

Sickness of the Revolution

Loss, Fetishism, and the Impossibility of Politics

MILAD ODABAEI

ABSTRACT Conventional accounts of the 1979 Iranian revolution emphasize the loss of the revolution's "true" spirit in the violence of the Islamic state. In contrast, this essay foregrounds a recurring dream of parricide in the generation of children of revolutionaries to explore the fetishization of the revolution in such accounts. This dream refracts the violence and loss emphasized in the narratives of the revolution. In dethroning the fetish of the revolution, it enables a confrontation with the losses and limits of earlier theological and political paradigms indexed by the event of revolution. As a form of anthropological defamiliarization, the dream thus offers an opportunity for a speculative encounter with loss as a political-theological horizon of renewal.

KEYWORDS dreaming, Iran, revolution, loss, fetishism

Just as I pressed the shutter their mother grabbed my phone and hid it in her purse. [The skewed image captures the event.] She turned to E (her older daughter) and me to state that if anyone asked about our visit or confiscated my phone, we would tell them that we were about to get married and were only there for her father's blessing.

Her father's body lay in one of the mass graves under our feet. Upon arriving, we had looked around for guards who could hassle us or prevent our entry. But no one was there. Slowly we began to tune out the city and turn toward the dead. After a while, when we had come together again at a corner of the lot, I noticed the trees and the cross on the dome of the church through barbed wire over the wall facing us. I was struck by the contrast between the unmarked, deserted grounds of Khavaran on our side and the signs of nature and God on the other. This is when I pulled out my flip phone to snap a picture.

E and I were taken aback by her mother's impromptu plan. After a moment of bewilderment, E broke the silence: "Congratulation agha Milad," she joked, combining English and Persian. "You finally made groom!" "And at last a bride," I responded. We hugged, laughed, and left shortly after.

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FIGURE 1. Khavaran, summer 2014. Photograph by Milad Odabaei.

Located between the Christian and Bahai cemeteries in southeast Tehran, Khavaran is a mass grave of Marxist activists who were executed by the emerging state in the years following the 1979 Iranian revolution. The bodies were dumped there en masse without an Islamic burial because the authorities deemed those who refused to recant their political affiliations no-longer Muslim. They were therefore ineligible for proper burials in Tehran's main cemetery, Behesht-e Zahra, which carries the name of the Prophet's daughter (Zahra).

Visualizing Disaster

E kept dreaming of killing him. In the dream her mother would be by her side, but at the last moment she would abandon her to act alone. Every time, she would jolt into waking life in terror. To confirm that it was just a dream, E would look for her younger sister, with whom she shared the only bedroom of their apartment in the Enghelab (Revolution) neighborhood of central Tehran.

"He" was her stepfather, the only man her mother would marry after her father. Like them, he was also a member of the community born into violence and loss in the wake of the revolution. He, too, lived in the shadow of an event that was made palpable not in language or in terms of social fact but by the disappearance of E's father from their lives and through the prohibition on his remembrance.

Between 1986 (when E was about four years old and her father was arrested) and 1988 (when she was barely six and last saw him), she would regularly visit him in Evin prison. She would dress up as if she were going to a party. She would wear dresses and fill the many pockets her mother had sewn into them with sweets. She would patiently endure public transit and the prison waiting room in anticipation of delivering them to her father. One door would close, and another would open

into a room where her father would greet her on his knees. He would hug her and carry her in his arms. He would sit her on his lap and sing her “Maraa beboos” (“Kiss Me”).

Kiss me, kiss me
For the last time, as I bid you farewell, leaving to my fate
.....
Hand in hand with the sailors amidst the storm
We must pass the storm without regard for our lives
.....
Beautiful girl, tonight I am your guest
I will stay with you
Until you put your lips on mine
Beautiful girl, the spark of your eyes
And your innocent tears
Light up my night¹

One day, in the summer of 1988, the visitations stopped. When E asked for her father, her mother told her that they were no longer allowed to see him. Shortly thereafter her mother let her know that her father was no longer alive. Around this time, everything changed. But E did not fully understand how or why. Indeed, while she has since learned about the historical circumstances of the event—the revolution, the war—she still does not know the details surrounding her father’s execution, or even the specifics of her parents’ activism.

The English psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott has conceptualized as “unlived experience” experiences that have not been incorporated into the time and formation of the self (ego) and, as such, do not fit the traditional model of traumatic repression or the unconscious more generally. Since unlived experiences cannot be put in the past, they engender a search for relevant detail in the future.

My conversations with E, which were carried out largely in 2014 and often included her younger sister (A), were spaces of “afterwardsness” (*Nachträglichkeit*), where new facts would emerge that bore on the unlived experiences of their childhoods and the feelings of stuckness and struggle that they have come to identify as the mark of their adult lives.²

The time and details of our conversations corresponded to belated (*nachträglich*) queries borne from the anthropological history of the Iranian revolution. This was true not only for them but also for me. I was born a few months after her to parents within the same activist community. Our conversation and my writing about it here were made possible by communal ties that preceded us, compelled us to speak to one another, and, in transference, relate to the queer registers of our respective

lives.³ Like meditations on dreams, these were tentative, uncertain, and open-ended conversations that were attempts at establishing relations where there were none. But, as I will suggest in the following pages, precisely because of their speculative nature, they hold lessons for a critical theory of the revolution and for the contemporary economies of violence and loss in Iran and the broader Middle East.

E's dream locates the revolution in a history of violence and loss that questions the possibility of patrimony, cultural lineage, and political community. It reveals the ideological, affective, and phantasmatic investments that sustain the representations of the revolution as a monumental event. In contrast, the dream addresses the revolution as the limit of the generational transmission of history and tradition. It invites a reckoning with revolts that have come to assume a repetitive logic in the region as the impossibility of politics.

Loss, the Revolution

The 1979 Iranian revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic are often spoken about in terms of violence and loss. Despite four decades of debate, these conversations remain radically circumscribed: revolutionaries, pundits, and scholars limit the discussion of loss to the loss of the revolution's "true" spirit while identifying the state and geopolitics as the primary sources of violence. They point to the convergence of the domestic suppression of dissent and the war with Iraq (1980–88), which together devastated Iranian politics and decided the fate of the revolution.

In this story, the history of the revolution is narrated in terms of its "before" and "after": a genuine popular revolt was hijacked by an Islamic faction led by Ayatollah Khomeini. This practice of periodization, grounded in the secular teleology of homogenous and empty time, dislocates the revolution from the losses of earlier political and theological paradigms and the violence borne of these specific losses. Once dehistoricized in this way, the revolution is narrated as an eternal struggle between the forces of good and evil. Terms such as *liberal*, *nativist*, *secular*, *Marxist*, *Islamist*, *feminist*, *fascist*, *anti-imperialist*, *anticolonial*, *reactionary*, or *Third-Worldist*—which tell us as much about the critics' contemporary ideologies as about the attachments of yesterday's revolutionaries—sustain this narrative.

The methodological positivism and populism that dominate theoretical accounts of the revolution only reinforce the limit of conversations about the revolution, violence, and loss.⁴ By identifying and representing various agents or processes within a priori categories, historians and social scientists reproduce (in the guise of objectivity) the juridical discourse of the victim and the perpetrator.⁵ We are left with a politics of recuperation. However implicitly, we are invited to bear witness to the moment of popular uprising and the sacrifice of yesterday's revolutionaries as the harbinger not only of moral lessons and political cues but of hope and futurity itself.

This is a scripted politics of memory bereft of risks and revelations. We know what to remember, and, lest we forget, the evils of the Islamic state and global imperialism (or capitalism, neoliberalism, etc.) are already there to anchor us toward the good fight.

Dreams and Futurity

I began this essay in the unusual space of a dream, because dreams uniquely inhabit violence and loss as part of the anthropological condition of history. Dreams uncomfortably point out, as Sigmund Freud did in his reflections on war and death, that the tendency toward death and destruction is not opposed to the movements of human civilization.⁶ Traumatic dreams, such as those analyzed by Frantz Fanon in the colony, reflect the inability of culture (*kulturarbeit*) to sublimate unconscious drives into symbolic and spiritual creations.⁷ In this way, dreams can attest to the limits of a politics of recognition and how, incapacitated, a culture “testifies against its members.”⁸

On the other hand, and precisely because of their capacity to bear witness to the limit of symbolic transformation and human fraternity, dreams have long been understood as a source of wisdom.⁹ As Reinhart Koselleck noted in relation to the terror of the Third Reich, dreams have the capacity to register otherwise unimaginable terror.¹⁰ In modernity, dreams can be oracular insofar as they reveal the contingent nature of violence and loss that have been routinized to the point that they are hardly noticeable. Without assuming and reifying a paradigm of social representation (as in modern historiography or law, for example), dreams register violence and loss at the limit of representation.¹¹ In other words, they abandon the defensive (historiographic and juridical) project of identifying and containing violence and loss. Instead, dreams allow us to inhabit the phenomena identified as “violence” and “loss” as part of the impersonal register of human history.¹² Therefore—and even while they enact defensive measures of idealization, forgetting, and disavowal—dreams can be received as a form of anthropological defamiliarization that render commonsensical truths untimely. Under certain conditions of reception and elaboration, which need not be limited to a psychoanalytic session, they can help dethrone familiar political fetishes toward yet-unknown futures.

In Persian, dreams are said to be “witnessed” or “seen” (as opposed to “had”). The terms for rendering received dream images into words are *ta'bir* and *ebrat* (Arabic: *'ibra*), which have a rich conceptual history in Islamic and Persianate traditions. In the discourse of Ibn Khaldun, for example, *ta'bir* denotes “figuration” and “imagination” while *'ibra* invokes “a passage . . . across incommensurable places, spaces, languages, or times” and “a lesson to be drawn from things past.”¹³ Such rendering (interpretation, figuration, passage) is central to how the finite time and the perspective of human civilization are speculatively conceived in relation to a

more-than-human, theological imagination. I therefore think of the “interpretation” (*ta'bir*) of dreams as a speculative translation that is tentative, open-ended, and contingent on the distinct capacities of the witness (the dreamer, us). Although the dream itself remains untranslatable, it invites many aporetic translations.

E's was a recurring dream of parricide aimed at the generation of Iranian revolutionaries from their children. In the postrevolutionary lexicon, the dreamer's generation (those of us born in the 1980s, during the war) is referred to as *nasl-e sukhteh* (the burnt, exhausted generation). *Sukhteh* captures the incapacitation of the generational emergence of subjectivity. The dream reflects the incapacitation and the stasis that is characteristic of *nasl-e sukhteh* not only in its recurrence but also in its hovering on the threshold of the murder: suggesting it and yet never visualizing it. In this essay, I speculate on this threshold through which history and tradition are transmitted today. What “burnings” and “exhaustions” does the dream reveal about patrimony, cultural lineage, and Iran as a political collectivity in the midst of revolutionary change? I address this question by problematizing the fetishistic tendency to monumentalize the revolution.

On the one hand, the dream points to the affective and ideological ties of the generation of the revolution with the following *nasl-e sukhteh* tasked with keeping the revolution alive. The revolution must be kept alive and tended as a flame—even if it burns a generation. On the other hand, however, the dream reveals the idolization of the revolution as part of the anthropological unfolding of violence and loss. In so doing, the dream shifts the locus of violence and loss to impersonal and unthought registers of history which are obscured and demand speculative translation. It reveals that “the revolution,” fetishized, is a foreclosure of a relation to the experience of history, to the past as past and therefore to the future.

The Revolution, the Fetish

From its fraught disciplinary origin in anthropology, the analytics of fetishism have been central to critical theories of representation.¹⁴ My turn to the fetish addresses the limit of social-scientific objectification of non-European histories by highlighting the psychopolitical alterity of Iran that exceeds Euro-American representations of the Iranian “other.”¹⁵ Turning to the fetish underscores the affective investments, fantasies, and representations that sustain Iran's modern self-fashioning contra Europe (Iran's “Europe”). I am particularly interested in intellectual and political projects that reduce Iranian (and postcolonial) politics to a revolutionary “no” against colonialism and other modern afflictions. I ask: how does the idea, affect, and fantasy of revolution operate belatedly as a source of the self for both proponents and opponents of the revolution alike? Critical (re)formulations of fetishism allow for the identification of defensive and pleasurable projects that constitute the modern abdication of loss, alterity, and destitution.¹⁶ The fetish guards against

risky or painful encounters, which include political and theological confrontations with inherited Islamic and Persianate traditions that might unsettle modern sectarian identities (West versus Iran, Islamist versus leftist, perpetrator versus victim, and more) and yield uncertain, unknown, and yet-unknowable futures.¹⁷

Freud understood fetishism as a response to an ongoing threat.¹⁸ He theorized it within the developing discourse of psychoanalysis as an acute case of the splitting of the ego. In fetishism, the ego disavows loss (or absence), but this disavowal need not be total.¹⁹ Fetishistic disavowal of loss can go hand in hand with the recognition and affirmation of loss (the famous “I know, but still . . .”).²⁰ Indeed, such affirmation reinforces the durability of the fetish. In other words, the affective and epistemological incapacity of relation (to loss or absence) manifests in pleasurable projects of overinvestment, valorization, and idealization. These are processes of passionate identification and monumentalization that acquire an affective and epistemological life of their own. They are made possible by the elision of the material and temporal gap between the lost object and its replacement. In historiographic discourse, fetishistic memorialization occurs in part through elision of the gap between the singular occurrence of the event and its memory. A fetishistic memorialization of loss is at once a mnemonic registration and repudiation of loss. The fetish commemorates “not the lost object *per se* but *the loss of loss*.”²¹

The fetish of the revolution preempts a confrontation with losses that are indexed by the historical event, since the fetish objectifies the revolution as an event that was lost. That preemption, in turn, guarantees that nothing new is born: loss has proven too traumatic and must be preempted at all costs. It is important to emphasize that by identifying a fetishistic tendency to memorialize the revolution, I am not simply naming individuals’ (unconscious) attitudes toward the loss and terror of the event. Rather, I understand fetishism as part of a generalized historical-epistemological condition of decline and confusion that I recognize as the “sickness of the revolution” and will elaborate further in the conclusion. This is a condition born in the wake of the epistemological limit of earlier theological and political paradigms, and consequently, a rupture in the generational transmission of tradition and history. Turning to fetishism helps bring into focus the loss of relation to tradition, culture, and the past (as past); it helps characterize the resulting untimeliness as the mark of the modern experience of Iran and the Middle East. In the case of the revolution, fetishism helps highlight the theoretical severing of the event from the epochal losses and political-theological renewals of tradition and modernity. It problematizes the tendency to historicize away the untimeliness of the revolution by recourse to the secular conceptual apparatus of modern historiography. In doing so, fetishism makes space for the speculative translation of untimeliness as the mark of historical experience.²²

A Car Accident

The sisters were speculating on their father's confrontation with persecution and death in prison. Their mother remembered:

Your dad's friend told me that they had lined them up by the wall next to a closed door. Your dad was in front and was called into the room first. When he stepped out, as they were passing one another, he pressed his friend, "Say you are a Muslim; you are a worker; you are illiterate and held no Marxist literature." When this man went inside the room, Nayeri and other judges were seated.²³ They asked him if he prayed and read the Qur'an. He said no. They asked, "Why?" He responded that his parents were illiterate nomadic people and he could barely read and write. He said he had supported the Marxists only because of all the pain and suffering of their lives. He was freed in 1989.

No public court had ever condemned their father to death. He was arrested in 1986, six years after the revolution, and had received a thirteen-year sentence for his leftist political activism. E knew that it would take some time, but she was waiting for her father to return home.

Then came July 26, 1988, and the Mersad Operation near the end of the war with Iraq. The war had started immediately after the revolution, in 1980. Amid the political turmoil, Iraq had initiated a border dispute and launched a surprise attack against Iran, quickly gaining control of border territories that gave it invaluable access to the Persian Gulf. But the war immediately showed itself as an international event. Authoritarian regional powers and Western liberal democracies backed Iraq in order to contain the Islamic revolution and the challenge it posed to the geopolitical order in the Middle East. Iranian revolutionaries, particularly those who were being left out of the emerging state, came to negotiate their domestic agendas within a volatile geopolitical situation. In Operation Mersad, members of Mojahdeen-e Khalgh (MEK, an Islamic-Marxist Iranian political organization) who had come to organize in Iraq drew on Iraqi support and launched a surprise land offensive against the Khomeini-led Iranian state. While the offensive was unsuccessful, it became the pretext for the Islamic Republic to eliminate all those who challenged its politics. The state executed a large number of its political prisoners regardless of their affiliations, charge, and punishment. The circumstances surrounding the mass executions remain unknown. Thus, all accounts, including this one, are necessarily incomplete and disputable.²⁴

Their mother: We imagined the war to be a national effort [mihani] until the day Khoramshahr [a city on the border of Iran] was freed from Iraqi occupation.²⁵ That day I was so euphoric! I bought a big box of cream puffs and passed them around the neighborhood. I thought it would be the end of the war. It was after this point, when the war did not end, that we

came to think of it as a reactionary event [erteja'e]. We could no longer support it. If Khomeini had accepted a ceasefire and not continued the war, it is likely that we wouldn't have had to face this ordeal.

I had gotten married as the war started. She [E] was born shortly after. We were hopeful. We did not imagine eight years of war ending in this disaster.

Although their mother told them that he was no longer alive, neither she nor they were ever able to see his corpse or participate in a burial or mourning rites. They have yet to receive a public acknowledgment of his execution or be notified of the location of his body. A few months after the visits to the prison had stopped, men in plain clothes dropped off a plastic bag of his clothes at their door. They told them not to hold any commemorations. A few weeks later, a woman from the same activist community delivered E's father's watch. The woman was given the watch by her own husband, also a political prisoner, who had been with their father in prison when he believed he was being taken to be killed. Their father had entrusted his watch to a fellow prisoner, asking him to deliver it to his wife and daughters.

Despite this fact, and despite her mother's insistence to meet with the recently released man, the former prisoner had refused to meet with them in person. He had said he could not bear to see his dead comrade's family.

The watch had ceased working upon delivery, frozen at shortly after ten o'clock. E likes to think this is a secret message from her father. An encoded message, an enigma, would keep open a space of exchange between them. But her mother laughs at E's conviction. "My daughter! What message would this be? This is no message! Just dead batteries." Some years later, when E was in primary school and had learned to tell her classmates and teachers that her father had perished in a car accident, she found out about Khavaran. Her mother woke her early one morning for a long journey to a strip of land that she introduced to her as her father's resting place.

National Secret

But with the man in E's dream, her stepfather, things were different. They had a secret understanding of a history that she had yet to come to know and narrate as her own. He had come out of the same prison that held her father. He could have as easily been buried with him in Khavaran. While he had survived the prison, he, too, had lost their father. Not only did he not ask them to remove his pictures from around the house, but (so our conversations suggested) he helped them mourn his loss. He would often stare into his pictures, call his name, and lose himself in his remembrance. In these occasions, E and A would follow their mother and rush to console him, gradually bringing him back into language and recognition. "My dear, don't do this. Don't beat yourself up like this. He wouldn't want you to do this: you are killing yourself. Look, look, see, the kids have come. They are here for

you. Please don't do this to yourself." E recognized her stepfather's seizure-like fits of anguish and despair, as well as his flat affect and inability to express love and life, in ways she knew from her own father. (Ahmad Shamloo, who writes "I am the common pain: scream me!" is one of her favorite poets.²⁶) His aimless gaze, his anxious, slouched, and hesitant movements in space and time, his inability to relate to others, memorialized without symbolizing an anonymous loss that affected them both. She translated this common loss in terms of the violence of prison, and later in our conversations, as the shame and guilt of having survived.

E and A did not betray their secret bond with their stepfather when the violence and silences that had brought them together manifested in the space of their home, in anger and bitterness, and in what they described (in recourse to the English language, breaking the flow of the conversation in Persian) as "sexual abuse." In order not to provoke my judgment of his abusive actions, E immediately switched back into Persian and referred to him as *daghoon* (destroyed), *bichareh* (helpless), and *badbakht* (misfortunate). They wanted me to know that "he was not fully there" when he did what he did.

When E became a teenager, her stepfather started to torment her for her self-presentation, which he judged to be overtly sexual and unbecoming of their posture as revolutionaries and as the inheritors of the revolution tasked with the memorialization of the event. He would tell her that if her father were alive, he would be ashamed of her. The feeling that she was failing to honor the revolution in the face of the state's usurpation of the event tormented her. But it was the dragging of her father into this dispute that pushed her over the edge. One day, in response to him calling her a "whore," she called out his own sexual actions. "*You cannot say anything!*" Shortly after, her mother divorced him, and he left their lives.

An Unbearable Image

E offered the dream as part of a conversation that included A and was carried out late in the evening in their bedroom while her mother slept in the living room. Locating the dream in the trajectory of their lives and Iran's recent past, the sisters also offered their interpretations. These interpretations, which are contradictory and incommensurable, point to the difficulty of interpretation in situations where loss is generalized and therefore cannot be marked as such, undercutting the emergence of subjective position required for interpretation.

E: From the very beginning I could not ever look at him. I felt sorry for him, but I could not see him.

A jumped in, suggesting that E was unable to see their stepfather because of her real and unequivocal bond with their father. A gently reminded us that she did not enjoy such a bond and that their stepfather was her only real father.

I never got to visit him in prison. I don't have any memories of him that are mine. All I know of him is passed on to me from our mother, E, and others. He [the stepfather] is the only father I have ever known. When I was a child, much younger, I appreciated him. E never had a good relationship with him but I used to think that it was good that I have a father. I remember loving him.

E's dream is here a paradoxical parricide: while killing a parent figure, it memorializes her bond with their father. But perhaps more fundamentally, the recurrence of the dream that hovers on the threshold of murder paradoxically fulfills the wish for an undead father. The dream keeps the father alive.

A's interpretation ascribes to E a unique choice between their father and their stepfather, one that she herself does not enjoy. In the context of the sexual abuse, the dream can also be described in relation to a (forced) decision about what actions disqualify one from the position of father. However, I worry that this reading takes for granted the individuated child and her extraordinary capacity to choose (who qualifies as) her father. It leaves out the psychopolitical emergence of this power, which is elaborated by strands of Freudian theory that relate child and adult individuality to parricide.²⁷ A psychopolitical account therefore does not assume but explains the psychic and political laws that lead to the generational emergence of the parent and the child as distinct experiences of the self. It does not decouple but relates the violence and loss internal to the generational emergence of subjectivity to forms of sociopolitical violence that situate the bourgeois family and its moral code as part of the larger sociopolitical organization of secular modernity.

The Monumental Father

A's distinction between the two of them, even if provisional, proves to be uncomfortable. It suggests that she had a unique bond with their stepfather that was like the bond E enjoyed with their father. But this distancing, which aligns their stepfather and father and refuses to choose between them in favor of their father, causes anxiety. Almost apologetically, A backtracked and emphasized that her love and appreciation for their stepfather was contingent on the absence of a bond with their father. The significance of a concrete bond with a father was immediately lost in the flow of conversation. Instead, A affirmed her sister's ambivalence toward their stepfather with her own. The two of them began describing how his arrival in their lives, and her mother's union with him, was uncanny and provoked feelings of unease, anger, guilt, and shame.

At the time that the sisters began to reckon with the absence of their father and the arrival of their stepfather in their lives, the revolution was being globally idealized as "a world-historical event." The conventional narrative of the revolution usurped by a band of mullahs had started to take hold. This account, which too easily separates the reign of terror following the event from the event itself, drew

heavily on the experiences of excluded revolutionaries such as her father. But it also drew evidence from those within the Islamic fold, such as Ayatollah Montazeri, who pointed to events like the massacre that killed their father as a departure from the ideal vision of Islamic revolution. Consequently, and because of their violent exclusion, the loss and ideologies of the Iranian left after the revolution came to acquire a distinctive historical and political charge. They were valorized over and against other experiences of loss and other ideologies of the revolution and tasked with redeeming the revolution from itself.

The families of those executed were forced to move between their concrete loss of loved ones to the loss of the revolution as an event outside history (the monumental founding of a utopian society). The terror that they experienced could have been seen as continuous with Iran's revolutionary dreams. It could have been interpreted historically and impersonally, in accordance with the crises of power and authority born of the dissolution of earlier theological and political traditions. After all, it is these specific losses and the violence born in their wake that is generative of Iranian experiences of *tajaddod* (modernity) and the revolution therein.²⁸ But revolutionary dreams and the event itself were severed from their concrete history and instead idealized, in part by the revolutionaries who insisted on securing their dreams apart from the postrevolutionary state.

For their part, the sisters followed their mother in memorializing their father's steadfast commitment to the revolution and leftist politics. In this context, their stepfather became an uncanny figure, for he did not live up to the idealized figure of a revolutionary. He had made it out of prison, provoking suspicion of cooperating with the Islamic Republic and recanting his convictions. He was broken and weak. Not only did he not embody virtues of justice and care, but he was also capable of tyranny and abuse. His actions incited fear and shame. The sisters saw him as just a man, and a particularly pathetic one: "a backward Iranian man" (*mard-e aghab-mandeh-ye irani*). That he stood in the place of their idealized father and next to their seemingly unshakable mother was unsettling. It demanded a reckoning with the melancholic idealization of the revolution, when this idealization was the dominant form of political resistance to the postrevolutionary state.²⁹

Reinterpreting the dream as keeping their father alive, A emphasized her ambivalence toward their stepfather by recounting a recurring dream of her own. In this dream, their father is alive but unable to return home because their stepfather has replaced him. She situated this dream in the history of the revolution and the war and particularly the indeterminacy of the experience of life and death in this history. She recalled not only the disappearance of her father and his corpse but also the postrevolutionary commemorative genre that blurred the boundaries of the revolution and the war, absence and presence, as well as the living and the dead. During the war there emerged a public discourse that addressed revolutionaries, soldiers,

and the men lost to the war as *shahid* (martyr/witness; pl. *shohada*). The *shohada* were witnesses to the injustice of the Pahlavi state, the Iraqi invasion, and the larger geopolitical order of things that backed despotism and war in Iran. Widowed wives and orphaned children of *shohada* were valorized as living *shohada*. As part of the propaganda-driven media campaign, filmic mediation on the war in the burgeoning war cinema (“the cinema of the holy defense”) portrayed *shohada* as ideal political subjects and depicted the remembrance of *shohada* as a political virtue.

A and E recalled that their uncle, himself a surviving Marxist activist, addressed them as living *shohada* and the testaments of the revolution. A made sense of dreaming her father alive but unable to return home in reference to mediatic depictions of men believed to have perished at the war front returning home to their families who had largely repressed their memory and moved on with their lives. She suggested her dream vision echoes her sister’s dream of parricide in that they both keep vacant the place of their father (therefore allowing for idealizing projections).

A: In high school, I would stay up with my cousin wondering if he is alive. We would try to imagine his life and what he would look like. I don’t know but maybe I believed he was alive. Maybe I wanted to believe that [he was alive].

Unkillable, Undead

The reference to the public commemoration of the revolution and the war in our conversations provoked another association that uncomfortably suggested that the man to be killed in the first dream is their own father. This is because the public discourse did not recognize leftist revolutionaries such as their father as *shahid* but as *shahid*’s other, *monafeq* (hypocrite; pl. *monafeqin*).³⁰ The Qur’anic term *munaḥiq* designates those who appear to be Muslim but have betrayed Islam in their hearts. The *munaḥiqin* are worse than the unbelievers because they introduce deceit and division within the community of the faithful.³¹ They are worse than the enemy because the enemy announces itself as such and is therefore recognizable. The MEK, who had gradually turned from a revolutionary organization to a cultlike opposition that participated in overt and covert operations in Iran, exemplified the figure of *monafeq*. Even the sisters were affected by popular feelings of disdain and revulsion that associated revolutionary activism against the state with hypocrisy and division.

E: I remember watching the forced confessions of a number of women on TV, who testified to being members of the mujahideen [MEK] involved in bombings in the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad. I remember their confessions were juxtaposed against images of the remains of those killed in the event. It was all so terrifying. I was thinking that these women, whom I find so scary, are real partisans! This is what activism against the Islamic Republic looks like! I was terrified of any association with them.

As a visualization of this situation, the dream expresses a desire to extinguish the father as their link to hypocrisy. The parricide would sever their tie to a father who could never live up to the revolutionary status projected upon him and was therefore always a hypocrite. This interpretation is incommensurable with earlier ones in that it does not condemn their stepfather and monumentalize their father. Instead, it suggests that their stepfather provides the opportunity to confront their actual father—the father who, having been memorialized, has become unkillable. The murder, in this interpretation, marks generational thinking. It distinguishes (as opposed to collapsing) the travails of the revolutionary and the postrevolutionary generations and shows the earlier interpretations to be caught in the dilemmas of the former. This was an uncomfortable reading, almost unthinkable, for the murder of the father would not only be an assertion of a generational will to subjectivity over and against parental figures; it would also be a repetition of a killing already performed by the murderous state. The politics of the revolutionary state has disabled killing the father as an index of the generational politics of loss and regeneration.

Speculative Translations

In Iran and the Middle East, the fetishization of the West (and its effects on the fashioning of the postcolonial self) has clouded the epochal losses of Islamic and Persianate traditions. Iranian and Arab modernists have fetishistically resorted to secular conceptions of “religion” and “revolution,” pronouncing “all that is solid melts into air” and “all revolutions fail,” rather than relate modern debates of their respective societies to the specific limits of Islamic and Persianate discursive traditions. Similarly, it has also been easier to ground modern religious, cultural, and political identities (Persian, Iranian, Arab, Coptic, Islamic, etc.) in a colonial and racial dialectic vis-à-vis Europe than to critically theorize them outside these discourses of race, religion, and language.³²

The urgency as well as the limit of the region’s politics of revolution are evident in recently intensified cycles of revolt and suppression. As formative as they have been for the generation of their participants, the Iranian and Arab uprisings are impossible to separate from reasserted authoritarianism and sociopolitical devastation. While a thorough investigation of contemporary politics in the region is not the aim of this essay, critical analysis of the revolution as fetish addresses the historical unconscious of the modern Middle East. It helps identify the fetishization of revolution as a defense against the general historical and epistemological condition of loss and incapacitation that the Lebanese artist Jalal Toufic and the Iranian critical theorist Javad Tabatabai, respectively, identify as the “withdrawal of tradition” and the “im-possibility of learned discourse.”³³ This is an impersonal and epistemic condition of decline that disables self-assertion through aesthetic

and spiritual experimentation. It compels the emergence of speculative discourses of the self and society in a break from inherited traditions and through the one-directional migration of discourse from European formations of knowledge to the Middle East.³⁴

What is important about accounts such as Toufic's and Tabatabai's is the symptomatic identification of the present in terms of untimeliness, decline, and confusion, which I have elaborated yet differently (and politically) in terms of "sickness of the revolution." By relating revolutionary politics to historical and epistemological limits, this formulation opens to a negative space of loss and impossibility that anticipates speculative translations but is disavowed in fetishistic politics of revolution. I believe this space corresponds to what Fanon identified as "a zone of non-being" and is related to what he augured as "a genuine new departure"—even if Fanon did not consider history and tradition to be impregnated with the discontinuous, political-theological birth of futurity.³⁵

It is toward a critical theory modulated by the experience of Iran that I have theorized the fetishistic politics of revolution as the limit of relation to historical losses and epistemological incapacities. These discursive losses and incapacities exceed European representations of the Iranian or Muslim "other" and yet entwine the destinies of Iran and the Middle East with that of Europe. If the fate of revolutions in the region is to have any historical significance, the reassertion of the old through the new and the revolution's close proximity to fascism and civil war (which in turn invites imperial interventions) cannot be ignored. Rather, a psychopolitical theorization of the contemporary can help dispel the fetishization of revolution and thereby come to terms with the epochal loss and modern limit of theological and political paradigms in favor of a speculative horizon of a renewed politics.

MILAD ODABAEI is assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Arkansas. His research explores the intersections of anthropology and critical theory around questions of the history and historiography of Iran, religion and politics, and violence and subjectivity, as well as translation and migration. His writings have appeared in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, *Iranian Studies*, *Debates do NER*, *Comparative Islamic Studies*, and the edited volume *Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and Narratives of the Enlightenment* (2016).

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Notes

1. Gol-Naraghi, “Mara Beboos.” Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. For an account of “Kiss Me” as part of the politics of the popular song in mid-century Iran, see Hammasi, “Intimating Dissent.”
2. On *Nachträglichkeit*, see Laplanche, “Notes on Afterwardsness.” On “unlived experience,” see Winnicott, “Fear of Breakdown”; Ogden, “Fear of Breakdown and the Unlived Life.”
3. Winnicott writes that “if the patient is ready for some kind of acceptance of this queer kind of truth, that what is not yet experienced did nevertheless happen in the past, then the way is open for the agony to be experienced in the transference” (“Fear of Breakdown,” 105). My use of the term *queer* echoes the ambiguity that marks Winnicott’s use and, I believe, bears on the untimeliness of the unlived experiences in relation to the temporality of the sexed and gendered individual. I use the term “transference” in reference to my conversation because I believe not doing so would reduce the insights of psychoanalysis to its limited institutional practice.
4. On the limit of positive and populist orientations in historiography and anthropology, see Koselleck, “Terror and Dream”; see also Navaro, “Aftermath of Mass Violence”; Mazzarella, “Anthropology of Populism.”
5. On politics of victimhood, see Brown, *States of Injury*; Meister, *After Evil*.
6. Freud, “Thoughts for the Times.” See also Rose, *Why War?*; Butler, “Political Philosophy in Freud.”
7. See Fanon, “Colonial War and Mental Disorder”; Obeyesekere, *Work of Culture*; Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*.
8. Fanon, “Racism and Culture.”
9. Bollas, “Wisdom of the Dream.”
10. Koselleck, “Terror and Dream.”
11. On “dreams as critique,” see also Mittermaier, “Invisible Armies.”
12. In psychoanalytic discourse the impersonal is often discussed in relation to the drives, but more generally, it refers to approaches exemplified by Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault that “do not deny the relevance of the person, but work to dislodge its sovereignty by opening up some venues for alternative trajectories” (Manoukian, “Vocabulary for the Impersonal,” 156).
13. Pandolfo, “*Ta’bir*”; Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History*, 63–74.
14. Morris and Leonard, *Returns of Fetishism*.
15. In Odabaei, “Burning Translations,” I elaborate on the form and stakes of this strategic and noncanonical engagement with canonical concepts and discourses.
16. Morris, “After de Brosse,” particularly 213–20; Comay, “Sickness of Tradition”; Marriott, “Racial Fetishism.”
17. To be clear, I am not suggesting, as the Iranian critic Ali Shariati did, an anticolonial return to the self. Rather, I am inviting reflection on contemporary readings of Iran’s revolutionary archives as being projects caught up in fetishism—as is disclosed through their abdication of a relation to the past, the law, tradition, and to others in the anticolonial refashioning of “the self.” In our postcolonial condition, secular episteme, and anglophone discourse,

- it is often more expedient to read Iran and the Middle East as an anticolonial “no” than to seriously explore, beyond good and evil, the limit of inherited political and theological paradigms as the horizon of *tajaddod* (renewal). See Odabaei, “Modernity from Elsewhere.”
18. Freud, “Fetishism.”
 19. The disavowal of loss brings together fetishism and melancholia. In the limited space of this essay, I leave aside specifically melancholic commemoration of the revolution. My focus on fetishism, however, helps clarify the risk (endemic to revolutionary melancholia) of hypostatizing a projection of loss and the revolution as the reality of the event—which thereby forecloses a speculative relation to both loss and the revolution. See Comay, “Sickness of Tradition.”
 20. Mannoni, *Clefs pour l’imaginaire*, 9–33.
 21. Comay, “Sickness of Tradition,” 92.
 22. The fetishistic resistance to loss as conceived by Freud in psychoanalytic terms finds a parallel in positivist philosophy’s resistance to truth as movement as conceived by Hegel in speculative terms (Hegel, “Fichte’s and Schelling’s System”). See also Comay, *Mourning Sickness*; Comay, “Resistance and Repetition”; Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*. For a speculative translation of untimeliness contra positivism in thinking “Iran” or “Islam,” see Tabatabai, *Ibn Khaldun and the Social Sciences*; Tabatabai, *Prolegomenon*; Tabatabai, *Rule of Law in Iran*.
 23. The cleric Hossein Ali Nayyeri, currently a high-ranking judge in the Iranian judiciary, was then part of a panel of judges widely known as “the death committee,” which oversaw the fate of political prisoners.
 24. For a most comprehensive account of the ordeal, see Mohajer, *Voices of a Massacre*.
 25. The Iraqi occupation of Khoramshahr early in the war became an emblem of the war’s injustice. The city was recaptured by Iranian forces after two years, in 1982. It was the decision by Iranian leaders to continue the war for six more years after Iran regained all its occupied territories that many critics, including E’s mother, question.
 26. Shamloo, *Collected Works*, 213–15.
 27. On this point, see Loewald, “Waning of the Oedipus Complex”; see also Thomas Ogden’s reading of this essay in Ogden, “Reading Loewald.”
 28. On Hegel’s reaction to the reign of terror following the French Revolution, see Comay, *Mourning Sickness*; see also Javad Tabatabai’s postrevolutionary reflections on crisis and *tajaddod* (renewal, modernity) in Tabatabai, *Prolegomenon*; and Tabatabai, *Rule of Law in Iran*.
 29. As Joan Copjec observes in relation to the paradigmatic doubling of Moses in Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, the double is uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), for it confronts ahistorical essentialization with historical contingency. “The uncanny or the unhomely . . . limits the homely from within. . . . The uncanny . . . give body . . . to a certain displacement or out-of-jointness in the homely place where they appear. They hold open or maintain a gap or limit within history, which gap ensures the very contingency of history” (*Imagine There’s No Woman*, 96–97). Uncanny doubles proliferate within this essay (the father and the stepfather, the dream and the watch as ciphers of death, the *shahid* and *monafeq*, the revolution as fetish and the revolution as loss, the revolution as the founding of a new politics and revolution as civil war, a utopia and the Islamic Republic) and help demystify the revolution as a fetish object.
 30. See Talebi, “Iranian Martyr’s Dilemma.”
 31. On *nifaq* (hypocrisy) in Qur’anic discourse, see Izutsu, *Ethico-religious Concepts*, particularly the chapter “Religious Hypocrisy.”

32. See Anidjar, *Semites*; Kia, *Persianate Selves*; Mahmood, *Religious Difference*.
33. Toufic, *Withdrawal*; Tabatabai, *Ibn Khaldun*.
34. Odabaei, "Modernity from Elsewhere."
35. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xii.

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