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IRAN'S QUIET REVOLUTION

MOHAMMAD JAVAD JAHANGIR'S THE INVISIBLE CROWD

By Mohammad Salemy

According to Ervand Abrahamian, a scholar on Iran's contemporary history, George Rud's observation that "perhaps no historical phenomenon has been so thoroughly neglected by historians as *the crowd*" is particularly true about the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> "While European journalists have invariably portrayed oriental crowds as "xenophobic mobs" hurling insults and bricks at Western embassies, local conservatives have frequently denounced them as "social scum" in the pay of the foreign hand, and radicals have often stereotyped them as "the people" in action. For all, the crowd has been an abstraction, whether worthy of abuse, fear, praise, or even of humour, but not a subject of study."<sup>2</sup>

Abrahamian's classic text on the subject called *The Crowd in Iranian Politics 1905-1953* describes the role of the crowd in politics and conceptualizes, for the first time, the social and class make-up of the Iranian crowd in the country's transformation from a pre-industrial to a semi-industrial national economy, and by doing so, invents a language with which to study the Iranian political crowd and its history.<sup>3</sup>

While written in 1968, Abrahamian's text unfortunately does not bear witness to the crucial role that the crowd played in the political developments that culminated in the Islamic revolution of 1978, a task Abrahamian finely accomplishes later in his magnum opus *Iran between Two Revolutions*.<sup>4</sup> Abrahamian is Iran's first structuralist historian who rejects the prominence of events and personalities as clues to history and is rather interested in the social makeup of Iran and their various movements for political power, an energy that according to him, find their proper medium of expression in the crowds and demonstrations.

Events of the past few weeks surrounding the Iranian presidential race and its aftermath not only were the most recent example of the social force called the Iranian political crowd, they were also a new chance for Iranians to reexamine Abrahamian's thesis regarding the political crowd in the age of global spectacle. In doing so, a sudden interest in the reform movement and its social makeup is not enough. Understanding the phenomenon of political crowd, one also needs to cross to the other side and study the pro Ahmadinejad and the pro government crowds.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was the first revolution to coincide with the rise of the spectacular global media that acted as a mirror reflecting the image of the street crowd onto the pages of newspapers, magazines and on broadcast network television. Ayatollah Khomeini was quickly able to understand and incorporate this mirror into his political machinery by surrounding himself with Western educated members of the Iranian intelligentsia who were able to reflect his views to Europeans, and through them to the Iranian educated class. It was in the global media that the text about the Ayatollah and the revolution appeared alongside

the images of the crowds in the streets of Tehran, giving meaning to the people and defining their leadership.

Today, the new wave of protests in Iran are taking place in a different media environment where Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs and text messages have replaced Time, Newsweek, Paris Match and Der Spiegel as the international currency of news. At the same time Iran is going through a spectacular awakening in its Debordian sense.<sup>4</sup> The development of a post Persian Gulf war consumer society in Iran has had similar effects on Iran as did similar developments in Europe and America after the World War II. After centuries of resisting the temptation of images as a needed addition or a replacement for the centrality of text and literature in creating social meaning, globalization in the last two decades has finally forced Iranian society to take images, particularly their own image, very seriously.

This new spectacular awakening among Iranians about the role of the image, the visual aesthetics and the physical beauty was apparent everywhere in the presidential campaign and its aftermath. The reliance on the spectacle to reflect, rather than to engage directly in the situation, actually could be preventing a much larger violence, since, appearing on a spectacular stage that in our time involves and relies on the internet, is not limited to the pro reformist crowd: countering the wave of visual creativity in support of reform, the Islamist friends of Ahmadinejad were also using a large amount of imagery, alongside fashion items and accessories, to identify themselves, to promote their candidate and to fight the propaganda of the opposition.

To counter the green colour that earlier in the campaign had become the symbol of the supporters of the reformist candidate Mir Hussein Moussavi, the Ahmadinejad campaign picked the Iranian three-colour flag as its symbol. In this reversal of the usual identities, Moussavi, the closest candidate to secular nationalists, decided to use an Islamic green colour to deflect the accusation of not being Islamic enough, while Ahmadinejad used the flag and its nationalist association to deflect the accusation of religious extremism.

Protests and demonstrations are not new in Iran. In fact, pro government demonstrations have been institutionalized by the state since the dawn of the Islamic Republic and have been used to both legitimize and assert state power. The sudden interest by the global media in the anti-government protests in Iran has made the world audience familiar with the faces and the social makeup of the pro reform crowd. Yet, a shroud of mystery surrounds the pro Ahmadinejad crowd. The dual nature of the Iranian society along the lines of culture, education, region and class has made it easy for both groups, pro-government and pro-reformists, to claim the title of "people". Only a close study of the make-up of these crowds may allow us to come to an understanding of the Iranian society and its complex structure.

Unlike the reformist crowd that has quickly emerged through the recent presidential campaign of Mir Hossein Moussavi, the pro Ahmadinejad crowd has a long thirty years history in the making. A once official crowd in service of the state, the Ahmadinejad crowd has been made mostly of those who returned to the street, and the ballot box, after a decade, to launch their own reform against corruption and to renew their support for the regional resistance against the USA and Israel.

This invisible crowd, particularly those not working for the security services and government agencies, was asked by the state to stay home throughout the riots to

prevent the situation from turning into civil war. Nevertheless, they had been present at the ballot box and at certain demonstrations including the Friday prayer given by the Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Captured by Mohammad Javad, they are here to show, at least to themselves, that they exist, and to refute the reformist candidate's claim that the reelection of Ahmadinejad was anything but the democratic will of the people.

*The Invisible Crowd* exhibition borrows its name from a sign that has inspired the work. During one of the early pro Ahmadinejad rallies before the vote, Mohammad Javad Jahangir, who was present at the scene, noticed a sign in the crowd that poked fun at the lack of the global media coverage of large pro-Ahmadinejad demonstrations. The sign depicted a television containing a still-frame of an empty city street with the CNN logo at the bottom. Underneath the television set read the words "We are the invisible crowd for the western media."

With this series of photographs, Mohammad Javad is attempting to map the social and economic makeup of the pro-government masses in Iran. Ignored by modern secular middle class as uneducated, ignorant and or hired bodies, the pro government crowd has been, and continues to be, an important part of the political developments in Iran.

Mohammad Javad Jahangir is an Iranian artist based in Tehran who has a background in Islamic studies from the seminary. He has studied and worked with Iranian artists Abbas Kiarostami, Reza Abedini and Mohsen Rastani on several projects. His work has been featured By BBC, Reuter and other international news organizations. He graduated from the Tarbiate Moalem University of Tehran in January 2009.

Ervand Abrahamian (B.A., M.A., Oxford University; Ph.D. Columbia University), is a professor of Iranian History at Brauch College at the Coty University of New York. He has published *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, *Khomeinism*, *Tortured Confessions*, and *Inventing the Axis of Evil*. He teaches at the CUNY Graduate Center, and has taught at Princeton, New York University, and Oxford. He is currently working on two books: one on *The CIA Coup in Iran*; and another, *A History of Modern Iran*, for Cambridge University Press.

Mohammad Salemy is an artist and curator of the former DADABASE Gallery. He is also known for his writing and activism. A graduate of Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, he is currently a MA student at the University of British Columbia. His work has been included in solo and group exhibitions locally and nationally. He is currently working on a group exhibition for Artspeak Gallery scheduled to open on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009 titled *Race: Proposals in Truth and Reconciliation*.

1 G. Rude, *The Crowd in History, 1730-1848* (New York 1964), p. 3.

2. E. Abrahamian, *The Crowd in Iranian Politics, 1905-1953, Past & Present*, No. 41 (Oxford, 1968), p. 184-210, <http://dadabase.ca/crowd.pdf>

3. E. Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, 1982)

[http://books.google.com/books?id=qh\\_QotrY7RkC&printsec=frontcover&dq=iran+between+two+revolutions](http://books.google.com/books?id=qh_QotrY7RkC&printsec=frontcover&dq=iran+between+two+revolutions)

4. G. Debord, *The Society of The Spectacle* (Cambridge, 1989)