

Reading Arendt in Iran/Reading Iran through Arendt: Speech, Action, and the Question of Street Politics

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Hannah Arendt's political theory emphasizes the political quality of speech, the transformative experience of action, and the plural nature of power. According to her theory of revolution, the vertigo that accompanies the leap into a new political future can only be counterbalanced by the claim that it is really a grounded return to a true historical past. For most readers of Arendt, these are familiar concepts linked to more or less familiar experiences; Arendt inspires us in part because we so rarely encounter the revelatory, constitutive political reality she describes.

Until very recently, this was particularly true for Arendt readers in the postrevolutionary context of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Arendt's skepticism of mass street protest as politics, and her prioritizing of the slow process of speech over the immediate gratification of confrontation, were deeply frustrating to a younger generation of Iranian citizen readers. Having grown up after the revolutionary period of the 1970s and during the blocked reforms of the Khatami presidency, these students had experienced neither the fervor of mass uprising nor the tepid satisfaction of the kind of local street march most of us in the West have participated in almost without thinking. In the spring of 2007, the students in my Iranian graduate seminar on the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt fetishized street action (without ever having experienced it) and disdained political talk (having experienced too much of it). By the summer of 2009, their experience had been transformed: having experienced both the pluralist unity of collective political action and the absolutist negation of state violence, their political landscape, both

intellectual and practical, had been revolutionized.

This paper is a double reading: of Arendt through the lens of recent political upheavals in Iran (the contested election of June 2009 and the subsequent mass protests and emergence of the Green Movement); of contemporary Iranian national events through the lens of Arendt's political analyses. The dual perspective is balanced on my experience teaching a graduate seminar on Hannah Arendt's political philosophy at the Iranian Institute of Philosophy in Tehran, Iran in Spring 2007. Having written extensively on Arendt and been doing fieldwork in Iran for a number of years, the seminar was my opportunity to bring together my theoretical and empirical political interests. Teaching Arendt to my Iranian students gave me a better understanding of both her work and their experience, often in unexpected ways. But the 2009 June Presidential election and its aftermath have shifted my own perspective, back from looking at Arendt's writing through my students' eyes, to thinking about Iranian political events through the interpretive constructs of Arendt's political theory.

In particular, this paper focuses on the possibilities for recognizing transformative political experience when, despite all our expectations, it may be happening in front of us. Writing about the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Michel Foucault mentioned that political concepts like (Rousseau's) collective will seem like hypotheticals ("like God, like the soul, something one would never encounter") until they do—all too fleetingly—appear.¹ Arendt's theories of action and revolution are somewhat similar; a provocative alternative that usually has little relevance to what passes for politics in modern life. But what are the implications for citizenship and new futures when individuals have experienced the open-ended ordinary process that is Arendtian political action? Reading Arendt in Iran, and reading Iran through Arendt, may provide insight into some of these very contemporary questions.

¹ For this quote, and the rest of Foucault's observations on the possibilities and puzzles of the Iranian Revolution, see the Appendix (which includes the Foucault writings) in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the UIC Great Cities Institute*

The Course

In the Spring of 2007, I taught a graduate seminar on Hannah Arendt. Although I have taught individual Arendt texts before in both undergraduate and graduate courses, this was my first opportunity to teach a full course with an explicit focus on Arendt's writing and ideas. It was a normal graduate course: we didn't have time to read everything, so I selected the readings according to certain interrelated conceptual trends among her arguments. The students wrote weekly analytical papers, and a final seminar essay. There were about a dozen students enrolled, with a few extra auditors, and a core group of three really dedicated and gifted individuals (one woman, two men). There was one not especially gifted student who tended to talk too much and annoyed the other students. We met weekly, plus additional hours for individual consultation, and I was always a bit rushed on the days I was teaching to be sure that I was fully prepared, had organized my notes, taken care of student details, and managed to eat lunch before walking into the classroom in mid-afternoon. In other words, according to my experience, a very normal course. The only exceptional thing about this course was where it was: in the Iranian Institute of Philosophy in Tehran, Iran.

The *Moasaseh-ye Pazhooheshi-ye Hekmat va Falsafeh Iran* (the direct translation is the Iranian Institute of Metaphysics, Wisdom and Philosophy, but the official translation is the Iranian Institute of Philosophy or IIP) is an independent academic institute affiliated with but independent from the University of Tehran, which is the oldest and the most prestigious humanities and social sciences university (as opposed to the science, technical, and engineering schools) in Iran. Every major academic discipline at the university has a separate affiliated research institute, housed and funded

Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 253.

independently, with an explicit mandate to encourage scholarly exchange, original research, and intellectual inquiry. When Haberman, Rorty, and other foreign philosophical dignitaries come to Iran, their lectures are given at the IIP. Often, these lectures are overflow, standing-room only events. A few years earlier, when I had gone to the Institute to hear Habermas speak, the lecture room, the verandahs, and the grounds were so packed that even with the French doors wide open and a loudspeaker system, we couldn't get close enough to understand anything and made do, like many others, with hanging out in the farther reaches of the Institute gardens, talking philosophy and politics in a picnic-like atmosphere.

Some of the Institutes, like the IIP, also run small, very selective doctoral program. Some, but not all, of my seminar students were enrolled in the Institute, but most of them used the Institute for its intended purpose; as an affiliated resource that can provide a more open environment for less politicized, i.e. less controlled, teaching and discussion. Although good work still comes out of the major Iranian universities, both students and faculty are under constant surveillance, and the atmosphere is always more pressured. Precisely because the Iranian universities have always been a source of student resistance and opposition to the state, both under the Pahlavi monarchy and since the Revolution, the universities are fragmented between intellectual and student critics of the authorities, and loyalist administrators and student pressure groups who enforce correct ideological positions. This tension has become even more pronounced since the first election of President Ahmadinejad, who supervised a new, quieter purge (compared to the post-revolutionary closure of the universities from 1980-83) of faculty and administrators who were seen as inadequately Islamic according to the views of the most hard-line elements of the regime.² This is the significance of the Institutes' combined affiliation and

² In the repression after the contested June 2009 Presidential elections, pressure on universities, students, academics, and intellectuals became even greater, including on the Institute of Philosophy. One of the regime spokesman went so far as to ascribe the intellectual organization of the Green Movement as being maneuvered by Richard Rorty, **UIC Great Cities Institute**

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independence from the university system; it has been a legitimate place of restrained but authentic academic freedom in what is otherwise a highly restricted institutional environment. During a period when “filtering” (i.e. censorship) of the internet was particularly intense, and ordinary public and university servers couldn’t even access the *London Review of Books*, the computers in the Institute library were never blocked. I have to admit I don’t know if anyone there ever tried to access pornography sites, which are always heavily controlled in Iran. But the main problem for Institute students, faculty, and visitors was not the usual Iranian state controls, but the access controls Western university libraries and journals put on their own materials; if you don’t have the membership password, you can’t get in. As paradoxical as their tolerated freedom in the midst of social and political crackdowns can seem, the Institutes have a logical role in the organization of the Islamic Republic: if you are an ordinary university student or overworked faculty member, the government makes your life difficult and restricts your ability to explore ideas and educate yourself about alternative possibilities. But if you are a really serious student or intellectually dedicated faculty member, the kind who will be more trouble than you are worth if you can’t dig out a particular article about neoliberalism or Emanuel Kant, the state provides you with a small but available outlet where you can read and talk about ideas to your heart’s content. This is where I taught my seminar on Hannah Arendt.

My class was held in the same overflowing room where Habermas spoke, but we only occupied the front table and first rows. Just as I am sure I will never have an office as nice as the office I occupied for the quarter I was a guest lecturer at UCSD, when I had a view of the Pacific ocean through mimosa trees and over an open green playing field, I am sure I will never again hold a semester-long seminar in a classroom that had been the main salon of a small but jewel-like 19th century urban

Jurgen Habermas, and several of the other international speakers who had given speeches and seminars over the years at the Institute of Philosophy.

mansion. The Institutes' privileged status are reflected not only in their internet access, but in their real estate; they tend to be housed either in elegant mid-19th century mansion compounds in the old downtown (like the Fine Arts and Philosophy Institutes), or late 20th century estates in the cooler, greener northern foothills of the city (where Political Science is located). Always walled, the Institutes, especially those downtown, are literal oases of serenity in the midst of a very polluted, noisy, and overcrowded urban landscape. But the IIP neighborhood is particularly evocative. Around the corner and down the street is the Vatican Embassy and a neighboring Catholic Church; parallel to the *kucheh* (alley or small street) entrance to the IIP is the Kucheh Prof. Henri Corbin. The neighborhood is a remnant of one version of the "old" Tehran: the 19th and early 20th century city of urban cosmopolitanism and art deco architecture, a dream of elite hybridity (before the term was fashionable) that incorporated indigenous and borrowed cultural traditions. It's now shabby and somewhat forsaken, but it's still there. And although I have been traveling to Iran for a number of years, doing research and working with students and colleagues there, and although I have felt comfortable in the culture for some time, finding this neighborhood, working in it and passing through it on a regular basis, made me feel at home. This, then, is where I taught Arendt.

Arendt in Iran

There is an intensity about studying Philosophy in Iran that is different from studying Philosophy, or even Political Theory, here. Ideas matter there, not only as an intellectual avocation but sometimes as a matter of literal freedom or incarceration, autonomy or subjugation. It is exhilarating to teach in Tehran. But it is also a further responsibility. The Iranian Institute of Philosophy was a sphere of relative freedom, but teaching a seminar on Arendt, including Arendt's work on anti-Semitism and Eichmann, in a politicized context in which the President liked to make very provocative statements on

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the historical veracity of the Holocaust, was a somewhat daunting prospect.

Along with selected articles and essays, we read four books: *On Violence*, *The Human Condition*, the three volumes of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. We didn't read *On Revolution*, which in some ways would seem to have been the obvious choice. But although, even in Ahmadinejad's Iran, I knew we would have no official problems reading and discussing a book that takes as its premise (for all the controversy of its specific argument) the historical and moral reality of the Holocaust, I was hesitant to teach a book that explicitly argues that there are two stages to a fully successful revolution, and that it is quite possible to succeed at the initial project of liberation while failing to succeed at subsequent project of the foundation of a new political polity.³

In fact, the text that provided the sharpest insights, for myself and my students, was the one that might have seemed to be least controversial: *The Human Condition*. I hadn't thoroughly considered *The Human Condition* for years, and when I was writing both my dissertation and my book, I was happy to characterize it (and in some ways dismiss it) as the most "nostalgic" of Arendt's political writings. I still found her distinctions among labor, work, and action provocative, but her positing of the *polis* as the free space of political action and being I had found to be historically problematic and overly idealistic. But *The Human Condition* produced unexpected resonances, in surprising directions, when considered in the Iranian context. For myself, the seminar discussion of Arendt's hostility to the social took on new meaning when identified with the non-political, absolute cultural authority referenced in the private (familial) sphere. You could argue with government laws or religious edicts, but when presented with familial demands for obedience in the apparently always minor but nonetheless encompassing matters of doing things according to "our tradition" (always presented in the singular), the social became

³ I may have been overly cautious, but this was the period when the government had arrested a series of high profile bi-national Iranian-American academics and researchers, most of whom I'd worked with directly, and if you want to keep working in Iran, you learn when to be cautious.

recognizable as the main forum for individual repression (especially for young women). There was possible leverage against any other temporal authority. But faced with the supposed cumulative investment of generations, any one individual's preference not to do things the way (it was claimed) they had always been done, inevitably was experienced and narrated as an assertion of shallow self-indulgence in the face of massed implicit, and sometimes explicit, expectation. Expectation is not the same as demand, which can be argued against or resisted. But the expectations of the social brooked no resistance, in that the category of resistance was not recognized in matters so minor as social practices. In the postwar West, one sign of Western identity is the relaxation of familial generational ties and the emancipation (or alienation) of the individual from traditionally defined social obligations. But contemporary Iran is probably a lot more like prewar Europe, and Arendt's resolute recognition of the implacable and confining expectations of the social suddenly made sense.

Despite my surprise at the shift in perspective reading *The Human Condition* in Iran provided for my own conceptual understandings, I was not prepared for the intensity of my students' response. They were not especially concerned with the issues that are most often critically targeted in that book: the exclusion of women and slaves from the sphere of freedom; the consignment of labor and work to a subsidiary role in human experience; the hostility to social or economic analysis. No. What really bothered them was Arendt's conception of political action as speech. Vehemently, they took up and argued against this definition, and its apparent implication that real politics was not street politics; real politics was the kind of talkative persuasion they associated with a frustrated reform movement and its inability to challenge an authoritarian regime.

These were philosophy students who longed for a theory of uprising. Adamantly committed to a democratic view were themselves intensely frustrated by the lock on governmental power being maintained by what was obviously a very small faction of the political community. They were further frustrated by the reform

movement's apparent unwillingness to challenge the regime directly, and its focus on press freedom and intellectual argument and other forms of talk. These were philosophers who wanted action, and having a political theorist (whether me or Arendt) argue that the highest form of political action was a collective process of self-disclosure through speech—in other words, more talk—did not make them happy.

Yet of course this was discussion in a seminar, where speech was taken absolutely seriously. No one confused speech with jargon, whether when speaking among themselves or attending to the public pronouncements of political and administrative authorities. The students were remarkably free of the academic lingo that can be so seductive to some burgeoning intellectuals, and later in the course they were appreciative of Arendt's argument that Eichmann prevented himself from thinking about his actions because he had immersed himself in a language of noncommunicative bureaucratese. Their frustration with their own political landscape was not that public officials said or revealed nothing in their statements, but that the statements, rather than being action, seemed to prevent it.

In that classroom I realized, in a way I hadn't in all my many previous conversations with young Iranian activists and intellectuals, that despite their democratic credentials and individual integrity, they had only a very narrow experience of civic engagement and political pluralism. The Arendtian give-and-take of mutual persuasion, policy negotiation, and stable political change, all of which could arguably have been recognized to have been occurring during the Khatami Presidency and reform period, seemed as nothing to them. They were trapped by the legacy of the Revolution: political action as absolute liberation, even if the foundation of the new (Islamic) Republic got rather stuck. Despite their serious, scholarly commitment to the conceptual argument, and the fact that a number of students were involved in various ways with student activism, they didn't want to talk, they wanted to do something. It struck me that I was probably the only person in our classroom who had participated in a march or a

mass protest: the experience of being part of a collective action but also completely anonymous, the opposite of the kind of self-revealing political engagement through mutual speech that Arendt describes.

Being part of a march—the epitome of street politics—is a phenomenon familiar to Iranians, even those too young to have experienced it. The Revolution was built from strikes and street politics. Strikes and street politics liberated the country from the Shah, but it was civil war that founded the institutional reality of the new state, and consolidated the transition from one authoritarian executive regime to another. In 2007, the power and restraint of collective action was a conceptual possibility for my students, but not an experienced reality. Their knowledge of effective political action was all street and some charismatic leadership; as citizens, they had little familiarity of either institutional mobilization or grass-roots organization. I suppose this should have been obvious, but it wasn't necessarily. These are people who have read extensively in multiple languages (the seminar itself was conducted in English, which is not unusual for Institute programs), and have deeply questioned the theoretical assumptions of their own and others' political traditions. They are fluent in ideas, but they lacked practical experience. Children of the Revolution, they didn't romanticize violence, but they longed for the drama and immediacy of street politics: action as confrontation, the manifestation of democratic power and agency in the public realm.

Iran through Arendt

In late Spring 2007, in that gracious 19th century classroom in the Iranian Institute of Philosophy in Tehran, I found a change of elites. The authoritarian structure might remain the same, even if the ideology and personnel are entirely different. I argued that the premise for active democratic citizenship is inevitably Arendtian: individualistic, pluralistic, respectful of persons and the power of speech to make a difference and make the world. The students were attentive, intrigued. But I wasn't sure they had been convinced.

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Almost exactly two years later, I happened to be in Spain, trying to get the preliminary Iranian Presidential election results. Over the next days and weeks it proved to be: first the filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf speaking for the Mousavi campaign from Paris (and being translated by graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi), explaining that the campaign headquarters had been closed down and key personnel arrested, and that Mousavi had first been informed by the Ministry of the Interior that he had won, and then himself seen the subsequent official announcement claiming the vote for Ahmadinejad; Mir Hossein Mousavi's own refusal to accept the official result. Even as primary reformist strategists and campaign organizers were arrested, new layers of loose organization kept emerging from the campaigns, providing a weak but real structure to the popular response. The color green, which had been associated with Mousavi's campaign, became a symbol of democratic expectation and legitimacy; the Green Movement emerged, even though no one knew exactly what it was.

I would argue that the Iranian Green Movement is best understood as Arendtian political action, with all the real confusion that implies.⁴ Within days, there were the massive, peaceful, silent marches across the major cities. At that point, I realized that my seminar students had finally gained their experience of street politics. But instead of the dream of immediate confrontation they had seemed to cherish, they were displaying something else. Ironically, those massive, silent green marches were not the rowdy protests of the revolutionary era that my students had seemed to have in mind and so desired. Silent and almost leaderless but coherent in their presentation of a collective political agency, the marches presented street politics as speech, with a multiple, single voice not speaking a clear message: "Where is my vote?"

⁴ I am not the only one to make the connection between the post-election Green Movement and Arendt's political theory. See Nima Emami, "The Consolation of Philosophy: Hannah Arendt and the Green Movement" in the online journal *Tehran Review*, May 21, 2010/30 Ordibehesht 1389 < <http://tehranreview.net/articles/2780>>. Emami focuses on Arendt's distinctions between making and acting and violence and power, to emphasize that the nonviolent Green

Can silence be a form of speech? Perhaps to the same extent that open restraint from action can be a form of action. The formal name for this is civil disobedience. Prompted by the American civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s, Arendt's careful study of civil disobedience as a genuinely political response to delegitimized state authority is strikingly relevant to the Iranian Green Movement actions more than forty years later.⁵ Arendt is precise in her analysis: civil disobedience must not only be performed in public, but it must be part of a public enactment of nonviolent participatory politics. Civil disobedience presumes democracy, and democracy presumes both plurality and citizenship. Civil disobedience considered as action cannot be an individualized gesture, no matter how morally heroic, and in this Arendt implicitly questions Thoreau's status as a civil disobedient even while appreciating the strength of his legacy. Arendt states explicitly that "the situation of the civil disobedient bears no analogy to either [the conscientious objector or legal challenger] for the simple reason that he never exists as a single individual; he can function and survive only as a member of a group."⁶ This means that civil disobedience is a phenomenon (rather than an occurrence) that emerges only when citizens (not subjects) presume a norm of (democratic) government accountability and represent that norm back to the state. "Civil disobedience arises when a significant number of citizens have become convinced either that the normal channels of change no longer function, and grievances will not be heard or acted upon, or that, on the contrary, the government is about to change and has embarked upon and persists in modes of action whose legality and constitutionality are open to grave doubt."⁷ June 2009 in the Islamic Republic, indeed.

Over the tumultuous events of next several months, inside and outside Iran, there was concern

movement is a pluralistic example of action, while the instrumental violence of the regime lies within the (nonpolitical) category of making.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience" in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

⁶ "Civil Disobedience," 55.

⁷ "Civil Disobedience," 74.

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that the Green Movement was either only a narrow candidate protest or a radical rejection of the entire Islamic Republic; that it was being manipulated by disgruntled losing candidates or that it was an amorphous mass with no leadership at all; that it was the long awaited Iranian counter-revolution or nothing of consequence. The insistence, by observers and participants alike, that the Iranian Green Movement conform to simplistic conceptual and material political expectations is further challenged by Arendt's very careful analysis. Her point is precisely that it is hard to draw a clear distinction between civil disobedience and revolution, despite the apparently stoic nonviolence of the one and the radical challenge of the other. "The civil disobedient shares with the revolutionary the wish 'to change the world,' and the changes he wishes to accomplish can be drastic indeed—as, for instance, in the case of Gandhi, who is always quoted as the great example, in this context, of nonviolence. (Did Gandhi accept the 'frame of established authority,' which was British rule in India? Did he respect the 'general legitimacy of the system of laws' in the colony?)"⁸ Arendt reminds us not only that some political action is civil disobedience, but that civil disobedience is often radical and even revolutionary in its effect, if quiet in its method. The inevitably slow process of democratizing an existing state can be a more profound change than taking the state in a revolutionary moment, as Arendt has demonstrated in other historical considerations,⁹ and the Iranians have learned through hard recent experience.

The analytic perplexity about the Green Movement kept reminding me of Foucault's vividly attentive observations in 1978 and 1979 of the Iranian Revolution itself. At the time, the Iranian Revolution didn't fit the Western conceptual definitions of a modern revolution: Iran wasn't a colonized state; there was no vanguard party; the unexpected role of religion as a radicalizing political ideology as opposed to its assumed political use as a popular opiate.¹⁰ The Iranian Revolution introduced the world

⁸ "Civil Disobedience," 77.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

¹⁰ Foucault in Afary and Anderson, pp. 183-89, 198-203, 220-23, 250-60.

to the global significance of modern political Islam, but most observers treated it as an aberration or a throwback. Foucault's insistence on the need to consider Iranian events as apprehendable social and political manifestations of dynamic power relations, rather than either predictable or confounding moves in a predetermined conceptual frame, was controversial but prescient. Thirty years on, the Iranian Green Movement has revived some of the tropes of the revolutionary movement, adapted some fresh ones, and again presents observers and participants alike with a seemingly familiar, but also unexpectedly new, problem of interpretation. Is the Green Movement a mass political uprising or a mob of disgruntled elites? Or is it a form of civil disobedience, with all the potential limits and transformatory democratic possibilities that term implies?

Civil disobedience is the reworking of recognizably ordinary practices within the accepted framework of political meaning to load the significance of those practices in a different, but fundamentally central, direction. It is an attempt to shift the contested balance of hegemony. During the Iranian Revolution, the evening rooftop calls of "Allah-o Akbar" signified an encompassing moral unity and the righteousness of sacral authority against the temporal, secular claims of the monarchy. But in summer 2009, the same rooftop chants signified the popular re-appropriation of the democratic potential of the revolution, against the formal religiosity of the theocratic state. Similarly, other post-revolutionary practices have been reclaimed within a shared national framework of political signification. Although the state has for years been building an enormous Tehran Friday prayer mosque (which, now completed, is being used for trade shows because it is far too big for the regular congregation),¹¹ the politically important, state-sponsored Tehran Friday prayers have continued to be held in a hall on the campus of the Tehran University. Hotbeds of revolutionary fervor (both Islamic and leftist and of various combinations) thirty-odd years ago, the universities are now centers of reformist

student activism and under suspicion as nurturing-grounds of intellectual critique. Despite this, the Tehran Friday prayer sermon has remained a national platform for institutional conservatism and hard-line positioning, and its location on the university campus only emphasizes the contested ideological and institutional legacy of the Revolution.

On July 17, 2009 Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former President and present leader of both the powerful Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council,¹² gave the Friday prayer sermon at the University of Tehran. Rafsanjani is considered a wily pragmatist rather than a principled reformer, and has been at times one of the most universally hated national political figures, a status that heavily contributed to the election success of Ahmadinejad in 2005 when the two competed as Presidential candidates. But the blatant inconsistencies accompanying the official election results, the severity of the repression mounted against the peaceful protesters (including Neda Agha-Soltan's death on June 20th), and the apparent consolidation of the government around a very narrow and exclusive faction connected with the Supreme Leader Khamenei, President-elect Ahmadinejad, and the Revolutionary Guards, meant Rafsanjani's insistence on leading the prayers, and therefore delivering the public sermon from the biggest national platform, was regarded as an important challenge from within the mainstream of the government against the new extremism and in guarded support of the legitimacy of the Green Movement.

Although access to the campus was restricted, the audience for the sermon was huge, filling the

11 See Kaveh Ehsani, "The Politics of Public Space in Tehran's International Book Fair," unpublished paper delivered at MESA, 2006.

12 The Assembly of Experts is an elected body formally responsible for electing and if necessary dismissing the Supreme Leader; the Expediency Council is an administrative assembly appointed by the Supreme Leader to mediate between the Parliament and the Guardian Council; the Guardian Council is the appointed assembly of jurists who determine if parliamentary laws are constitutionally Islamic and vet candidates for election according to their Islamic credentials. Although there are sharp rivalries between factions within these bodies, membership in any one is an indication of insider status within the clerical nomenclature of the state.

streets and neighborhood surrounding the entire university.¹³ This was a tense moment for the regime, since the Friday prayer sermon is an official institution, but was in this case also an opportunity for the Green Movement protesters to come back into the streets legitimately. There was a heavy police presence, but the state certainly couldn't openly dissuade people from attending an official event (a similar dynamic has occurred on other official, state-sanctioned public holidays, including Al-quods/Palestine Day and the mourning festival of Moharram). In this context of repoliticized religious meaning, young women and men who might not otherwise observe the prayers, let alone practice them publicly, turned the shared space of the streets into a collective forum for civil disobedience by praying together, side by side. In Iran, women as well as men attend public prayers at the mosque, but they are physically separated, usually with the men at the front and the women at the back or to the side (foregrounding the women's bodily prostrations would presumably distract the men from their proper concentration). But the prayer space of the streets was fully integrated. Men and women stood side by side listening to Rafsanjani, and they prostrated themselves side by side in the collective movements of Muslim religious devotion.¹⁴ On that Friday outside the Tehran University campus, shared public prayer became a recognizable form of peaceful protest against the violent authoritarianism of the theocratic state.

As soon as the sermon and the prayers were finished, police and members of the paramilitary *basij* began dispersing the crowds with batons and teargas. Those public prayers were not innocuous, and the repressive elements of the state did not mistake them as such. Like silence, ritual prayer does

¹³ Estimates are that this was the most widely attended Friday sermon since the Revolution, with possibly one million persons filling the streets and area around the university.

¹⁴ Despite the widespread modern assumption that religion (especially Islam) is inherently traditionalist rather than socially or politically progressive, religious identity and religious spaces have often provided the main resources for democratic political mobilization. For the incorporation of religious spaces into the "free spaces" of political activism, see Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America*,

not usually count as speech. But as civil disobedience, both collective silence and collective prayer can count as action. And action, according to Arendt, is precisely that which is open-ended and plural, rather than instrumental or hierarchically fixed. It is by nature unpredictable and creative, and therefore especially threatening to those who want to restrict change, whether in terms of the social organization of public prayers or the democratic accountability of the state.

Action creates the free space of the political, and the community of individual political actors who share it. This is the paradoxical tradition of Aristotelian (and Arendtian) politics as active being: a dynamic process rather than an institutional technique, and therefore inevitably evanescent and hard to pin down. This is also the contemporary reality of the Green Movement. Its collective self-definition has emerged from the back-and-forth enunciations of its own members, whether through anonymous graffiti, blogs, and twitters or the relatively rare public statements of its better known leading figures.¹⁵ In this sense it has no clear leadership, but that is because it is action, which means it exists through its own self-creation of a public sphere with multiple and diverse actors. It is new, and as such it is spontaneous, open-ended, and productive of further action which may continue to produce unpredictable results. And it has been resolutely non-violent, despite the harsh repression that has been directed at many of its most ordinary public participants.

It is not clear if the Green Movement is revolutionary, but that may be the wrong question to ask, at least in practical terms. Is civil disobedience revolutionary? These are philosophical questions. Under different circumstances, they would be appropriate for the students in my Iranian philosophy seminar. Yet those students, so frustrated during our discussions with Arendt's scepticism at street

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). "Free spaces are never a pure phenomenon. In the real world, they are always complex, shifting, and dynamic...," 19.

¹⁵ A year after the 2009 election, the movement is less visibly active in the streets, but developing a strategy of considered opposition to the anti-democratic forces in the state. The Green Charter posted on Mousavi's website on

politics, have themselves remade the Arendtian potential of the street. And they have suffered the consequences. But they are not unaware of themselves as political actors, and as Arendtian political actors at that. Their questions are no longer naïve; political experience has caught up to desire. But it is precisely because of their new familiarity with the fragile but transformative power of political action that the role of theory is also revitalized. Like speech, sometimes theory is more than just talk, and in one version, according to Arendt, it is a kind of telling of stories, a making real by recognizing and narrating the blur of urgent experience. Without narrative, action, no matter how significant, is lost to its moment of immediacy. Action is rare enough. The least we can do is to try to recognize it when we see it, and acknowledge its challenge, in the moment, a year on, and in the future.

June 15, 2010 is an indication of this move towards a certain formalization of its principles, after a year of state repression has blocked street politics but not succeeded in crushing the political revival.

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