

## **Symposium2011**

### **Azar's talk at symposium**

March 29, 2011

Thank you very much, Amir, for that warm welcome. It is such an absolute pleasure to be here today and I would like to thank our distinguished panelists, participants and all those who have helped make this meeting possible.

I would also like to thank Jake Schrum, president of Southwestern University. After my talk at the Southwestern, Jake said: "You know what. I have to put you in touch with this guy." "This guy" who happened to be a miracle worker was in fact Rich Ekman. And the rest – it was not silence. And now we have this wonderful meeting and it is one of those events where I would like to talk much less in order to hear all of you. But unfortunately for you and for myself, I have to say a few words.

Our first panel will begin with this question: "Why Humanities?" Reminding me of the great Persian poet – Mowlana Jallaeddin Rumi – who said: "The reason for the existence of the sun is the sun." The reason for Humanities is Humanities, needing no further explanation or articulation. But being human I will immediately proceed to contradict myself by explaining and articulating.

And I'm going to respond to the question within the context of my experiences in the two places I have called home: the country of my birth, Iran, and the country I have now chosen as my home, United States. I wanted to talk about these two countries because I believe that in a metaphorical way Iran and America become one another's distorted mirrors, each revealing the other's potentials and possibilities in the best and worst sense of these words.

Another great poet, Osip Mandelstom, who perished in the Soviet Gulag, had said that "Only in Russia is poetry respected— it gets people killed." As you know, unfortunately, this kind of "respect" is not restricted to Russia. The truth of this statement had not hit me until 1979 when literally two days after the defense of my dissertation I left the United States for Iran. Until then I had not actually experienced what it meant in real life for someone to be killed by the state not because of any dangerous political activity or armed insurrection, but simply because of being a poet, a writer, musician, thinker, journalist, or an academic.

Tyrants are well aware of the dangers of imagination and thought to their rules. So their extreme violence against human and individual rights is inevitably accompanied by an assault on imagination and thought. This violence is not based on a sense of confidence and feeling of strength but is rooted in weakness and fear. The purpose of Humanities is the

search for truth, and truth as we know, is dangerous because it is always a call to action, once we are aware of it, we can no more justify our silence or our indifference. Of course, that is no consolation to those who get killed, tortured, jailed and humiliated; but I believe there is some consolation in the knowledge of the vulnerability of those in power as well as the potential power of their victims.

This is true of all totalitarian systems. In case of the Islamic Republic, the regime's suppression and confiscation of Iranian citizens' human and individual rights was accompanied by its confiscation and mutilation of Iran's history, culture, and religion. The Islamic regime justified its suppression of women, minorities and culture through reducing Islam to a political ideology, used to maintain and validate its rule. Yet, if we look at Islamic Republic's claims through the alternative eyes of Iranian people, their history and culture, a completely different story emerges.

Contrary to the regime's version, the modern institutions and the belief in human rights and an open society were not foreign to Iranian history and culture, or the results of an imperialist conspiracy. Iran's Constitutional revolution at the start of the last century was rooted in a deep cultural, social and political crisis and Iranians' refusal of an anachronistic and absolutist political and religious system. It was as much a political revolution as a cultural one, demanding new ideas, resulting in a revolution in literature and arts, and the introduction of new forms of expression. That revolution was supported by different strata of Iranian society, including intellectuals, progressive clergy, women and even some members of the nobility, and culminated in a Constitutional Monarchy that was the first of its kind in Asia.

Iranian women's rights for which they had fought since mid-nineteenth century was not something a Shah had bestowed on them, for an Ayatollah to take away. By 1979, at the time of the Islamic revolution Iran could boast of two women ministers, one for women's affairs and the other for higher education. There were women active in the Parliament, in police force, in heavy industry and all different branches of society. The Islamic regime in the name of religion implemented some of the most brutal laws against women, including lowering the age of marriage for females from 18 to 9, depriving women from child custody rights, defrocking female judges, and the punishment of stoning to death for what the regime called 'adultery and prostitution.' These laws targeted all women, regardless of their beliefs or backgrounds, and in most cases they affected the poorest and at times most traditional women within the society. Resistance against the imposition of mandatory veil on women, was not a struggle for or against religion or the veil, but about the freedom of choice, and the fact that no authority on earth, including the government had the right to dictate to its citizens how to believe or what to believe and how to relate to their God; the choice of wearing or not wearing the veil was the right of Iranian women and not a decision forcefully made for them by the state.

**Confiscation of Iranian citizens' rights and reconstruction of their reality was accompanied by an assault on freedom of expression and on all that goes by the name Humanities. From the very start universities were among the regime's main targets. Ayatollah Khomeini who had time and again accused the academia of being tools of Western Imperialism, claiming that the universities were "more dangerous than bombs," sanctified the 'Cultural Revolution' that led to bloody protests by the students, faculty and their supporters, and closing down of the universities. The main purpose of this 'Cultural Revolution' was to purge the universities of 'undesirable elements' and Islamize the curricula, a goal that was doomed to failure.**

**Along with censorship and the ban on many of the great and popular works of Persian literature, both classical and modern, literature and arts from other countries were also banned and censored as decadent and western. Olive Oyle for example was censored from *Popeye* cartoons, because she lived in sin! As you can see, this pattern of behavior had little to do with tradition and religion and was far closer to totalitarian mindsets in Eastern Europe where individual freedoms and human rights were also curtailed in the name of an ideology. In Soviet Union, Hemingway, Faulkner, Camus and Sartre were banned, denounced as decadent, and the death of the swan was deleted from the ballet of Swan Lake in order to avoid depressing the masses. In the same manner in Iran Desdemona was excised from most scenes in Laurence Olivier's *Othello* and Othello's suicide was also censored because it would depress the masses. Apparently the masses were more depressed by the death of a character on screen, than getting flogged or being stoned to death—after all that was their culture!**

**Iranian people resisted through their insistence on their individual and human rights, refusing to comply with the regime's codes, fighting against the reactionary laws. They refused to give up activities that were considered subversive: reading certain books, listening to certain music, dancing, watching certain films and videos, even dressing and interacting in a certain way.**

**Alongside of this, many in Iran, especially the youth, reconnected to the world from which they were barred through the best that the world could offer: its great cultural ambassadors, philosophy, literature, music, film and art. During the short periods of opening and liberalization when thinkers and philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur or Jurgen Habermas were allowed to visit Iran, they were received with the same enthusiasm as rock stars in this country. Among the best memories of my 18 years in the Islamic Republic are the fervor with which classes on literature and literary criticism, were greeted not just by the students but by many who came from different parts of Tehran and its suburbs to learn about and discuss *Ambassadors or A Doll's House*. A talk I gave on modern novel at the Tehran book fair attracted so much attention that the security interfered, banning the rest of the lecture series. There was something satisfying in the fact that James Joyce or Paul Ricoeur could so inflame the authorities and be so beloved by young Iranians.**

**In 2009, almost thirty years after the Islamic revolution, during the mass protests when hundreds of thousands of Iranians, from different backgrounds, Muslim and non Muslims, traditional and modern, male and female came into the streets to demonstrate against the rigged Presidential elections, the frustrated and desperate regime resorted to extreme violence, again claiming that these protests like the ones before it over the past three decades were incited by the western powers and their domestic agents.**

**The regime's frustration was deepened by the fact that now many among the former revolutionaries and high officials such as the former Prime Minister and former Speaker of the House had joined the ranks of dissidents. Disillusioned by the Islamic Republic's rule and the failure of its ideology, many among these individuals were also reading and quoting Hanna Arendt, Kant and Spinoza, alongside of subversive Persian and Islamic poets and thinkers such as Rumi or Ibn Khaldun. On the thirtieth anniversary of the Islamic revolution many who had once condemned others for propagating forbidden ideas, were now also tried for such acts of treason. For example according to the Chronicle of Higher Education, Said Hajarian, a former ardent revolutionary, was forced to confess in his show trial to being led astray by Max Webber's ideas! What better proof of the fact that the desire for freedom is never far from the desire for knowledge, and once you have bitten the forbidden fruit you can never be the same again?**

**Alongside of these show trials and arrests, torture and murder of many dissidents and ordinary Iranian citizens, the regime began an assault the Humanities as one of the main culprits in inciting the protests. Already, long before the demonstrations, Mr. Ahmadinejad had complained that the universities from the start of the last century have been dominated by 'secularism and liberalism,' and the Islamic regime has been unable to effectively change that. Now, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenai and other high officials attacked Humanities as being essentially 'foreign' and 'western.' Because of protests and resistance to regime's threats to close down the Humanities, the officials instead expelled 20 Deans of Humanities, and closed 12 fields to the new students, further claiming that books and curricula in the field of Humanities had to be revised and 'Islamized,'**

**As you can see there is a thread that links the flogging of a young girl or stoning to death of a Muslim woman in the name of Islam to banning Iranian poets and writers, or holding Max Weber responsible for dissidence against the regime.**

**\*\*\*\***

**The good news is that over here poetry does not get people killed, but this should not make us feel too complacent. In *The Bellarosa Connection* Saul Bellow had wondered, whether**

those who had survived “the ordeal of holocaust,” will survive the “ordeal of freedom.” For him what threatened the democracies was their “sleeping consciousness” and “atrophy of feeling.” And he was right. For many living in the Islamic Republic of Iran or former Eastern Europe, imagination and thought become essential to the preservation of their integrity and rights as individuals, what the amazing Elizabeth Caddy Stanton celebrated as each individual’s ‘solitariness.’ In democratic societies this relationship is more opaque and perhaps taken too much for granted. The danger here is indifference.

Today in this country we are challenged by an attitude that in the name of pragmatism, dismisses the essential role of Humanities in the well being of the society. This attitude is not restricted to the universities that are more and more encouraged to act as businesses. Along with diminishing role of the Humanities in the academia, we are confronted by lack of adequate funding for libraries, museums, performing arts, for music and arts in our schools. It is such an attitude that recommends cutting funds from National Endowments for the Humanities and Arts, and the Smithsonian. This, in a country where its first President, a pragmatic general, felt that to be enlightened was to be “the citizen of the great Republic of humanity at large,” and wanted to create a national university in the Capital! For the founders of this country as for the great men and women who contributed to its progress and prosperity, who fought in the civil war and later in the civil rights movement and women’s movement, literature and arts were not luxuries.

Such an attitude is neither pragmatic nor practical, it is merely shortsighted and utilitarian. How can we solve an economic and political crisis without imagination and thought, without the power to reflect, to criticize and self-criticize, without the ability to connect to the past, assess the present and foresee the potentials in the future? How can we relate to the rest of the world and formulate a cohesive and honorable foreign policy if we encourage our youth to learn Arabic and Persian out of expediency, in order to find a job at the State Department and not out of passion for others’ rich cultures and histories, out of a desire to discover other worlds and people?

Liberal Arts and Sciences are based on curiosity, leading to empathy, critical thinking as well as innovation—all this is another way of saying that Humanities, no matter which part of the world you live in, or under what political system, is not something you can have today and discard tomorrow, but is a way of viewing the world, connecting to the world as well as changing it. And the best thing we can do for our youth today is to help them articulate that almost sensual urge to know, the passion for discovery that is at heart of any form of knowledge, be it speculative, imaginative or scientific.

I for one refuse to believe or accept that in a democracy people lose or do not need that urge and passion. I still remember how as a young student in this country, I shared with others my own age, the excitement that kept us up all night trying to understand one paragraph or a sentence by people with names like Wittgenstein, Spinoza, or Kant, or

made us forego many pleasures for the far more pleasurable task of finishing a novel called *Tristram Shandy*. Over the past 14 years since my return to this country, travelling across different states, red and blue I have shared with many so-called ordinary Americans, regardless of their different backgrounds, or political inclinations, the love for literature, for history, for philosophy that transforms perfect strangers into intimate strangers, sharing a common space that cannot be taken away by politics or prejudice. If there is something that links young men and women in Iran or Egypt and other parts of the world to those in this country is this shared universal space, reminding us of ways through which we can transcend the barriers of time, place, nationality, language, religion, ethnicity, race and gender. This reminder is the gift that Iran brings to America.

I hope we will continue today's conversation, sharing it with our students and the communities from which they come from and to which they will return as well as through connecting to and supporting other individuals, groups, and institutions related to the Humanities outside the realm of the academia. The challenge is not only to confront the attitudes today that negate Humanities' worth, but to also continue the time-honored tradition in the disciplines within the field: posing ourselves as questions marks, while re-defining our role.

I would like to end with a quotation by Saul Bellow whom my students in Iran, as in the case of many other of their favorite authors, called affectionately and with some humor "Saul." Their passion for ideas and imagination is a reminder of why in the end, the reason for Humanities is Humanities itself, whether in a tyranny or a democracy is, needing no further explanations. Bellow believed that Stalin emptied Russia of its soul but Mandelstam and Sinyavsky restored that soul by reciting poetry to fellow convicts and by writing in their journals. Bellow said, "Perhaps to remain a poet in such circumstances, is also to reach the heart of politics. The human feelings, human experiences, the human form and face, recover their proper place—the foreground." And what better place than this, and what better people than you to help bring this humanness to the foreground?

Thank you.