

Setrag Manoukian

## Two Forms of Temporality in Contemporary Iran

(doi: 10.2383/36425)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, dicembre 2011

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

### **Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

# Two Forms of Temporality in Contemporary Iran

by Setrag Manoukian

doi: 10.2383/36425

This essay discusses the relationship between politics and experience in contemporary Iran through an analysis of two forms of temporality in the post-election protests of 2009.<sup>1</sup> The day after presidential elections of June 12, 2009, people began protesting across Iran. In growing numbers, they took the streets to denounce what they perceived to be an electoral fraud. As days passed, they expressed a growing general discomfort with the state of things and continued to march through the streets of Tehran and other cities. Security forces began to confront the protesters who reacted in kind. Threats, arrests and deaths followed. Protests continued on the streets in diminishing numbers through the summer and fall of 2009 and up to February 2010, amidst increasing repression. Though militants tried to keep the momentum alive, much of the tension morphed into other concerns while arrests and trials of politicians, journalists and activists continued. In 2011, from the point of view of the general public, whatever happened in 2009 has become something of the past. While many recognize that these events changed people's relationship to politics by making them more aware or engaged, they also feel that, as ordinary citizens, they should not need to get involved in politics and its manoeuvrings. Both people who participated in the demonstrations and those who did not but followed events felt

<sup>1</sup> Offline and online research was supported by a Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For reasons of confidentiality I withhold all contextual information on interviews and conversations.

that, during that period, there was a sudden opening of possibility followed by a sense of disillusionment.

What are the conditions for experiencing politics in contemporary Iran? How did people relate to the situation of political uncertainty triggered by the presidential elections of 2009 and how are they making sense of these events retrospectively? The overwhelming answers to these questions in editorials and academic works has indicated the site of such an experience in a “struggle for democracy and freedom,” and has defined its form by presenting the state and the people of Iran as two separate entities that confront each other on a battleground. Other remarks, often more informal but no less widespread in Iran and abroad, voice instead a deep scepticism towards the protests and see them as the last frontier of the combination of marketing and liberalism that rules the world. Given the supposed relevance of internet and social media in the events of 2009, many commentaries have also focused on the role of these media in the aforementioned “struggle.” These discussions mostly focused on evaluating “positive” and “negative” effects of media, equally split between those that celebrated internet’s contribution to democracy and freedom and those who conversely emphasized its controlling and repressive functions.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, attentive scholars who analyzed the events of 2009, even those working within this framework, have to recognize that the situation in Iran does not fit this schematic view. Given the dispersion of the actions and words of participants, it is not easy to understand the social configuration of the movement, nor its demands. Despite the violence and the fact that the political order was brought into question, the protests did not seem aimed at transforming the government of the country or seizing power. Clearly new conceptualizations of the political process are needed to describe contemporary Iran. For example, Asef Bayat calls the protests a “movement without a movement,” emphasizing the individualized and fragmented character of participation in the events [Bayat 2009]. Hamid Dabashi [2009] terms it a “civil rights movement” to distinguish it from a revolutionary one and suggests to study media by giving relevance to the expressive forms that accompanied the movement, as evidence of participants’ concern with the self-expression.

This essay seeks to offer an alternative framework to discuss post-election events by reflecting on their temporality and by analyzing media production, videos in particular, as concrete instantiations of the relationship between politics and experience

<sup>2</sup> See Michaelsen 2011 for a balanced review of these approaches that considers both “positive” and “negative” entailments of the internet through a contextual approach. Sreberny and Khiabani [2010] is the most informed account of internet in Iran, but also see Farivar [2011] that approaches the question through a transnational comparative perspective. These debates were amplified and expanded in the winter of 2011 in conjunction with social movements across the Arab world.

in contemporary Iran. Its backdrop is an understanding of experience (*Erfahrung*) that following Benjamin [1968a] considers it as a process of self-orientation in relation to one's past and surroundings. Such disposition is not a natural human faculty but the contingent result of encounters between human beings, the conditions of their lives and the technological devices at their disposal. Benjamin was mostly interested in the dislocations of this process in the encounter with urban and technological transformations, combining the analysis of expressive forms with a conception of time that could account for such new ways of living. While on the one hand he declared that experience as the traditionally understood sense of life and narration passed down from generation to generation, had disappeared in the wake of modernity, he was mostly concerned with the analysis of the means through which it was possible to reconstruct a relationship to the world and collective life under current modern conditions. Such experience for Benjamin was mostly available in states of shock, sudden and disruptive awakenings that made possible to imagine otherwise the past, the present and the future – a form of messianic time [Benjamin 1968b].

Subtracted from its sometimes nostalgic tones, Benjamin's analysis resonates with social life in contemporary Iran, which is characterized by massive urbanization and technological saturation. Moreover, the messianic dimension is a relevant axis in Shii discursive traditions and practices, which emphasize a temporality of suspended expectation waiting for the return of the Hidden Imam, a descendant of the prophet who will announce the end of time. During the revolution of 1979 some of the features of this messianic trajectory concurred in configuring a new political space and became part of the discourse of the emergent nation-state. In realizing themselves politically in the course of these thirty-two years since the revolution these messianic expectations have lost much of their impetus. They are not anymore the fragmentary possibility of a different present but rather embody the most instituted side of political imagination and have become part of a market of images which, though apparently opposite to consumerism, shares many of its characteristics. Benjamin's analysis, and that of many of his contemporary commentators who envisage messiansim as a time of political redemption, finds here its limit, which prevents facile adaptations of this vocabulary to describe modern Iran. What does remain of a temporality of expectation when its forms have already been spent? What kinds of experiences are available when the openings towards a different kind of politics are also the sites where such politics is already worn out?

This essay argues that in the post-election protests the condition for experiencing politics in Iran was predicated on a temporary suspension of habitual mores. At the center of this suspension there was a constitutive indistinction that made possible to interrogate the order of things, but also neutralized the force of this interpellation.

As a result, nowadays, at a moment in which many in Iran perceive they have gone back to their usual life, whatever that means, politics has become something either feared or despised but with which it is not easy to come to terms.

### **A Time of Suspension**

Testimonies describe how the campaign for presidential elections of June 2009 created an atmosphere of expectation in the weeks preceding the vote. People who had never engaged in political activities or had been inactive for years, got involved by supporting candidates, attending rallies, and distributing leaflets. As someone commented, “people felt progressively drawn into this heartwarming situation.” American style televised debates between the candidates accrued interest in the elections and highlighted differences among contenders. But differences in opinion did not translate into animosity among supporters of rival candidates. People recall how everyone seemed happy, how common arrogant or offensive attitudes on the streets were abandoned out of a shared sense of responsibility and commitment towards the destiny of the nation.

Many people describe how the day of the elections Tehran was empty. No one was riding the metro, no one talked in taxis: “the city was dead.” As soon as results were announced, people began to assemble on the street shouting slogans. With crowds on the streets, expectation gave way to suspension. Through their public presence people triggered an intermission in ordinary temporality, momentarily altering the rhythm of social and political life [see also Fischer 2010].<sup>3</sup> I use the term “suspension” to refer to a time in which events unfold in a present that is momentarily withheld from passing.<sup>4</sup> This is a time in which the constitutive articulation of past-present-future is momentarily suspended and a temporality of the now takes precedence. Suspension pertained both to the quantitative division of time, the passing of hours, days and nights, and to its quality, its more experiential dimension.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to underline how this time of suspension did not bring about the disruption of social life in its entirety. On the contrary, according to several accounts many people went about their day as usual, and the streets of Tehran were anyway filled with traffic. However, postelection events and the people involved in them became signifiers of the whole (whether this was a media effect or not it's a different question). Accounts also emphasize how people's participation was porous: they were “coming and going” to the demonstrations or following events from home while also working and going about their daily lives.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that this was a homogenous and empty time. Each day things changed drastically: demonstrations in June 2009 were quite different in scope and outlook from the ones in Dec. 2009. These transformations should be ideally attended to in a way that the length of this essay does not allow.

This suspended temporality finds its genealogy in other instances of the history of Twentieth century Iran when people took to the streets to protest. Parallels can be found between events in 2009 and what happened during the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 and with the movement for the nationalization of oil that ended in a coup d'état that toppled Prime Minister Musaddeq in 1953. Most of all, there are similarities between what happened in 2009 and the revolutionary movement of 1979. In all these instances the time of suspension signed a moment when politics came to the fore.<sup>5</sup> These are moments when the habitual alliances that define the political landscape come into question. These are moments when difference emerges and events redefine the conditions of possibility of collective life as well as the relationship between people and government. Both 1953 and 1979 were times when the people involved in those events perceived that the ordinary divisions and subdivisions of social and political life were suspended or neutralized and new differentiations emerged.<sup>6</sup> Political subjectivity was remoulded or reconstituted on different grounds: the movement for the nationalization of oil in 1953 marked the consolidation of “the people” as the principal subject of politics in Iran and the revolution of 1979 the moment when people took power.

In order to understand what transformations the events of 2009 brought about in politics and experience, it is necessary to attend to the specific configurations of this temporality. In 2009 suspension had two prevalent features. First, it was a time of urgency. There was the widespread sense that these were crucial hours for the destiny of the country, and as such recalled other such moments as those of 1953 or 1979. The effort to downplay the crisis proved successful in the end, but acts and words by politicians on different sides made unequivocal the exceptional character of the moment. Second, it was also a time of possibility. Things that were thought impossible became possible: hundreds of thousands of people were on the

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, one should not overstate the suddenness of these events, as they are the outcome of long processes of political engagement.

<sup>6</sup> I find no better way to describe this temporal frame in synthetic fashion than by quoting comments I have heard in relation to both 1953 and 1979. “You would see the unseen,” a particularly acute observer of 1953 told me in Shiraz in the late 1990s, recounting those events and referring to public figures who had been enemies until the day before but united in their support of Prime Minister Musaddeq. The light in his eyes betrayed both the fervor and the exceptionality of the moment: an almost sudden release of conventions and mores, towards a cause he deemed superior. “Everything had a different smell,” an activist in the 1979 revolution told me to describe the period soon following the declaration of the Islamic Republic. The comment referred to new forms of social life as well as the particular existential dimension of those days. Many militants of the generation of 1979 often describe how this particular social and existential sensation was transferred to the warfront, subsumed in the war against Iraq (1980-1988) where such “smell” was kept alive. Then followed the disillusion and sense of betrayal of those who came back to face civilian life in the post-revolutionary state, as for example depicted by Makhmalbaf in the film *Marriage of the Blessed*.

streets. People and political personalities spoke out and addressed contentious issues explicitly, bypassing habitual restraint or the rather reserved style of public political speeches.<sup>7</sup>

Interwoven with such suspension were the ways in which different media concurred in structuring the unfolding of events. An extreme variety of media infrastructures (TV, radio, press, internet, cell phones but also banners, posters, leaflets, graffiti on the walls, word of mouth), narratives forms (from state discourse to individual opinions, from professional photos to cell phone snapshots, from global news outlets to text messages), and diverging accounts constructed a thick layering that became the “texture” of this suspended temporality. This variegated transnational media landscape highlighted the features of urgency and possibility and defined the contours of the time of suspension. Many of these media infrastructures transmit information about events right when the events are happening. This simultaneity turned their accounts of the events (“this is what is happening”) into an interrogation about them (“what is happening now?”). This mechanism not only heightened the urgency and the possibility of this suspended moment but also exhibited the indetermination that constituted it, a point I will elaborate on below. Ultimately, media also contributed to define the duration of such suspension and its end.<sup>8</sup>

Urgency, possibility and their mediation also structured the relationship between the moment of post-electoral suspension and truth. As in other instances when crowds were on the streets in Twentieth century Iran, 2009 was a moment of “revelation,” a moment in which things that have been kept secret (or, more precisely, things that were perceived as being kept secret) “need” to be revealed, so that truth can prevail. A suspended time brings with it an urge to declare, to denounce and to set the record straight. During the revolutionary movement of 1979 and its aftermath this involved denouncing the covert actions and alliances of the monarchy and its functionaries. It also en-

<sup>7</sup> This was prepared by the electoral campaign that, compared to Iranian standards, was particularly aggressive especially in televised debates. A telling example of both features of the post-election temporal suspension is the June 19 Friday prayer sermon by Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei, Supreme Guide of the Islamic Republic. He argued that although he usually refrained from citing names, the situation called for referring explicitly to some of the people involved in the events, such as re-elected president Ahmadinejad.

<sup>8</sup> Therefore the time of suspension has to be considered in relation to the amount of time the protest where on the front page in TV, news websites and newspapers both in Iran and across the world. Though certainly one step removed from the action, international media was relevant in this regard. See for example the *New York Times* op-ed “The End of the Beginning” of June 23, 2009, ten days after the elections when the protests were still taking place. As media theorist Jonathan Sterne noted in an oral comment to me, the death of Michael Jackson on June 25, 2009 certainly played a role in structuring this time. This is not to say that media, either in Iran or abroad, defined events.

tailed an apparently widespread practice of delation. In 2009 there were constant accusations of plots, frauds and foreign interference. The opposition claimed that the vote was manipulated and that police operated outside legal procedures in repressing dissent. The government attributed post-electoral unrest to domestic or foreign plans to destabilize the country and conducted investigations and trials. The quantity and circulation of allegations was such that in most cases it became impossible to determine what went on. Framed by doubts about the electoral results and the authenticity of the protest, pushed by the sense of urgency and possibility, constantly interrogated through the simultaneity of media, the truth of the events became at once necessary and unattainable.

## **Two Forms of Temporality**

In this media-saturated suspension, establishing the truth was indispensable to construct a meaningful relationship to politics, either to grant legitimacy to the government or to recognize the “will of the people.” However, conditions were such that factual and existential truths were unattainable, no matter how much violence was deployed. This deadlock around truth was one of the defining components of what can be called a “zone of indistinction”.<sup>9</sup> This was a condition in which the dislocation of habitual references endowed actions and thoughts with the potential to interrogate the order of things, but also neutralized them by reinserting this questioning into a circuit in which the gestures, images and words that expressed it were already consumed and therefore unavailable for a different use. This zone of indistinction can be understood better through a discussion of two forms of temporality that were activated in the time of suspension and that can be analyzed retrospectively through gestures, images and words.

### *Temporality as Citation*

As many commentators noted, 2009 postelection demonstrations, pictures and slogans were in many ways citations of actions, images and words of the 1979 revolution. Moreover, as many analyses have shown [e.g. Fischer 1980; Agahie 2004], the revolution of 1979 was itself organized around references to the temporal struc-

<sup>9</sup> I am borrowing the term from Agamben [1998], but I am here more concerned with the forms of life that are produced in such zone than with the operations of sovereignty, to the extent that it is possible to distinguish two sides of the same process.



tures of Shii practices and discourses. The revolution actualized the Shii calendar and turned Shii messianic expectations into a political project that translated religious traditions into a secularized nation state. It could be argued that the events of 2009 were second order citations [see also Talebi 2010]. The postelection protests, though taking place a long time after the revolution, cannot be understood apart from it: most of their force stems from this referential ground. This of course does not mean that the revolution of 1979 is the necessary and unchanging horizon of contemporary politics in Iran or the only vocabulary at people's disposal, but that people on the streets in 2009 reactivated a certain past in relation to the current situation. It is as if images of the revolution jumped forth from a forgotten past that was suddenly available again and therefore constituted the condition for present thoughts and actions. In the words of a participant: "we thought it would never happen again, I mean we saw these pictures of the period of the revolution and we always thought: this does not exist anymore. Then, all of a sudden, I saw that it could happen, that it was really happening, and everything became much more tangible."

Today in Iran images and words of the 1979 revolution are part of everyday life. Present in schools and workplaces, they permeate public space through street names, billboards and banners. They also constitute the visual and conceptual vocabulary of television, radio and other media. Several key dates of the revolution and its aftermath are state holidays, to the extent that the calendar is inextricably linked with the revolution. In addition, events such as the war against Iraq (1980-1988) and a series of central themes in state discourse (Palestine, women, martyrdom) are remembered and celebrated on designated days of the calendar.<sup>10</sup> This habitual relationship with the revolutionary past was suddenly reconfigured during the protests of 2009. Rather than referencing the revolution as a fixed origin for the present social order, 1979 quotations in the actions, images and words of the 2009 protests retrieved the revolution from the past and projected it into a different future. Citations were not a return to or a reenactment of the revolution. In the moment of suspension in which they were effected, they opened up the present to a new vision of past and future.

The citational structure of the 2009 protests was overwhelming, both in the general spatio-temporal coordinates as well as in people's individual gestures. In Tehran for example, hundreds of thousands of people marched on the same streets where the revolutionary movement of 1979 took place, on streets that are named in memory of those events such as Enqelab (revolution) Avenue, Azadi (freedom)

<sup>10</sup> To have a sense of the actual calendar of anniversaries and festivities in contemporary Iran, the lunar religious calendar must also be considered.

Square, 7 Tir Square. These are the streets and squares where several times a year state-sponsored marches commemorate the revolution and the history and values of the Islamic Republic. Moreover as the protests unfolded and were met with growing repression through the fall and winter of 2009, people used the state and the Shii calendar of commemorations to organize protests on days when official marches were summoned or religious rituals were celebrated, notably for Student Day (December 7) and Ashura, the most important religious holiday of the year which in 2009 took place on December 27. By occupying these spaces and times, people activated the relationship between these streets and the revolution, creating what could be conceived as the material and conceptual milieu out of which politics at a time of suspension became possible.

In addition, people's individual gestures were often citations of well-known photographs and film sequences from 1979, in which people are depicted raising their blood stained hands, assisting the wounded, dragging them into cars or pick-up trucks to be taken to hospitals for treatment.<sup>11</sup> Acknowledging the substantial differences between the two moments, the similarity between the images of 1979 and those of 2009 is quite striking. From this point of view it is irrelevant whether these citational images are the result of the ways in which participants or journalists taking the pictures framed what they were seeing (shooting films or photos when the scene seems noteworthy, that is similar to 1979) or the outcome of the gestures of those being photographed, or, as it is more likely, a combination of the two. Certainly such frames are also predicated on national and international photojournalism as an evolving genre, but their citational character is unmistakable.

Slogans people chanted were often either direct quotations or modifications of slogans from 1979. For example "The blood in our veins is a gift to our Guide" became in 2009 "the blood in our veins is a gift to our people" and "cannons, tanks and weapons have no effect anymore" became "torture, rape have no effect anymore." *Allahu Akbar, Khomeini Rahbar* (God is great, Khomeini is our guide) had been one of the main slogans of the 1979 movement. The chant *Allahu Akbar* as well as other words and images of the revolution have been used for thirty years to sustain the political imagination of the revolutionary state. In 2009 crowds appropriated the slogan, and chanted it on the streets and on the roofs at night.

<sup>11</sup> See for example photos 1 and 2 in this [post](#) from June 13, 2009 and the photo at the bottom of this [webpage](#) and compare them with photo 8 and 31 in this [album](#). Likewise images of the streets of Tehran in flames in 2009 recall similar images from 1979. The imagery of blood plays an important role in Shii traditions, as interpreted in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The display of blood in 2009 points to the resilience of this imagery, but also to its appropriation towards different ends.

Redeploying these spaces, images, gestures and slogans, crowds questioned the order of things through its own vocabulary. 2009 protests both referenced and disavowed the past of the revolution. They activated the past of 1979 and turned it into a set of current gestures, images and words while establishing a relationship with those events that questioned the ways in which they have become part of the established order of things. Police repression only made more evident the citational character of the slogans and the incapacity of the government to live up to its own rhetoric. By positioning itself against crowds, as the monarchy had done in 1979, the government was seen as failing to be truthful to its own history.

Even though heated opinions circulated among crowds on the street, citations did not have the structure of judgments. Turning a revolutionary slogan such as *Allahu Akbar* against security forces, crowds reclaimed the legacy of the revolution, but also voided it of any meaning. Instead, citations raised a series of unanswered questions about the present, past and future of the Republic. They acquired their force from the interplay between their closeness to the past and their distance from it. Suspending their referent but activating its resilience, citations worked as interrogations on the nature of politics and its language. They questioned the conditions of possibility for the exercise of politics in contemporary Iran: what are the premises of the order of things of the Republic? Who stands for the revolution of 1979? Who are the people? Who are the police? They also interrogated the forms and vocabularies of politics, not by proposing an alternative lexicon but by disarming whatever fixed vocabulary was at one's disposal. By inhabiting spaces and times of commemoration they questioned the indifferent participation of those who attend such anniversaries by habit; they disassembled and recomposed in unusual ways nationalist and religious stereotypes, often mixing sacred and profane. Finally, they also raised existential questions about individual and collective life, expressing fear, anger, excitement and joy (a recurrent slogan was "don't be afraid, don't afraid").

Marx famously remarked how in social movements second degree references to the past, what he called the "poetry of the past," were either an obstacle to or a sign of the incapacity of a social class to see itself as such and find its own language [Marx 1963]. Approximately a century later, conceptualizing the relationship between capitalism and images, Guy Debord theorized that *only* an ongoing strategy of poetic displacement through images and words could still make language politically effective by upsetting the pervasive "spectacle" that society had become. Drawing on Brecht and the surrealists, Debord called *détournements* these displacements and described them as decontextualized fragments that are detached from their referents and inserted into a new setting. Because of their detachment and self-referentiality *détournements* bring back into play "previous kernels of truth" [Debord 2010, §.

208]. The gestures, images and slogans in postelection protests in 2009 can be seen as *détournements* that in exposing the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic suspend it from its referent and make it available for a different use that involves a different actualization of the past of the revolution and an opening towards an unknown future [on the question of use see Agamben 2009].

However, in the age of digital reproduction 2009 *détournements* quickly became themselves one of the features of the spectacle and the suspended temporality that they implemented was turned into yet another instance of the “power of the false” rather than a re-appropriation of time. The post-electoral situation became one in which almost all words and actions were disconnected from their referents. The government, its political opponents, and available media infrastructure contributed in different ways to this outcome. As I have mentioned above, accusations and counteraccusations of frauds, complots and intrigues on either side saturated networks of communication, thus making it impossible to discern what was true and what was false.

During the first weeks after the elections this disconnection, coupled with the suspension described above, made citations a resilient form of temporality in which people could come to terms with their past and future by reclaiming its experience in the present. As time passed and violence increased, this open interrogation turned either into more defined and less productive assertions, or became ineffective in demanding a truth that it could not itself sustain. At the same time, satellite televisions and international newspapers quickly turned the *détournement* techniques into news items, while media such as YouTube progressively erased the friction between *détournements* and their context, thus halting their interrogation of time and language and inserting them into the never ending and fleeting flows of images, sounds and news bites that viewers are exposed to.

This being said, it is not just that the efficacy of citations faded with the passing of time, the capillarity of the repression and the alienating effects of media circuits. Their force and their opening towards a different use of the past, the present and the future of the revolution were never the expression of what one would call an “authentic” political subjectivity, to the extent that it would be misleading to “mourn” the lack of such identification. The potential of citations to interrogate the present stemmed from the “zone of indistinction” I recalled above, an unstable situation in which the suspension of time reshuffled the habitual terms of reference (and one could dare say subject positions). The potentialities and limits of this zone come to the fore in discussing a second form of temporality that characterized the 2009 protests, the combination of mediation and immediacy that is most evident in videos shot on the streets during the protests.

### *Temporality as Mediated Immediacy*

Crowds on the streets were simultaneously participating in the event and reporting on it.<sup>12</sup> This combination established particular temporal coordinates in their media production. The videos shot by people in the crowd, uploaded on the internet and circulated in the global mediascape exhibit a temporal structure that combines immediacy and mediation.<sup>13</sup>

The simultaneity of participation and reporting generated an effect of “immediacy:” the sense that the videos were the unmediated “here and now” of the protests as participants themselves experienced them. The temporality of these videos combines the intensity and dispersion that constitute experience as duration. This effect is doubled by the inextricable links between the body of the reporter and the video. The camera angles of these videos coincide with the eyes, mouths or hands of those who are holding them, while the audio tracks are composed of their voices and the sounds of their bodies (breathing, walking, panting) along with that of more distant others. The movements and sounds of the body/camera set the rhythm that alternates moments in which nothing happens with sudden outbursts of action and commotion (see examples [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) from an automobile). One of these videos begins with a sudden close-up of cement blocks that appear in someone’s hand (watch it [here](#)). The camera moves to people walking in sparse groups or by themselves. At a street corner a young woman offers more pieces of cement blocks to those passing by, including the holder of the video-camera, who stops for a second or two before moving again, while framing some people who walk in the opposite direction, a burning trash can, the trees that line the street. Slogans are interrupted by commentaries, then after moments of silence and movement, shots are heard as the camera nears an intersection and frames the street sign. A voice reads the name of the street out loud as if announcing it to an audience and adds, “they are shooting real bullets.” Everything starts to move faster: a group of people passes by carrying someone wounded, while everyone cries and runs. The camera stops again to zoom in on a pool of blood.

<sup>12</sup> The term “citizen journalist” is sometimes used to describe this double role. However, the simultaneity of witnessing and reporting is more than just a sum of different subject positions in that it delineates a subject in which political action is communication in a way the term does not fully capture.

<sup>13</sup> During the months of protests there was a varied video production that included both “unedited” videos such as the one I discuss here and videos with a more markedly composed structure. Each type of video should be discussed in detail as their spatio-temporal coordinates differ. Moreover, here I focus solely on those videos that are shot by participants/bystanders in the street and not for example on videos shot from a higher viewpoint (balconies and roofs).

At the same time, in a contrastive tension, the features that effect immediacy also mark these videos as a product of mediation. The rawness or absence of editing, the low definition of the images, the uneven framing and the body sounds – all these features exhibit the medium through which the videos were produced. They make evident how the production of experience that the videos capture is an encounter between human beings and particular devices. Moreover, in the videos shot during the demonstrations of 2009 cellular phones are ubiquitous. They are often held by the raised hands of people whose face remains unseen because they give their back to the camera, or are masked or cut out of the image. It is as if the perception of the events was entrusted to cellular phones, the sensory apparatuses with the real capacity to register what is happening. These acts of delegation, besides recalling visually McLuhan's idea that the content of any medium is always another medium [McLuhan 1964], bring center stage the very production of the videos as a defining feature of the events. The focus on the medium does not necessarily entail a disavowal of the images but, by making mediation evident, distances them from the perceived immediacy.

Moreover, these videos are embedded in other media on the internet that re-frame them within their specific rules of operation, so adding another layering to the interplay between immediacy and mediation. If their availability can transmit a sense of “here and now” across space and time and their de-contextualized consumption can generate new communities of feeling, these same characteristics make them equal to the other millions videos that circulate on websites such as YouTube. Here the videos are often edited with soundtracks, commentaries, captions and other images, to the extent that these “remediations” (Bolter and Grusin 1999) freeze the instants the videos had captured into an endlessly repeated and yet fleeting present.<sup>14</sup>

The tension between immediacy and mediation defined a form of temporality in which these two dimensions cohabit in such a way as to create a never ending ambiguity between the shock of the “here and now” and the images of an already consumed spectacle.<sup>15</sup> This unresolved tension is what makes these videos a concrete testimony of the zone of indistinction I mentioned above. At least in the video production I am

<sup>14</sup> For a comparison, see this [video](#), which is similar to the one I describe above but has a voice over of an American journalist that alters its vision drastically. Note also that the journalist states that the authenticity of the images could not be confirmed and that the video now circulates on YouTube without any mention of who the journalist or the network is.

<sup>15</sup> Mazzarella [2006] who focuses on a corruption scandal and its “revelation” is useful to think how mediation and transparency (with its affective immediacy), while opposed to each other, are inextricable dimensions of contemporary politics. Allen [2010] draws on him to discuss media but seems to focus more on a question of representation and its instrumentality rather than on the foundational contradiction that mediation entails.

commenting on, the dimension of immediacy of this zone is characterized by different forms of affective participation: emotional outbursts, recordings of sensory states of affection such as joy, fear or anger. Its mediated counterpoint interjects these states with other “affective” images, words and sounds that are well known national and/or religious tropes such as the suffering of the [nation](#) or the blood of the martyrs, and with more universalizing ones such as rock music, [Bella Ciao](#) (with Persian subtitles) or the discourse of human rights. The resulting inseparable combination of the two marks this zone as of one simultaneous excitement and disillusion.

### **Indistinction**

As in other moments in the history of Iran, the gradual morphing of the time of suspension of 2009 into a more habitual rhythm of social life was mostly achieved through a set of capillary disciplinary processes, often by violent means. A combination of disillusionment, fear and exhaustion ensued. In the words of a young woman: “in these two years, my sister got married, my brother got diabetes, my daughter began school and I was finally hired permanently. [...] These days I try not to listen to the news, because they just make me cry.” Politics appears as the distant, unfathomable practice of a few brave militants or the concern of administrators who are foremost interested in power and money. Nowadays, retrospective accounts tend to foreground how there was something “odd” about the pre-election festive atmosphere, and how the violence that ensued was shocking but probably to be expected. People talk about the events of 2009 as both something that marked them profoundly and yet whose consequences are today difficult to ascertain.

The vast majority of commentators in Iran and abroad either enthusiastically embraced the post-election “non-movement” or skeptically rejected it. These reactions run the risk of eluding a consideration of the constitutive indistinction, which in my view was one of its main characteristics. The two forms of temporality I described, citation and immediacy/mediation, constitute the conditions of possibility for the experience of politics in contemporary Iran and exemplify such indistinction. Citations of the revolution of 1979 that characterized so many of the actions, images and words of 2009, subtracted the past of the revolution from the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic and actualized it towards a new use, which was however folded back either in the state’s control of appearances or in the transformation of these quotations into news headlines. The immediacy effect of street videos that shocked audiences around the world was also what neutralized their political efficacy through their endless reproduction.

These elements underline how in the contemporary epoch it is in many ways impossible to separate enthusiasm from skepticism, détournements from the power of the false, and immediacy from mediation. This indistinction, should be a topic of further inquiry rather than the object of moral condemnation. This future research would have to understand how this indistinction constituted the site where an experience of politics is still possible. It would also have to reflect on what appears to be a widening divide between on the one hand politics seen as the management of people and things and, on the other hand, politics lived as affective participation, through either indignation or estrangement. Far from the presumed opposition between the state and the people, this growing split between politics as management and politics as affection seems to characterize the contemporary epoch, in Iran and elsewhere.

## References

Aghaie, K. (ed.)

2004 *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Agamben, G.

1998 *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

2009 *What is an Apparatus?* Translated by D. Kishik and S. Pedatella. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Allen, L. A.

2009 "Martyr bodies in the media: Human rights, aesthetics, and the politics of immediation in the Palestinian intifada." *American Ethnologist* 36: 161-180.

Benjamin, W.

1968a "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." Pp. 155-200 in *Illuminations*, edited by H. Arendt. New York: Schocken Books.

1968b "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, edited by H. Arendt. New York: Schocken Books.

Bolter, J.D., and Grusin, R.A.

1999 *Remediation: understanding new media*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Dabashi, H.

2009 "Social Networking and the Making of a Civil Rights Movement." *Social Text* Nov. 12, <http://www.socialtextjournal.org/periscope/2009/11/social-networking-and-the-making-of-a-civil-rights-movement.php>

Debord, G.

2010 *Society of the Spectacle*. Black and Red.



Farivar, C.

2011 *The internet of elsewhere: the emergent effects of a wired world*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Fischer, M.

1980 *Iran: from Religious Dispute to Revolution*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

2010 "The Rhythmic Beat of the Revolution in Iran." *Cultural Anthropology* 25: 497-543.

Marx, K.

1963 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers.

Mazzarella, W.

2006 "Internet X-Ray: E-Governance, Transparency, and the Politics of Immediation in India." *Public Culture* 18: 473-505.

McLuhan, M.

1964 *Understanding Media*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Michaelsen, M.

2011 "Linking up for change: the internet and social movements in Iran." In *Social dynamics 2.0: researching change in times of media convergence: case studies from the Middle East and Asia*, edited by N.-C. Schneider and B. Graf. Berlin: Frank & Timme.

Sreberny, A., and Khiabany, G.

2010 *Blogistan: the Internet and politics in Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Talebi, S.

2010 "Reenacting of a reenactment: the 1979 revolution and the recent uprising in Iran," paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Meeting, New Orleans.

## Two Forms of Temporality in Contemporary Iran

---

Abstract: This article discusses the relationship between politics and experience in contemporary Iran through an analysis of two forms of temporality in the postelection protests of 2009. Street demonstrations were citations of words, images and actions of the 1979 revolution. Citations actualized the revolution but also disavowed its past as currently configured. This temporality unfolded in parallel to that of video production. Videos were the “here and now” of experience while also its mediated repetition. These two temporalities define the conditions for politics in Iran: once the revolution has already happened and messianism consumed, the expectations of a time to come have the structure of a constitutive indistinction.

---

*Keywords: Iran, video, citation, mediation, indistinction.*

---

**Setrag Manoukian** is an Italian anthropologist who teaches at McGill University in Montreal. He is the author of *City of Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran: Shiraz, History, Poetry* (2011).