DEMOCRACY ESSAYS MEDIA & PUBLICS

My Living Room as a Public Sphere

Philippe Gonzalez — May 19, 2015

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Travelers in Iran share a living room with two local shepherds © Hamed Saber | Flickr

“I’m not certain that the ideal society should be religious. I start from the premise that the ideal society should be secular.” So spoke documentary filmmaker, Mehran Tamadon, in a conversation with the four conservative mullahs, advocates of the Islamic republic, he invited to be part of his new movie *Iranian*. The conversation consists of five men sitting in a living room in Iran, arguing about the ideal society: this is pretty much the plot.

Behind closed doors, the mullahs’ wives are relegated to the bedrooms as their children play in the garden; in the living room, the four clerics and the self-avowed atheist embark upon a fascinating experiment. Mehran Tamadon, who lives in France and has both a French and an Iranian passport, invited his guests to spend 48 hours in his mother’s house, 40 miles from Tehran. But the house is more than a space to share. According to the filmmaker, it’s a metaphor of society. Each bedroom symbolizes the private space that its resident occupies as he or she wishes, whereas the living room stands for the public space of that small but diverse community. This raises a tricky question: how to deal with this diversity when four conservative Muslims sit with an unbeliever? Dialogue and persuasion are the selected means, even if intimidation is never far.

Democracy
Iran
Public Sphere
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Farrokhzad (Forough)
Goldfarb (Jeffrey)
Mossadegh (Mohammad)
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Besides the discussions, the small community cooks grilled corn and kebab, shares plenty of melon and drinks tea. The mullahs bow down to their God five times a day on the carpets in the living room. To an outsider, all this seems quite natural. Yet, in his interviews to the media, Mehran Tamadon recalls all the years and failed attempts that came before he managed to gather such diverse people under his roof.

In 2011, he convinced four theologians from Qom to come to a place he was renting in their city. They would appear each morning to discuss, but they wouldn't touch a dish or a glass of water, even less pray. After a week of filming, they confessed to their interlocutor that, as a nonbeliever, he was "impure," which made everything complicated, even going to the restroom. The filmmaker stopped the shooting: "I didn't want to make a movie about the impossibility of living together." Not to mention the phone calls threatening him of legal action if he kept on with his project.

In October 2012, Tamaron eventually found four interlocutors willing to share bread — and not only arguments — with him. That's when the full experiment became possible. Still, the fear remained that some word or gesture would breach the small community, prompting the mullahs to slam the door and run away with their families.

As I watched *Iranian* this week, at a screening in Geneva with Mehran Tamaron, I couldn't help but notice the striking parallels between this Iranian living room and Jeff Goldfarb's description in *The Politics of Small Things* about what took place around the kitchen table behind the Iron Curtain. In these familiar settings, a critique of an authoritarian — if not totalitarian — regime can be spoken, the official versions of history and truth ridiculed or challenged. It is a kind of free zone where dissidence can materialize, another version of reality imagined and acted upon. Goldfarb's concept of *clandestine public space* aptly fits both the Iranian living room and the Soviet kitchen table. In order to work, this clandestine public space needs to appear not only as a *private*, but also as a *familiar* space. It requires some amount of familiarity, connivance and discretion: private qualities that enable alternative politics.

This requirement of discretion runs precisely against the presence of a camera, which is a medium of visibility. To the public at the screening, Mehran Tamadon explained how easy it is to bump into critiques of the regime in an Iranian living room. But as soon as there is a camera, the critical citizens change their discourse, reversing to the official versions of reality. (A snatch of this official discourse is effectively captured in the opening scene of the movie, one of the rare shots filmed outside the house: as they finish praying in an important mosque of Tehran, the men ritually shout: "Down with the USA! Down with the UK! Down with Israel!")

What, then, convinced these four mullahs to debate in front of a camera? First of all, their stance is one of defending the regime, even if they sometimes diverge about the ideal society. But, above all, they seek the visibility of the camera to provide public vindication of the cause of Islam

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and of their republic. Their incentive is apologetics and proselytism: every successful contradiction opposed to their contender is a battle won for the cause. Yet, full victory lies in the prospect of converting the atheist in the house, taking his camera as a witness. One of the mullahs, the most vocal, acknowledges this dimension: in the middle of an argument, he retorts with sheer delight to a Mehrad Tamaron struggling to find a counterargument: "The spectators perfectly get my point." The cleric presupposes an agreement with an audience that is not Iranian — how could such movie be shown in Iran? — but French and Western.

Thus, the clerics are involved in a foreign mission in the movie, from their perspective. Their idea of publicity is purely instrumental: the camera grants access not to a free, pluralistic, and critical — free *because* it is pluralist and critical — public sphere, but to a greater display area for their ideology.

Mehran Tamadon's use of publicity is very different. There is an Arendtian quality to it: "Everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance — something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves — constitutes reality" (*The Human Condition*, p. 50) [1]. And its prime effect is to show that free, pluralistic, and critical debate is possible among Iranians.

This leads us to the arguments and, from there, to the experimental setting. As soon as Mehran Tamadon proposes that the small community works on a secular — not to be confused with an hysterical secularist — basis, his proposal is met with a sarcastic comment: "Secular is the name that you give to your religion." The mullahs try to make their point by invoking the problem of feminine "nudity" within the public space: "What about a woman walking without her veil among us?" Such a scene would show, they argue, "disrespect" towards men since they are — "it's a scientific fact" — more easily aroused than women. During the whole debate, the mullahs' arguments against a free society revolve around the public regulation of sexuality, trying to "preserve social order," that is, the inequalities of gender. In their view, only religion can provide a strong morality able to protect society as a whole and support political institutions.

Mehran Tamaron's counterarguments to the clerics are not always as incisive as one might wish. In fact, it's not in disputation that he is at his best, but in the way he subtly frames the debate. Leaving aside the veil issue, he draws a square representing the living room and proposes that his guests use three of the four walls. On their walls, they can display whatever they wish, as long as they leave one for him. This raises the questions: what can be shown on the walls of our public space? and: how are we going to decide what can be shown?

Tamaron restates these general questions in a very simple, pragmatic, and yet powerful way, using books, portraits, and music as concrete examples. Books: which can be displayed in the public space? Not only the posters reproducing the bookshelves of his guests, filled with religious volumes, but also his own bookshelves full of subversive novels. Portraits: not only the

official pictures of the Islamic Republic leaders (Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei), but also pictures of personalities erased from the collective memory (politician and reformist Mohammad Mossadegh, poetess Forough Farrokhzad). Music: not only male vocal music, but also female singers accompanied by instruments.

As the five men debate over each item, they are forced to evoke the rules guiding their decisions, and thus the rules binding their small community. At that point, Mehran Tamadon looks much more like John Rawls sitting on a carpet and reinventing political liberalism out of scraps of cultural artifacts (books, pictures, records): the experimental setting is able to recreate the original position where the social contract gets negotiated.

As his colleagues start arguing about every artifact, the most vocal of the mullahs becomes aware of how all this is starting to go very wrong. One cleric even says: "I understand that in such society I have to raise my level of toleration." The religious leader tries to halt the process: "Look, there are two ways to this: either we make up by ourselves the rules of our society; [or] we accept that there is a very wise legislator who anticipated all our problems, and the only thing we have to do it to accept his law." Mehran Tamadon, seeing who is hiding beneath the disguise of this "wise legislator," declares that he doesn't believe such person exists — a statement that shocks his opponent. But even more shocking: one mullah, who seems to miss the point, sides with the atheist!

Very soon, the vocal mullah puts an end to the experiment by striking up the Muslim confession: "There is no god but […]." His colleagues immediately join him, reforming the community around a religious basis, leaving the atheist out of it.

After the Geneva screening, some spectators were disturbed by the possible use of the movie for propaganda. An Iranian woman, who might very well have lived first-hand the 1979 Revolution, accused the film of being a commercial for the regime. For her, inviting the mullahs to a debate gave them a platform and already meant siding with their camp. "One does not dialog with the enemy" seemed to be her motto. Another Iranian spectator, a man, pointed out that the film gave too much weight to the official discourse of the mullahs and not enough to the critique coming from the margins. Mehran Tamaron replied again that he found no one willing to criticize the regime in front of a camera. He had to do it himself, as one of the characters in the movie. And he had to live with its consequences: at the airport, as he was about to embark for his return flight to France, both of his passports were withdrawn, preventing him from leaving Iran for a month after the shooting was completed.

Iranian asks where a free, pluralist, and tolerant society begins. Its answer is surprisingly simple: people debating in a living room in front of a camera. As a matter of fact, many people argue in Iran about the regime, some in favor, some against it, and the living room is the place where they confront their

public, not in a public place, and even less a public sphere.

The critical edge of *Iranian* lies neither in the sophistication of the mullahs' or Tamadon's arguments nor in the fact that they're debating. It lies in *publicity*: the film says out loud what many are asserting in their homes among relatives, friends, and neighbors. As the movie will circulate on the social networks and reach Iranian living rooms using virtual backdoors, it might very well give both a public incarnation and a new reality to their claims for a free society.

REFERENCES

[1] Arendt, H. (1998). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (original work published 1958).

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