

# IRANIAN INTELLECTUALS AND DEPENDENCY THEORY

- M. ARMAN



This essay by M. Arman, taken off the internet, speaks to the independent theoretical analysis of Iranian Marxists in the 70's. Centering a broad third worldist anti-imperialism, and dependent capitalist state theory, opposed to building socialism until the "right" circumstances prevailed. This led to tactical unity with oppressive forces that eventually took over the government and violently suppress the left afterwards.

Today we see this in terms of "anti-imperialist" solidarity with countries that actively perpetrate violence against the left, women, LGBTQ etc... in favor of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' outlook.

The history of the left in Iran serves some important lessons for left forces in the United States, and our revolution here. From developing a historical materialist analysis, theory and strategy for revolution in the United States, to principled international solidarity with working class and communist forces globally.

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*Fedayeen Khalq guerrilla organization of Iran flag.*

THE IRANIAN revolution was a defeat of the dominant mode of thought of the Iranian left. Despite the sincerity of the left's struggle against the Pahlavi monarchy, its effective participation in the armed struggle of February 1979, and its organizing activities in the post-February period which resulted in the emergence of the left as a viable social force, none of these measures overcame the deep structural constraints which the left imposed on itself by its thought. There were two major consequences: first, the left's already limited energy was misplaced; and second, the left failed to gain an insight into the nature and goals of the dominant clerical force that emerged. Only after the decisive days of June 1981 (during which the clergy went on an all-out offensive) did some segments of the left start to re-evaluate their old ways and sterile concepts. This article is an attempt in the same direction.

There are good reasons for being critical of the left, since its previous project has practically and theoretically been defeated. A re-examination of the nature of that project is imperative today. Moreover, despite the multi-faceted consequences of defeat, the bulk of those organizations that should logically bear the main responsibility are still more or less attached to the 'old horizon'. There has been no re-evaluation of theories, or in particular of dogmas, and the defeat is invariably presented as if it can be reduced to the military might of the Islamic regime, or some avoidable

'mistakes'. Since the objective is to exit from this impasse, it is essential to transcend the old ways of formulating questions. I hope to move in this direction through a critique of some of the fundamental operative concepts of the traditional left in Iran.

## **Features of Iranian Marxism**

MARXIST THOUGHT is interpreted in a variety of ways in different social formations. This or that aspect is emphasized, depending on class structure, general level of development, location, pre-existing (non-Marxist) schools of thought, and finally the particular emphases chosen by the Marxist intellectuals of the day. In Iran, the dominant Marxist interpretation of the 1970s, and to some extent the post-revolutionary period, owes its origin to what is sometimes called 'Russian Marxism'. This is a deterministic and economic interpretation which was originally made popular in Russia by Georgy Plekhanov, the so-called 'father' of Russian Marxism. After the final consolidation of the bureaucracy under Stalin, an even more rigid and now nationalistic version of this Marxism became the official ideology of 'Marxism-Leninism'. This was no longer a theory of action, but an ossified world-view which represented supposed 'eternal truths' about the world.

The nationalistic thesis of 'socialism in one country' laid the ground for a utilization of the communist parties all over the globe to serve the political interests of the Soviet Union. With the onslaught of the Cold War and the formation of the Cominform, the purpose became 'to force Washington to recognize the division into zones of influence within the framework of a world-wide compromise guaranteeing bipartite control of the world by the two superpowers'.<sup>1</sup> In 1947, at the

founding meeting of the Cominform, Zhdanov, Stalin's spokesperson, divided the world into two camps: 'the imperialist and anti-democratic camp on the one hand and the anti-imperialist, democratic camp on the other'. Peripheral countries were included in the latter only if they were anti-American, or against one of America's major allies. The concepts 'national independence' and 'national-democratic revolution' have since been invoked by the communist parties in the peripheral countries to mobilize forces against the US. This rigid 'two worlds' theory has become the principal yardstick of the Soviet Union and the communist parties in their assessment of political forces.

In Iran, the influential Tudeh Party has, since its inception, been the major promoter of this politics. Various journals, social clubs and front organizations have been the vehicles.<sup>2</sup> During the 1940s the Tudeh was successful in attracting a considerable segment of the Iranian intelligentsia. Writers and poets such as B. Alavi, N. Yooshij, J. Al-e-Ahmad, S. Hedayat, A. Nooshin and M. Oskooii, were among those associated with the party, in one way or another. Many texts in political economy, philosophy, politics and literature-which were later picked up by a new generation of left activists -were either translated from Russian by Tudeh theoreticians or written up by them. In this way the major questions of the Iranian left were defined by the Tudeh Party's intellectual 'legacy' long after the organization itself had been discredited. The central conception which remained dominant was the Tudeh's definition of Iranian class politics in terms of the international rivalry between the two camps.<sup>3</sup> The 'anti-imperialist' struggle of the Iranian nation was viewed as a continuous drawn-out affair from the struggles against Britain in the Mosaddeq period (with Tudeh involvement) to the

involvement of the US in the 1953 coup and the years that followed. The Tudeh leadership so discredited itself in the course of the coup and its aftermath that by 1956 its disintegration as a viable mass organization was complete.

With the direct help and supervision of the United States, the coercive apparatus of the Iranian state greatly expanded. In the aftermath of the coup, this American presence in Iran, alongside the dictatorship, reinforced the anti-American mood of both intellectuals and the general public over the coming years.

Another political force whose influence on the left should be taken into consideration is the National Front - a loose coalition of liberal bourgeois and Islamic nationalists led by Dr Muhammad Mosaddeq. In 1952 the National Front succeeded in mobilizing a populist base against Britain's plunder of Iranian oil through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

The struggle for the nationalization of Iranian oil was but one link in the chain of struggles in the Third World for national independence after World War II.<sup>4</sup> The 1955 Bandung Conference of Afro-Asian nations marked the first collective appearance of the Third World on the international scene, with the objective of its participating more effectively in the decision-making process on global issues. One of the major demands of this conference was an increase in the price levels of raw materials and primary goods purchased by the West from the Third World.

The Cuban revolution of 1959 and its further radicalization after 1961 (which reflected itself in active political and military support for likeminded guerrilla movements in Latin America

and elsewhere in the periphery) was a more far-reaching example of a national liberation movement. In the first half of the 1960s Cuba's foreign policy revolved around the notion of forming an 'anti-imperialist front' of radical countries. The impact of the Cuban revolution in particular on Iranian intellectuals in the 1960s was considerable. Its influence was also felt indirectly through the efforts of the Latin American 'dependency school' theorists, who emphasized the exploitation of the periphery by the advanced capitalist countries.

China during the 1950s and 1960s also based itself on the 'anti-imperialist struggle' thesis. After the 1966 split in the Tudeh Party (outside Iran), and the formation of the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh, some of its activists went to the People's Republic and managed to broadcast regular political programmes in Persian through Radio Peking. Mao's thought was disseminated among the Iranian left in this and other ways. Maoist influence was pronounced in the promotion of populism on both the national level ('dictatorship of the people') and the international level ('anti-imperialist block of Third World countries'). It also fostered an aversion to theory in politics, and 'practice' was conceived in an extremely narrow and mechanistic manner.

The one common element among the Third World's communist parties, national liberation movements and guerrilla organizations in the post-war period was a populist conception of revolution. This reduced the term to a struggle against foreign domination (particularly that of the United States). The Marxist conception of social revolution, which deals with the totality of social relations of production, was cast aside to be replaced by a narrow political concept which revolved around foreign domination. Revolution was defined as the overthrow

of puppet regimes, or what James Petras called 'collaborator states'.

The ideals and aspirations of these struggles were reflected in the writings of intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Régis Debray, Paul Baran and Samir Amin. Their books and articles best exemplify the new 'Third Worldism' of the 1950s and 1960s. These were also the ideas and experiences that dominated Iranian Marxism in the 1960s and early 1970s. They can be summarized briefly as follows:

- 1) A strong radical nationalism.
- 2) Economism, which expressed itself in equating human history with the development of technology.
- 3) Populism and a 'rich versus poor' conception of politics (on both the national and the international level).
- 4) An orientation towards practice as against theory.
- 5) Scant attention paid to democracy or fighting for the extension of democratic rights to the popular masses.

### **The new Iranian left: the Feda'een**

AN IMPORTANT feature of the generation that took a political lead in the 1960s and early 1970s was its earlier experience with the Youth Organization of the Tudeh Party, and its associations with the National Front and its student organizations of the early 1960s. The National Front was a coalition of anti-colonialist and anti-dictatorship forces which strongly believed in a parliamentary system. The expanding



international horizons of the Iranian bourgeoisie in the 1950s, and the arrest of the more radical leaders of the National Front in its formative period, had contributed to a growing conservatism in the main party. None the less, in the absence of alternatives, the student organizations of the Front had become a centre for the progressive and radicalizing youth in the 1960s.

These two poles drew further and further apart. The radical activists were impressed by the 'Third World Marxism' of the time, and in particular its celebration of armed struggle. Nor could this generation identify with the Tudeh Party, which by now had become extremely unpopular among intellectuals. The support given by the Tudeh leadership to arms purchases from the Soviet Union and to other policies of the Shah were among the reasons for this unpopularity.

As repression intensified following the bloody events of June 1963, the idea of guerrilla warfare to defeat the Shah's regime and imperialism looked more attractive, particularly since there was a growing number of such struggles going on around the world. A number of Iranian groups were the products of the new mood (for example, the Revolutionary Movement of Iranian Muslims, the Organization for the Liberation of the Iranian Peoples, 'the Palestine Group' which later joined the Feda'een, the People's Mojahedeen, and the People's Feda'een). The Feda'een were formed from a merger of two smaller groups identified by the names of their principal leaders: Bizhan Jazani and Hassan Zarifi on the one hand, and Massoud Ahmad-Zadeh and Amir-Parviz Pouyan on the other hand. The former group had pro-Soviet leanings and three-quarters of its founding members had been involved with the National Front's student organization.<sup>5</sup>

According to 'A Short History of the Ahmad-Zadeh/Pouyan Group', up until 1966-67 both founders of this group had pro-Mossadeq and religious inclinations.<sup>6</sup> All the groups were, to varying degrees, influenced by Latin American revolutionary literature, particularly on the Cuban experience, and to a lesser degree by Maoist teachings. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the structure of the Feda'een in more detail. Suffice it to say that all groups that went into its formation united basically on a common faith in guerrilla warfare as well as a shared attitude to the Shah's so-called 'White Revolution' reforms. They agreed on the nature of the socio-economic developments in Iran and the task of the 'anti-imperialist' struggle. The two groups united in 1971 to form the People's Feda'ee Guerrillas. A comparison of the theoretical writings of the Feda'een with other major guerrilla movements of the times indicates a common content: the further radicalization of a former purely nationalist movement. Régis Debray's depiction of the Tupamaros sums up the essential character of the Feda'een as an organizational type:

'Both by their links with the past and the nature of their historic enemies, the Tupamaros constitute one branch of a vast river that flows through Latin American history, whose source goes back very far indeed: revolutionary nationalism. . .

'The MLN-Tupamaros is a radical movement, but not in the sense of the word used by the peripatetic and cosmopolitan 'New Left'. It is radical because, in its praxis and its ideology, it has unearthed the popular, federalist, agrarian, libertarian, nationalist, indeed indigenous, roots of Uruguayan society; and because it is itself rooted in a specific past and a collective unconscious previously repressed or

merely glimpsed... Outside the country they are often glorified for their 'internationalism', but this is usually based on a misunderstanding. . . '7

Do not the ideals of Dr. Mosaddeq reappear, however indirectly, in the young Iranian guerrilla movements of the 1960s and early 1970s (particularly the Feda'een)? The concept of 'dependent capitalism' best depicts the new and subtle form in which the old nationalism reappears. This hybrid term, which originates in the Latin American dependency school of thought, expresses a centrist stance between a full-fledged nationalism and revolutionary socialism. It therefore ends up pointing to some form of radical nationalism. It is anti-capitalist to the extent that the latter is 'dependent' and therefore 'unnatural' in some sense; and to the extent that it places 'dependency' before capitalism (say in political action), it is not anti-capitalist. The term has occupied a central place in the theoretical armory of the Iranian left, and in particular amongst the Feda'een.

What Jazani once said about the radical Islamic Mojahedeen also applies to the Feda'een themselves: 'Following the defeat of the national bourgeoisie vanguard, the radical petty bourgeoisie develops its ideology, and with assistance from working-class ideology, rebuilds and gives it a revolutionary spirit.'<sup>8</sup>

An obsession with dependency can be seen in Jazani's works. For example, in his characterization of the Iranian social formation he states: 'The character of dependency which is inseparable from this system expresses foreign exploitation and imperialist domination in our society.'<sup>9</sup> The next logical step is to lump together all strata and classes that in one way or another are in conflict with imperialism, under the catch-all

term 'people', and attribute to them the 'historic mission' of 'anti-imperialist' revolution.

*'Not only the toiling masses and those who are under the domination of foreign and internal exploitation, but the remainder of the national bourgeoisie. . . stands opposed to this foreign system and as a result constitutes part of the people.'*<sup>10</sup>

A similar populist viewpoint - influenced by Maoism - can be seen in M. Ahmad-Zadeh, another Feda'een theoretician. He regards capitalist development in Iran as 'unnatural' and 'artificial', and hence evil:

*'Relying on political and military force, imperialism. . . embarked on an assault on the East and. . . distorted the otherwise natural development of Eastern societies: compared to Western development, it gave rise to an artificial [result].'*<sup>11</sup>

Historically, this argument appeared in the writings of the early 'Utopian socialists'. Unable to explain the nascent capitalism of their times, they attributed social problems to 'unnatural' developments. The city, for example, was to be shunned. Similarly, the Russian populists viewed capitalism as a foreign import. They advocated 'going back to the people' in the countryside. The idea was to bypass capitalism, and preserve a 'natural' mode of social organization.

In Iran, during the 1960s, the migration to the cities from the rural areas was at its peak. 'Between 1966 and 1976 about 2,111,000 migrants left their villages for the cities.'<sup>12</sup> Also between 1960 and 1970 the percentage of the total population living in urban areas rose from 33.9 per cent to 43.1 per cent.

Considering that all major Iranian political developments of this century have been urban in nature, it is not surprising that the radical Iranian intelligentsia was deeply affected by the sufferings of these 'urban villagers'. Many Iranian intellectuals of this period used to go to the public tea-houses to get acquainted with 'the people'. A. Bayat, in his remarkable study of Tehrani factory workers, states: 'Contrary to many people's understanding, the existing tea-houses in Tehran are not places of gathering of the industrial workers. Only 2 out of every 120 workers asserted that they spend their leisure time in the tea-houses.'<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, in the writings of the radical intellectuals of the 1960s and early 1970s, one can trace frequent references to 'the people', in the sense of the oppressed urban poor. All of these writings consider 'imperialism' or 'dependent capitalism' as responsible for the miserable situation of the masses. The Feda'een were convinced that the working class could not play an independent role because of the Shah's repression. Safaii-Farahani, in 'What a Revolutionary Should Know', divides Iranian society into a 'deprived majority' and a 'consumer minority', and argues: 'The deprived majority is the natural heir of national culture. Lack of any relation with colonialist Western society has caused the national values, traditions and ethics to continue in this sector. . . '<sup>14</sup> His main concern is reflected in the question: 'Can the present Iranian bourgeoisie attain the classic development of the Western bourgeoisie?' He responds in the negative. Elsewhere he says: 'This bourgeoisie cannot liberate the domestic market [of Iran] from the international monopolies.' But why is this so important for him? Jalal Al-e Ahmad, the well known Iranian intellectual, in his important book *Gharb-Zadeqi* (Being Struck/Fascinated by

the West) defines gharb-zadeqi as a 'disease', 'a complication originating from the outside'.<sup>15</sup> He looked for a 'third way'.

My critique of all this Third Worldism is not aimed at denying the fact that Iranian peripheral capitalism has been dominated by the world capitalist system. Any revolutionary socialist movement in Iran must deal with the question of dependency as one of its many combined tasks. There are, however, other tasks, concerning women, the nationalities, religion, freedom of speech, control over production, and so on. By viewing 'dependency' as the fundamental question of the movement, a problematic is formed that conditions the final goal. The struggle against dependency becomes separate from the struggle for democracy and against capitalist relations of production, and gains an independent existence. Put differently, the struggle for socialism is postponed to the indefinite future under the guise of formulas such as the 'absence of objective and subjective conditions', and the primacy of national independence.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Iranian revolution and the left**

THE UPHEAVALS of 1978-79 were the overdetermined product of various international and domestic forces whose final outcome and form were not clear until the final months of the process. Considering the Blanquist method of urban guerrilla warfare - which dominated the Iranian left up to 1976 - and the hegemony of the dependency perspective discussed above, and of course the repression of the Shah's regime, the left was in a weak position to start off with. Nevertheless, as the months before and after the uprising clearly showed, Iranian youth increasingly sided with the revolutionary left in general, and the Feda'een in particular. The heroic struggles of

the latter in the 1970s, as well as their effective armed participation in the three days of the February uprising, had attracted in addition some sectors of the petty bourgeoisie and to a lesser extent the workers. But neither before the revolution, nor after, did the left ever have a clear vision of the future. Disregard for theoretical work, and a one-sided emphasis on 'practice', prevented it from formulating a clear strategy whose minimum function might have been political independence from the Islamic movement. This did not happen. The left did not challenge the 'Independence, Freedom and Islamic Republic' slogan of the Islamic movement. Lacking the theoretical basis, the left was swept up by the anti-American and populist tone of the movement.

After the February revolution, the left enjoyed a unique opportunity to expand its activities, and it took advantage of this. The major left organizations penetrated the farthest corners of society (Kurdistan and Turkeman Sahra, for example). In Tehran, Abadan, Tabriz and other industrial centers, the left gained considerable influence. The urban youth and the intelligentsia generally sided with the left. Nevertheless, once again, by relying on formulas like 'anti-imperialist' struggle, the purposefulness of all of this support was lost. For two years after the revolution the clergy were still considered 'progressive', 'anti-imperialist' and hence a 'part of the people'. Consider this short summary of some of the positions of the major left organizations after the revolution:

The Tudeh Party believed that 'the dominant aspect of the national and democratic Iranian revolution is its independence - seeking and anti-imperialist aspect'17

The Fedā'een (before the 1980 split into the Minority and Majority factions) were so preoccupied with 'anti-imperialist' struggle that in one of their 'directives' to the workers of a Tehran factory, they said: 'In unity with the workers and other urban and rural toiling masses, cut the hands of world imperialism from the factories.'18

The Fedā'een Minority (post-1980), in a resolution of their first congress, stated that it 'considers imperialist domination and dependent capitalism to be the primary obstacles on the road of development and evolution of society and the productive forces, and believes that any revolutionary transformation must eliminate them. . . as the first step'.19

The pro-Albanian Peykar organization, which at least made an effort to criticize the extreme versions of the dependency outlook, still could not break out of the same ideological constraints. In a congress resolution we read: 'Due to imperialist domination and the imposition of severe national oppression... the objective and subjective conditions for a socialist revolution are not present, and our revolution at the present stage has a directly democratic and anti-imperialist character.'20

Finally the pro-Chinese Revolutionary Organization (later known as Ranj Baran), whose main slogan was 'Not America, not Russia, an independent and self-reliant Iran', defined the task of the Iranian left as follows: ' . . . the task of real communists and revolutionaries. . . is to emphasize the grand national alliance against American and Russian imperialism and their agents. . . '21

The list could continue almost indefinitely.



The tragic massacre of the left and the Islamic Mojahedeen, which became systematic after June 1981, was an enormous shock. As a result, many people among the left have in recent years started to question the old dogmas and theories. The 'dependency' problematic is increasingly losing its hold. The more enlightened elements of the left have realized the necessity of a new way of looking at things, away from such categories as 'national independence', 'people's democracy', 'dependent capitalism', the 'Third World', and so on.

In conclusion, it should be said that the experiences of the Iranian revolution have reaffirmed that political forces seeking autarky are not necessarily progressive. Opposition to the West may stem from insecurity in face of more developed societies, as in the case of the shi'i clergy. Moreover, as a result of the tragic acts of repression of recent years, the question of democracy has begun to find a place in the thought of the left. Social injustice and political democracy are increasingly viewed as interrelated aspects of the socialist programme. There is also growing recognition of the important social weight of the working class. The Iranian working class, which did not participate as a 'class for itself' in the 1978-79 revolution, is increasingly showing signs of independence. In the post-1981 period, it has been the only social group to engage in collective action against the regime, on some occasions putting it on the defensive. This is largely an outcome of the experiences of the workers themselves in recent years, and the agitation of the left in industrial centers. In short, the Iranian revolution is starting to exhibit signs that at least some lessons are being drawn from the mistakes of the past.

## Notes:

- 1 F. Claudin, From Cominterm to Cominform, part 2, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1975, p466.
- 2 Among the more important theoretical journals of the Tudeh, one should mention Name-ye Mardom. Among Tudeh-affiliated organizations there were the Society for Democratic Youth and the Society for Democratic Women. For more information, see: E. Abrahamian, Iran: Between Two Revolutions, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1982, ch. 6 and 7.
- 3 An important example of such politics is the case of the militant, anti-British strikes of the oil workers in 1946. Three Tudeh leaders did their best to convince the workers to stop striking. At the time the party, in accordance with the line of the CPSU, was avoiding a direct confrontation between Soviet and British policies in Iran.
- 4 For a good general discussion of the concept of the 'Third World', and Third Worldist ideology, see G. Chaliand, Revolution in the Third World, Penguin, New York, 1978.
- 5 19 Bahman Teoric, name of journal, no.4, May 1976, pp11-13 (in Persian).
- 6 Ibid, no.7, July 1976, pp2-9.
- 7 R. Debray, A Critique of Arms, vol. 1, Penguin, 1975, pp212-13.
- 8 19 Bahman Teoric, no. 8, December 1976, pp27-38. See section on 'Revolution's Vanguard and People's Leadership'.
- 9 Ibid, no. 6, January 1976, p99.
- 10 Ibid, no. 3 (2nd edn), August 1976, p6.
- 11 M. Ahmad-Zadeh, Armed Struggle: Both as Strategy and Tactic (4th edn), Tehran, 1979, p49.
- 12 F. Kazemi, Poverty and Revolution in Iran, New York University Press, New York, 1980, p13.
- 13 A. Bayat, 'The Proletarianization Trend of the Tehran Factory Workers', Alefba, no.4, Paris, Fall 1983.
- 14 M. Safaii-Farhani, What A Revolutionary Should Know, p8.
- 15 J. Al-e Ahmad, Gharb-Zadegi, Tehran, no publisher, 1962.

- 16 Robert Brenner, in his critique of Sweezy, Frank and Wallerstein, points out a similar problem with the Latin American 'dependency school of Marxist thought: ' . . . Frank's analysis can be used to support political conclusions he would certainly himself oppose, for so long as incorporation into the world market/world division of labor is seen automatically to breed underdevelopment, the logical antidote to capitalist underdevelopment is not socialism, but autarky.' See his article entitled 'The Origins of Capitalist Development', in H. Alavi and T. Shanin, eds., *Sociology of Developing Societies*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1982, p70.
- 17 Mardom, Fall 1979.
- 18 Kar, no. 35, Fall 1979.
- 19 Kar (Minority), no. 140, Fall 1981.
- 20 Paykar Teoric, no. 2, Winter 1981.
- 21 Setareh Sorkh, Summer 1979.

Book traversal links for Iranian intellectuals and dependency theory  
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