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# 'Imperial Grooming' (Iranian Cinema and the Inconvenience of Class Struggle)

By Melancholic Troglodytes

After the Iranian 'revolution' in 1979, film became public enemy number one. Viewed with suspicion, this infidel medium became the target of state repression and, at the same time, the site of a necessary and astonishing inventiveness. As a result, (some) Iranian cinema has been subject to widespread celebration throughout the film festivals and art house cinemas of the West. Mute asked the journal Melancholic Troglodytes – which has consistently covered Iranian politics, history and culture – whether western support for dissenting Iranian voices is not also a form of 'imperial grooming'; the neoliberal cultivation of liberal opposition to fundamentalism for its own ends.

## The Conundrum

In commissioning an article about 'imperial grooming' and Iranian cinema, *Mute* magazine has posed *Melancholic Troglodytes* an interesting conundrum. The problem as we understand it, is as follows:

- 1) To what extent are 'imperial' powers (presumably meaning the western bourgeoisie) *grooming* an oppositional elite to confront and ultimately take over from a mullah-bourgeoisie that has (mis)managed Iranian capital for the past quarter of a century?
- 2) Could cinema (the process of capital investment, production, distribution and reception of film-commodity) be considered the primary node of this grooming process? And,
- 3) If 'imperial grooming' is the fundamental catalyst for change in far off societies such as Iran, then what of the *internal* dynamics of social struggle?

## The Dismissive Response

Faced with a metaphor steeped alternatively in moralistic and paternalistic traditions, it would be churlishly convenient to dismiss 'imperial grooming' out of hand. One could raise the objection that 'imperial grooming' is no more than a clumsy updating of the bane of 1960s Leftist politics – namely, the utterly disgraced 'dependency theory' and the related notion of the 'comprador bourgeoisie'. [1] Proponents of dependency theory tended to underestimate the relations of production and the internal antagonisms of so-called 'peripheral' societies by exaggerating the influence of more powerful outside forces. The alleged ability of 'metropole' countries to extract surplus value from 'satellites' through unequal relations of exchange (Samir Amin, 1973) became an excuse for ignoring class struggle and for supporting national liberation movements. Ironically, it also failed to come to terms with the exact nature of surplus value extraction. Geoffrey Kay (1975: 103) demonstrated how dependency theory failed to grasp the real nature of capitalism:

'[Dependency theory] does not recognise the law of value but is [a combination] of orthodox economic theory and revolutionary phraseology, seasoned with self-explanatory facts, such as data concerning the pattern of trade and capital movement, and spiced with cynical quotations by Western politicians and businessmen on their aims and methods adopted to achieve them. *The conclusions reached are not wrong in so far as they go, only they cannot get beyond the level of general ideological critique.*' [emphasis added]

This quote could be applied to today's trendy leftists, writers like Antonio Negri, who having rejected the law of value and Marx's distinction between *formal* and *real* phases of capital development (Hardt & Negri, 2000), are now committing similar mistakes (see Melancholic Troglodytes, 2003). It is also worth remembering that some of the elements on the British left who beat themselves up about

'imperial grooming' are exactly the same forces who in the 1970s supported Samir Amin's banal notion of 'de-linking'. Amin was a dependency theorist who proposed workers and peasants of 'peripheral' countries should save themselves by de-linking 'from the bloody process of primitive accumulation imposed by western capitalism' (Loren Goldner, 1989). Saving oneself from the cruelty of capitalist relations betrays political naivety and a desire for religious purity in equal measure.[2]

This basically moralistic approach to revolutionary activity suited the Middle Eastern Left perfectly since it shifted the blame for failure onto the betrayals of the 'comprador bourgeoisie' (see the inane rants of Bizhan Jazani, 1980: 36-37).[3] The 'comprador bourgeoisie' were the groomed elite of yesteryear who allegedly 'betrayed' their own people by acting as a bridgehead for 'foreign' capital. The solution was, therefore, to seek the 'true national bourgeoisie' and forge a populist alliance between them and the proletariat-peasantry. And who better to carry off this task than intellectuals, students and leftist power brokers? (Arman, 1986: 27-35)

The phrase 'imperial grooming' also harks back to the paternalistic ideologies of the 1970s because it reduces the complex interactions of world capitalism to the machinations of a faction within the Anglo-Saxon ruling class. Why study the complex interrelation of capitalism, capital and capitalists when all your gesture politics requires is some asinine metaphorical gambit? It is a perfect godsend for a Middle Eastern Left that has traditionally taken refuge behind various incarnations of conspiracy theory to conceal its impotence (Abrahamian, 1993: 111-131).

Furthermore, in recent times 'grooming' has gained currency within the context of the bosses' moral crusade around paedophilia. The paedophile is said to *groom* his victims by gaining children's trust, paying them attention and acknowledging their achievements. The sexualised acts depicted on the net are then 'normalised' in the hope of gaining the child's consent to participate. The 'imperial grooming' metaphor depicts Iranians as children who can be manipulated and seduced by western adults. Their achievements are rewarded using rituals based on sympathetic white magic such as the Oscars or the Nobel Peace prize.[4] Again this is not to deny that grooming takes place. As the above Geoffrey Kay quote suggests, dependency and grooming have some empirical validity. They correctly describe a partial aspect of experience at a certain superficial level. Similarly we have no doubt certain Iranians fit this category to a tee. Some Iranians may very well view westerners as their elders and betters and look forward to being molested (err, groomed) at film festivals. In order to understand why this description cannot get us very far, we could extend the parameters of grooming and see what happens. For example, grooming is not always carried out by 'imperial' forces. If we look at the Left, we encounter something alarmingly similar. For instance, British Leninism (usually as a matter of policy) and British Anarchism (usually inadvertently and as a matter of habit) groom Middle Eastern activists to become paler copies of themselves.

Here are three more ways of extending the parameters of grooming: 1) The Iranian elite could be said to have a paternalistic relation to neighbouring people. Conferences and anthropological investigations by Iranian intellectuals in and around Afghanistan are part of a grooming process based on the same strategy SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies in London) has deployed in relation to Iran for decades. It reifies the subject matter and does so whilst creating cultural 'dependence' amongst Afghani intellectuals. 2) The highly admired films of the Makhmalbaf clan (father and two daughters) not only employ stereotypes of Afghans but in a rather crude manner attempt to shape their behaviour pedagogically. 3) And finally, would it be fair to say that in the last 25 years Iranian politics has had a more dramatic impact on US politics than vice versa? Remember, how the hostage crisis ended Jimmy Carter's hopes of being re-elected and how the Iran-Contra scandal damaged Reagan and his cronies. Now, who is the groomer, who is the groomed?[5]

## The Considered Response

It is now easier to see the problems with this grooming metaphor. Given these objections it would be convenient to dismiss it without further ado. Easier still if we reject the very notion of 'imperialism' as a useful tool for understanding the dynamics of class struggle, as so many libertarian communist and left-communist groupings did during the 1980s and 1990s. Yet it remains the case that grooming encapsulates a certain aspect of 'truth'. The rest of this essay attempts to posit a more nuanced model without losing this moment of truth.

To understand Iranian cinema, one must first understand that the failure of the Shah's regime (1953-1979) to complete the transformation of capitalism to the real phase of capital's domination over the proletariat (i.e. the failure to extract generalised *relative* surplus value) was the main reason for its downfall.[6] *Khomeinism* was a temporary 'switch to the terroristic control of *absolute* surplus value production by the state which meant that the bourgeoisie had to smash proletarian political organisations' and replace them with different structures in preparation for making the switch to the real phase of domination (Sohn-Rethel, 1987).

As with Franco's Spain, a loosely defined pro-fascist party and the 'Church' dominated all cultural production towards a 'spiritual' moral order. Under Franco too, 'men and women were obliged to stay separate [on the beaches] and to wear bath robes' (Bosch & Rincon, 1998). As Nayeri (1993) has noted: 'In its early days, the Islamic Republic branded cinema as a vile western import akin to pornography and eroticism and launched a crusade against it. Theatres were burned to the ground. Film reels were cut and blackened with thick markers.' The 'image' as a potential competitor to the monotheistic deity was deemed a threat and thus frowned upon. Cinemas as part of *industrial* capital represented one of the most vulnerable institutions of the Shah's regime for unlike finance capital it could not simply get up and go. It was an easy target and the murder of some 300 cinemagoers in the southern city of Abadan in 1978 by Islamic terrorists in an arson attack was testimony to this vulnerability. Now, more than two decades after the Islamic recuperation of the revolution, the majority of mullahs understand the move to the real phase of capital's domination as a survival imperative. Hence, the genuine attempts at liberalisation underway at all levels of society, including cultural production.

The early phase of the mullahs' political domination was achieved almost by default. As with Nazi Germany the lack of a viable political society was supplemented by 'charisma' in order to secure 'reactionary modernism', 'that is a nonsynchronous blend of pre-modern fantasies and technological instrumentalism' (Herf, 1984). The Society of Progressive Filmmakers (a leftist-liberal institution established in 1973 as a split from the conservative Syndicate of Iranian Artists and Employers) became very active after the 1979 'revolution' but was soon amalgamated into the political institutions of the new dictatorship. By the end of the early manoeuvrings two forces emerged: the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education and the Foundation of the Dispossessed. With the temporary eclipse of liberal Islam in the early years of the 'revolution', the fascist wing consolidated its power base around the Foundation of the Dispossessed. Ironically, the Foundation became subjected to an even more traditionalist grouping of censors known as the New Council for Film Analysis, composed of army high brass, Pasdaran Guards and clerics, who were more concerned with Islamic mores than short-term profit. The latter set up the Farabi Foundation to compete with the Foundation of the Dispossessed.

The Farabi Foundation gradually took over foreign film importation and began to tax its rivals. The deputy minister of Culture and Higher Education called for: 'films that instil the spirit of optimism in the Almighty as well as encouraging sacrifice in the path of the Lord, unity and co-operation against oppressors and creativity and initiative against sinners, piety and humility amongst the faithful...' (Alameh-Zadeh, 1991: 38). The Artistic Section of the Islamic Propaganda Unit was set up to devise

an Islamic theory of art and cinema. The minister of Guidance, Khatami (the current president of the Republic) tried to systematise a division of labour for the mosque and cinema so they can work together to maintain Islamic hegemony. The first ostensibly 'Islamic' films failed miserably to impress critics and were refused screening at international festivals.

However, the puritanical aesthetics of Islamic cinema allowed the state to present itself as the rebellious reformer of a 'corrupt' Pahlavi regime, in the same way Riefenstahl's film philosophy ('The law of the film is the law of the architecture – balance!'), allowed the Nazis to portray the Weimar culture as 'decadent'. Furthermore, just like Mussolini's Italy, Khomeinism was a reaction against the rapidly shifting boundaries between public and private spheres. Mussolini too 'wanted to harness the energies and tolls of progress and use them to restore traditional social and sexual roles' (Ben-Ghiat, 1996). Through the waging of wars and pedagogic morality, Franco, Mussolini, Hitler and Khomeini forged the perfect 'worker-soldier'. It is the increasing refusal of this 'worker-soldier' to produce according to the rules of absolute surplus value extraction that has convinced a section of the Islamic ruling class to move away from Islamic Fascism towards a viable Islamic liberal state formation. Proletarian cinemagoers are also refusing their diet of fascist/populist didacticism. Throughout the '80s and early '90s there was a simple division of labour between fascist and liberal Iranian filmmakers, with the former catering for the internal market and the latter (known as festival filmmakers) showcasing their work abroad. Today even the internal market craves liberal, secular and blasphemous movies.

So the passage from an intransigent fascist pole (which also incorporates populist and traditional elements) towards a reformist-liberal axis (incorporating social democrats, constitutional monarchists and even some Leninists) is perfectly real. To use a misunderstood metaphor, the need to harmonise base, structure and superstructure may be poorly articulated by the reformists, but it is keenly felt. It is our argument that *the power of Iranian cinema both within and outside the country emanates from its seminal role as the catalyst of this process of liberalisation.*

The reformists can usually be found jockeying for position under the banner of 'civil society', which has become an emblematic by-word for change in recent years. Yet various reformers define the term differently and subsequently use cinema for different agendas. Those inclined towards liberalism and constitutional monarchy prefer Locke and Rousseau's emphasis on civil government as differentiated from 'natural society' or the state of nature. The social democratic and Leninist pole of the reformist tendency foreground a (Eurocommunist) Gramscian take on civil society. For 'Gramsci civil society is not simply a sphere of individuals who have left the unity of the family to enter into economic competition, *but of organizations, and has the potential of rational self-regulation and freedom*' (Sasoon, 2000).

What is missing from both accounts of civil society is twofold: 1) Marx (1843/1984) showed how the divide between civil and political societies is a socio-historical construct and the need to supersede this false dichotomy; 2) Peter Linebaugh (1991) has convincingly demonstrated how civil society is used by the bourgeoisie as a device for recuperating proletarian autonomy. It is in this internal context that the 'turn to cinema' amongst Iranian intellectuals must be understood – a process egged on externally by the US, European and Japanese bourgeoisie in an attempt to regain a foothold in a sensitive strategic outpost. The role of film festivals and organisations such as the British Film Institute/National Film Theatre, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Cannes, Locarno and sympathetic film critics in this scenario cannot be overstated.

None of this is to deny the genuine originality of certain filmmakers or people's passion for every aspect of the movie-making process. In Tehran, taxi drivers prefer discussing Kiarostami and Hitchcock rather than whine about pollution and traffic. Football fans bemoan the demise of

intellectual sci-fi and fierce arguments break out over the relative merits of Brando and Al Pacino as performers. Interestingly, most of the markers western critics recognise as modernist or post-modernist techniques in Iranian cinema, devices such as Brechtian distancing, neo-realist non-professional acting, French New Wave spontaneity and out-door shooting, Bakhtinian multiple subjectivities and dialogic interactions, Surrealism's admiration for chance encounters, and Situationist psychogeography and drifting have been arrived at independently.

Mulvey (1998) has identified the inner dynamics of this phenomenon accurately: 'The new Iranian cinema emerged out of comparative isolation, enforced by international politics and the post-revolutionary government's censorship of non-Islamic art and entertainment. In parallel, however, the government has actively supported home-produced films that conform to the basic rules of Islamic cultural codes.[7] These circumstances have turned Iran into perhaps the last completely cinephile nation, where a love of cinema flourishes in a way long forgotten elsewhere. At the same time, the limitations on content and image have arguably contributed to the development of a cinema that in formal and intellectual terms has caught the imagination of critics and film theorists outside Iran too...'

A few points need unpacking. First Iranian cinema did emerge out of relative isolation. Islamicists silenced leftist filmmakers schooled outside Iran shortly after consolidation of power and concentrated on rebuilding a nationalist cultural industry with pretensions of 'authenticity'. Any western grooming that has taken place since was an after-thought. Second, it may also be true that Iran really is 'the last completely cinephile nation'. The third-rate film critics who populate the pages of film magazines and art section of quality papers in Britain, for instance, are too concerned with polishing their repertoire of clichés to ever threaten the rest of us with anything daring or thought provoking. Iranians, however, feel genuine passion for cinema, its history and theory. Consequently, there is a concerted attempt to push various boundaries. Lastly, there is also some truth in the widely held opinion that 'limitations on content and image have' contributed to the appeal of Iranian films. An analogy with web design may illuminate the paradox. Imagine you want to design a website but lack the proper WYSIWYG web editing software such as Dreamweaver or FrontPage. You have no choice but to revert back to HTML and think hard about what every command and attribute means in practice. Having written your code the hard way, you have to worry about finding a friendly ISP that welcomes your slightly illegal images and to top it all you have to think about how your website opens up in different web browsers. These are exactly the problems Iranian directors have grappled with for the last two decades, the need to go back to basics, outsmart the censors and allow for a multiplicity of interpretations in different arenas.

What makes this process more intriguing is that the Iranian 'turn to cinema' has certain localist idiosyncrasies. Contrary to Weber's misdiagnosis, it is precisely Islamic bourgeois families that display the qualities of thrift, discipline, 'individualism', and hard work expected from an overabundance of the 'Protestant Work Ethic.' [8] They are acutely aware of the need to accumulate capital (both literal and cultural capital), and the mechanisms of denial and self-sacrifice that allows the saving and re-investment of precious resources. This makes them perfect for filmmaking. Anyone who doubts this is invited to witness the Makhmalbaf dynasty in action and then contrast their dedication to familial symbolic capital with the so-called 'secular' branch of the Iranian bourgeoisie whose slothfulness and lack of solidarity has undermined their bid for glory. This factor alone goes a long way to explaining the relative dynamism of films made by liberal and fascist Muslim filmmakers in contrast to their secular liberal/leftist counterparts in exile.

### **Conundrum revisited**

Let us revisit the questions that began this investigation. We began by asking to what extent are imperial powers *grooming* an oppositional elite to confront and ultimately take over from the mullah-bourgeoisie. Having discussed some of the problems of the grooming metaphor we concluded that at an empirical level, at least, grooming does take place. The Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie grooms both the internal opposition (students, filmmakers, dissident muslim intellectuals and politicians) and the exiled opposition (Monarchists, liberals, technocratic Muslims, social democrat Republicans and increasingly Leninist hangers on). Cinema acts as a bridgehead between these two geographically isolated oppositional tendencies.

The US faction grooms pragmatically, using short-term methods. The British faction still prefers a more strategic grooming protocol, which involves *sub-conscious* grooming (this is more true of the Foreign Office than Americanised Blairites). This sub-conscious grooming relies on Iranians in exile voluntarily accepting the superiority of western values, internalising them and after the presumed overthrow of the Islamic Republic transferring them to the Iranian scene. It also consists of the slow rebuilding of civil society to balance out the powers of political society. What all factions (US, British and Iranian) ignore is, of course, the proletariat and the raging class struggle within Iran.

Secondly, we asked if cinema is the primary node of this grooming process. Our conclusion was that since cinema occupies so many niches, it is ideally suited for carrying out this function (Sporting activities are the other mode of communication used in the past). None of this should ignore the real talent on display. To borrow a distinction from Raymond Williams (1973), the strength of Iranian cinema is its ability to mix themes and metaphors in a dialogic tapestry using *residual* premodern cultural forms (such as honour), *dominant* modern forms (such as dignity) and *emergent* postmodern forms (such as authenticity). This provides it with a textured richness lacking in most contemporary films.

Finally, we asked: if ‘imperial grooming’ is the fundamental catalyst for change in Iran, then what of the internal dynamics of social struggle? We answered this by suggesting that the *internal* dynamics of class struggle are the most decisive factor in determining the future course of events and not grooming practices. Ultimately, it will be proletarians and not White House fundamentalists who will call time on the mullah-bourgeoisie. What happens after the demise of the mullahs depends on how far we are willing to push things.

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## Footnotes

[1] By *Leftism* we are referring to all those organisations/individuals who occupy the extreme left wing of capital. Not only social democrats but in our view the overwhelming majority of Leninists, Autonomists, Situationists and Anarchists fit this profile. A reevaluation of the relationship between leftists and revolutionaries is essential if the 'anti-capitalist movement' is going to transcend its inadequacies

[2] *Secularism* has in many ways mirrored theism without subverting its principle assumptions. In fact, in some ways the so-called separation of the church from the state strengthened religiosity by portraying the church/mosque as neutral. Religious reactionaries can stay in the shadows whilst the state attacks proletarian living standards. A renewal of 'atheism' has to take into account that mechanical/ideological atheism, which has its roots in either 'scientific' Engels-Leninism, moralistic anarchism or 18th century enlightenment, is a reactionary force. On the other hand *organic atheism*, an atheism which consciously links everyday proletarian activity with a long-term tendency towards a world without religion, is the only force capable of coming to grips with religion in all its manifestations. Perhaps the coming Iranian revolution will be an occasion for the emergence of this organic atheism

[3] Jazani was the Che Guevara of the Iranian Left. Admittedly not quite as intellectually vacuous as his Latin American counterpart (let's face it, it would be difficult to be more obtuse than our macho poster-boy), Jazani was nonetheless responsible for romanticising Leninist-Stalinism. In the process, thousands of potential revolutionaries ended up in the quagmire of 'monkey (guerilla) politics'

[4] Ceremonies such as the Oscars are modern day fertility rites where participants ensure a productive harvest for next year through what anthropologists call sympathetic white magic. Ancient fertility rites were about *use value* and bringing the community together. Contemporary rituals are about exchange value and competition. The granting of this year's Noble Peace prize to an Iranian 'Muslim-feminist' is a primary example of grooming through sympathetic magic

[5] A more radical critique would dispense with developmental metaphors altogether, since applying such terms as 'growth', 'decay' and 'grooming' cross-culturally is fraught with danger

[6] The distinction between *formal* and *real* refers to both different methods of exploitation and different phases of capital development. During the formal phase of development (e.g., prior to 1850s in Britain) capital is still struggling to defeat pre-capitalist relations of production and at the same time to extend its hegemony over the proletariat. Surplus value is extracted by extending the working day. During the real phase of development (after 1950s in Britain), capital's domination is complete and the preferred method of exploitation becomes the introduction of new machinery. In reality, the two methods, formal and real, are combined in most societies

[7] Iran occupies the 13th position in the world film production ranking. The local films' share of the domestic box-office in 1998 was around 95 percent

[8] Weber was of the firm opinion that Islamic doctrine contains tenets that make capital accumulation prohibitive. How wrong can you get?