The Manifestation of Social Trauma:

The Implications for Future Revolutions and Political Conflict

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***Introduction***

What are the conditions under which the public openly commits to a revolutionary movement to present a viable threat to an existing regime? Revolutionary movements emerge in stages. The public commitment is a moment when sizable portions of society join ongoing protest and demonstrations against the current regime. The movement from the presentation of challengers to mobilization is difficult to explain. The public commitment stage is a moment where larger and larger crowds are openly challenging the regime in the face of potentially fierce repression. To explain this transition in the revolutionary situation, this study will draw upon Cultural Trauma theory, and specifically Sztompka’s model of traumatic sequence, to explain when public commitment to a revolutionary situation is more or less likely to consolidate. Cultural Trauma theory is a theory of societal disruption- the consequences of rapid and abrupt social change. The application of Cultural Trauma theory on revolutionary trends is new, offering us an opportunity to examine something useful in terms of predicting and understanding collective action.

The discussion of cultural trauma comes in an identifiable and interpreted shock to the cultural tissue of a society. Although Cultural Trauma theory has been studied, there is room to examine how such traits may be used to predict a universal revolutionary behavior. Additionally, such identifiable symptoms illuminate the effects of cultural trauma on countries facing revolutionary potential a second time. I will seek to explain how certain macro behavioral trends may be attributed to the prevalence of cultural trauma in a country and how the influence of cultural trauma drastically changes the course of the second revolution, ultimately stunting its development and success.

In this study I will use Iran as a case study in which appears a manifest social expression of cultural trauma, arguably due to the impact of previous revolution. I will identify symptoms of cultural trauma in order to evaluate the impact of the trauma on failed revolutionary collective action. The goal of this study is to examine the case of Iran, examining the political activity since the time of the Revolution of 1979. In this way, the case of Iran highlights an example of collective hesitant behavior during recent attempts at revolution, arguably due to violent revolution in the past. Such information can be useful in understanding and predicting revolution from the angle of a collective trauma that has lasting effects on group political behavior.

***Understanding Cultural Trauma***

Trauma is a term usually associated with medicine and psychology. However, the notion of trauma has recently applied to theories of social change. Piotr Sztompka (2004), author of *Cultural Trauma: The Other Face of Social Change*, explains trauma within the context of the collective body of society, studying the traumatic consequences that present themselves prior to a negative event or societal experience. Occurring when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event, cultural trauma leaves indelible marks upon a group consciousness, marking memories forever and changing a society’s future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

Cultural trauma is a concept that examines every day life. Actors describe themselves as being traumatized when the environment of an individual or collectivity suddenly shifts in an unforeseen and unwelcome manner. As the revolutionary process plays out, if the symptoms of cultural trauma present themselves, the consequences may be detrimental to the daily functioning of society.

In understanding the notion of cultural trauma, it is imperative to grasp the importance of the role of the collective body, as revolution is defined in terms of a group movement rather than on an individual level. While it may be difficult to discern what separates a collective trauma from an individual trauma, Kai Erikson conceptualizes this notion characterizing collective trauma and the consequences of which “damage the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson in Alexander 1976). Erikson outlines the process explaining that collective trauma works its way slowly into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with trauma. However, he mandates that it is a shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support. As a response, society realizes that an important part of the self has disappeared-‘we’ no longer exists as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body (Erikson in Alexander 1976).

In order for an event to qualify as cultural trauma it must emphasize the collective agency--the acting and driving force of a society. Because the collective body makes up the backbone of social transformations, it allows for the continued influence of revolution within the cultural construct. This named shock to a collective body leads to disorientation, displacement or incoherence in a culture as the cognitive context of human life loses its homogeneity and stability (Smelser 2004). Thus an incongruence emerges between the very central assumptions of a culture-the core values, bases of identity and foundations of collective pride, and the outcomes of the unexpected change. Above all cultural trauma is traumatic not only because of a pointed event that has occurred, but more importantly because it disrupts the every day life routines of a culture. It is a disruption of normalcy, a break in the understanding of what is socially acceptable that brings upon the true traumatic condition. People place value on security, predictability, continuity, routines, and rituals of their life-world (Sztompka 2004). The very disruption of these core parameters that make up every day life is what allows for cultural trauma to develop and permeate a society, allowing for influence in generations to come.

In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Sztompka outlines both the requirements for a trauma to occur as well as the identifiable symptoms that manifest in a culturally traumatized society. Sztompka’s model of the traumatic sequence provides a framework for operationalizing the concept, allowing the theory to become a tool in which may be applied to the specific cases. The traumatic sequence outlined by Sztompka does not outline a cause and effect relationship. Rather, the sequence embodies a process of six stages mapping out the steps in identifying a culturally traumatized society. The first stage is characterized by traumatogenic change, which is necessarily sudden, deep and fundamental-all of the characteristics associated with revolution. The second is the dis-organization of culture and the accompanying disorientation of actors. This phase leads to a collective identity crisis, breaking down the unity of the masses that would otherwise participate in the revolutionary movement. In the third stage, the traumatizing situations or events appear as a result of traumatogenic change in areas other than culture, affecting the life-world of people. Next, the traumatic condition presents itself and is expressed by a set of traumatic symptoms-mental or behavioral, which are new, shared ways of conduct. Following the traumatic condition, the fifth phase embodies the post-traumatic adaptions that employ various strategies of coping with trauma. Last in the traumatic sequence, overcoming trauma comes in the way of consolidating a new cultural complex. The traumatic sequence does not hang in a vacuum, but instead runs in the wider context of other processes that occur at the same time (Sztompka 2004). The crucial question has to do with which types of changes are termed “traumatogenic,” or put simply, touch the core aspects of social life or personal fate, in turn giving new meaning to universal experiences.

In order for people to properly interpret changes brought about by revolution, a specific mental frame must be established. Thus, only if the victims of a revolution are represented in terms of valued qualities shared by the larger collective body, will the audience be able to symbolically participate in experiencing the original trauma. Awareness is crucial in the production of cultural trauma. The trauma must be remembered with a strong negative affect-namely shame, disgust or guilt. It must be made culturally relevant, represented as something sacred, a value perceived to be essential for the integrity of the affected society. Meaning is not invented in the minds of individuals but rather is drawn from surrounding cultural situations. According to the Thomas Theorem described by Alexander, “If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Alexander 2004). Distinguishing itself from massive trauma, collective traumas appear only when people become aware of the common plight, and perceive their personal situation as similar with that of others, defining it as shared. As a society begins to talk about a revolution, exchange observations and experiences, gossip and start rumors-the life of the trauma begins to take shape. The collective body formulates diagnoses and myths, identifies causes and villains, and develops coping methods. Such debates then reach the public arena, taken by the media and expressed in art, literature, movies and other forms. The entire “meaning industry” full of rich narratives focuses on giving sense to the common and shared occurrence of revolution, going beyond the subjective and symbolic and taking on tangible social forms such as collective mobilization and rebellion (Sztompka 2004).

While symptoms of trauma may take many forms and depend on the society being studied, there are some widely recognized and observable symptoms that are necessary to the identification of cultural trauma. In the observation of such symptoms, relationships between one revolutionary event and the next may be better understood. The depth and seriousness of each symptom present in a country is a crucial illumination, as it will determine how the cultural trauma continues to affect the collective body in regards to political behavior.

One symptom comes in the form of cultural disorientation, occurring when shared ways of conduct and widespread norms and opinions break down. Against this background there must appear a set of conditions, perceived as threatening which in turn trigger precipitating factors for the emergence of trauma. In this way, cultural disorientation yields a general and frightening confusion as to what the norms are in society. As emphasized in the discussion of culturally traumatic consequences, cultural disorientation leads to a disruption of normalcy, allowing for an erosion of a previously concrete set of rules, customs and shared way of thinking.

One of the most important indications of a traumatized society is when a culture experiences a collective identity crisis. This symptom involves the production or invention of themes emerging in the culture that are incongruent with the former culture. In this way, the identity of the collective body loses its coherence, producing a redefinition of meaning and a re-evaluation of belief systems. If the collective identity experiences a break down in their identity (the core of culture), the implications will have a paralyzing effect, shaping the capacity of the society to engage in future societal progressivism. Pessimism concerning the future matched with nostalgic images of the past are societal manifestations symptomatic of trauma. Thus through these observed symptoms, a collapse in the collective identity occurs. Sztompka emphasizes that the more trauma touches the core of collective order; the domain of main values, constitutive rules and central expectations-the stronger it will be felt by society (Sztompka 2000). Because revolution by nature embodies radical content, a collective identity crisis occurs readily when new ideas and lifestyles are inflicted upon the public, especially if imposed without consent or democratic process.

Just as there are observable symptoms in the identification of trauma, there are essential variables that must reveal themselves in order for a society to qualify as overcoming the cultural trauma experienced. In this way, once a country surpasses the final phase of the sequence, it may be argued that cultural trauma no longer affects future political behavior. In this way, the consequences of trauma have become obsolete and are no longer influencing revolutionary trends. In order for this to take place, the traumatizing situation seen as immediate must disappear or at least be redefined, losing salience. Coping strategies adopted against trauma must prove to have real healing effects. The cultural ambivalence or split must lose its acuteness allowing for the cultural “pains of transition” to become less likely to arise. However tortuous the trauma process, moving through the final phases of Sztompka’s sequence allows cultures to redefine new forms of moral responsibility and to redirect the course of political action. Recovering from a cultural trauma demands re-learning, re-skilling and re-socializing-all of which must be sustainable.

Alternatively, a failure to overcome trauma would suggest that a country is still in the symptom phase of Sztompka’s traumatic sequence. This label indicates that mobilization against trauma was too insignificant and that attempted coping strategies proved to be ineffective. If a country remains in this phase for too long, it may lead to the initiation of a vicious cycle of cultural destruction, prompting the traumatic symptoms to become increasingly grave. In this way, cultural incompetence and disorientation deepens, social activism is paralyzed, and widespread distrust, apathy, pessimism and resignation lead to the loss of cultural identity. In the long run, this is a prescription for cultural collapse. If the means of mobilization are few, and the access to resources for dealing with trauma are scarce, the trauma may become unmanageable--making it difficult for a country to move forward. Thus, consequently cultural trauma will continue to have an affect on future revolutionary behavior.

***Cultural Trauma and Revolutionary Movements***

The previous section defines cultural trauma and the stages of the traumatic sequence. At points, the discussion laid out the intersection of cultural trauma and revolution. Now I want to elaborate more completely on how cultural trauma can shape revolutionary behavior. The condition under which cultural trauma manifests in revolutionary situations is by way of the *Failed Utopic Promise.* Stavrakakis defines Utopia as “images of future communities in which the antagonism and dislocations fueling them will be forever resolved, leading to a reconciled and harmonious world.”A failed utopic promise involves the inevitable breakdown of this ideal and appears as a form of cultural trauma that may help us to understand the failure of revolutionary movements to consolidate in the present.

If the collective body in question has been culturally traumatized by a revolution past, the masses are more likely to by cynical about the pursuit of results through collective action in the future. In the context of revolution, the justification for the development of Utopian meaning is a crucial illumination. A society becomes susceptible to a hunger for a fantasy world during periods of uncertainty, social instability and conflict-all of which are periods ripe for revolution. As Stavrakakis emphasizes, “when the element of the political subverts the fantasmatic stability of our political reality” a Utopian mindset is developed and spread (Stavrakakis 1999). When a Utopic vision for a better future surfaces or is created, it becomes vulnerable to effective exploitation by revolutionary leaders. By identifying a scapegoat in which to place their blame, revolutionaries are able to single out a specific party-namely the ruling regime, as the cause of the current misfortune. In calling for the overthrow of the current system, leaders of the revolutionary cause insinuate that the result will be a healed and reconciled society-a Utopic ideal. Combining the revolutionary’s strategy of a Utopic promise with an already socially unstable environment encourages the momentum of a revolutionary movement forward.

Despite the promise of a healed society, it is impossible for a Utopic promise to become a reality even with the success on the side of the revolutionaries. Inevitably, a Utopia is both unrealistic and unattainable. Thus, if a country has already experienced a revolution and subsequently, a failed Utopic Promise, the collective body will be cynical about future success by means of political action. In this way, Stavrakakis explains that the cynical and disenchanted public fails to see the benefit in risking their lives and expending mass amounts of material and human resources in a fight that they believe will not yield results. Given that efforts of the masses did not produce the Utopic ideal the first time, the public distinctly remembers failure and disappointment; becoming resistant to engage in revolution–an extremely risky behavior, a second time. As the masses were in a sense “tricked” during the first revolution, seduced by the false promise of a Utopic world upon the consolidation of a new regime, the public becomes distrustful of the committing to a revolution a second time. As the collective body realized upon the first revolution’s conclusion that the lives of individuals were not that different and in some cases, worse than they were prior to revolution—frustration, disengagement and political apathy set in. The recognition of the first failed Utopic Promise is necessary for its influence, allowing effects to paralyze future political behavior. Additionally, the remaining memory of a failed Utopic ideal creates a culture that is both cynical and skeptical of political activity in general-including a revolutionary movement that is working towards a seemingly worthwhile cause. As emphasized by Stavrakakis, because of the remembered trauma and lack of results during the first revolutionary event, the promise of a second Utopia is “met with skepticism; hope is replaced by pessimism and in some cases resignation (Stavrakakis 1999).” Because continued repression by government forces becomes greater than the “revolutionary cause” the remembered trauma within a culture is enough to hinder the continued enthusiasm for action.

The failed Utopic Promise helps us to understand how Cultural Trauma Theory applies to revolutionary patterns as a whole. In order to gain a more in depth perception of cultural trauma as a barrier to revolution, the specific symptoms must be explained as barriers to mobilization as well. The first symptom discussed is a cultural identity crisis. Because ideology creates currency in the context of a revolutionary movement, its influence allows for political action to take shape. If there is a breakdown in ideology as seen in the manifestation of a cultural identity crisis, it stunts the revolution’s development because it may not longer be employed as a method in which to unite the masses for a cause. Cultural trauma presents an obstruction of the identity-building phase of revolution. One of the most imperative stages of revolution involves a widespread public commitment to the movement. In order for the masses to function as a composite actor, it is necessary that each individual share the same interests and goals. The extent of the group’s common identity and unifying structure represents the organization factor present in the formation of a revolution. The way a revolution gains momentum comes in the formation of a common identity. This common identity is imperative in that it minimizes the factions within society, and instead unites them under one front. This united front can then be used for effective collective action, the action that drives the revolution. Because cultural trauma creates an environment of distrust, it is difficult for groups to unify. Furthermore, it is unlikely that individuals will be convinced that members of the revolutionary movement are committed to the same cause given that suspicion is ever-present in a culturally traumatized society.

The second prevalent symptom-cultural disorientation has an extensive influence on hindering mobility. In order for a revolution to be successful, there must be a shift in the collective values and shared beliefs of the masses. During cultural disorientation, there is confusion as to what constitutes the norms in society. Thus, if the collective body is naïve of what their shared values are in the first place, it is impossible for a fundamental shift of beliefs necessary for the success of the revolutionary process to take place. Cultural disorientation involves a breakdown of shared values within a cultural construct. Without a consensus concerning the shared goals of a society as a whole, the construction of unifying goals for a political movement is even more difficult. Thus, in the absence of an established set of desired outcomes, a revolution loses the glue that holds it together. Furthermore, if the foundation for why a revolution is beginning to form is unclear, it is inherently impossible for revolutionary leaders to unite the crowds under a specific ideology.

***Research Design***

According to the discussion above, the likelihood of a revolutionary movement consolidating and challenging the existing regime is conditioned by the persistence of past cultural trauma in society. Hence, the presence and salience of cultural trauma in a community serves as a barrier to collective action, thereby limiting the potential of future revolutionary movements to successfully mobilize significant portions of the population for a sustained challenge to the state. In order to evaluate the impact of cultural trauma on revolutionary mobilization, this study provides an intensive review of Iran. Because Iran provides an example wherein a revolutionary movement collapsed, or failed to successfully consolidate after the revolutionary situation presented itself, it serves as an important narrative in the way of building Cultural Trauma Theory. Iran is a case that observes a revolutionary situation that failed to mobilize broad segments of the population despite observable support for the general revolutionary goals of removing the regime. In this case, we observe past revolutionary experiences suggesting that Iran is, according to the requirements outlined by Sztompka, a candidate for the label of a “traumatized” country. Iran provides a descriptive lens with which to view Cultural Trauma Theory, and thus the identification of macro-political behavior trends is plausible. Given this close examination, I will be able to cultivate the unique and precise examples in which Iran may or may not present observable collective symptoms of cultural trauma that in turn, have prevented collective mobilization. In examining this relationship, questions arise involving the use of Iran as a starting point, a base for a potentially universal revolutionary trend. Additionally, the case study of Iran provides an interpretation beyond what raw data could provide in order to explore a trend. Such relationships are examined in asking: does cultural trauma help us to understand the failure of a second revolutionary movement to mobilize? To what degree does each symptom present itself and does this have an effect on the intensity of the trauma experienced? This study hones in on the specific symptoms of cultural trauma and will evaluate if the collapse in recent a revolutionary movement can be attributed to cultural trauma extending from past revolution. It is important to note that many factors contribute to the success or failure of any revolutionary movement and Cultural Trauma theory is merely a lens with which to understand this behavioral phenomenon. If it is established that Iran has in fact been culturally traumatized by the violent revolution of 1979, I will then in turn seek to hypothesize to what extent this traumatic condition as well as each specific symptom identified contributed to the collective hesitance that may be observed in the subsequent Green Revolution which took place nearly thirty years later.

In reviewing the case of Iran, I will observe if there is a presence of the traumatic sequence as outlined by Sztompka’s model. Furthermore, I will identify in which stage Iran finds itself in the sequence. Thus, the cultural trauma symptoms observed in Iranian society post revolution demonstrate the country’s adherence to the steps of the traumatic sequence. In exploring how close Iranian’s culturally traumatic condition follows the steps outlined by Sztompka allows for the operationalization of this variable and provides a lens for discourse. Beginning with an episode of rapid and radical change, the model lays out the following stages of the traumatic sequence: a cultural split, dualism and ambivalence observed immediately following the episode. The next step comes in traumatizing occurrences or situations, supported by cultural templates for interpretation. After this stage, the manifestation of traumatic symptoms are observed. It is in this stage that I will be doing the majority of scrutinizing and intensive review, as it is the symptomatic representations in group behavior that become imperative observations in the identification of a culturally traumatized country. Arguably, it is this phase in which many cultures become stuck, paralyzed and unable to continue through the sequence which comes to a close in coping strategies, generational turnover, and finally, an embedding of a new culture. If I qualify Iran as unsuccessful in the completion of the sequence, I will conclude that the country remains in the traumatic symptoms stage. Thus, given Iran’s position in the sequence, I will seek to hypothesize if the collective body is ill equipped to engage in a revolution a second time given their current inability to move out of the traumatized condition. Apart from the appearance of the traumatic sequence, I will probe the collective behavior in Iran to inspect whether or not the symptoms observed lends to Sztompka’s definition of cultural trauma. This variable will require that the change be sudden, scope wide, radical and fundamental; affecting the every day lives of the collective body of society.

Because there are numerous variables in discussing the identification of cultural trauma symptoms, I will discuss three. Furthermore, Sztompka mandates that it is not necessary to observe every possible symptom in order to make an argument for the presence of cultural trauma. These core variables to be studied in combination with the presence of the traumatic sequence are especially telling in the appearance of cultural trauma and I believe will be sufficient in identifying the presence and influence of trauma in a society.

The first is a collective identity crisis. This crisis manifests in the production or invention of themes emerging in the culture that are incongruent with the former culture. In this way, a re-evaluation of the belief systems occurs. This variable can be measured in examining media forms from before and after the revolution. Whether this evidence takes the form of rhetoric found in speeches, topics taught in the education system, or the portrayal of certain themes in films, a cultural shift in beliefs is easily recognized and discussed.

The second variable is cultural disorientation. Sztompka describes the consequences of cultural disorientation in the terms of anomie, or the breakdown of social norms. This deterioration of norms in turn results in “civilizational incompetence” maintaining that for most people culture represents their internalized, trained ways of life. Cultural disorientation occurs when these every day routines lose effectiveness and even become counterproductive or negatively sanctioned in the new system. Meanwhile the new cultural rules appear as alien, imposed and coercive (Sztompka 2004). The identification of this variable comes in the form of policy change enforced by the new regime in addition to observable reactions by the society due to these changes. These changes may also be a shift in norms outside of policy, leaving a culture confused as to what is socially acceptable as there is a disparity between the old way of doing things and the new.

The third variable comes in the form of an observed pessimism due to the failure of a Utopian promise as outlined by Stavrakakis. In using this general theory, I will operationalize this concept by applying it to my specific research question. Stavrakakis uses Lacan’s psychological theory in a political context. I will take it one step further, applying it to the specific realm of revolution. Arguing that the failed Utopic Promise is a form of cultural trauma, the collective body finds disillusionment with the realized false promise of a Utopia in the first revolution after the consolidation of a new regime. Thus the collective body becomes not only hesitant but also uninterested in engaging in revolution a second time. This study allows for an increased awareness of the influence of cultural trauma on revolutionary patterns. Furthermore, it presents the application of a broad theory onto a narrow and observable phenomenon that has not been previously brought to light.

***Iran***

Iran is heir to a very rich culture, renowned for its poetry, visual arts, music and cuisine. It is also the birthplace of the Zoroastrian faith and the Shi’a interpretation of Islam. The revolution of 1979 demonstrated an exceptional separation from the ruling Pahlavi regime, replacing 2500 years of monarchial rule with an Islamic Republic and establishing a culture that was completely new. The revolution of 1979 will be my focus in terms of the event in which provoked Iran’s traumatic condition.

Unlike his father, Muhammad Khan Pahlavi was viewed as weak in the eyes of Iranians, a corrupt puppet of the West. Interest groups and political parties began to form—challenging his legitimacy. In response, the Shah employed his secret police force, the SAVAK in order to sustain power. Although the Shah facilitated a westernized Iran, this was more of a cultural doctrine rather than a political philosophy. The SAVAK executed and tortured opponents of the regime regularly, fueling the fire of dissent in Iran. Consequently, Muhammad Pahlavi was the last Shah to rule. In 1979, efforts of the revolutionary movement proved successful in overthrowing the Shah, under the leadership of Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini although exiled during the course of the revolution, distributed his message to his followers through cassette tapes. These tapes were smuggled into Iran during the course of the overthrow, duplicated, and broadcast in mosques and through other media outlets. Welcomed back in Tehran by several million Iranians upon the revolution’s end, Khomeini was established as Supreme Leader of Iran in February of 1979 (Gasiorowski 2014).

The revolution’s ideology was initially met with great support as Khomeini called for an abolition of Iran’s dependency on the west. In separating himself from the Shah’s previous perception as a puppet, Khomeini united Iran under nationalist and religious ideals. The new government implemented was an Islamic Republic, which for some citizens was perceived in a positive light, demonstrating a move back towards the traditions and values upheld in Islam. The ideology that made up the revolution was composed of both a fierce rejection of liberal capitalism as well as communism. Equipped with the slogan, “Neither East, nor West-Islamic Republic!” the Ayatollah created an entirely new political system. This included the supreme leader as the highest authority (the Ayatollah), followed by an assembly of experts, a council of guardians, a revolutionary guard and military police. Khomeini ruled based on the Shi’a sect of Islam, making the laws of the Shi’a interpretation of Islam into the laws of Iran, a huge step away from the previously secular state. During the beginning stages of his rule, Khomeini declared the prime minister’s government illegal, appointing a revolutionary council to oversee the transition into his new system. His book, *Islamic Government* provided a blueprint for the creation of his Islamic Republic (Gasiorowski 2014).

The new Islamic leaders that came to power after the revolution were radical in every sense of the word, transforming both political and cultural life inside of Iran. Although the Shah was repressive, Iranian’s previously enjoyed a progressive and westernized culture, characterized by many social freedoms. Above all, this culture separated religion from politics. In examining Iran’s revolution of 1979, numerous symptoms of cultural trauma may be identified and discussed as a fundamental shift in the entire cultural and political structure took place under Khomeini, fundamentally changing the country of Iran in irrevocable ways. Revolutionary “committees” sprang up in towns taking over public services and administering “revolutionary justice” on citizens deemed enemies of the state. The revolutionary committees began arresting top officials of the Shah’s regime and executing them. This was only the beginning however, as by November executions had already totaled over 600 (Gasiorowski 2014).

***Iran’s Green Revolution***

On February 9, 2011 also termed “the day of rage” Iranian protests broke out following the 2009-2010 Iranian elections. The widely unpopular Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the presidential election for a second term, taking 64% of the vote. Also called the Green Revolution, this revolutionary movement began because reformers believed that Mir-Hossein Mousavi was the rightful winner of the election insisting the results had been rigged. Opposition groups requested permission from the Ministry of Interior to protest under the supervision of police, however permission was refused. Mousavi and his supporter Mehdi Karroubi called for nationwide protests. Protestors included students, the working class, and reformers who were sick of Ahmadinejad’s conservative agenda wrought with cronyism. Although the initial outrage over the election died down eventually, a much bigger social movement formed protesting the conservative clerical structure of the Iranian political system. On June 13th, thousands of protestors poured onto the streets and, by the 15th, hundreds of thousands were protesting and clashing with security forces. Ayatollah Khamenei made a speech on June 19th condemning the acts of protests and defending the election results as a “divine assessment.” The next day, security forces brutally attacked protestors, killing at least ten and injuring many more. The killing continued during the following week with estimates of death the dozens and some 4,000 arrested of which included reformist leaders, journalists and intellectuals (Kagan 2013). Despite the revolution’s inertia in the beginning of the cause, the Green Movement gradually dissipated in 2010 and reformist factions were severely weakened, ultimately losing significance in the political realm.

***Symptoms Observed in Iran’s 1979 Revolution***

Iran’s revolution of 1979 follows the traumatic sequence outlined by Sztompka. In addition, the revolution embodies an adherence to the definition of cultural trauma. First and foremost, the revolution was rapid as the Shah fled Iran on January 16th and Ayatollah Khomeini returned to take over the country, greeted by jubilant supporters in Iran on February 1st. Additionally, the revolution was fundamental in the implementation of an Islamic Republic, a huge move away from the previous secular rule of the Shah. Khomeini established the principle of the “supreme leader” as being the only legitimate ruler over the Iranian state. In addition, the supreme leader was established as the best qualified to interpret the Qu’ran as it applies to the law. A cultural split was observed in the extreme division within the country between the supporters of the revolution under Khomeini and those persecuted for their suspected loyalty to the Shah. The final requirement to meet the definition of cultural trauma comes in the manifestation of traumatic occurrences. Such events took the form of Khomeini’s targeted repression and execution of thousands deemed “political prisoners” perceived as threats to his rule. For example, more than 30,000 political prisoners were executed in the 1988 massacre on Khomeini’s secret order. Recently revealed documents smuggled out of Iran reveal that due to the high quantity of necks to be broken, prisoners were loaded onto a forklift in groups of six to be hanged from cranes in half hour intervals. According to Dr. Eryand Abrahamian an expert on Iranian politics, the number (8,000) executed by revolutionary courts immediately after the consolidation of the new regime, largely exceeded those killed by the royalist government in an attempt to quash the revolution. Executions of military and police officers, SAVAK agents, cabinet ministers and deputies of the Shah’s regime were carried out only days after the end of the revolution, usually by firing squad. These events signify culturally traumatic events both in the physical occurrence of violence as well as the remaining trauma they left behind.

***Collective Identity Crisis***

As one of my named variables, the presence of a collective identity crisis in Iran is imperative in the identification of the traumatic condition. The new themes brought about in the Islamic Republic created a discrepancy in the Iranian’s collective self-image. In this way, due to the new and enforced policy, Iranians were as a collective body, unsure of what defined their sense of identity. One facet of collective identity comes in gender roles present in society. Under the Shah, women in Iran enjoyed many freedoms and were respected as contributing members of society. After the revolution, top officials of the fundamentalist regime enforced a new role for women outlined in traditional Islam. Although Iranian women played a significant role in the success of the 1979 revolution, they were the first segment of the population treated with disrespect and animosity upon consolidation of the new Islamic government. During the last three decades women have experienced imprisonment, insults and legal constraints due to the new enforced cultural construction. One such change came in Khomeini’s enforcement of the compulsory wear of the hijab by women while at work. The country’s Organization for Employment Affairs issued the circular letter No. 29280 in 1981, making the compulsory hijab mandatory as women employees uniform (Skocpol 1982). Before the revolution, women were allowed to act as judges. After the revolution, this route was no longer a career path for women as it was deemed inappropriate. The Family Protection Act allowing for divorce was deemed under the Khomeini, in direct opposition to the teachings of the Qu’ran. In a speech, Khomeini emphasized this notion saying, “The Family Protection Act is contrary to the enlightening sharia and the Grand Ayatollah has unequivocally commanded this law to be suspended until the Ministry of Justice announces its abolishment” (Kagan 2013). Not long after, religious jurists assailed rights of women regarding custody and guardianship of children. An article passed in July of 1968 read, “In order to allow women to participate more than ever in the country’s social transformation, and according to the principles of ‘Revolution by the Shah and the People’ cultural, health, medical and social services are also recognized as the holy duty of women. Performing these services will be mandatory for women who acquire a high school diploma or higher degrees.” Women were forced by law to play sports out of the sight of men and were prohibited from participating in sports that would require the removal of the hijab. Although previously a presence in literary and artistic spheres, women’s role in the arts was greatly reduced. Women were not allowed to touch men and thus performing arts were stripped of their emotion. Limitations of women writers as forbidden to describe love between an unmarried man and woman, restricted expression immensely. The evidence of these deprivations of women’s rights as a symptom of a loss of identity is apparent in the attempted protests. Female members of *Sepah-e Danesh* (Army of Knowledge) for example, held sit-ins in all offices of Ministry of Education demanding additional training courses and guarantees of employment. Hundreds of protests against the extreme reduction in women’s rights all over the country broke out after Khomeini took office, however they were generally repressed or discontinued as women began to fear for their safety (Kagan 2013).

***Cultural Disorientation***

The breakdown of social bonds and disruption of normalcy was present in Iran after the revolution in a number of ways. One way came to fruition in a class-based upheaval from below. Prior to the revolution, the Iranian upper class was pro-western in its cultural style. This elite structure consisted of state bureaucrats, foreign capitalist investors and domestic capitalists closely tied by patronage (Skocpol 1982). With the removal of the Shah came the disposal of many (especially political privileged) capitalists by the removal of all top officials. In addition, judicial and administrative institutions were completely re-organized. The lifestyles of the westernized groups were attacked. Popular demonstrations led by the Shi’a clergy during the revolution were fielded and instead directed against “US imperialism” (Skocpol 1982). Mehdi Bazargan, the first prime minister prior to the revolutionary regime, headed a government that had very little control over the country or the bureaucratic structure. Hundreds of semi-independent revolutionary committees performed a variety of functions in major cities and towns. In addition, many of the leaders of such organizations were factory workers, civil servants, and students. Most importantly, Ayatollah Khomeini did not consider himself to be answerable to the government. He made policy announcements, established new institutions and organizations, and announced decisions without the consent of his prime minister (Gasiorowski 2014). Thus, there was a mass disruption of normalcy in the function of government structures. Furthermore a breakdown of norms was seen in the intense controversy of the activities of the revolutionary courts. The revolutionary council, under the direction of Khomeini was allowed to try individuals under broadly defined crimes such as “sowing corruption on earth” and “crimes against the revolution.” In this way, there was a massive disconnect in the way justice was carried out in comparison to the previous system, having grave consequences on the culture of Iranians. The revolutionary committee patrolled neighborhoods in urban areas, guarded prisons and government buildings, and made arrests. The following activities incited a great sense of distrust in the collective body as society was constantly paranoid of being implicated in an activity deemed “anti-revolutionary.” Cultural disorientation also comes in the form of media censure, as people only have access to a one-sided explication of events. In August of 1979, the revolutionary prosecutor banned the left-wing newspaper “Ayandegan.” Given the shift in the elitist structure and the method by which the law was upheld and carried out, Iranians experienced a disruption of normalcy in their everyday lives. The collective agency lost the comfort of predictability and routine in the new strict laws and policy implemented by the Ayatollah and enforced by the revolutionary council.

***Pessimism due to Failure of a Utopic Promise***

A failed Utopic Promise is a form of cultural trauma that allows us to understand the relationship between one revolution and the next. The expression of the consequences of a failed Utopia in Iran may be examined through media outlets. The film *Persepolis* based on the graphic novel by Iranian native Marjane Satrapi, discusses the narrative of life before and after the revolution of 1979. Told through the perspective of Marji, a young girl who comes of age against the background of a rapidly changing political environment, the film outlines the original support for the revolution and the harsh reality and disappointment present when the reality of the revolution consolidates. The name *Persepolis* is a reference to the ceremonial capital of the Archaemenid Empire and serves as a comment on the power and beauty of Iran before the Islamist take over. The film begins with Marji as a child. Marji’s western attire is emphasized in her Adidas sneakers and free flowing hair. However Marji observes her parents discontentment with the Shah’s reign, and is portrayed in the film chanting “down with the Shah.” As she experiences the revolution, Marji observes the cultural disorientation that takes place, as an abrupt shift in beliefs is implemented in the new Islamist Republic. Marji explains, “our neighbors birthmark became a scar from the fighting-everyone became a revolutionary. Our teachers who used to love the Shah made us tear up his pictures in textbooks.” In this way, the young Marji observed the hypocrisy and breakdown of social norms. As she continues to grow up against the background of the revolution, Marji’s family’s previous support for the revolution quickly fades away. Instead, her family hopes only to stay alive as the Islamist regime turns out to be even more violent than the Shah’s, systematically killing individuals perceived as threatening to the state. In school several years down the road, Marji is portrayed as wearing a veil along with all of the other girls in her class. While the teacher is lecturing about the glorious revolution, Marji stands up shouting “The Shah had my uncle prisoned. But the new government had him killed.” In this way, Marji is pointing out the failed Utopic promise presented in the revolution and the subsequent consequences of the radical Islamist regime currently in place. While initially her family was in support of the take down of the oppressive Shah’s regime, they come to find out that their lives after the revolution are far worse off than when the Shah was in power. Worried for her safety, Marji’s parents send her to school in Vienna. The audience is told a story of a family friend who was executed because she was perceived as a radical. Because the young girl was a virgin however, and because Islamist law mandates that it is illegal to kill a virgin-she is forced to marry a guard who proceeds to rape her before her execution.

Another side story in *Persepolis* that demonstrates the impact of the Islamist regime occurs when a friend of Marji’s family needs heart surgery. However, when the wife is allowed to speak with the surgeon she finds that the doctor assigned to her husband’s case was their family window washer prior to the revolution. This demonstrates the complete rupture in the culture of Iran enforced by the new regime prior to the revolution as Khomeini effectively removes elites in power positions in order to maintain control of the state. The film comes to a dark ending with Marji’s eventual return to Iran. Marji feels isolated as though she does not belong in her own country because the norms and values have so drastically been altered. Narrating her return, Marji mandates that she felt depressed, unable to cope with the stringent restrictions on her liberties and freedoms that she readily enjoyed in Vienna. In a flash-forward to Marji in her middle age, she describes the mood of the collective body in Iran stating, “we were so eager for happiness, we forgot we weren’t free. Many students were imprisoned after the revolution and so no one dared speak of politics.” This ending explicates the lingering effects of the revolution on the collective identity. Furthermore in stating that “no one dared speak of politics” Marji outlines the impact of cultural trauma on the Iranian people as they have arguably become disillusioned as a whole with politics and revolution due to the failure of the Utopic promise.

Apart from the observed pessimism in media outlets such as *Persepolis* it is important to note that the way in which events played out in the 1979 revolution were inconsistent with the original goals of revolutionary supporters. In this way, Khomeini hijacked the ideals that served as the roots of enthusiasm for the overthrow of the Shah, misconstruing the ideology to benefit the formation of his Islamic Republic. The masses became skeptical of revolution because the way in which the initial goals of the revolution were manipulated in order to bring the new government power. Thus, the collective body became skeptical of any future political behavior. Because the initial goals of the 1979 revolution were hijacked by Khomeini for the purpose of creating a radical new government, society became disillusioned with any hope that their desired outcomes for a revolution would be fulfilled a second time.

***Green Revolution-An Influence of Cultural Trauma***

Although it is clear that the uprisings during the Green movement were significant and had revolutionary potential, full on revolution never came to fruition. The main protests centered around the election died down not long after they began. While the broader social movement retained momentum, in the end reformist leaders were ultimately weakened and became inconsequential (Gasiorowski 2014). While many would argue that this is simply due to the fact that protestors were repressed, there are other factors to consider in the discussion of causes for the ultimate failure of the Green Revolution. It is important to consider the great repression that was present in the Pahlavi regime and yet, the revolution of 1979 still took shape as the masses became mobilized and determined on a large scale. Numerous protestors were shot by the SAVAK but despite the crackdown, the revolutionary movement continued to push forward until the Shah could no longer maintain power. In this way, it is necessary to view the failure of revolutions from a perspective other than repression. If the Shah’s repression did not stop the revolutionaries in their action in 1979, what changed during the green movement? Although cultural trauma can not be definitively attributed as the sole cause of the collective hesitance seen in the Green Movement, it is certainly an important component to consider.

***Discussion***

Nima Naghibi author of *Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia in Diasporic Iranian Women’s Autobiographies*, outlines her opinion on the collective trauma that remains ever present in Iran stating, “At this particular historical juncture, the wounds of revolution are still fresh, and we remain at the preliminary stages of capturing and processing a sense of loss before we can redefine our diasporic subject positions through the possibilities of revolutionary trauma.” In this way, Iran is still dealing with deep-seeded issues caused by Cultural Trauma. The continued influence of trauma in Iran not only qualifies it as “traumatized country” but also brings to the light how the impact of trauma has hindered the ability for revolutionary collective mobilization since the 1979 revolution.

In examining the evidence and observing the symptoms of cultural trauma since the time of the 1979 revolution, it may be argued that citizens of Iran continued to feel that their collective subjection to a horrendous event left indelible marks upon their group consciousness. Thus, the revolution of 1979 marked memories of Iranians and has thus changed the society’s future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. Cultural Trauma theory tells us that Iran has in fact been “traumatized” given the identification of multiple symptoms of cultural trauma, in addition to the discussion of a failed Utopia. Despite the limitations of a qualitative study, the case of Iran provides for us a lens with which to view a behavioral phenomenon. While the impact of cultural trauma will be specific to each country’s unique cultural, the impact of trauma on revolution and collective action may be universal. Such information may prove useful in understanding and predicting revolution from the angle of a collective trauma that has lasting effects on group political behavior.

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