“Projection and Denial in the Interpretation of Foreign Affairs: New York Times Coverage of Post-Election Protests in Iran”

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Prepared for presentation at the 2014 Western Political Science Association

Annual Meeting in Seattle, Washington

(First Draft: Not for Quotation without Permission of the Author)

Citizens in technologically advanced societies, with printing presses, telephone lines, radio signals, and computer screens, understand events in faraway places partly by reflecting on messages sent by the news media. Citizens differ in how they receive intellectual food from mass-circulation newspapers, popular television-news programs, and announcements about “breaking news” on internet search engines. Cultural habits inform each citizen’s handling of what she or he hears and reads. Some recipients choose to ignore or reject the reports completely; a few swallow them whole; some masticate them, mixing the reports with the recipient’s own ideas.[[1]](#footnote-1) Regardless of how they are received, the reports provide material for citizens’ reflection and thereby play a role in their thinking. News stories provide important food for everyday political thought.

Although citizens use the news stories to help make sense of the world, the stories are not direct, unmediated reflections of reality. Rather, they are tales about the world constructed by imaginative minds. As Todd Gitlin and Lance Bennett have noted for many decades, reportage is partly an artistic endeavor.[[2]](#footnote-2) Journalists contrive coherent pictures about political situations and then communicate the images to readers, listeners, and viewers. Journalists describe physical events in the world, but they also attempt to make the corporeal motion sensible by assigning motives to human actors. Reporters also ascribe to the actors perceptions of situations that readers and listeners find familiar and comprehensible. These additional literary elements seldom can be verified (especially if the story covers happenings in a location faraway). This does not mean that they are mere ornaments. The claims about situations, perceptions, and motives provide the physical movements with a logical sequence and generate drama for the reader.

But if the meaning of the physical events come not from events themselves, from where do the ideas about motives, perceptions, and situations come from? To propose some tentative answers to this question, this paper considers how journalists in the United States described the 2009 elections in Iran and their bloody aftermath. To some extent, the journalists merely described physical events. The amassing of hundreds of thousands of human bodies in the streets of the major cities of Iran immediately after the announcement of the election results; the public killings, beatings, and arrests of Iranian citizens; and the stern warnings issued by the Supreme Leader following the tumult. But the journalists also attributed an overarching logic and ascribed motivations to the happenings that they covered. This paper speculates about the origins of these imputed features that gave the news reports their artistic shape.

1. Ricoeur and the News

To identify possible origins of the literary dimension of this set of news stories, this paper draws upon a set of ideas developed by the recently deceased French social philosopher, Paul Ricouer. In a series of books and essays,[[3]](#footnote-3) Ricoeur argues that scholars, when either reading or listening to political utterances, should always assume that that the interlocutor’s words and sentences, by themselves, are incomplete expressions of the actor’s actual views. To see completely what the political actor imagines, the analyst needs to string the actor’s words and sentences into a coherent and complete narrative.

Ricouer uses the term “narrative” to denote a vision about a deed: about its origins, execution, and consequences. In a typical narrative, either a single actor or a group of actors decide to act either to achieve a goal or because the act seems inherently worth doing; the course of the action proves, in practice, to be more dangerous and slippery than the singular or collective protagonist had expected; this requires modifications of amendments of the original plan; and the action ultimately leads to particular consequences, many (often unexpected). The entire sequence, from the description of the world before the deed to the description of the world afterwards, constitutes the narrative.

According to Ricoeur, a term, phrase, exhortation, or seemingly non-committal expository sentence (say, “The dragon is 20 meters long.”) acquires significance for an actor because of its relationship to an underlying and half-hidden broader tale (say, a story about a knight deciding to defend his ailing father’s castle) that the actor takes seriously. If the analyst does not know the implicit tale, then she or he will be unable to fathom the logic that generates the actor’s emotions, expectations, and wishes. The author’s meaning, when uttering a concept, name, sentence, or word, will elude the analyst’s comprehension.

Ricoeur’s understanding of “narrative” diverges from a set of related notions, such as “framing” and “frames,” currently popular among social scientists who approach politics from a cultural perspective. As Judith Butler points out, framing and frame refer to attempts to fix and bound one’s use of reality. In a painting, a movie, or a photograph, the edges of the frame lop off certain possibilities from the view of the audience. One’s understanding is restricted, and one’s likely conduct is thus limited.[[4]](#footnote-4) Butler’s understanding is congruent with Erving Goffman’s older psycho-sociological sense of framing, as a type of behavior modification induced by systematic threats and personal pain. According to Goffman, one learns via punishment the proper way of responding to a standard social situation (say, greeting a pesky neighbor at a funeral) and is dissuaded from unseemly behavior.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Ricoeur, in contrast, sees a narrative as a verbal practice that spurs, not inhibits, action. In his opinion, the story of quest, obstructions, and heroism helps one discern options and inspires effort. Stated differently, Goffman and Butler see frames as rules about correct behavior and understanding that make social life predictable; frames condition us.[[6]](#footnote-6) For Ricoeur, narratives are stories about quests that inspire extraordinary, unpredictable action.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The uncovering of a half-hidden story in a verbal utterance gets the analyst only so far, Ricoeur adds. In his opinion, a researcher also needs to locate the implicit narrative amid more widely held social myths with which the political actor has been raised since infancy. Ricoeur believes that narratives carry emotional wallop not for abstract aesthetic reasons, but because they resemble long-held tales that circulate within one’s community. These communal tales ceaseless tug at our imaginations and channel our feelings.

Ricoeur avers that humans embrace communal myths partly for reasons of survival. Myths allow human beings, who have physical bodies that need to be maintained and protected, to make sense of the challenges and tasks that surround us. Myths teach people how to identify dangers, prioritize goals, recognize evils, and seek safety.

In addition, we are taught myths since infancy for a societally functional reason. According to Ricoeur, humans, to survive and prosper, necessarily live in social settings. A durable social setting requires shared norms among members (so that life is predictable) and deep sentiments of mutual loyalty and gratitude. Shared myths recall and thereby perpetuate the shared norms necessary for collective existence.[[8]](#footnote-8) Through their community’s stories about legendary actors and grand deeds, humans acquire images of virtues and motivations to be brave, steadfast, just, and so forth. Without a shared myth, which describes the world’s dangers and prescribes ways of dealing with those concerns, humans would not feel at home with others (because they would never know the emotions, priorities, and norms that others in the community treat as sacred).

Therefore, to understand the political message embedded in any written or spoken utterance about politics, a researcher must consult the writer’s or speaker’s narrative heritage – that is, the narratives that are prevalent within the speaker’s community. Even this is not enough, Ricoeur quickly adds. Before an analyst can feeling confident that she or he one has a solid understanding of an interlocutor’s vision, the researcher must take a third methodological step. The researcher must reflect on the history of the speaker’s or writer’s community, and consider aspects of that history that the interlocutor may be trying to avoid, deny, or whitewash. In other words, a researcher should never view the declarations and pronouncements of a person or group as an uninhibited revelation.[[9]](#footnote-9) Paul Kearney, one of Ricouer’s former students, summarizes Ricoeur’s position through the epigram “narrative memories are never innocent.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

According to Ricoeur, humans – for reasons of profound shame, calculations of material advantage, and smoldering, indignant anger about power inequalities – assiduously hide a portion of their motivations and beliefs from outsiders, including scientific investigators. To discern the political vision of a person or a group, an investigator must consider possible hidden agendas from two additional sets of information: (1) past acts by the speaker’s community (what harmful deeds, material interests, and power inequalities might be the actor be intentionally camouflaging?), and (2) the ways that the political actor, when describing contemporary public affairs, modifies her or his community’s shared myths about heroism, heroic actions, and evil threats. In other words, how does the writer or speaker, whose meaning the analyst is trying to grasp, apply the community’s “Grand Narrative” – or the set of stories with which the community’s leaders routinely rationalize social arrangements and justify acts of oppression within and outside its borders?[[11]](#footnote-11)

Using Ricoeur’s advice, the remainder of this paper looks at news stories about apparent electoral fraud during Iran’s 2009 presidential election, popular demonstrations sparked by the fraud, and subsequent government repression. The paper focuses on reports in the New York Times (hereon to be referred to simply as the Times) partly because it has been a frequently cited news source among American citizens interested in and working within the Washington Beltway and within the New York-Washington Corridor. So, one can assume that U.S. citizens who thought about events in Iran were pondering the Times’ rendering of events in Iran (which, interestingly, was seldom challenged by other major news outlets in the United States). Following Ricoeur’s recommendations, the paper does not abstractly count the journalists’ utterances and then discuss numeric patterns. Instead, it first summarizes some recurrent empirical claims in the correspondents’ reports. Then it draws parallels between the narratives to traditional myths of America’s national founding. Finally, the paper, after recalling some intense policy debates and social worries in the United States at the time of the Iranian protests, considers the ways that the reports enabled Americans to avoid thinking about their own community’s political-economic circumstances and its own potentially embarrassing past.

II. Statements about Iran before the Elections

The Times published more than two hundred articles about Iranian politics in 2009. The frequency of coverage varied over the year. Prior to the election, the newspaper typically ran 3-to-6 news stories (including editorials and political analyses) per week. During the election week and the month that immediately followed, the newspaper ran 2-to-6 news stories a day. In the months thereafter, coverage declined slightly, to about 1-to-2 stories a day.

Prior to the election, the news reports usually depicted Iran as a place of old-fashion and pre-modern cultural traditions, and as ruled by a headstrong and religiously puritanical president with little interest in scientific reasoning. In addition, reporters often described rival class interests within the country and told of acts of intimidation and violence by non-government groups.

A story on October 13, 2008, for example, describes a nation-wide strike by merchants in Iran’s bazaars.[[12]](#footnote-12) The strike was a protest against an upcoming 3 percent sales tax legislated by the Iranian parliament – reportedly the first sales tax in Iranian history. The reporter’s account seems, on first glance, to be about interest-group politics and little else. The report pointed out that Iran’s elected legislature enacted the tax to generate revenues for public services (in particular, to fund public goods for young and unemployed adults). Striking shop owners were depicted as not only self-interested but also as bullies (allegedly, the few who did not want to close their business were physically threatened by neighboring merchants). Equally prominent in the story was a seemingly tangential discussion the economic policies of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The discussion was tangential in the sense that it was not immediately relevant to the title of the article: “Tax Delay Fails to Quell Iranian Protest.” The article purportedly was an account of striking merchants, not a discussion of the president’s economic program. Yet at least a quarter of the article was devoted neither to Ahmadinejad’s order to delay the tax nor to the merchants’ strike, but to his economic vision since becoming president.

Allegedly, Ahmadinejad had pursued a program of economic reform that had angered all major sectors of the country’s bourgeoisie. Among other things, he had terminated government subsidies to many private manufacturers, and then redistributed available government funds to non-wealthy citizens in the countryside and poorer sectors of cities. Journalists actions depicted the redistribution as economically misguided and irrational to boot (the result of personal dislike of the wealthy). To substantiate these judgments, the reporter for the Times (Nazila Fathi) quoted Iranian social scientists who found the president’s economic vision empirical wrong-headed. They maintained that both the cuts in subsidies to the direct handouts spurred inflation, and contended that Ahmadinejad has succeeded in alienating all sectors of society. The article closes words by an Iranian social scientist: “No one feels safe in a situation where there is recession, inflation, unemployment and economic crisis. All traders feel threatened.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Until the eve of the election, the Times continued to portray Iranian domestic politics against the backdrop of the president’s pursuit of economic reforms, and continued to represent those reforms as unreasonable from an informed, scientific point of view. In “As Iran Gets Ready to Vote, Economy Dominates,”[[14]](#footnote-14) the correspondents noted that some sectors of society (especially the rural poor, young married couples, and public employees) might benefit in the short run from the president’s policies, but then quoted without rebuttal social scientists who maintained that the government’s policies in fact undermined long-term economic growth.[[15]](#footnote-15) The sequencing of positions gave the impression that the economic policies were, from an objective point of view, reckless.

The tone of the reports began to change as the campaign period drew to a close. Correspondents began to describe verbal attacks among the candidates – akin to what is called “negative campaigning” in the United States. According to one writer, “levels of passion and acrimony” had risen to a level almost unprecedented in modern Iranian politics.[[16]](#footnote-16) Reporters told of candidates publically accusing each other of corruption, bribery and torture, and generalized that the country was becoming polarized into two partisan camps: anti-Ahmadinejad “reformers,” which included an unusually large number of women, intellectuals, liberals, and residents of posh urban neighborhoods; and pro-Ahmadinejad “principalists,” which included a disproportionate number of rural poor, public servants, and retirees.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Times news reports began to cite without criticism the work of private pollsters in Iran who had ideological and financial ties to liberal-reform organizations. The pollsters contended that the opponents of Ahmadinejad were attracting far more citizen support than was Ahmadinejad. Times reporters did not discuss either practical methodological challenges to survey research in Iran (such as question formulation and sample selection in an ethnically heterogeneous and geographically far-flung country like Iran) or the possible partisan biases of the collectors and analysts of the polling data.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Perhaps because many Americans do not realize that some government office holders in Iran are elected, Times reporters periodically referred to some of the constitutional details of Iran’s political system.[[19]](#footnote-19) The reporters noted that some key legislated and executive offices in Iran are indeed elected, yet Iran’s political system is, in the reporters’ assessment, generally authoritarian. Allegedly, this is because many government officials are either theocrats or clerics who for the most part abide by the wishes of the Supreme Ruler. The Supreme Ruler is a non-elected official with extensive appointment powers. For more than a decade, the current Supreme Ruler (Ayatollah Ali Khmenei) has sought to recast Iranian society according to Islamic principles and, on the whole, has successfully weeded out opponents from the broader political landscape. One method of limiting the points of view in Iranian politics revolves around the decisions of a committee of religious experts, which has the power to screen candidates for parliamentary and presidential elections so that critics of the regime are excluded.

III. Reports about the Post-Election Protests

According to the reporters for the Times, before the polls officially closed on June 12, all candidates for the presidency had boldly predicted victory. Not surprisingly, each insisted that he had done very well toward the end of the campaign period and that his opponents had suffered setbacks. All the candidates who ran against Ahmadinejad predicted that he had failed to receive an absolute majority of ballots cast (under Iranian election rules, if no candidates receives at least half of the ballots cast in the first presidential election, a second election takes place between the top two vote getters).

According to the Times, Iran’s state-supported news agency predicted only a few hours after the polls closed that Ahmadinejad had beaten his closest competitor by a hefty margin (roughly 2:1) and that a second vote would not be needed. The timing of the announcement (before results from the countryside could be tabulated and forwarded to the cities) and the size the president’s anticipated victory spurred cries of irregularity by those candidates who were predicted to lose.[[20]](#footnote-20) This contributed to days of unauthorized street protests in Iran’s major cities that the newspaper reports called the “Green Movement.”

Over the next few days,[[21]](#footnote-21) U.S. correspondents filed reports daily about the street demonstrations and about the government’s response. The Supreme Leader vacillated, first insisting that the elections were carried out fairly and that no recount would take place, and then tolerating an investigation of charges of ballot tampering in selected locations. On the streets, protesters were occasionally harassed by uniformed officers and more frequently were threatened and beaten by non-uniformed bullies. The latter, according to the news reports, were widely believed by have been thugs hired by the beneficiaries of the election results.

As the weeks passed by, the reporters devoted more space to descriptions of the Supreme Leader. At first, the correspondents maintained that Ayatollah Khamenei, because of his position as Supreme Leader, had the authority to declare the election invalid and said that his decision was unpredictable, given that he was a reserved, consensus-oriented political leader who kept his political cards close to his chest and who disliked outspoken dissenters and public unrest.[[22]](#footnote-22) After the Supreme Leader declared that the election was basically fair and that documented irregularities were limited and had not affect the overall outcome, journalists began to construct more critical images of the country’s political situation. Reporters referred to “baton-wielding riot police officers” and “riot police officers dressed in RoboCop gear” who “roared down the sidewalks on motorcycles to disperse and intimidate the cots of pedestrians who had gather to share rumors and dismay.”[[23]](#footnote-23) One reporter described President Ahmadinejad as “a Holocaust-denying hard-liner,” deemed the election a “sham” whose outcome the government had orchestrated for weeks, and called the political system a “paternalistic quasi-theocracy” and a “controlled society.”[[24]](#footnote-24) According to one analysis in the Times, so many Iranians were frustrated by the high-handedness of the government that those whose religious faith had never been tied to theocracy might permanently disengage from public life.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Correspondents described a myriad of ways that citizens were expressing their dissatisfaction and anger toward the regime. News reports told of enormous silent marches, with many thousands of participants, taking place almost every day in Iran’s largest cities. Reportedly, sometimes marchers shouted “Death to the coup d’état!” and “Death to the Dictator!,” and occasionally groups threw rocks at riot police and at night torched parked cars and broke the windows of business establishments. At heavily attended sports events, such as the World Cup qualifying games, athletes who were dissatisfied with either the outcome of the election or the brutality against protesters wore green armbands (green was, among other things, the campaign color of the most popular candidate who ran against President Ajmadinejad).[[26]](#footnote-26)

As the weeks passed, correspondents for the Times began to describe Iranian politics as a conflict between “the government” (presented as a single unit) and a “broad cross section of society,” including clerics who advocated spiritual values but opposed theocracy.[[27]](#footnote-27) The government, the reporters said, comprised a set of “hardliners” who for years had wanted to expunge liberal values and democratic procedures from Iran.

Allegedly, the country was increasingly ruled through fear. The unseemly hubbub had provided the hardliners with a legal pretext for rounding up liberals and eliminating the few civil liberties that remained in Iran. At least two dozen protesters reportedly had been killed either by security forces or by vigilantes tolerated by the regime. Many hundreds of suspected opponents of the re-elected government had been arrested. Reportedly, scores of those who had been imprisoned were tortured through sleep deprivation, mock executions, rape, and beatings.[[28]](#footnote-28) Reporters also told of show trials in which personages who had denounced the elections confessed before television cameras of participating in a plot, fomented by foreign countries, to bring down Iran’s elected government.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Why did the hardliners resort to contemptible actions (by the reporters’ and implicitly the readers’ standards) and desire a regimented society? According to the correspondents, love of power was the motive. Those who monopolized the command posts of Iran’s government and its religious tradition wished to rule uncontested, and President Ahmadinejad provided the perfect public face for the cabal: “Mr. Ahmadinejad is the shrewd and ruthless front man for a clerical, military and political elite that is more unified and emboldened than at any time since the 1979 revolution.” Under its democratic façade, Iran was, according to reporters, controlled by “a complex and opaque power structure”[[30]](#footnote-30) that was ultimately managed by the Supreme Leader, with the President serving as day-to-day groundskeeper.[[31]](#footnote-31)

To sustain itself, the conspiracy relied on populist xenophobia, patronage, and religious zealotry. While protesters came from all walks of life, they were disproportionately well educated, followers of western fashion, and violators of traditional Islamic norms. Allegedly, they did not advocate a particular ideology, political revolution, or economic upheaval. They simply wanted free and fair elections. “We don’t the regime to fall. We want our votes to be counted,” said one Iranian is reported to have said.[[32]](#footnote-32) Citizens who supported the regime, in contrast, were depicted as devout Muslims, poorly educated, and without property and secure livelihoods. This subpopulation of Iranians was allegedly too tied to the hierarchical tenants of Muslim faith to care about democratic niceties. It was “essentially conservative,” which made it difficult to know the degree to which the election was completely high jacked and the extent to which the fraud was limited to a few places and, therefore, did not affect the outcome.[[33]](#footnote-33) Allegedly, the formally educated Iranians from upper- and middle-class backgrounds were informed enough to know what had happened and sufficiently independent in their thinking to question what authorities were saying and distrust, whereas less educated and less wealthy Iranians were pawns of government misinformation.

IV. Projection and Denial

As mentioned earlier, according to Ricoeur, humans depend on familiar narratives to make sense of the world, to discover dangers, to develop goals and priorities, and to nurture appropriate virtues for attaining those goals and priorities. Consequently, humans will tend to observe the world according to the categories and logic of familiar narratives, especially those taught since childhood, widely held within society, and propagated by the community’s leaders and their rituals.[[34]](#footnote-34) Conversely, observations that fit poorly with a community’s narrative heritage are generally ignored. We can see both dynamics at work in the news reports about the 2009 election and its aftermath.

Immediately prior to the election, the journalists covered Iranian politics largely in terms of a clash in economic aspirations and ambitions. President Ahmadinejad was depicted as a populist who ignored economic wisdom and who was willing to sacrifice the interests and goals of business groups for the sake of ameliorating the economic hardships facing Iran’s working poor and unemployed. The other candidates were depicted (and depicted themselves) as different promoters of either greater integration into the global economy, champions of the national bourgeoisie, or promoters of austerity measures.

After the election results were announced and the demonstrations began, the economic background to this outbreak of political strife in Iran was forgotten. Instead, the coverage of the Green demonstrations and of the government’s response was told in terms of villains and valiant citizens. The reports of the struggle paralleled some features of standard stories about America’s colonial origins and its subsequent war of independence. In the opinion of students of U.S. popular culture, Americans over the decades have tended to believe (1) that the country was first founded by deeply pious, courageous, and self-reliant pioneers who responsibly cultivated parcels of private property from the wilderness, (2) that earliest pioneers were trying to escape religious intolerance in the Old World, (3) that the pioneers fought savages and mastered the wilderness not for self-benefit but to promote and protect an unprecedented liberal, free-market, and democratic order, and (4) that they engaged in political rebellion only after patiently and properly pursuing legal redress of grievances to no avail and were always respectful of rule of law.[[35]](#footnote-35) Versions of these familiar themes about a Manichean struggle between an intolerant, tyrannical government and noble, everyday individualists appear in the Times depiction of events in Iran.

First, the news reports in the Times portrayed the rowdy and defiant crowds as orderly and, in fact, as evidence of the spread of Western culture in Iran. Allegedly, the protesters were representatives of the country’s better educated, property-owning, secular, and Westernized populations. The protesters respected social order and rule of law, and were compelled to amass because of tyrannical behavior by government officials. Even though the demonstrators technically defied laws, believed in rule of law and seldom contemplated radical notions about restructuring the economy, redistributing property, reigning in capitalism, or living without a centralized system of political authority. No anarchist, socialist, or populist motivations and aspirations were involved. The goals of the political opposition were (the reporters contended) morally upright, lacking untoward anti-bourgeois intentions. To borrow Karl Marx’s facetious phrase, these were “beautiful” revolutionaries without narrowly material, spiteful, or politically self-interested motivations. At most, they wanted to nullify the election results and hold a re-election. At minimum, they wanted to prevent similar electoral shenanigans in the future.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The rulers, in contrast, were depicted as cold blooded and power hungry and as having no fixed goal besides ensuring that Iranian citizens conformed to directives. The Supreme Leader, the President, and other officials might talk in public about the need to obey Iran’s constitution or the Koran, but underneath pious words, were unthinking tyrants who did not respect human rights of the rule of law. All that the rulers desired was mastery.

The implicit references to a well-known American narrative to impute motivations, perceptions, and conditions in Iran arguably helped reporters conceptualize what was happening around them. They were able to impute motivations, perceptions, and conditions to literally hundreds of thousands of political actors (both government officials and civilian demonstrators) in Iran. But the narrative also may have obstructed alternative understandings of what was taking place before their eyes, because the reporters neglected of several features of the election and protests that did not easily fit the familiar narrative of American colonists fighting for their freedom.

For example, the reports in the Times ignored evidence of market instability and economic suffering in Iran. This is surprising given the extent to which the proper political response to economic hard times had been debated in Iran during the weeks leading up to the post-election protests, and the differences among the candidates on the subject about how to deal with high unemployment, housing shortages, and other economic problems. Likewise, the large disparities of wealth and huge pockets of squalor within the country were seldom mentioned in articles about protest even though the protests tended to occur in the more economically prosperous neighborhoods of Iranian cities. The journalists, finally, failed to discuss the variety of economic groups that participated in the demonstrations and the non-political demands that they were making, including more power for unions, equal rights for women, greater protection of native industries from foreign competition, and greater political powers for municipal merchant associations. The Green movement, in other words, overlay a wide range of class struggles within Iran. That set of struggles might have provided alternative explanations for both the altered election results and the rulers’ motives in trying to monopolize power.

In addition, the correspondents generally presented both the conservative and the reformist political groups in Iran as monolithic, organizationally hierarchical, and ideologically unified, whereas many scholars in the West have argued that the political groups and institutions in Iran are profoundly fractured and internally pluralistic.[[37]](#footnote-37) Even the Revolutionary Guard, it has been argued, has competing cliques, circles, and factions, and therefore acts differently in differently in different locales.[[38]](#footnote-38) According to the more pluralist reading of Iranian politics that scholars have advanced, many in Iran’s political and religious elite have disagreed with the policy positions of both the Supreme Leader and president Ahmadinejad, and were outraged by both signs of election manipulation and the subsequent widespread violation of the civil rights of Iranian citizens. For these reasons, half of the members of the Iranian parliament refused to attend the president’s induction ceremony, despite risking the displeasure of the Supreme Leader.

The reporters for the Times did not entertain this vision when describing the street struggles and elite politics following the disputed elections. Put simply, scholarly studies about Iran portrayed a highly pluralistic regime, in which people, political elites, and religious orders pursue a multiplicity of goals and aims, and clash accordingly. In the words of Farideh Farhi, “it is hard to imagine any institution – including the [Revolutionary Guard]—free of elite schisms.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Journalistic accounts, in contrast, tended to portray Iranian politics in a binary fashion, with actors being assigned to roles familiar to Americans raised since childhood on mythic stories about a new nation of property-owning and legally respectful individuals resisting religiously intolerant and untrustworthy political tyrants. Observations from Iran that might clash with the familiar story about America’s founding were conspicuously absent.

V. Narratives and Forgetfulness

If the journalists for the Times did in fact employ a common American storyline to make sense of the events in Iran, why did they do so, as opposed to either adopting some form of class analysis or recognizing the large universe of competing interests and values that many scholars report? Ricoeur suggests that the reasons for embracing a familiar narrative are not merely those of convenience. It is not simply that “I need some sort of narrative to make sense of my situation, so I might as well use the narratives that were taught to me since childhood.” In addition, he says, people use one or more of their community’s narratives as a fig leaf to cover shame and guilt. Narratives, besides expressing and revealing a person’s beliefs, obfuscate the past and permit selective amnesia about one’s personal and group history.[[40]](#footnote-40)

US intervention in the affairs of other sovereign countries is one of the topics that perhaps was obscured by the narrative of an oppressed people rising together against a tyrannical system of rule. According to the news reports, the Iranian government accused the United States and Great Britain of aiding the anti-government demonstrators.[[41]](#footnote-41) In the words of one article, “[T]he government appeared to fall back on a familiar playbook: trying to rouse Iranians through populist appeals against outside interference and dark accusations of foreign conspiracy.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Rather than taking the accusations seriously, the reporters simply cited the accusations as an example of a conspiracy of tyrants attempting to misinform citizens.[[43]](#footnote-43) Election manipulation and the designs of the ruling class sufficed as explanations for why citizens were taking to the streets.

But did the familiar narrative also allow the reporters and, indirectly, the readers of the news reports to dodge an uncomfortable truth? The United States, after all, for more than a half century has been involved in efforts to redirect Iranian politics from outside the country’s borders. Very early in the Cold War, for example, the United States secretly prepared an uprising that toppled Iran’s elected government. Afterwards, the United States armed and financially aided a dictatorship in Iran for more than a quarter century. More recently, the United States sided with Iraq in a highly destructive war with Iran and, during the war, may have facilitated Iraq’s use of chemical weapons against Iranian citizens. In addition, the United States military during its standoff with Iran over hostages shot down a non-military Iranian passenger plane (killing more than one hundred passengers) that had not violated air space. After Iran offered to help the United States with its war with Afghanistan and its invasion of Iraq, the United States labeled Iran a member of the Axis of Evil. Finally, during the reported events of 2009, former insiders during the presidential administration of George W. Bush revealed to Times reporters that the U.S. government had been fomenting dissident groups within Iran through both overt and covert means.[[44]](#footnote-44)

In other words, the American government has been trying to control Iranian public affairs for a long time and in doing so has backed non-democratic groups and impeded democratic processes. Its ongoing behavior belies its claim of being a defender of democracy and of human rights. Consequently, the narrative of a freedom-loving people arising spontaneously against their governmental oppressors not only is congruent with stories Americans like to tell about their country’s origins. The narrative also allows Americans to be distracted from more morally troubling questions about the authenticity of their democratic claims, about the country’s use citizens of foreign countries as objects, and about buttressing unwanted tyrannies whenever it seems to US officials be in the best interest of the United States. Through the use of the familiar narrative, difficult questions – about recurrent violations of international laws through covert actions, and about the degree of democratic control over America’s security state – become unnecessary to ask.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Besides obfuscating U.S. efforts to reconstruct other societies, the narrative about Iran’s beautiful rebellion against tyranny hides possibly another painful issue from American readers: fears about the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of corporate elites and about the possible growing power imbalance between “main street” and “Wall Street.” The journalists covering Iran’s post-election rebellion either knowingly or unknowingly brushed aside suspicions wafting through Iran that the candidates running against Ahmadinejad either belonged the wealthiest families (by far) in the country and had acquired that wealth through sub rosa political connections, or were backed by the country’s self-serving oligarchy. In theory, a class-based interpretation of the anti-government demonstrations and of splits within the elite would not have been difficult to write (and, as we have already noted, economic aspects of Iran’s domestic politics were stressed immediately prior to the election). Strikes by bus drivers, school teachers, and factory workers had been shaking Iranian society for several years. This led one scholar to emphasize that “the Green Movement was not just a clap of thunder in a clear blue sky.”[[46]](#footnote-46) But, that was not an angle that reporters and editors chose to stress.

Why the de-emphasis of economic interests within Iran? Timing may provide a clue. The reports about Iran appeared in a particular historical context: the American economy had recently nosedived. At that time, laid off workers, indebted home owners, and bankrupt small businesses were increasingly furious with and demanding punishment of Wall Street bankers; and the seeds of the Tea Party movement and, a little later, the Occupy movement were being planted. It was unclear what to do with collapse of major banks, auto companies, and housing markets. In the United States, economic verities were being questioned: bailouts were being considered for enormous corporations and financial institutions; proponents of austerity measures and Keynesian thought denounced each other’s reasoning. Meanwhile, in Iran, rival visions of capitalism, of socialism, and of Islamic understandings of economic justice were being debated heatedly and were fragmenting the political elite, Iran’s religious establishing, and the highly decentralized Green protest movement.

Given conditions in the United States, it may be that the disagreements and clashes over economic policies and theories in Iran was not a topic the correspondents wished to address in a thorough and systematic manner. It may have been that the political tinderbox of how to handle capitalism’s periodic meltdowns was too scary to contemplate about because the topic was, substantively, too close to home. Arguably, to discuss in detail the intense economic debates percolating through Iran would have compelled both journalists and their readers to address uncomfortable questions about the permanence and promise of capitalist economics in general, at a time when worries were becoming widespread. A full economic interpretation of Iranian politics would have reinforced growing fears about the fate of America’s own economy. Given the growing insecurities and defensiveness of those Americans who were wedded to capitalist arrangements, denial of the economic side of the Iranian experience may have seemed a less intellectually threatening and therefore more appealing option.

VI. Conclusions

Ricoeur’s ideas about how familiar narratives inform representations of public events are useful for understanding the way allegedly “objective” news accounts represent reality. Narratives, by imputing motivations and perceptions to actors, give journalistic descriptions logical shape. But, they also distort and obfuscate vision. Narratives make events on foreign soil feel familiar, because the actors and their actions resemble already well-known figures and plots. But, familiar and emotionally comfortable narratives also allow for issue avoidance and can facilitate denial. Through the use of familiar storylines, reporters can minimize facts and observations that might unsettle arrangements at home. Extant patterns of authority are thus reinforced, and subversive notions about social alternatives are eliminated.

There are, however, costs to denying the aspects of reality that may make one uncomfortable with one’s home. Necessary debates about social reform can be postponed, and shameful actions can continue. The critical discussion of the narratives that a community encourages and that journalists’ employ thus may be an important first step in reducing the amount of self-serving amnesia in a citizenry’s thinking, and in cultivating a sense of responsibility for existing social arrangements.

1. William Gamson, for example, found through an analysis of focus groups in the late twentieth century that when looking at political cartoons about foreign affairs, Americans from the wealthiest and most formally educated strata were more likely to accept racialist symbols in prestige newspapers and newsmagazines as accurate and reasonable than were Americans from less wealthy and less formally educated backgrounds, who tend to be more dubious about the accuracy of print media and who also tend to juxtapose news-media messages with messages from community sources, such as churches and synagogues. William Gamson, Talking Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For more abstract reflections on the diverse ways that people contemporary Anglo/American societies receive and interpret media messages, see Stuart Hall, “Encoding/decoding “ in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis, eds., Culture, Media, Language (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 1992), 128-138. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Lance Bennett, News: The Politics of Illusion, Second Edition (New York: Longman, 1980). The argument that “the news” is modern industrial societies is not simply a detached representation of “the truth” has a long history, of course. See Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: Macmillan, 1922). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In constructing a simple depiction of Ricoeur’s complex and far-ranging argument about narratives, myths, and memory, I am drawing on the following writings by Rioeur: Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1970); Time and Narrative, Volumes I-III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 1984, 1985); Lectures on Ideology and Utopia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Memory, History, and Forgetting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); On Psychoanalysis (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Judith Butler, Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 8-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an explication of Goffman’s view of “frame” as a psychologically repressive experience induced by taunts and threats, see Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, “On Frames and Narratives: Two Modes of Experiencing and Interpreting Politics,” presented at the 2009 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting in Toronto, Canada. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Butler contends that sometimes it is possible to replace a frame that “cons” us with a healthier frame that is less limiting, even if it inevitably structures our lives. She sometimes calls these “interpretive matrices.” See Frames of War., pp. 12, 51-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Ricoeur, “Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator” and “Narrative: Its Place in Psychoanalysis” in On Psychoanalysis, pp. 187-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ricoeur’s repeated emphasis on national foundation myths – which, he argues, underlie the political thinking of all people in a community – clashes slightly with the logic of more pluralistic intrepretivists, such as Mark Bevir, who suggest that webs of political meaning can exist independently of stories of a national founding and that there need not be a shared national consensus. This divergence may partly reflect the different connotations that each author associates with the notion of a national myth and therefore differences in substantive visions of cultural homogeneity. Both Ricoeur and Bevir, after all, contend that individuals inherit paradigmatic political stories, which inform their beliefs about current events and structure their political practices; and both insist that the political beliefs of humans are neither random nor disconnected from the themes that concerned previous generations. See Bevir, “How Narratives Explain” in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, eds, Interpretation and Method: Empirical Methods and the Interpretive Turn (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), pp. 281-90. For one of Ricoeur’s most strongly worded statements about the importance of national founding myth to social cohesion, see Lectures on Ideology and Utopia, p. 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One secondary work that is particularly useful in unpacking dimensions of Ricoeur’s so-called hermeneutics of suspicion is Richard Kearney, On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva (London: Ashgate, 2004). For relevant primary texts, see Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy, Lectures on Ideology and Utopia, and Memory, History, Forgetting. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kearney, On Paul Ricoeur, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ricoeur contrasts the community’s self-serving “Grand Narrative” with the local “counter narratives” that dissenters within a community constantly coin. He maintains that although the two types of narratives diverge on some details, in general they align on important points of the community’s story: the primordial problem that the community faces; the type of hero that the community needs to handle the recurrent problem; and the types of obstacles, threats, and opponents facing the hero. For Kearney’s rendering of Ricoeur’s position and also for Ricoeur’s own statements on the benefits and dangers of official narratives, see Kearney, On Paul Ricoeur, pp. 99-114, 157-169, and Ricoeur, Memory, History, and Forgetting, especially pp. 443-452, 500-503. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nazila Fathi, “Tax Delay Fails to Quell Iranian Protest,” The New York Times, October 13, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Fathi, “Tax Delay Fails to Quell Iranian Protest.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Robert F. Worth, “As Iran Gets Ready to Vote, Economy Dominates,” The New York Times, June 10, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See also, Robert F. Worth, “As Iran Votes, Talk of Sea Change,” The New York Times, June 12, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Robert F. Worth, “In Iran, Harsh Talk as Election Nears,” The New York Times, June 8, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Worth, “In Iran, Harsh Talk as Election Nears”; Robert F. Worth, “In Iran Race, Ex-Leader Works to Oust President, The New York Times, June 11, 2009; Robert F. Worth, “As Iran Votes, Talk of Sea Change,” The New York Times, June 12, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Worth, “In Iran Race, Ex-Leader Works to Oust President.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Worth, “In Iran Race”; Worth, “As Iran Votes.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, “Both Sides Claim Victory in Presidential Election in Iran,” The New York Times, June 13, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Worth and Fathi, “Both Sides Claim Victory ”; Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, “Protests Flare in Tehran as Opposition Disputes Vote,” The New York Times, June 14, 2009; Bill Keller, “Reverberations as Door Slams on Hope of Change,” The New York Times, June 14, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Worth, “In Iran Race”; Worth and Fathi, “Both Sides Claim Victory ”; Nazila Fathi, “Iran’s Top Leader Dashes Hopes for a Compromise,” The New York Times, June 20, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, “Unrest Deepens as Critics Are Detained,” The New York Times, June 15, 2009; Keller, “Memo From Tehran.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Keller, “Memo From Tehran.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Bill Keller and Michael Slackman, “News Analysis: Leader Emerges With Stronger Hand,” The New York Times, June 15, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Worth and Fathi, “Protests Flare”; Nazila Fathi, “Protesters Defy Iranian Efforts to Cloak Unrest,” The New York Times, June 18, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Worth and Fathi, “Unrest Deepens”; Fathi, “Protesters Defy”: Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, “Defiance Grows as Iran’s Leader Sets Vote Review,” The New York Times, June 16, 2009; Neil MacFarquhar, “Iran’s Latest Protests Are Seen as the Toughest to Stop,” The New York Times, June 17, 2009; Robert F. Worth, “A Struggle for the Legacy of the Iranian Revolution, The New York Times, June 21, 2009; Michael Slackman and Nazila Fathi, “Crackdowns on Protesters Drape Tehran in Silence,” The New York Times, June 24, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. MacFarquhar, “Iran’s Latest Protests”; Nazila Fathi, “In a Death Seen Around the World, a Symbol of Iranian Protests,” The New York Times, June 23, 2009; Michael Slackman, “Iran Arrests Iranian Employees of British Embassy as Protests Return,” The New York Times, June 29, 2009; Robert F. Worth, “Reports of Prison Abuse and Deaths Anger Iranians,” The New York Times, July 29, 2009; Robert F. Worth, “Iran Expanding Effort to Stifle the Opposition,” The New York Times, November 24, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Michael Slackman, “Top Reformers Admitted Plot, Iran Declares,” The New York Times, July 4, 2009. Roger Cohen, “Op-Ed Columnist: Iran’s Tragic Joke,” The New York Times, July 21, 2009; Robert F. Worth, “Reports of Prison Abuse and Deaths Anger Iranians,” The New York Times, July 29, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Worth and Fathi, “Unrest Deepens”; David E. Sanger, “Understanding Iran: Repression 101,” The New York Times June 28, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Worth and Fathi, “Unrest Deepens”; Keller and Slackman, “Leader Emerges With Stronger Hand.” One news report offers a slightly different perspective and mentions in passing that it is possible that Iran is not ruled by a single, cohesive elite but by “fractious power centers.” But even this article in the end argues that the Supreme Leader on the whole rules Iran hierarchically. Nazila Fathi and Michael Slackman, “As Confrontation Deepens, Iran’s Path Is Unclear,” The New York Times, June 19, 2009; Cohen, “Iran’s Tragic Joke.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Worth and Fathi, “Defiance Grows.” This quotation reappears in Helene Cooper’s report, “Exploring Iran’s Unrest and the Obama Factor,” The New York Times, June 21, 2009. See also MacFarquhar, “Iran’s Latest Protests”; Nazila Fathi, “Recount Offer Fails to Quell Political Tumult in Iran,” The New York Times, June 17, 2009; Danielle Pletka and Ali Alfoneh, “Iran’s Hidden Revolution,” The New York Times, June 17, 2009; Nazila Fathi, “Protesters Defy Iranian Efforts to Cloak Unrest,” The New York Times, June 18, 2009; Fathi and Slackman, “As Confrontation Deepens.” [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Keller, “Reverberations”; Worth and Fathi, “Unrest Deepens”; Noam Cohen “Twitter on the Barricades: Six Lessons Learned,” The New York Times, June 21, 2009; Neil MacFarquhar, “In Iran, Both Sides Seek to Carry Islam’s Banner,” The New York Times, June 22, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. In addition to the earlier references, see Lectures on Ideology and Utopia, pp. 262-265. Ricoeur never systematically addressed the question of a how to identify the community’s key narratives, or what he sometimes calls national myths. He seemed to assume that the task is fairly easy, even in a self-described polyglot society, such as the United States. This is debatable, of course. Not only do Latinos, Latinas, and African Americans communicate and use narratives and myths that are very different from what is taught in grade-school texts, but modern U.S. fiction suggests that descendants of early European Americans also are quite diverse in the substantive myths of America founding that they embrace. See the regional novels of Daniel Woodrell, for example. Is it possible that stable communities can be more internally heterogeneous in their orienting narratives than Ricoeur presumes? [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For further discussions about these themes and their persistence in American popular culture, see Perry Miller, Nature’s Nation (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Edmund S. Morgan, Puritan Political Ideas, 1558-1794 (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965); Michael Paul Rogin, “Nature as Politics and Nature as Romance in America” Political Theory 5 (February 1977); Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence, The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978); Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Nazila Fathi and Michael Slackman, “Options Shrink for Opposition as Iran Tightens Grip,” The New York Times, June 26, 2009; Nazila Fahi and Michael Slackman, “Iranian Leaders Gaining the Edge Over Protesters,” The New York Times June 27, 2009; Robert F. Worth, “Candidate Declares Iran May Face ‘Disintegration’,” The New York Times, July 13, 2009; Robert F. Worth, “Ex-President in Iran Seeks Referendum,” The New York Times, July 20, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For a sample of scholarly treatments of Iran politics during the 2009 election period, see Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan, Evolving Iran: An Introduction to Politics and Problems in the Islamic Republic (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), pp. 91-113; Negin Nabvi, ed., Iran: From Theocracy to the Green Movement (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Asef Bayat, Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East, Second Edition (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 153-188, 284-304. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Fariba Adelkhah, “Political Economy of the Green Movement” in Nabvi, Iran: From Theocracy, pp. 25-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Farideh Farhi, “The Tenth Presidential Elections,” in Nabvi, Iran: From Theocracy, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ricoeur, Freud, p. 516; Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, pp. 444-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Nazila Fathi and Michael Slackman, “Iran Stepping Up Effort to Quell Election Protest,” The New York Times, June 25, 2009; Fathi and Slackman, “Options Shrink”; Fathi and Slackman, “Iranian Leaders Gaining the Edge”; Slackman, “Iran Arrests Iranian Employees of British Embassy”; Alan Cowell and Stephen Castle, “Europe Weighs Pulling Envoys From Tehran,” The New York Times, July 2, 2009; Elaine Sciolino, “Iranian Critic Quotes Khomeini Principles,” The New York Times, July 19, 2009; Michael Slackman, “Iran’s Supreme Leader Softens Tone,” The New York Times, August 28, 2009; Robert F. Worth, “Scholar Who Was Held After Disputed Iranian Election Is Given at Least 12 Years,” The New York Times, October 21, 2009; Nazila Fathi, “Iran Lashes Out at West Over Protests,” The New York Times, December 30, 2009; Michael Slackman, “Standoff in Iran Deepens With New Show of Force,” The New York Times, January 2, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Fathi and Slackman, “Options Shrink for Opposition.” [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Richard Bernstein, “In Tehran, Shades of Tiananmen,” The New York Times, July 2, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Landler and Mazzetti, “U.S. Scrambles for Information.” [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Cooper, “Exploring Iran’s Unrest.” [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Adelkhah, “Political Economy,” p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)