini's 'progressive' turn.

Halliday later (1987: 31) frankly acknowledged his underestimation of Khomeini. It needs also to be said that even early on Halliday (1979: 40) made the greatest effort to situate his analysis within a Marxist framework, repudiating populist interpretations and criticizing those Iranian leftists who had 'tried to contest the reality of capitalist development or lament it, almost as if the previous impoverished condition of Iran was something that should have been preserved', while reminding readers that 'one of the bases of the Leninist and Marxist analysis of the development of capitalism is that this development is in some respects a *progressive* feature, one that socialists should welcome as an improvement over pre-capitalist systems and as paving the way for socialism'.

This was by no means a peculiar interpretation, although it was one that had fallen out of favour with the rise of Third Worldist politics and the ascendancy of dependency theory in analyses of imperialism. Trotsky (1973: 6–7) had said much the same: if the Kuomintang could unify China under a national-democratic regime, he said in 1924, the country's subsequent capitalist development would bring the Chinese proletariat 'out of a prehistoric, barbaric state' and cast them into 'industry's melting pot, the factory', which would force them 'to seek new forms and new paths of life and struggle'.

This qualified defence of capitalism against so-called 'Third Worldism' was at that time most prominently expressed by the former Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) theoretician Bill Warren, who had a significant influence on Halliday's work in this area (Halliday 1987: 30, 1993: 147).

Warren (1980: 3) argued that ‘the bulk of current Marxist analyses and propaganda about imperialism actually reverse the views of the founders of Marxism, who held that the expansion of capitalism into pre-capitalist areas of the world was desirable and progressive; moreover, the reversal is generally effected in apparent ignorance of the fact’.<sup>7</sup>

Although Warren’s work did not touch on the Iranian revolution (he died in January 1978), Halliday (1983a: 22) has written that Warren ‘would have been intransigently hostile to the Ayatollah Khomeini’, seeing his reactionary politics as worse than the Shah’s. While portraying Warren’s insistence on the primacy of the proletariat in every revolutionary situation as insensitive to local cultures and histories, Halliday conceded that ‘the stick has been bent far too much towards Third World nationalism and indulgence of the specificity of individual countries. The justified critique of imperialist and Western ideologies should not obscure the mystifying nature of many Third World ideologies.’

**Back to the canon** Few academics referred back to the Marxist-Leninist canon, although this was commonly found in the activist left propaganda. Like most exegetical ventures, its value was tempered by dissident interpretations and internal inconsistencies; as Ralph Miliband once noted, the ‘variegated and fragmented’ nature of the texts handed down by Marx and his successors meant that even ‘the most careful textual scrutiny will not yield a smooth, harmonious, consistent and unproblematic Marxist political theory’ (1978: 1–11) – partly because of Marx’s own elevation of political economy over the derivative superstructural construct known as ‘politics’, but also, as Miliband noted, because a fragmented textual corpus is an invitation to ‘arbitrary selection and emphasis’.

Activist left interventions were therefore sometimes devalued on sectarian grounds – the rigorous orthodoxy of an unrepresentative campus-based groupuscule could be seen to count for much less than the contested opinions of academia or the realist perspectives of more politically engaged social movements. Nevertheless, some such interventions at least attempted to tease out aspects of Marxist and Leninist thought that might have been overlooked or romanticized over the previous decades, even if their sometimes strident and simplistic delivery often denied them the serious consideration they deserved.

Activists commonly cited Lenin on the national and colonial questions, and Trotsky on the Chinese Revolution of 1925–7, when the Stalin-Bukharin Comintern ordered the Chinese Communist Party to subordinate itself to the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang (which then massacred the Communists), as well as Trotsky’s defence of Nationalist China against Japanese imperialism in 1937. Most writings were naturally open to multiple interpretations. Although Lenin had in 1920 called on all Communist parties in ‘the more backward states and nations, in which feudal or patriarchal-peasant relations predominate’ to ‘assist the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement in these

countries', he also reminded Communists of the need to struggle against the clergy 'and other influential reactionary and medieval elements' as well as combating Pan-Islamism 'and similar trends' (1975: 26–7).

For the ultra-purist Trotskyists of the US-based Spartacist League, those 'who simultaneously hail Khomeini and the mullahs as 'revolutionary' and call themselves Leninists' needed to explain in light of Lenin's comments 'how they can claim Lenin's heritage and ignore his call for a struggle against Islamic clericalism and for proletarian independence' (1979a: 5). Any support for bourgeois-nationalist movements could be offered under strict conditions only, they argued. 'We, as Communists', Lenin had written, 'should and will support bourgeois liberation movements in the colonies only when they are genuinely revolutionary, and when their exponents do not hinder our work of educating and organising the peasantry and the broad mass of the exploited in a revolutionary spirit' (1975: 33). First, said the Spartacists (1979b: 5), the Khomeinists were *not* a revolutionary bourgeois-nationalist movement. Second, Khomeini's *Le Monde* interview of May 1978 clearly showed his intention to hinder the work of communists in Iran. 'A glance at the basic Comintern documents on the colonial question is enough to convict as opportunists those self-styled "Leninists" who supported the Islamic opposition – and those in Iran as suicidal opportunists.'

The Spartacists argued that Lenin's 'algebraic' 1920 formulation had been modified by history: the Kuomintang's massacre of its communist allies in 1927 had proved that the colonial bourgeoisie would never 'not hinder' revolutionaries. Nor was this a peculiarly sectarian reading of Lenin: Fernando Claudin, formerly of the Spanish Communist Party's politburo, had previously said: 'Time and events were to show how hard it was to find this white blackbird, a bourgeois liberation movement that was willing not to prevent the Communists from educating and organising the exploited masses in a revolutionary spirit' (1975: 265).

The neo-Trotskyists of Britain's Socialist Workers Party, on the other hand, read Lenin's *Theses* as calling on socialists to defend Iran against imperialist attacks, while maintaining the independence of working-class or revolutionary socialist organization. Lenin's criticisms of clerical forces were not addressed, although it was claimed by the SWP's Phil Marfleet (writing under the name of Marshall) (1988a) that 'fundamentalism' was an essentially petit-bourgeois response to the problems created by imperialism. 'There can be no illusions that fundamentalism is a "progressive" force with which there can be political compromise.' He nevertheless added: 'Lenin insisted [that] communists must be ready to stand by nationalist movements against the imperialist powers. . . . The Comintern maintained that all movements with the capacity to destabilise imperialism, the main enemy of the international working class, and to open up the possibility of wider change, should be supported.'

Such a reading – also shared by Trotsky (1974: 34) in his theoretical defence of the semi-fascist Vargas regime in 1930s Brazil in a conflict with British imperialism – placed a higher value on a regime's stance towards

‘imperialism’ (whatever that stance’s ultimate motivation – socialist, fascist or religious obscurantist) than its stance towards its own proletariat. Yet Trotsky’s ultimate argument in its favour – that the defeat of an imperialist power, even if by a repressive anti-worker regime (such as 1930s Brazil or 1980s Iran) would prompt a proletarian uprising in both the victorious and defeated countries – was simply not supported by any evidence.

Where theory ends and practice begins Most Western observers acknowledged that the Iranian left had been substantially moulded by years of brutal Pahlavite repression of legal opposition – both liberal and socialist. This had helped shift the left towards guerrilla warfare, it prevented the left from building a base among Iranian workers, it distorted the left’s understanding of contemporary Iranian politics and, as is generally acknowledged, it created a vacuum that only the clerics were able to fill. The guerrilla groups believed that armed struggle would be the means to build a working-class base and increase the political awareness of the masses. In contrast, the Tudeh party and Western left groups argued that only proletarian political organization would radicalize the workers, and that guerrilla-ism was a petit-bourgeois diversion.

The political stances adopted by the Iranian left (guerrilla and otherwise) had been profoundly influenced by their understanding of Iran’s relationship to the world economy. What was the Pahlavi regime’s relationship to international capital? Was it a puppet regime of US imperialism? Did the Shah’s controversial ‘White Revolution’ reforms of the early 1960s highlight class contradictions through the development of an industrial working class or dampen down class struggle by doling out illusory benefits?

Such questions were meant to disclose the present consciousness of the masses. Under the Pahlavi regime, the debate centred on three possibilities: was Iran at a national democratic, people’s democratic or socialist stage? As Behrooz explained, the first meant that ‘a coalition against the imperial regime did not have to be led by communists, that development did not have to be a social revolution and that reform could be of a type commonly referred to as bourgeois-democratic’ (1999: 51). The second meant that ‘any coalition against the imperial regime had to be led by the communist element, that the reforms that followed would necessarily be both bourgeois and socialist in nature, and that such development would be a social revolution. The third contended that the only social revolution was a socialist one, de-emphasized coalition with non-communist groups and pointed to the working class as the only class capable of bringing about real change’ (ibid.).

The Tudeh party saw Iran (both before and after the revolution) as being at the national democratic stage, although most other Iranian groups (with the exception of the co-thinkers of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, or USec, the international grouping of Trotskyist parties that included the US SWP, Britain’s IMG and France’s Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire)<sup>8</sup> believed a people’s revolution was more relevant.

The answers to such questions determined the ideological flexibility of leftists regarding the nature of the Khomeini regime, which in turn defined the possibility of alliances with liberal or clerical forces. For example, the Iranian left's simplistic understanding of the Iranian economy under the Shah gave rise to remarkable theoretical confusion concerning the Khomeini regime. Mirsepassi-Ashtiani and Moghadam (1991: 36, 38) have argued that this was a major contributing factor in the Iranian and Western left's misreading of the Islamic forces. So, for example, because the Fedayeen (Minority) believed that the Republic was still a dependent capitalist state, it felt obliged to then argue that it must still be supported by imperialism. The Fedayeen (Majority), on the other hand, used this perceived fundamental nexus between imperialism and capitalism to insist on the regime's revolutionary credentials. If the Shah had gone, they argued, this meant that imperialism had been repudiated, and therefore the new regime, though petit bourgeois, was genuinely anti-imperialist and therefore deserved the critical support of revolutionaries. Its anti-democratic policies 'were of secondary importance' (Behrooz 1999: 112–13, 137–8). The US SWP (Lynn and Frankel 1981) argued likewise, even though it at times questioned the authenticity and sincerity of Khomeiniite anti-imperialism.

Anti-imperialism, the highest stage of socialism? The defence of Khomeini and the regime in the name of anti-imperialism and the revolution (which continued well after serious repression of the Iranian left had begun) was perhaps the greatest failing of most Leninist groups in the West, and the factor that most set them apart from their generally far more questioning academic (Marxist or otherwise) counterparts and the liberals.

Anti-imperialism had long had great resonance among Western radicals. Jean-Paul Sartre was only one of thousands who 'found himself an admirer of the attempts of Third World countries to establish their independence...and viewed their struggles as an inspiration for a revolutionary revival in Europe' (Drake 2000: 176). In Britain, *New Left Review* (to which Fred Halliday had been closely aligned) had in the 1960s and 1970s 'emulated the anti-colonialism and replicated the Third Worldism of Sartre and Beauvoir's [*Les Temps Modernes*], which, frustrated by an immobile Stalinism at home, projected its political aspirations abroad' (Elliott 1998: 6). John Callaghan, a historian of British Trotskyism, has argued that the Third Worldist and student emphases of the *NLR*-linked International Marxist Group after 1970 'were symbols of a political practice which gave *de facto* support to the view that the European working class was no longer a revolutionary force' (1984: 133).

Maxine Molyneux and Fred Halliday were to later note that this enthusiastic focus on the Third World risked 'dangerous idealisation of events and potential in the poor and beleaguered states of the Third World' and 'has led many metropolitan Marxists to pay insufficient attention to political developments in their own countries' (1984: 20). The Spartacists also recognized the dangers of Third Worldist romanticism. 'According to our

reformist/centrist opponents, imperialist domination sanctifies the petty-bourgeois masses of the oppressed, backward countries, making them immune to reactionary mobilisations', one *Workers Vanguard* article noted (Spartacist League 1979b: 4). 'The petty merchants and *lumpenproletarians* of Germany or France may sometimes do bad things, but not so their Iranian or Indian counterparts.'

In the Iranian setting, a focus on anti-imperialism was not without logic, as it had unquestionably become the unifying symbol of dissent under the Shah, far greater, indeed, than Islam ever was, as Asef Bayat noted (1997: 36). Yet, as Rahnama and Nomani have shown, the regime's 'anti-imperialism' bore no relation to that of the socialist left, whatever the 'objective' circumstances.

In reality, the clerical leadership was anti-non-Islamic. It made no difference if the non-Islamic state was a truly proletarian, democratic, imperialist or fascist state. . . The rule of thumb was simple: any country which opposed Islamic Iran was imperialist or in league with imperialism and any country which supported it was anti-imperialist. The linguistic distortion was taken to its logical consequence when, at one point, all socialist and Marxist groups came to be considered as creations of one or another imperialist power.

(Rahnama and Nomani 1990: 4–5)

In the case of the Tudeh party, theoretical justification for its alignment with the Khomeini forces owed much to Soviet-originated theorizing on the 'non-capitalist' road to socialism (Behrooz 1999: 126–8; Solodovnikov and Bogoslovsky 1975: 147–54), which enjoyed a significant following among Moscow-line communists in the Third World. This posited that developing countries under a non-communist leadership could, via state intervention (and appropriate alignment with Soviet interests), bypass capitalism and prepare for a transition to socialism. This theory also enjoyed some support among Western leftists (especially but not limited to formal Moscow-liners and Stalinist-inclined labour/trade union peripheries), providing a more 'orthodox' variant of Third Worldism, one which trumpeted the virtues of self-determination and economic independence from the capitalist bloc, while minimizing the Third Worldist politics of cultural liberation and cultural nationalism (MacFarlane 1985: 143–5).

By the late 1970s, Soviet theorists had begun cautiously to question the efficacy of the non-capitalist road, a development which, according to S. Neil MacFarlane, 'presumably reflected . . . Soviet disillusionment with non-proletarian client regimes which had in the mid-1970s distanced themselves from the USSR (for example, Egypt, Somalia and Iraq), and the emergence, particularly in Africa, of a number of self-avowed Marxist-Leninist regimes' (1985: 175). Moreover, the relevance of the 'non-capitalist' template to the Iranian situation, where the Khomeiniite clerical forces could not easily be reconciled to the idealized national liberationists of Soviet theorists, was increasingly problematic. Yet it was still enthusiastically

embraced by the Tudeh party in revolutionary Iran. Here Behrooz (1999: 127–8) was especially critical of Rostislav Ulyanovsky, a CPSU International Department specialist on Iran who wrote extensively (1974) on the non-capitalist road and who consistently urged Tudeh to build links with the radical mullahs. Yet in 1985, wrote Behrooz, Ulyanovsky publicly criticized Tudeh for seeking the very failed coalition that he had privately urged.

Theory aside, Tudeh was also beholden to the foreign policy needs of the Soviet Union, which deprived the party of the theoretical freedom and flexibility enjoyed by other groups (Behrooz 1999: 126–8), and also substantially undermined later Tudeh claims that objective circumstances allowed it no other choice but to align with the Khomeinist forces (Tudeh Party 1983: 53; Yodfat 1984: 85).

Western Trotskyists and neo-Trotskyists (such as those of the British International Socialist tradition) criticized Tudeh's 'Two Stage' (national-democratic *then* socialist) theory (Harman 1994: 46; Marshall 1988b: 85, 111) on the grounds that it underestimated the revolutionary potential of the working classes and embraced short-term reformism and compromise with the bourgeoisie. While arguably more revolutionary than the Tudeh proposal, and persuasive on paper, the 'First Stop – Proletarian Revolution' scenario resolutely ignored the harsh fact that had plagued Iranian leftists for years – *no one* had a base among the workers. Unless one could actually identify a party or movement with such a base, theorizing about a socialist stage was mere rhetoric.

Whatever happened to the revolution? Prior to the Shah's fall, there was an assumption among much of the Western left that any revolution in Iran would, if successful, take a leftist, secular tone. The weight of history favoured such an interpretation.

The novelty of the Iranian Revolution can be said to reside. . . in the role played within it by religion and in particular by what is loosely termed 'religious fundamentalism'. For the first time in modern history (that is, since 1789), a revolution has taken place in which the dominant ideology, forms of organisation, leading personnel, and proclaimed goal have all been religious in appearance and inspiration.<sup>9</sup>

(Halliday 1988: 32)

Much of the Western left appeared to acquiesce in the elevation of Khomeini to the leadership of the revolution. This was at least partly based on the assumption that the Ayatollah was merely the symbolic leader of the revolution and that, afterwards, secular politics would be resumed. However much Khomeini may have been hailed as a powerful unifying force against the Shah, no leftists suggested that it would be a good thing for Khomeini to wield

power once the Shah had fallen. To that extent, at least, there were no illusions.<sup>10</sup>

The finger-pointing of hindsight notwithstanding, it was not unreasonable for the left to have wondered during 1978 and the early part of 1979 whether this was going to be a workers' revolution. The proletariat had played a significant role – as a proletariat – in the 1978 protests (Rahnema and Nomani 1990: 12–13; Turner 1980: 279–80). Parties of every sort flourished after the Shah's fall, and there was remarkable freedom of expression. The first few months after the revolution saw sustained activity on the part of the *shoras* (workers' committees) throughout Iranian industry to keep the revolution on a leftist course against the perceived trimming of Bazargan's Provisional Revolutionary Government.

Yet even before the Shah had fallen, leftists were being harassed and terrorized by *hezbollahi* gangs. Some of Khomeini's publicly held views – such as his attacks on Tudeh and his disingenuous dismissal of 'Islam-Marxists' – were clear indications of intolerance towards organized leftist politics. 'At every stage during these first few months,' wrote the émigré Iranian socialist Ramy Nima, 'the new regime tested the balance of forces by staging small attacks, such as those on women protesting against the veil, on some newspapers, and on the left. This was not only to gauge the strength of its adversaries, but also to show the incompetence of the secular forces and to prepare the ground among its supporters for a final crackdown' (1983: 96).

Following the Imam's line By the summer of 1981 wrote Sepehr Zabih (1986: preface), a majority of Iranian leftist organisations had denounced the Islamic Republic. The Tudeh party, however, stayed resolutely loyal to what it saw as the Imam's line even after its leader, Nureddin Kianuri, had been arrested, tortured, possibly drugged and forced to 'recant' on national television on May Day, 1983. Fraternal foreign Communist parties were sympathetic but critical. Two Tudeh leaders interviewed by the South African Communist Party's *African Communist* defended their support of Khomeini and the IRP, in the name of anti-imperialism. 'Our policies were the correct policies', they insisted. 'We could not have put forward a different line. The fact that we did not succeed in everything was due to objective and subjective factors over which we had no control' (Tudeh Party 1983: 53). The line of questioning the Tudeh leaders faced did not suggest their SACP interlocutors were persuaded; much the same disbelief could be detected in the questions posed by the CPGB's Monty Johnstone (1983), who interviewed A. Sadeg of the Tudeh Central Committee for *Marxism Today*. Sadeg's account of the unravelling of the revolution chronicled the Tudeh's errors without ever really acknowledging them as such, even when Johnstone dryly asked, given Khomeini's long-standing anti-communism, 'was not a ferocious repression of the present kind against the Tudeh Party to be expected?' The closest Sadeg came to an admission of failure was in response to Johnstone's query: 'is it not possible that there was an underestimation of the negative tendencies of those

with whom you were wanting to work, that is, the Khomeinists?' 'Possibly', Sadeg replied. 'They were against the liberal bourgeoisie primarily because they were secular. Perhaps we didn't see the problem from that angle.' Nevertheless, Sadeg insisted on blaming this ill-defined 'bourgeoisie' for Tudeh's predicament.

Among Western leftist groups, the Trotskyist US Socialist Workers Party perhaps most closely mimicked the Tudeh's loyalty to Khomeini, an ironic situation given the group's generally rigid cleaving to working-class politics in the face of the US New Left's preference for the newer social movements based on race, gender and sexuality. It is unclear whether the US SWP's Khomeini loyalism was primarily influenced by its Iranian co-thinkers or whether it in fact exerted the influence.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the role and organizational capacity of the Iranian working class was continually overemphasized at the expense of clerical and middle-class secular forces, with exaggerated hope placed in the positioning of its Iranian co-thinkers.<sup>12</sup> It proposed strategies whereby a mythically organized proletariat could take power on a (culturally sensitive) socialist platform through the establishment of *shoras*. Indeed, the US SWP based its partial defence of the regime (Frankel 1980) on claims that, whatever the subjective problems in the revolution, peasants were organizing popular committees and redistributing land, and workers were establishing factory *shoras* and enjoyed 'considerable control over working conditions and production'. The reality, of course, was far more complex: not only were official attitudes towards land seizures and factory committees greatly ambiguous, but many if not most factory *shoras* were weak, fragmented and dominated from above. By the winter of 1981, wrote Zabih, the *shoras* were effectively 'extensions of the government security system, the revolutionary committees, and/or the Islamic societies' (1986: 153). By insisting that the *shoras* were objectively creating the groundwork for a socialist Iran, whatever the correctness of supporting the *shora* system as a means of extending democratic control, the US SWP and like-minded activists were effectively providing an alibi for the clerics' continued stranglehold on power.

The US SWP consistently tempered its criticisms of the new regime, especially the Khomeini wing (as opposed to Bazargan or Bani-Sadr). Even when twelve members of its Iranian sister organization, the HKS, were reportedly sentenced to death by a secret tribunal in August 1979, more fire was directed towards US imperialism than towards the Khomeini camp, with the arrests blamed on overtures from Washington in August 1979, including the sale – approved by President Carter – of two million barrels of heating oil and kerosene (Feldman 1979; Lynn 1979). The United Secretariat's Ernest Mandel also shrugged off the arrests – at least the HKS was still able to sell its newspaper, he told one critic, which was better than under the Shah.<sup>13</sup>

The US SWP (Lynn and Frankel 1981: 6) acknowledged that the regime was capitalist and bourgeois, but insisted its anti-imperialism (as exemplified in the US embassy seizure) deserved the support of socialists – even two years after the Shah's departure. The regime's liberal critics could not be supported,

however, as they sought to bring the revolutionary process to a close, and this would have a negative effect on the political consciousness of the Iranian working class. The SWP (Lynn and Frankel 1981: 5–7) also identified what it believed to be genuine gains in regime policies such as the nationalization of land and major corporations, including banks and insurance companies. The Iranian secular left was urged to accommodate (and even subordinate itself to) the more powerful clerical forces, admittedly with the intention of ultimately overcoming these forces at some later, unspecified stage.<sup>14</sup>

To what extent such faith in the regime's policies was justified is debatable. One US academic, Forrest Colburn, has argued that, although 'the left lost its bid for control of the state, it nonetheless exerted substantial, and perhaps decisive, influence over Marxists' greatest passion – economics' (1994: 32). He cites Bakhash (1985) in support of this, although Bakhash in fact places greater emphasis on the Islamo-populist economics of Ayatollah Taleqani, Mohammad-Baqer Sadr and Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr. Soviet orientalist S. L. Agayev was dismissive of those on the left (including the Tudeh party) who cited as an example of genuine social and economic change the mere nationalization 'of some large-scale industry and banks' and 'paternalistic charity undertakings funded with oil revenues' (1990: 377). This was supported by Val Moghadam's observation that the economic changes undertaken by the regime were 'not the deep and permanent changes in a democratic socialist direction that had been aspired to by Iran's Marxists' (1989: 92).

Responses to the US Embassy seizure also illustrated the Western left's dilemma. Most groups were understandably sympathetic to the widespread demands for the Shah's return, but were less persuaded that the seizure of the US Embassy was the best way to achieve this, and many indeed suspected it was a diversion from Khomeini's domestic political problems with the economy and the push for an Islamic Republic.

Few in the mainstream left were fooled. Halliday described the seizure as 'the anti-imperialism of fools' (1981: 329). Joanna de Groot, writing in the CPGB's *Marxism Today*, argued that Khomeini's 'virulently anti-American propaganda campaign... is in fact a diversionary *political* gambit, concealing the inability of those who think like him to produce helpful answers to the pressing issues facing the Iranian economy' (1980: 21). The US radical weekly *Guardian* agreed: 'Deeply troubled by Iran's economic and social problems, which he is incapable of resolving, plagued by national uprisings, unable to stabilise his government... Khomeini is taking advantage of this popular and anti-US trend to consolidate his own political position and divert the masses from Iran's other difficulties.'<sup>15</sup> The US SWP, on the other hand, welcomed the embassy seizure (Foley 1979; Frankel 1979a, 1979b) as a sign that the Iranian masses had 'resumed their advance' against US imperialism. The radical Princeton law professor Richard Falk initially defended the seizure (Doyle and Falk 1980: 110; Falk 1980a; Allain 2003: 191–3) given the assaults on Iranian sovereignty by US imperialism<sup>16</sup> but later revised his view: it was

now 'a costly mistake...lawless behavior justified in the name of the revolution' (1982: 103).

Disillusionment sets in Some Western groups fractured over the revolution. Although the organization remained intact, activists from the British anti-colonialist organization Liberation polarized to form solidarity organizations defending and opposing the new regime, based in some part on their perceived loyalties to the Tudeh party and Moscow. Stan Newens, a British Labour MP who was a leading figure in Liberation, found himself on the other side of a faction fight with Liberation's General Secretary, Tony Gilbert. 'The Tudeh Party was strongly supporting the regime, and...Tony Gilbert...was a very good friend of mine, but he was an old Stalinist, he was in the CP', Newens (2003) said. 'And of course what came through from the Communist Party, out of habit he took it.'<sup>17</sup>

The United Secretariat of the Fourth International was anything but united on the progress of the revolution. While its US affiliates in the Socialist Workers Party increasingly sided with the Khomeini camp, its European members became increasingly critical, as seen in the series of articles by the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire's Michel Rovere, published in the US SWP's *Intercontinental Press* in July and August 1980, which contradicted much of the SWP position.<sup>18</sup> Ernest Mandel, the USec's leading theoretician in Europe, stood by his tendency's decision to support the uprising against the Shah 'even though it was led by the clergy', but stressed, as the US SWP would not, that 'in all conflicts between the new regime and sectors of the masses struggling for their just demands, we stand 100 per cent on the side of the masses', by which he included not just the working classes but also national minorities, women and 'all those fighting against state repression for sexual "crimes" and so on'. Despite earlier downplaying the regime's anti-leftist tendencies, by the close of 1979 he was warning that 'to identify revolution with religious obscurantism is an act of ideological treason no less detrimental to the cause of Iranian and world socialism than the more classical forms of capitulation to oppressor classes' (1979: 100).

In the 7 February 1980 issue of *Socialist Challenge*, the newspaper of Britain's International Marxist Group, Azar Tabari warned that 'it does not bode well for the future of Iran that the majority of the international left' – including her co-thinkers in the US Socialist Workers Party – 'has been unable to distinguish between a process of permanent revolution and a rise in irrational fanaticism serving to consolidate the rule of a repressive and reactionary theocracy'.<sup>19</sup>

Disillusionment came early for many. Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet of France's (then) quasi-Maoist newspaper *Libération* visited Iran during the revolution and were struck by the similarities to an earlier visit they had made to China, during the Cultural Revolution. 'At Peking, we had the feeling that

the Chinese were forming a people “in fusion”,’ Blanchet later said. ‘Afterwards, we came to realise that we’d been taken in to some extent, the Chinese, too. It’s true that to some extent, we took ourselves in. And that’s why, sometimes, we hesitate to allow ourselves to be carried away by Iran’ (1988: 214–15).

Fred Halliday’s early disenchantment with the revolution can perhaps best be gauged by a reportage account from August 1979 published in the British socialist weekly, the *New Statesman*. Halliday wrote of a left under siege: Tudeh rallies attacked by ‘Phalangists’, National Democratic Front rallies stormed by club-wielding *hezbollahi*, Fedayeen bookstores torched, opposition newspapers closed down and slandered as ‘Zionist’ mouthpieces, women and national minorities under constant threat. ‘Unwilling to guarantee basic democratic rights to the press, the opposition or the nationalities, or to implement a serious program of social change, [Khomeini and his associates] are dragging the country towards a bloodbath the outcome of which no one can predict’, Halliday (2000: 164) wrote. ‘Khomeini may believe that God is Great, but it certainly seems to be the Devil who is working overtime in Iran today.’ By March 1983, Halliday was calling Khomeini a ‘clerical fascist’ whose regime had unleashed ‘a hideous reign of terror. . .against the Iranian people and all those who dissent – be they writers or workers, lawyers or traders, women or men, members of ethnic minorities or adherents of minority faiths’ (1983b: 24; 1983c: 8).

Richard Falk, on the other hand, stood by the regime long after many of his liberal-left associates and colleagues had abandoned it. It was, he said in 1980, a ‘malicious falsehood’ to suggest that one tyranny had replaced another. He defended post-revolutionary summary executions ‘given the revolutionary turmoil, the fear of private vengeance, and the long record of mass abuse associated with Pahlavi rule’. Criticism of the March 1979 referendum on an Islamic Republic was ‘academic’ and ‘probably overstates the political sophistication of the Iranian people’. Criticisms of the regime in general were too hasty – ‘at present, outsiders should watch, learn and wait, as well as judge and appraise’ – indeed, ‘given our complicity in the past sufferings of the Iranian people, it seems proper, and even prudent, to defer judgment’ (Albert 1980: 82, 84, 89; Allain 2003: 181). When challenged over his sympathetic portrayal of Khomeini, Falk employed an argument that would subsequently be used often by Leninists who sought to depict criticism of the regime’s human rights violations as the counter-revolutionary stirrings of unworthy liberals. ‘It was never my view that Ayatollah Khomeini would (or should) strive for a “comfortably liberal” republic’, he wrote. ‘How irrelevant it is to conceive of this singular revolution in such provincial terms’ (Allain 2003: 180).

It took three years for Falk to acknowledge that ‘in many respects, sad to say, Iran is worse off now than it was under the Shah’; yet he added that ‘it would be a mistake with reactionary implications to read too much into this comparison’ (1982: 102).<sup>20</sup> Rebutting the charge of naïvely supporting a Khomeiniite reign of terror, he mused that ‘for those who were so exquisitely

silent for decades while thousands perished in jails, before firing squads, and through police and army violence in the streets, this sudden solicitude for human rights in Iran seems most strange' (Allain 2003: 180). How he accounted for the likes of Halliday is unknown.

What did they know of Iran? Most in the Western left knew what they knew of Iran from the substantial body of leftist literature that had circulated in the West before and during the revolution. This came from a variety of sources: Iranian leftist groups in exile, such as the Tudeh party or the guerrilla groupings; student organizations that were linked to exiled left groups, such as the Iranian Students Association; sympathetic leftist allies in the West, such as the London-based Campaign Against Repression in Iran (CARI) or the New York-based Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedom in Iran (CAIFI); as well as commentary on contemporary Iranian events from established leftist parties and publications (Matin-asgari 2002).

Despite the intense and brutal political repression of the Pahlavi regime, which reached far beyond the borders of Iran, disrupting the activities of émigré oppositionists, Iranian radicals were well read in the works of their foreign counterparts (Abrahamian 1983: 464–5, 482–5; Bakhash 1985: 54–5). Debate among Iranian opposition forces (secular and religious) was vigorous, and at times was subjected to critique by Western leftists.<sup>21</sup> It should also be acknowledged, however, that debate was sometimes also poisonous and sectarian, which would have hindered a healthy appraisal of the political situation, as noted by Halliday (1978a: 23).

Although the general consensus saw a role for non-proletarian forces in the expected 'national' uprising against the Pahlavis,<sup>22</sup> most secular leftist observers consistently underestimated the influence of religious forces in the revolution. Two of the most popular and well-informed English-language pamphlets on Iran circulating in Britain before the revolution were *Iran: the Shah's Empire of Repression* (Committee Against Repression in Iran 1976) and *The Iranian Working Class* (Committee Against Repression in Iran 1977a). The first devoted just one paragraph to the religious forces. The second had no reference at all. One US SWP correspondent insisted that 'the religious ideology of the Iranian workers and peasants is merely the current form that their progressive social aspirations take' (Lynn 1980: 1371–2). The substance of these aspirations was socialism, she said, 'even though they may not yet call it that'.<sup>23</sup>

Many Iranians who sought to reconcile their radical politics with Islamic teachings could not be written off as wholly reactionary, or certainly not as reactionary as the Khomeini camp. But the Iranian Shi'ite hierarchy in general did not come with a clean reputation. From the 1920s onwards, Iranian communists had sought to build alliances with 'progressive clergy', in part because they recognized the *'ulama's* influence, as Abrahamian (1983: 116, 282) has noted. Yet twice in recent history – 1905–9 and 1953 – the clerical leadership had turned on secular reformers and embraced reaction, motivated

primarily by their desire to defend their own interests against the encroachments of modernization. Some (Floor 1980: 516; Abrahamian 1983: 92–101) have argued that the *'ulama* was reactionary in the face of the Shah's reforms in the early 1960s, which, though imperfect, were preferable to the *'ulama*'s alternatives. Even if a genetic line could not be drawn to Khomeini from the 1909 and 1953 upheavals, his responses to the land and franchise reforms of the early 1960s should have shown that his opposition to the Pahlavi state was of a qualitatively different form from that of the secular oppositionists.

This often led to misrepresentation or simplification when the radical or revolutionary credentials of Islam were being considered. Joanna de Groot of York University wrote in the CPGB's *Marxism Today* that 'religious leaders have traditionally spoken in defence of justice, law and religion *against* the state, which they have often seen as a threat to them, even while defending less progressive ideals as well' (1979: 109). There was, of course, a strong argument that the anti-state sentiments and activities of the *'ulama* were not in contrast to its 'less progressive ideals' but in fact an example of them.

Some preferred not to confront the matter. Although the British SWP's Phil Marfleet would argue that 'the Koran prescribed inequality, the early *umma* institutionalised it. . . it has nothing in common with a radical movement for a more equal society', he also insisted that the role of Islam in the Iranian revolution had been blown out of proportion by 'bourgeois commentators' and 'Muslim observers' (1979: 48). Brian Grogan of the USec's British affiliate, the International Marxist Group, dismissed all suggestions of religious reaction as the creation of the 'capitalist press'. 'During the insurrection', he wrote, 'the shouts of "*Allahu Akbar*" or "God is Great" could be heard everywhere. "*Allahu Akbar*" became the rallying cry of the masses fighting for their rights' (1979: 2).<sup>24</sup> This may very well have been true, but it was also the rallying cry of the *hezbollahi*-led mobs who just days after the fall of the Bakhtiar government were torching left-wing bookshops (Rahnema and Nomani 1990: 177). Grogan's generous reading of the slogan indicated an inability to acknowledge other, far more specific, readings that could not coexist with his.

Aspects of Shi'a Islam, such as the role of martyrdom and suffering or millenarianism, that helped the clerical forces secure ritual supremacy in the struggle against the regime were also overlooked, while aspects of Shi'a culture that complemented secular concerns, such as a commitment to social justice and opposition to tyranny, were overemphasized by Iranian and Western Marxists alike (Tudeh Party 1979; Hodgkin 1980).

The Western left's understanding of radical Islam was simplistic. Before the revolution hardly anything was written about Khomeini or Ali Shari'ati, the highly influential Paris-educated radical sociologist who sought to create 'a secular religion that would appeal to the modern intelligentsia without alienating the traditional *bazaaris* and the religious masses' (Abrahamian 1983: 467), much less other Islamist theorists, such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, author

of the seminal Iranian anti-modernist text *Gharbzadegi* (*Weststruckness*).<sup>25</sup> In his *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, Halliday referred just once to Shari'ati, noting that 'the currents of opposition that phrase their hostility to the Shah in religious terms still have considerable powers of attraction, and, whilst controlled by the regime in the mid-1970s, have developed a more active presence as this control has slackened' (1979: 227). Even after the revolution, especially among the radical left, Khomeini's popularity was only ever explicable politically – i.e. because of his uncompromising opposition to the Shah – with no thought given to the profound authority he enjoyed as a *marja' al-taqlid*, a source of imitation for the masses.

The unwillingness of some on the left to challenge the *desirability* of revolutionary Islamic politics seemed to be rooted in an understandable aversion to cultural insensitivity. For Western feminists (and others), protests against the regime's apparently misogynist course needed to be carefully balanced against the need to be sensitive to local situations, for both cultural and tactical reasons (Bruce 1979). The bitter fruit of this could be found in the 'ideological compromise' made by secularists (socialist and liberal) on the veiling of women.

Initially this confined itself to ambiguous comments on the veil being a symbol of resistance to imperialism (Haig 1979: 1244) or sexual objectification (Falk 1979: 12) even though Iranian feminists had expressed great concern over Khomeini's previous insistence on *hijab* (female modesty), as has been noted by Rahnema and Nomani (1990: 219–22), Adele Ferdows (1983: 292) and Kate Millett (1982).

One Iranian student activist of the period has conceded that the Iranian left was suspicious of 'reformist democratic actions, such as the women's movement against the dress code' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 1998: 246). Some in the West were equally suspicious: according to William A. Dorman (1979: 61), head of journalism at California State University at Sacramento, Western concern about the veil was thinly disguised racism. 'Women's rights have not been at issue in the Iranian revolution,' he wrote in the British journal *Race and Class* in the summer of 1979.

The Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA), which was closer to Moscow than its Eurocommunist counterparts, described Khomeini's views on women's rights as 'egalitarian, humane and democratic'.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, nearly a year after the Shah's departure, Suzanne Haig of the US SWP insisted that 'women are freer than ever before in Iran. They will never return to the degrading position they held under the Shah's rule' (1979: 1244). Just eight months later, after Khomeini had ordered Iranian women to wear the veil, its Iranian Trotskyist co-thinkers used the pages of the SWP's *Intercontinental Press* to explain why the refusal to wear the chador was an imperialist provocation. HKE leader Mahsa Hashemi was asked whether her party would ask women to wear Islamic dress 'if the majority in the society' decided they must. 'The answer is definitely yes', she replied (Hashemi 1980).

The [HKE] is convinced that in such circumstances it will quickly become clear that the question is not whether women should or should not wear Islamic dress, but that the real question is the rights of women and the struggle of the entire society against American imperialism. . . . Wearing Islamic dress is a tradition in Iran and since the majority do this, to oppose it is a divisive act and does not help advance the revolution.

(Hashemi 1980)

What does he know of Iran, who only theory knows? Michel Foucault came from a left that on one level defied categorization. Although the French poststructuralist philosopher had once been a member of the Communist Party, the libertarian strains of May '68 were far more influential in his politics. Furthermore, and to a much greater extent, through his works on the nature of power and social control he had fashioned his own politics.

Foucault visited Iran twice as a correspondent for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della sera*, the first visit in September 1978, just a few days after the Black Friday massacre, and the second in November 1978. On these visits he met numerous leading figures in the revolution, including Bazargan and Ayatollah Shariat-Madari (later meeting Bani-Sadr in Paris), although his main aim, according to one commentator, was to meet ordinary Iranians and discover 'the real forces moving the people' (Stauth 1994: 380–1). He also wrote on the revolution for the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

Foucault's journalism of those days was hugely controversial. The revolution, he said, heralded a new form of 'political spirituality', a politics lost to the West since 1789, possibly even last practised by Savonarola, John of Leyden and Cromwell. The possibility of martyrdom, played out night after night in the huge demonstrations against the Shah, engaged Foucault's attention far more than any political demands. Although he recognized the importance of such issues as the crisis of modernization and Pahlavi corruption, and acknowledged where many socialists would or could not that the mullahs were not revolutionary, Foucault's journalism (1994a: 686–7) returned constantly, insistently, to martyrdom, to death.

This goes some way, perhaps, to explaining Foucault's own chiliastic enthusiasm for the new political spirituality that he perceived in the revolution. He was seeing something radically different from most other observers, left and right, although he was probably able to do so only because he rigorously excluded from his field of vision any 'political' content that might temper this enthusiasm. In his interview with *Libération* journalists Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet (1988: 214), Foucault minimized the mundane factional disputes lurking below the surface, denying any ideological component to the revolutionary events, which were instead 'an inner experience, a sort of constantly recommenced liturgy, a community experience'. As Afary noted, 'Despite his familiarity with the fascist right in Europe, Foucault never related the Islamists' selective reading of *modernity*, or equation

of *modernity* with the loss of spirituality, to similar political invocations by the right in Europe four decades earlier' (2003: 9, 21). The point is valid: indeed, the roll-call of Iranian or Islamist thinkers whose rejection of the modern was influenced by European fascists, proto-fascists or Vichyites is lengthy, including Bani-Sadr (René Dumont), Bazargan (Alexis Carrel), Shari'ati (René Guénon and Alexis Carrel) and Jalal Al-e Ahmad (Ernst Junger) – see also Roxanne Euben (1999: 199, fn. 181) and Said Amir Arjomand (1986: 394–6, 402–7, 412–13).

Georg Stauth (1994: 390) argues that, in Foucault's reading of the revolution, the Iranian people's repudiation of modernity went far beyond mere 'anti-imperialism'; this was a spiritual act. Whatever the validity of Foucault's analysis, its narrow focus left him unprepared for the violence and terror of the clerical forces in the post-revolutionary period. 'I am at a loss to discuss Islamic government as an "idea" or even an "ideal"', he admitted in one essay (Foucault 1994b: 691, 694). 'But as a "political will" it impressed me.' Yet one fact must be clarified, he noted. 'By "Islamic government" nobody in Iran means a political regime in which the clerics would play a directorial or supervisory role.' Later he was to firmly insist that he had not misread the situation,<sup>27</sup> but he was dismayed by the fierce criticisms of friends and colleagues, as Janet Afary (2003: 30), Stauth (1994: 380) and Didier Eribon (1991: 289–90) have noted, and after May 1979 he never again spoke or wrote of Iran, even though it had once seemed so crucial to his ongoing explorations of the nature of power in society.<sup>28</sup>

What attracted Foucault to the Iranian revolution? Stauth (1994: 380–93) identified three themes that had long been central to his work: the role of coercion in modern projects of human governance; the capacity of Islam and spirituality in general to act as an insurgent knowledge; and the relationship of technologies of power to a revolutionary situation. All three can be clearly identified in his writings from the time. To these three can perhaps be added a fourth reason, the capacity of certain religio-spiritual practices (as witnessed by Foucault during the revolution) to fundamentally transform humanity by transcending social control in a way that politics could not.

At that time, Foucault was writing the fourth volume of his *History of Sexuality*, studying monastic texts and rites of Christian penance from the Middle Ages. 'Foucault', wrote Afary (2003: 9), 'was looking at many spiritual and bodily exercises adopted by the early Christians. Foucault seems to have believed that such "practices of the self" could be refashioned for our time and serve as the foundation for a new form of spirituality.' Foucault was fascinated by the Karbala myths (the yearly re-enactment at Muharram of the slaughter of the prophet Muhammad's grandson Hoseyn and his supporters at Karbala by Yazid) and their reframing as a political challenge to the Shah. He was also clearly fascinated with 'the self-flagellation of the demonstrators and the exuberance of death-defying crowds', in which, wrote Afary, 'Foucault apparently saw a re-enactment of the rituals of the monastic orders in early Christianity'.

In his personal life, as biographer James Miller documented at some length (1994: 263), Foucault was increasingly drawn to sado-masochism (S/M).

Foucault, whose corpus largely focused on the question of how to transcend power relationships, argued that the role-playing of S/M had the capacity to do just this, while the intensity of the experience (and here we return to the Muharram flagellants, glorifying transcendence through martyrdom, pain and suffering) in turn created a new self.

Yet this obvious parallel has gone largely unremarked upon by Foucault's critics, and is not to this writer's knowledge explicitly linked anywhere to his writings on Iran. Writing of Foucault's studies on the sacrificial aspects of the Christian theology of the self, Afary noted – in passing – that 'this renunciation of the self was either in the flesh (which Foucault seems to have preferred and was perhaps tied to his interest in S&M as a form of discovery of the self through pain), or in words, which Foucault criticised alongside modern disciplinary techniques' (2003: 19). Miller similarly fleetingly acknowledged the parallel in an aside concentrating solely on Foucault's Christian studies: it was impossible, he wrote, 'to ignore the affinities between the ancient art of penance, as the philosopher described it at Berkeley, and the erotic theatre of cruelty he was simultaneously exploring in San Francisco' (1994: 324).<sup>29</sup> Neither writer, however, sought to reconcile Foucault's political reframing of S/M with his 1979 portrayal of a transcendent Shi'a 'politics' of martyrdom and suffering.

While it is not argued in this paper that Foucault's initial enthusiasm for the revolution was primarily or even largely influenced by his theoretical musings on S/M (much less that such considerations defined his wider political positions), the relationship (if any) between Foucault's work on S/M and the centrality he gave to martyrdom in interpreting the Iranian revolution does appear to be intellectually consistent and therefore worthy of further consideration, however problematic such linkages might appear to be.

## Conclusion

Shaul Bakhash's dedication of *The Reign of the Ayatollahs* (1985) to his Iranian friends 'who loved the revolution, not knowing it would not love them back', applied as much to the Western left as it did to the Iranian people. But identifying how the Western left misread the revolution is not simple, not least because 'the Western left' encompassed many different political strands. None of this should be read as a criticism of those left activists and academics for failing to foretell the revolution itself: virtually no one, from SAVAK to the KGB, from the US State Department to the US SWP, was prepared for the events that would lead to the Shah's downfall (Cottrell and Hanks 1979: 544–7; Bill 1988: 243–60), as was frankly acknowledged by President Carter himself at a press conference the day after the Shah's sudden departure from Iran in January 1979 (Bill 1988: 259). What does emerge from most left accounts of the revolution, however, is the inadequacy of Marxism and Leninism, as both explanatory tools and political positions, in the face of Iranian political Islam. This showed itself in a number of ways.

First, as we have seen, although there were a number of attempts to explain the unfolding of the revolution by combining Marxism with other models, purely materialist explanations that were centred on the revolutionary potential of the ascending mode of production appeared inadequate in the face of Iran's cross-class uprising.

Second, Marxist explanations were marred by imprecise or protean definitions of the class players – a problem partly specific to the Iranian situation, where virtually all 'bourgeois' players were at times perceived to have the same interests – but one also generally found in both academic and activist writings on such ill-defined Marxist descriptive categories as 'petit-bourgeois' and '*lumpenproletariat*'.

Third, time and again the Western activist left placed sublime theory before inconvenient facts. The Marxist left had neither the strength nor the organizational capacity to gain a dominant role among the Iranian proletariat, much less seize state power. Bearing this in mind, Val Moghadam had usefully cited Marx's observation that 'we make history within certain limits. These limits included historical legacies (for example, the absence of a long-standing democratic tradition), international or world-systemic constraints, and the differential resources of contending classes, social groups and political parties' (1989: 96). But such advice was lost on some activists. 'The key to genuinely undercutting the Khomeinists', wrote the British SWP's Chris Harman, 'lay in mobilising workers to fight on their own behalf' (1994: 43). How, and with what organization was never explained. In contrast, the former HKS member Saber Nikbeen stated in 1983 that 'the basic lesson of the Iranian revolution... is the fact that unless [a revolutionary proletarian] organisation already exists before the revolutionary upheaval, it would be extremely unlikely that it can come about in the course of the revolution itself' (1997: 41).

Harman's comrade Phil Marshall/Marfleet (1988b: 46–52) cited Rosa Luxemburg to show how soviets arose from mass strike situations similar to those seen in Iran in July and September 1978. His inference was unambiguous, yet he was also immediately obliged to acknowledge that this was not possible in Iran because of the strength of Islamist forces in the workplace. He dismissed (1988b: 116) claims by Iranian socialists that Pahlavite repression prevented leftist organization in the workplace, citing Assef Bayat's *Workers and Revolution in Iran* to argue that networks of workplace militants existed under the Shah. Yet Marshall/Marfleet's argument ignored the fragmented and minuscule nature of such networks, the overwhelming weight of evidence pointing to severe and often brutal anti-socialist repression, the deep level of paranoia in the Iranian workplace and the indication that some worker militants at least had learned their revolutionary politics in the years preceding the Shah's crackdown. Each one of these factors had been highlighted by Bayat (1987: 91) on the very page cited by Marshall/Marfleet.

Fourth, some sections of the left effectively preferred silence to a difficult analysis. As Muhammad Ja'far and Azar Tabari have noted, 'whereas before and shortly after the February 1979 overthrow of the monarchy in Iran events in that country were given prominent, and often exuberant coverage in the pages of the left press, they have since been demoted to occasional references to this or that new repressive move by the regime' (1984: 322). Falk and Foucault had at least set out their positions on Iran before falling uncharacteristically silent.<sup>30</sup> The *New Left Review*, Britain's foremost journal of the intellectual left, did not cover the revolution until late 1987, when it ran two articles, from Halliday and Moghadam. The next article, a study of Khomeini's populism by Abrahamian, did not appear until 1991. Given the ongoing projects by *NLR*'s chief theoretician, Perry Anderson, in areas such as anti-colonialism, Western exceptionalism, imperialism and the nature of bourgeois revolutions, as well as the central role played in the development of *NLR*'s political position by Halliday, the journal's paucity of coverage on the Iranian revolution and the rise of political Islam is surprising (although this is no criticism of Halliday, whose writings on Iran elsewhere were extensive). *NLR* has elsewhere (Elliott 1998: 112, 122, 124; Sassoon 1981) been criticized for failing to report appropriately significant shifts in British and international politics. Equally, *Socialist Register*, a distantly related British left journal of similar scholarly importance and standing, did not cover the Iranian revolution until 1989, when it published an article by Moghadam (1989).

Fifth, and most important, was the fact that those leftists who criticized the ascendancy of the clerical forces – including Fred Halliday, Maxine Molyneux, Ervand Abrahamian, Val Moghadam, Ali Rahnama, Farhad Nomani and Azar Tabari – appeared to minimize the Marxist perspective in their defence of bourgeois democracy. Whatever the validity of the argument that classical Marxism clearly factored in a bourgeois democratic stage prior to socialism, explicit scenarios outlining the mechanics and desirability of such a progression were notably absent in the academic (although not the activist) literature. The academic literature is also notable for the absence of specific explanations of how the theories of Marx or Lenin (or any other Marxist or Leninist) could have brought about a more democratic outcome in Iran.<sup>31</sup> For these writers, at least, it could be argued that Marxism and Leninism had lost much of its theoretical force. Democracy was best defended within and by a liberal cross-class political culture that placed an emphasis on the defence of individual liberties against state intervention in personal life.<sup>32</sup>

This was perhaps best seen in the widely held conclusion that, in choosing the Khomeinist mullahs, the Iranian left had chosen the wrong bourgeois nationalist group to align with. Chehabi (1990: 158) looked to Bazargan's Liberation Movement. Rahnama and Nomani (1990: 184–9) saw much that was praiseworthy in Matin-Daftari's National Democratic Front. De Groot expressed the view that it was 'perhaps difficult to understand why the Tudeh Party, which rightly emphasises the need to support a broad democratic and anti-imperialist political force, is more critical of Shariat-Madari than of

Khomeini – particularly when its own existence is by no means secure under the present regime’ (1980: 20–1). Halliday would have preferred a ‘protracted Bakhtiar transition’ (1987: 37), and, although this does not necessarily imply an alliance with the Shah’s last Prime Minister, Molyneux and Halliday had written that ‘a period of bourgeois democracy would have been of far greater help to the left, and to the Iranian people as a whole, than the clerical tyranny now installed in Tehran’ (1984: 21)

Nearly a decade after the upheaval had begun, Halliday concluded:

The events of 1979 bring out what was, in my view, the central avoidable error of most of the Iranian Left – its catastrophic stand on ‘liberalism’. In essence, the Left allied with Khomeini to break ‘liberalism’ – that is, those moderate democratic forces that opposed the Shah but were against the clerical dictatorship. This was a political error, since Khomeini destroyed the Left as he had earlier attacked the liberals, but it also reflected a theoretical mistake about the character of social and ideological forces in Iran. For in any historical materialist perspective, the ‘liberals’ reflected a more progressive position than the reactionary ideas and policies of Khomeini.

(Halliday 1987: 37)

An even harsher conclusion had been drawn some three years previously that this support to Khomeini – especially as extended by the Tudeh party – ‘must rank with the errors of the KPD’ (i.e. the refusal of the German Communist Party to align with the Social Democrats against Hitler) (Halliday 1983d: 36).<sup>33</sup>

In response to Halliday, Harman of the British SWP claimed (1994: 43) that Iran’s liberals had been just as antagonistic as the clerics towards the left. Although it is true that Iran’s liberals – initially at least – made the same mistake as the left in underestimating the intentions of the religious forces, it is highly debatable whether they were as antagonistic towards the left as the mullahs. Harman’s example that ‘the liberal bourgeoisie under...Bani Sadr were united with Khomeini in the campaign...to purge the universities’ does not tally with the accounts of Bakhash (1985: 110) and others (Zabih 1986: 30–3, 98) that this campaign cost Bani-Sadr considerable support among the liberal bourgeoisie.

Yet, even if Harman’s claim had been correct, from the British SWP’s own preferred historical materialist perspective such an argument was irrelevant. Harman and others, such as the US SWP (Lynn and Frankel 1981) presumably defended the regime not for what it did or did not do to leftists, but because of its supposedly objectively progressive nature, thanks to its ‘anti-imperialist’ rhetoric. If, as one might assume, the politics of the ‘most modern sector of the bourgeoisie’ was secular and liberal, in what sense could this politics be less attractive to socialists than that of the ‘backward’ sector? This was a crucial question, and one that could not be answered easily by Leninists, especially those Leninists who had romantically mistaken the *lumpen* reactionaries of the *mostazafin* for a proletariat, a mistake with bitter

consequences, as Rahnama and Nomani (1990: 6) noted.

Indeed, when Rovere of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire asked the question, he could only answer with another question, turned not against his own tendency's theoretical inadequacies, but against those of the Tudeh party.

Can it be concluded [he asked] that the 'liberals' are more right-wing than the IRP members? This is the position that the Stalinist Tudeh Party has consistently taken over the last fifteen months. It gives complete uncritical support to the Shi'ite hierarchy and the IRP leadership, reserving its fire and attacks for the representatives of the 'liberal bourgeoisie' who it accuses of being in league with imperialism.

(Rovere 1980: 869)

Less than three years later, he was answered by his Iranian co-thinker Saber Nikbeen. 'It is not an exaggeration,' he wrote, 'to say that, as far as the fight for democracy was concerned, bourgeois liberal opposition or even the monarchists appeared to be more radical than the Stalinist left' (1997: 43).

The issues that Western leftists had to confront during this period are still with us today, although the exegetical working through of the problems seem more than ever confined to activists. US military action in Afghanistan in the latter part of 2001 prompted a furious debate among Western Leninists over whether the Taliban (which was generally acknowledged to be profoundly reactionary) should be supported politically and militarily against the United States.<sup>34</sup> Many of the arguments cited the exact same references from Marx, Lenin and Trotsky that had been central to activist debates over the Khomeini regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>35</sup>

Across the Atlantic, a three-part review (Shirvani 2003a, 2003b, 2003c) of the Iranian revolution in the US Socialist Workers Party paper, *The Militant*, published in April–May 2003, outlined the fall of the Shah as if the revolution had been a thoroughly socialist affair. The *shoras* were once again likened to workers' soviets. The clerical forces were mentioned only in passing, once again to highlight the crucial lack of a revolutionary working-class leadership. No criticisms were levelled at Khomeini: the betrayer of the revolution was still Mehdi Bazargan, who, 'along with some other leaders of the bourgeoisie, including clerics, had been at odds with workers because they were opposed to independent political action by the workers' (Shirvani 2003c: 9). The SWP's comrades of the HKS/HKE/HVK were not mentioned. The political implications of the SWP's confused line caught up with the party just two months later. The subhead of the front-page lead in *The Militant*'s 30 June 2003, issue read 'Washington tries to use student protests in drive to oust regime'. The equivalent subhead in the following issue (7 July 2003) read 'Student protests in Iran push for democratic freedoms'. The accompanying editorial, headed 'Support student protests in Iran', corrected the mistaken line of the previous week. 'It's true the US government is trying to take advantage of these protests to pursue its goals in the region. But there is no need to put a negative everywhere the imperialists put a positive sign.'

Such advice would have been helpful to the US SWP and its Iranian counterparts in the early 1980s, when anti-imperialism and anti-liberalism trumped all other considerations. They could even have learned something from the ‘Stalinists’ of the past, such as the French Communist Party leader Maurice Thorez, who in October 1935, speaking on the Popular Front, had declared: ‘Democracy, and democratic liberties, for all that they are relative and precarious, nonetheless still afford the working class better conditions under which to struggle for its own interests’.<sup>36</sup> For, although the sincerity of this Stalinist embrace of bourgeois democracy is – to say the least – open to question, Thorez’s claim was nevertheless well-founded. The inability or refusal to acknowledge qualitative differences between bourgeois democracy and dictatorship under capitalism had disastrous consequences for the left, as was seen in 1980s Iran just as it had been seen in 1930s Europe. Marx’s dictum about history repeating itself needs to be modified in the light of Iran. The first was tragedy, and so was the second.

## Notes

1 The ‘elaborators’ listed by Keddie were Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly, Eric Hobsbawm, George Rudé and Barrington Moore.

2 This lumping together of the opposition was common; see de Groot (1980: 19).

3 For example, Chris Harman (1994) of the British Socialist Workers Party wrote of an Iranian working class besieged by petit-bourgeois to its left (the IRP) and right (Bazargan and Bani-Sadr’s forces). Any analysis of substance was abandoned.

4 For the orthodox communist understanding of the anti-worker nature of ‘*lumpenproletarian* socialism’ see Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhensky (1970: 122–3). The category is, of course, contestable, as Tom Bottomore (2001: 327) noted. Asef Bayat rejected its applicability to the poor of his study, arguing that Marx’s term applied to ‘those nonbourgeois poor elements who did not produce their own livelihood and subsisted on the work of others. The agents that are the subject of this book, the urban disenfranchised, are not of this group’ (1997: 168). Nevertheless, as he himself acknowledged frequently, their insurgent and subaltern politics did not and could not challenge the state in the same way as those of the organized proletariat (1997: 14–15, 38–40, 56), and their politics of ‘quiet encroachment’ did fit generally accepted definitions of *lumpenproletarian* politics.

5 Misagh Parsa (1989: 3–4) also argued that the social breakdown model – as drawn on by Keddie (1981) – has similarities to Marxist tools insofar as it measures responses to disruptive economic and social developments along class lines.

6 See, for example, Göran Therborn, who lamented what he believed to be the tendency of contemporary Marxists to bypass ‘in embarrassed silence’ (1980: viii) the questions raised by Marx about the material determination of ideologies. Therborn, however, mentioned Iran only in passing, giving it as an example of a revolutionary mobilization of ‘a fundamentally ambiguous character, involving both reactionary and revolutionary elements’ (1980: 121).

7 And yet Marx had revised such views (perhaps best seen in his writings on India) by the time he came to address the effects of British colonialism in Ireland, thus bringing his understanding of imperialism much closer to what later became Lenin’s (Turner 1984: 156–7).

8 The Iranian Socialist Workers Party (HKS) was founded in Teheran on 22 January 1979. Within two years it had split into three rival groupings – the HKS, the HKE and the HVK. All three were members of an international Trotskyist umbrella grouping, the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (known as the USFI or USec) (Alexander 1991: 558–9, 565).

9 This singularity was challenged by one group of British/Irish ex-Marxists, which argued ‘the religious character of the Irish revolution was a more striking thing than the religious character of the Iranian revolution. The Iranian people only rejected the superficial liberalism of the Shah and the coterie supporting him. The liberal culture rejected by the Irish was the genuine article – British liberalism of the 19th century and the early 20th’ (Clifford 1991: 34).

10 Representative was the unsigned editorial in the US scholarly Marxist journal *Monthly Review*: ‘It is natural that the people who... have come to be as determined as Khomeini to get rid of the shah should now enthusiastically accept his leadership and turn a deaf ear to anyone, religious or not, who shows sign of compromise. But there is another side to this coin. Khomeini’s power is conjunctural, not structural or permanent. It can be expected to last until the shah has been definitively overthrown’ (1979: 15).

11 On Iranian Trotskyism during the revolution, see Alexander (1991: 558–67). According to a theoretical journal published by British and Iranian Trotskyists in the late 1990s, a paper was prepared for the United Secretariat by USec International Executive Committee member Saber Nickbin (or Nikbeen), on behalf of the HKS in 1983, which heavily criticized the Khomeini regime and those leftists who had refused to break from it. ‘A resolution based on the recommendations of this document was passed by the IEC immediately following the world congress which called for the expulsion from the F[ourth] I[nternational] of the supporters of the American SWP in Iran who had collaborated with Khomeini’s regime, public self-criticism by the USec of its mistaken positions on the Iranian revolution and support for the regroupment project initiated by the Iranian comrades. To this day, the USec has not yet published that resolution’ (Nikbeen 1997: 31).

12 One account of the HKS, ‘Growing openness to socialist ideas’, wistfully noted ‘big new openings for socialist ideas in Iran... a group of sailors, a glass cutter, a General Motors auto worker, and a few nurses are among those who have expressed their support [for the HKS] and asked to join’ (*Intercontinental Press*, 17 December 1979: 1244).

13 ‘You say that our comrades are in jail. So, some of our comrades are in jail – but our organisation is legal. Our paper is legal; it is sold in tens of thousands of copies like all other left-wing papers in Iran. Were they legal under the shah?... What you have is a step from a reactionary dictatorship which was bourgeois towards what you could call partial bourgeois democracy... We said that it is the beginning of a process of permanent revolution’ (Spartacist League 1979d: 5).

14 As Maxime Rodinson (1979: 36–7) has noted, activist Marxists rarely consider such encounters as a meeting of equals with the possibility of synthesis. Even apparent sympathy is largely a case of biding one’s time. Ultimately, one (Islam) has to surrender to the other (Marxism). See also Kertzer (1980).

15 *Guardian* (21 November 1979), cited in Frankel (1979c: 1242).

16 See also the responses of Peter M. Sussman (1980), John F. Murphy (1980), and Falk’s (1980b) responses to Sussman and Murphy.

17 See also Hymans (1979a, 1979b) for critical coverage and *Liberation* (1981) for supportive coverage. (Acknowledgements to Stan Newens for his kind assistance in locating this and other Iranian material from the British left and labour movements.)

18 This split in the USec line could be detected as early as August 1979, following the regime’s first anti-left crackdown (Spartacist League 1979e: 6).

19 Tabari (real name Afsaneh Najmabadi) had been involved with the US Socialist Workers Party in the 1970s, before moving to Europe in 1974, as noted by Behrooz (1999: 94).

20 'Certainly many more Iranians are being killed for political opposition, often on the flimsiest of charges. There are more political prisoners and a tighter ideological straitjacket. . . . In short, Khomeini has established a rule that is as brutal and repressive as the Shah's.' The latter statement was a 180-degree turnaround (unacknowledged) from his earlier insistence that 'it is in my judgment a grave mistake to equate the Shah and Ayatollah Khomeini' (Falk 1980b: 915).

21 Perhaps the best example here would be Halliday (1979), which, despite the inadequacies revealed in hindsight, introduced the politics of the Iranian opposition groups to a wider Western audience, and subjected them to thoughtful criticism.

22 One émigré Iranian Marxist well known in British labour movement circles insisted, however, that foreign revolutionary socialists should 'concentrate their energies on working class issues. . . the whole world is full of vulgar Marxists, petit-bourgeois intellectuals, and Western statesmen, who rally under the banner of "fight for all" and universalism, which looks very beautiful and very broadminded in *theory*, but have forgotten in practice the specific problems of the working class' (Ghotbi 1978: 92–3.) Stan Newens (2003) recalled a 1978 meeting in the House of Commons called by his Labour colleague Ernie Roberts at which Ghotbi was abused by 'frenzied' Islamists.

23 Referring to the resolution on the Iranian situation as published by the Eleventh Congress of the USec in November 1979, Robert J. Alexander has noted that 'as in the statements of the Iranian Trotskyists in the same period there was little reference to the Moslem clerical nature of the Iranian revolution' (1991: 559). The Iranian left acted similarly (Mirsepassi-Ashtiani and Moghadam 1991: 40).

24 This is reminiscent of the argument of the Christian-born Lebanese communist, Raif Khoury: 'Do you remember. . . that *Allaho akbar* means, in plain language: punish the greedy usurers! Tax those who accumulate profits! Confiscate the possessions of the thieving monopolists! Guarantee bread to the people! Open the road of education and progress to women!' (Rodinson 1979: 51).

25 Shari'ati's work was largely unknown to the West before the revolution: few of his works were in English translation, and their heavily theological content and flowery prose made them unlikely reads (for example, Shari'ati 1977). The almost perfunctory account of Shari'ati's death in the London-based socialist *CARI Bulletin* (Committee Against Repression in Iran, 1977: 12b) gave little impression of his standing in Iran. On Jalal Al-e Ahmad, see Mirsepassi-Ashtiani (1994: 60–3).

26 *Daily World* (6 April 1979), cited in Spartacist League (1979c).

27 'There is certainly no disgrace involved in changing one's opinion; but there is no reason to say that one's opinion is changing when one is against the punishments today, when one was against the tortures of the Savak yesterday' (Foucault 1999: 133). See also Miller (1994: 312).

28 'Foucault's [Iranian] essays are his most extensive set of writings on any non-Western society, and they form one of the major political engagements of his life' (Afary 2003: 8). Jeremy R. Carrette noted that 'The Iranian question was. . . part of a whole series of issues related to the "problematic of government" and "spirituality", which gripped [Foucault] in 1978 and which would eventually lead him to explore early Christianity' (2000: 137).

29 In 1981, Miller wrote, Foucault 'slipped a revealing comment into an otherwise pedestrian interview. . . "Each time I have attempted to do theoretical work. . . it has been on the basis of elements from my experience"' (1994: 31).

30 Two articles on Iran by Falk appeared after January 1982, 'The threat of Moslem fundamentalism' (*Newsday* 21 July 1982: 43) and 'Interviews with Abol-Hassan Banisadr and Massoud Rajavi' (*Alternatives*, 8(1) (Summer 1982: 91–107)). A 2001 footnote to his 1981 essay 'Human rights and the Iranian revolution', added little new (Allain 2003: 220–3).

31 See Moghadam (1987, 1989); Halliday (1987); Abrahamian (1991); Rahnama and Nomani (1990).

32 This, for example, was the conclusion drawn by Muhammad Ja'far and Azar Tabari (1984: 343–8), when outlining what they saw as a revolutionary Marxist or socialist programme for Iran. There was no mention of specific socialist demands.

33 The KPD analogy was also drawn by the Spartacist League. 'Although leftist support to Khomeini is an opportunist policy, there is a certain methodological similarity here to the ultra-left Third Period Stalinist position expressed as "After Hitler, us"' (1979b: 10).

34 See, for example, the *Weekly Worker* (paper of the Communist Party of Great Britain, a groupuscule not to be confused with the original CPGB) (27 September 2001, 18, 25 October 2001, 8, 15 November 2001).

35 See, for example, the debate between Bob Pitt (pro-Taliban) and Ian Donovan (anti) in the pages of the *Weekly Worker*: Pitt, 'Sectarian propagandism' (18 October 2001: 8); Donovan, 'Neither Taliban nor imperialism' (25 October 2001: 6–7); Pitt, 'Taliban bloc' (8 November 2001: 6); and Pitt, Donovan and 'orthodox' Trotskyist Liz Hoskings (pro), 'Should we defend the Taliban?' (15 November 2001: 6–7).

36 Cited in Rodinson (1979: 95).

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