

A Response to Danny Postel's call for critical solidarity with Iran (Reprinted from Tehran Bureau)

Frieda Afary

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This article assesses critically the current state of the Iranian democratic movement, while disputing Postel's contention that — despite Hugo Chavez's support for the Iranian regime — the Iranian democratic movement has a lot to learn from the Venezuelan economic model.

Danny Postel's "The Specter Haunting Iran" is a welcome call for "critical solidarity" with the Iranian democratic opposition movement. Unlike those on the Left who have been wary of characterizing the current democratic movement in Iran as a progressive phenomenon, Postel has supported this movement in just that light, as what he calls "a deep-seated shift in the consciousness of millions of Iranians in their ways of seeing and perceiving their political reality." In his previous writings, he has also attempted to demonstrate that the nonviolent and pluralistic features of this movement are related to the deep interest in philosophy, and specifically rationalist philosophy, that has emerged in Iran during the past 20 years.

I would add that the feminist movement in Iran, which has offered thoughtful and courageous arguments concerning women's rights and the issue of sexuality, is also a manifestation of the philosophical awakening that has characterized contemporary Iranian society. Readers who have had the opportunity to read Fatemeh Sadeghi's "Why We Say No to the Compulsory Hijab" or Shadi Sadr's recent challenge to Hojatoleslam Karroubi will know that Sadeghi and Sadr are not only activists but also deep thinkers and valuable theorists.

There is no doubt that poverty and economic inequality is a major concern of the mostly young participants in the current opposition movement. Iran's university students, of whom 60 percent are women, face unemployment or poverty wages of less than \$250 per month without benefits. According to the World Bank and the Iranian government, the absolute poverty line has been set at \$2 per day per person, which means that a minimum of \$240 per month is needed to support a family of four. In fact, according to the Central

Bank of Iran, the general poverty line for a family of four in 2006 was no less than \$400 per month. The newspaper *Sarmayeh* (Capital) has admitted that the practical poverty line in Tehran is actually \$800 per month for a family of four.

The question of alternatives to economic inequality and specifically alternatives to capitalism has not, however, been seriously addressed by the Green Movement. Whereas the Islamist movement of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shariati's brand of Islamic socialism in the 1970s used the promise of economic justice to gain adherents, the leaders of the Green Movement, Karroubi and Mousavi, advocate one or another form of market capitalism.

In light of this reality, I appreciate Danny Postel's statement:

I want to suggest to Iran's Greens that they take a close look at the cases of Eastern Europe and South Africa. The democratic movements that by and large formed the post-Communist governments of the former Warsaw Pact countries faced a similar situation—different from Iran in many regards, to be sure, but similar in the crucial respect that their focus was political in nature and their platform consisted mainly of democratic principles and negative liberties. It was presumed that these were the most pressing matters and that economic issues would get worked out in due course. But what happened? To make a long story short, shock capitalism happened, and it brought the kinds of dislocations, dispossessions, and disfigurements that are its global trademarks. Because the democratic-movements-turned-governments hadn't given much thought to questions of economic structure or policy, they were unprepared to respond to the convulsions induced by neoliberalization.

In fact, Iranians have already experienced the “convulsions induced by neoliberalization.” In addition to its ban on independent trade unions, the Iranian government has been promoting a two-tier wage system that has relegated a large percentage of Iran's workers to the status of contract workers without any benefits. Ahmadinejad's government has recently approved a plan for “targeted monetary subsidies” that will gradually phase out existing government subsidies for basic food items and petroleum. Mohommad Maljoo, an Iran-based professor of economics, has addressed these questions in a recent interview in which he refutes “trickle-down economics” and argues that the accumulation of capital is unlikely to improve the condition of the lower classes.

Given Postel's grasp of the “deep-seated shift in consciousness” that has taken place in Iran, I am surprised to see that, in his effort to take the terms of the economic discussion

beyond capitalism, he offers Hugo Chavez's Bolivarian economic experiment as a model alternative.

First, Postel admits that Chavez has been a strong supporter of Ahmadinejad and Khamenei. Although he suggests that this support is limited to the political realm, in fact Chavez's involvement with Iran's power structure is deeply economic. The Islamist regime has made large investments in Venezuela. Chavez in turn has been providing the current government with petroleum to reduce the impact of Western sanctions. The distinction Postel makes between Chavez's political practice and his economic practice is invalid.

Furthermore, Postel seems unaware that Iranian labor activists have attempted to distinguish between Chavez and his own country's labor movement, issuing appeals to Venezuelan workers to support them in their struggle against the current regime. In January 2007, on the occasion of Ahmadinejad's trip to Venezuela to meet with his friend, Chavez, the Bus Workers' Union sent an open letter to the Venezuelan Workers Syndicate calling on them to confront Ahmadinejad and defend Iranian workers (1/17/07).

I would argue that Chavez's political and economic support for the current repressive government of Iran flow from his fundamental economic views. I would further argue that a careful examination of those views reveals that they offer little more than a state-controlled version of capitalism. Indeed, the very article Postel cites as evidence of the achievements of Chavez's economic programs offers important critiques of the glaring contradictions in his brand of so-called socialism. Below are two passages from the article, "Venezuela's Cooperative Revolution," by Betsy Bowman and Bob Stone:

Zaida works seven hours a day, five days a week, and is paid \$117 a month, the uniform income all employees voted for themselves. This is much less than the minimum salary, officially set at \$188 a month. This was "so we can pay back our [government start-up] loan," she explained. Venezuela Avanza cooperativistas have a monthly general assembly to decide policy. As in most producer co-ops, they are not paid a salary, but an advance on profits. Workers paying themselves less than the minimum wage in order to make payments to the state was, Zaida acknowledged, a bad situation. "We hope our working conditions will improve with time," she said...

And even if all of the country's current cooperativization programs succeed, will that struggle—and it will be a struggle—result in socialism?... The history of co-ops from the Amana colonies of Iowa to the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation in the Basque country shows that even when they start out with a community-service mandate,

individual co-ops, or even networks of co-ops, tend to defensively re-internalize capitalist self-seeking and become indistinguishable from their competitors when made to compete alone against an array of capitalist firms in a capitalist economy.

As this article indicates, workers' self-management in the context of a capitalist world can simply not transcend capitalism. I would add that that the combination of massive oil income, state supervision, and worker's self-management on behalf of capitalist profit-sharing can also not be posed as an alternative to capitalism.

While most members of the global Left continue to offer uncritical support for Chavez's political and economic programs, there are a growing number of young people associated with the new Left in Iran who do not regard the Chavez model as a progressive alternative. They are, however, very interested in developing true alternatives to market capitalism.

In contrast to the period preceding and immediately after the 1979 Revolution, when the vast majority of the Iranian Left consisted of the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party and the Maoist advocates of guerrilla warfare, there is now a growing new Left in Iran that challenges the old Left's legacy of allegiance to the former Soviet Union and Communist China under Mao. This new Left is completely aware of the collaboration of the Tudeh with Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 in the name of anti-imperialism. It invites critiques of Stalinist and Maoist brands of thinking. It has welcomed new translations of Marx's 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts as well as Capital. (See the English translation of Hassan Mortazavi's preface to the new Persian translation of Capital volume I. It is fascinated by the concepts found in G.W.F. Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind. This new generation also reflects the deep interest in philosophy that has characterized Iran during the past two decades. It is challenging the economic and ideological views of the old Left that persist but are devoid of new ideas.

After the Ashura protests, the Iranian government accused the democratic opposition movement of having been instigated by "enemies of God and Marxists." This statement came as a surprise to Iranian socialists, who hardly thought that their influence had been widespread. Since then, many of those associated with the new Left have been arrested. These thinker-activists include Omid Montazeri, a 24-year-old law student, journalist, and writer for the online youth journal Sarpich, who was forced to "confess" during the show trials that followed the December 27 demonstrations. Omid Mehregan, editor of the online journal Rokhdad and cotranslator with Morad Farhadpour of Theodor Adorno's "Dialectic of Enlightenment" was released on February 19. Many others remain in prison.

I do strongly agree with Danny Postel's call for a critical solidarity that is based on addressing economic alternatives to capitalism. Those who are interested in this call can begin by defending the members of the Iranian new Left who are languishing in prison. We need to hear their views, learn from their experiences, and attend to their questions in order to fruitfully engage in critical solidarity with the Iranian democratic opposition movement.

Afary's critical response to Postel, as well as a link to Postel's article can be read at [Tehran Bureau](#).

Source: <http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/a-response-to-danny-postel%E2%80%99s-call-for-critical-solidarity-with-iran/>