International Political Sociology (2019) **0**, 1–21

Things and Terms: Relations between Materiality, Language, and Politics in post-revolutionary Iran

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Departing from the canons of the cultural and material turns, this paper emphasizes the shortcomings that each body of work has shown in addressing political transformations. So doing, it argues that shifting relations between materiality and language occasion different kinds of politics. Specifically, the paper offers a new interpretation of one of the most critical epochs in the political history of modern Iran, by illustrating that the confluence of the material and linguistic worlds in the Islamic Republic during the 1980s, brought about a distinct political field in which relations between words and their material referents became fixed at the level of multitudes. This blocked public processes of performativity and resignification of signs in ways that might have threatened the centrality of the revolutionary leader, Imam Khomeini. What developed was a social milieu in which Khomeini never faced the possibility of defeat in politics.

There is a curious gap between cultural and material understandings of political transformations. The cultural turn in the human sciences in the 1980s and 1990s put language at the center of our understanding of social relations. Language, whether backed by power (Bourdieu 1991) or as a form that power takes (Foucault 1972, 1990, 1995), was seen to occasion matter so that materiality came to be understood, in part, as an "effect" of language (Butler 1993, 63). The theoretical canon that emerged, however, fell short of offering an analysis of the reciprocal role of the properties of material objects in the formation of language.

Conversely, the recent interdisciplinary material turn has sought to illustrate that materiality is just as integral as language to social life (Latour 2005; Alexander 2008; Mitchell 2011). By seeking to release matter from its subordination to language, however, scholars of the material turn largely ignore language. Rather, they turn to studies of the political impact of materiality by focusing on the senses: taste, sight, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and the intersection of these sensory perceptions (Mukerji 1997, 2012; Biddle and Knights 2007; Sherman 2009; DeSoucey 2010; Zubrzycki 2011, 2013, 2017; Levitt 2015). Thus, mutual relations between language and material objects as social phenomena remain largely unexamined in the canons of both the cultural and material turns, leading to the failure of the human and social sciences to properly tackle the question: What are the political implications of the different ways in which things and terms are interwoven?

I address this gap by examining how Khomeini came to attain a certain transcendence in the Islamic Republic between 1981 and 1989. Bringing cultural and material approaches together, I argue that the regularization of everyday public objects

Sefat, Kusha (2019) Things and Terms: Relations between Materiality, Language, and Politics in post-revolutionary Iran. *International Political Sociology*, doi: 10.1093/ips/olz031
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eliminated an alternative liberal referential system with terms such as "plurality," "rights," and "freedom" from public use. In the absence of a rival liberal referential system, processes of resignification and performativity that might have threatened the centrality of Khomeini were impeded. Khomeini came to appear as beyond the dissenters' reach and, for that reason, beyond the possibility of defeat. What developed was a qualitatively distinct political field in which one faction—that is, Imam Khomeini and his followers—never faced the possibility of defeat in politics. In sum, I show that the confluence of the material and linguistic worlds occasioned a distinct domain of political intelligibility in Iran between 1981 and 1989, in which Khomeini achieved dominance.

By situating my research in postrevolutionary Iran, I provide a specific topography in which to explore relations between objects, words, and politics. In so doing, I advance our understanding of strategic political transformations that occurred at the dawn of the Iranian Revolution. A distinct form of idealism dominates the literature on revolutionary Iran, whereby the domains of the subject and intentional meaningful action take primacy over contingent material objects. The result fails to acknowledge that while everyday material things have no intentionality, they have agency and are central to, and constitutive of, the Islamic Republic. By focusing on the relations between public objects and words, this paper offers an alternative way of conceptualizing the political field that emerged in post-revolutionary Iran during Khomeini's leadership.

Furthermore, the paper highlights how reflecting on the relations between materiality and language can help us arrive at a more productive analysis of the international. War is one of the key domains of study in international relations (IR). The primary things that wars produce are corpses. And yet, as Jessica Auchter notes, dead bodies have remained out of IR's purview so that while IR is built on the backs of dead bodies, it fails to examine these corpses in their generative potential (Auchter 2015, 17). This paper illustrates the political implications of the way the primary matter of international warfare—that is, corpses—came to be woven with a politicoreligious vocabulary in Iran during the 1980s. In so doing, the paper sheds light on how a distinctive background of shared meaning was brought into being at the merger of international things and provincial discourses in the Islamic Republic.

These arguments develop in two sections. The rest of this section brings the recent interdisciplinary material turn into conversation with the literature on revolutionary Iran and, specifically, with key works on Khomeini. Section one offers an overview of the methods and sources used to complete this research project. Section two offers an empirical and analytical account of the relations between materiality, language, and politics in Iran, within an international context, between 1981 and 1989.

The Revolution's Missing Objects: Theorizing Things and Terms

A distinct form of idealism pervades most, if not all, of the literature on the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its aftermath. For forty years, scholars who have observed and described revolutionary Iran have offered narratives that hinge on political subjectivities, institutions, and technologies, with various forms of strategies and levels of interests, ideological immersion, and religious disposition. In other words, the historiography of the Iranian Revolution is firmly embedded within the domain of intentional meaningful action. By neglecting material objects, the canon of revolutionary Iran has thus failed to take account of a different set of key political drivers central to the formation and conceptualization of the Islamic Republic. While my aim here is not to offer a comprehensive survey of the literature on the revolution and its aftermath (a near impossible task), I do wish to highlight the idealism that

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pervades our conception of the Islamic Republic by focusing on some of the key works that address Khomeini's ascendance in revolutionary Iran.

Scholars of Iran have provided ample discussion of Khomeini. Guided by the cultural turn's schemata, the earlier conversations on this topic are shaped either by Max Weber's notion of the charismatic leader (see, for example, Kimmel and Tavakol 1986; Arjomand 1988; Ashraf 1994) or by Emile Durkheim's notion of "anomie" (see, for instance, Benard and Khalilzad 1986; Dabashi 1993). More recently, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam's (2014) edited volume, which brings together some of the leading scholars in the field, has offered a critical reading of Khomeini. This reading, however, is similarly framed by a culturalist scheme, which focuses on Khomeini's political philosophy and its application to politics in Iran, his stance toward the West, and his attitude toward gender. Neither body of work—that inspired by Weber and Durkheim nor the more critical examination of Khomeini—considers how contingent mute objects might have authorized, allowed, afforded, encouraged, permitted, suggested, influenced, blocked, and rendered possible Khomeini's charisma or the relations between his political philosophy and a range of social phenomena in Iran and beyond.

In their classic work *Small Media, Big Revolution*, Annabelle Sreberny and Ali Mohammad (1994) offer a different explanation of Khomeini's rise during the revolutionary process by drawing on the sociology of communication and particularly Jurgen Habermas's work on the public sphere. Specifically, they show how embedded cultural modes of communication coupled with technical media such as audio and video cassettes mobilized a revolutionary public prior to and during the tumultuous revolution. Sreberny and Mohammad's thinking about media is thus shaped by a model of communication based on the exchange of meaningful messages from producers to receivers, which is pervaded by the former's intentionality. To consider media solely in terms of technical media, however, limits our conception of mediated communication. Indeed, many objects that are neither traditionally understood as media nor driven by any specific intentionality, and whose primary message is their own materiality, come to play an equally important role in constituting publics. The emphasis on technical media from print to electronic, so prevalent within the field of Iranian studies, ignores a completely different, and equally significant, register through which a revolutionary public centered on Khomeini was assembled by means of everyday material things.

Even when political economists and economic historians seek to bypass cultural explanations of the Islamic Republic, their work is pervaded by the same idealism that shapes the literature (see Nomani and Behdad 2006; Karshenas and Moshaver 2012; Maloney 2015; Harris 2017). Take, for instance, Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad's influential study of class structures in Iran during the 1980s. For Nomani and Behdad, a populist-revolutionary discourse, which began a quest for an "Islamic utopia" and sought to abolish class divisions, paved the ground for the material transformations that followed (Nomani and Behdad 2006, 5). Nomani and Behdad thus presuppose a certain primacy that the domain of ideas holds over matter. As we shall see, however, the muffling of class distinctions by means of the regularization of public objects, and the proliferation of a distinct set of politicoreligious ideals, occurred through one another so that these were indeed not two separate processes but one.

Bringing together political economy and interpretive approaches, Asef Bayat (2007) has offered one of the most important works of political sociology dealing with Khomeini's reign in the Islamic Republic—one that he calls "Islamism."[1] Yet Bayat's discussion of Islamism is also embedded within the domain of ideas.

[1] Asef Byat is interested in comparative work between politics in Egypt and in Iran. To do justice to his scholarship—to which I owe a great debt—one must view it within that comparative context. This is, of course, out of the scope of my project, and I will have to limit my focus to his argument on the political field in Iran, and do so in a reductive manner, given the limitation in space.

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"Islamism," Bayat explains, was a top-down strategy that the state imposed on the public space, state apparatus, and individual behavior (Bayat 2007, 50). Workplaces, factories, offices, banks, and hospitals became sites of moral prescription. The sexes were segregated and women veiled. Bright colors disappeared. Black and gray reflected women's veils and men's facial hair, dominating the urban visual scene and mirroring an aspect of "Islamists' draconian" control of body, color, and taste (Bayat 2007, 54). All in all, these transformations, according to Bayat, were the manifestations of a strategy of "top-down" Islamism.

But why, we might ask, did this specific vision of Islamism—draconian control of bodies—proliferate, rather than less draconian, more draconian, or other draconian visions? Surely there is diversity in views not only within the Shi'ite world but also between Shi'ite seminaries within Iran itself, so that different sorts of Islamism could have been instituted. Bayat himself acknowledges that, "Infighting within the Islamic state showed disagreement over such Islamist vision" (Bayat 2007, 54). Even "revolutionary zeal" cannot explain why that specific vision of Islamism prevailed rather than other zealot visions.

Whilst Bayat speaks, briefly, of objects of the urban public, along with the dead bodies produced during the eight-year Iran-Iraq conflict, he does not seem to view these objects as implicated in a two-way relation with what he characterizes as Islamism. At least he does not develop their interconnections as such. Rather, we get the sense that Islamism is set forth as an already imagined and given content and plays an organizing structural role in constituting the nation, the urban public space, and the individual. I would like to suggest that this view is problematic, and, as we shall see, the predominant form of discourse that emerged during Khomeini's reign in postrevolutionary Iran did so to the extent that It had public objects about which it spoke and by means of which it proliferated.

Lastly, the few works on revolutionary Iran that emphasize the significance of material things do not stipulate objects in ways that push our conception of materiality beyond the insights offered by the cultural turn. Take, for instance, Naghmeh Sohrabi's (2016) essay entitled "Books as Revolutionary Objects in Iran." Sohrabi asks us to consider books not as mere curriers of meaningful content but as meaningful things in their own right, as objects around which activism was defined prior to the revolution in Iran. And yet, for Sohrabi, what endows books with meaning is the politicodiscursive milieu during the latter years of the Shah's reign. Books transform into subversive objects, for instance, because the Pahlavi state was highly sensitive to the possession and distribution of them. In other words, a certain political context occasions what use the object—the book—will have at a particular moment. Sohrabi's approach to objects is thus similar to Arjun Appadurai's (1986) and Igor Kopytoff's (1986) contribution to the cultural turn during the 1980s, which sought to illuminate the *social life of things*, showing how politicodiscursive fields inscribe material things with value.

The drawback in the culturalist literature discussed so far is, therefore, the tendency to presuppose notions of power, discourse, and political context and trace their involvement in processes of materialization of things and how objects are rendered meaningful, without providing any recourse to understanding how the very materiality of things generates meaning, constitutes discourse, and occasions political fields. Inspired by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, the material-turn canon takes a different approach to objects: first, by situating one's inquiry not within a certain political context after it has been brought into being but at the moment of its assemblage and, second, by considering how the very materiality of things transforms a prior set of concrete-abstract relations in order to generate that context. Timothy Mitchell (2011) offers an exceptional example of this sort of approach to matter in *Carbon Democracy*, which focuses on coal (as solid material) and oil (as fluid material) in order to show how the very material difference between the two fossil fuels helped occasion two distinct political systems in Europe and the

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Middle East, respectively. The point here is not to romanticize material objects but to deromanticize the subject and the domain of intentional meaningful action.

The material turn canon, however, is not without its flaws. Sociologists and anthropologists inspired by this body of work have fallen short of addressing the specificity of the relations between materiality and language (Alexander 2008; Sefat forthcoming). This shortcoming has also crept into the discipline of IR. Many IR scholars have argued, some in this very journal, for starting a conversation with the recent material turn (Nexon and Pouliot 2013). The goal is to understand how some of the insights and methodological tools provided by the material turn can help us better conceptualize the international. In the process, a number of provocative essays have been produced that push us to consider how certain things, from passports to garbage to microbes, constitute the international (see *Making Things International* 1 and 2, edited by Salter 2015, 2016). The strength of this emerging literature is that it moves our idea of the international beyond the domain of rational calculations and illustrates instead the generative *matter* of IR. The weakness of this body of work, however, is that, similar to their counterparts within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, IR scholars interested in the material turn have a tendency to privilege things over language.[2]

This is a problem, especially if we take seriously the cultural turns' criticism of a strictly object-oriented approach. "It will not be possible," says Butler, "to look at non-discursive things [objects] when it turns out that our very way of delimiting and conceptualizing [them] . . . depends on the formative power of a certain conceptual discourse" (Butler 1997, 155; also see Butler and Connolly 2000, 47). In other words, every time we speak of an object, we are already caught in a chiasmus relation with language. As Latour (1991) explains, materiality and language are ontologically connected, so that to speak of one without the other is to offer a half-sighted perspective. If scholars of the cultural turn have failed, so to speak, to acknowledge the organizing structural role that matter plays in the formation of language, scholars inspired by the material turn must avoid making the same mistake in the reverse order—that is, by failing to acknowledge the organizing structural role that language plays in the formation of materiality.

The title of this paper includes both *things* and *terms* to highlight how reflecting on the relations between the two as generative actors can help us better conceptualize the international and the Islamic Republic. On the one hand, this paper conceives of objects as distinct types of mediums that are different from technical media in important ways. Whereas print, electronic, and digital media often function as simple transporters of meaningful content from producers to receivers, and are pervaded by the former's intentionality, public objects can communicate by means of their very materiality. These objects can transform into political mediums, which may not permit just any form of signification. A dead body from the Iran-Iraq conflict, for instance, revealed the ontological indiscernibility of medium and world for many Iranians, permitting the invocation and mobilization of distinct sets of signifiers that were part of the provincial historical text, even if those signifiers had not been extensively used for some time. The more dead bodies as mediums circulated across Iran between 1981 and 1989, the more terms such as "martyr" and "sacrifice" proliferated, occasioning a new referential system with a bias against the body—one that Bayat calls "Islamism" and the revolutionaries called the "culture of martyrdom." Far from a top-down strategy, the institutionalization of "Islamism" or "martyrdom" in Iran thus occurred through the multiplication of corpses from an international conflict. In other words, dead bodies produced during an extrinsic war, along with the provincial terms they mobilized, brought about a new referential

[2]While these scholars suggest that they do not intend to ignore or deprioritize discourse (Salter 2016, xvii), their work ultimately falls short of illustrating the centrality of the relations between matter and language to the very political assemblages they speak of.

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system of martyrdom during the 1980s in the Islamic Republic, and this was but one way through which the generative matter of the “international” shaped a common background of shared meaning within Iran.

On the other hand, this paper recognizes the key role that discourse plays in shaping our material world by showing that just as the language of martyrdom was brought into life by way of material objects in Iran, that language with a bias against the body, in turn, led to the elimination of other material things that pertained to bodily pleasures. Women’s hair, bright attire, luxury items, and so forth—all discursively relating to bodily pleasures—were pushed out of the public and into the private domain. Liberal terms such as “freedom” and “plurality” vanished from public use in the process, for these words no longer had material things to refer to and circulate through, highlighting the ontological linkages between things and terms. The liberal referential system was thus muffled during the 1980s in Iran, with wide-ranging political consequences. In the absence of an alternative liberal referential system, processes of resignification and performativity that might have threatened the centrality of the revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, were stifled at the level of multitudes. What emerged was a political field in which Khomeini attained dominance. In sum, this paper shows how the confluence of international objects and provincial text occasioned a determinative political field in the Islamic Republic between 1981 and 1989, during which Khomeini assumed transcendental status.

Section One: Methods and Sources

Hermeneutic phenomenologists and ordinary language philosophers have long considered different modes of access to social phenomena in general and social change in particular. By offering a synthesis of these two traditions, social theorist John B. Thompson has argued for the disclosure of social phenomena by way of multilayered forms of contextualization (Thompson 1981, 1990). In the process, he has delineated three interrelated object-domains for social research: (a) the context of the production, proliferation, and disclosure of the thing, the utterance, or the action, generally analyzed by way of political economy approaches; (b) the thing, the utterance, or the action as text, analyzed by way of semiotics and discursive approaches; and (c) the way the thing, the utterance, or the action constitutes being as it lives and is lived, analyzed by ethnographic methods, life history accounts, and deep interviews. The three object-domains are of course interrelated, so that understanding any one of them feeds into and sheds light on the other two. The study of these three domains is known as the tripartite approach in the discipline of sociology.

The tripartite approach is a good fit to this study, as major political transformations in Iran cannot be comprehensively explained without bringing together aspects of political economy, discursive methods, and interpretive approaches. This is a difficult task to accomplish, however, considering the restricted length of a journal article—most article-length papers tend to focus on one or two of these object-domains of research. Nevertheless, providing an account of the relations between materiality, language, and politics in Iran during the 1980s requires that I move between these three registers for social research even if this means occasionally losing some subtlety. I undertake this task, in the first instance, by offering a social and historical analysis of the proliferation of things such as corpses and words that encapsulated them. I use qualitative methods to show how objects from bodies to attire to food were regularized in Iran during the 1980s and focus on the policies and contingencies that enabled their proliferation. I then use quantitative sampling of newspapers to illustrate how these objects mobilized and circulated distinct sets of terms across the public, while pushing other words out of public circulation. In the second instance, I offer visual semiotics and content analysis of prevailing public objects and discourses by reading them as text. Specifically, I analyze the works

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of documentary filmmaker Morteza Avini, to show the linkages between Khomeini, martyrdom, and everyday public objects. In the third instance, I offer an analysis of how these things and terms were lived, and made sense of, by relying on deep interviews and biographical methods.

This study draws on two years of fieldwork in Iran between 2013 and 2015 and uses a significant array of primary and secondary sources, including relevant literature, politically instrumental media, and critical information secured through interviews with political insiders in Iran. I conducted semistructured interviews with twenty-two individuals. Of these, twelve were women and ten men, and fourteen were former regime dissenters, of whom eight were formerly affiliated with the *Mojahedin-e Khalgh* (MEK), two with *Aghaliat*, two with *Aksariat*, and two with *Arman*. The other six were all Hezbollahie revolutionaries at the dawn of the revolution.[3] Of these, two are now state officials, and four work in the private sector. Overall, six of the interviewees were journalists who wrote for key newspapers during different epochs in postrevolutionary Iran. I conducted these interviews in order to address the following question: How did distinct sets of objects and signs proliferate in Iran during the 1980s? What were the policies and contingencies that enabled this proliferation?

Furthermore, I analyzed the most important newspapers from 1977 to 1989 in Iran, including *Kayhan*, *Jomhuri-e Eslami*, and *Etelaat*. The research design aimed to examine whether the increased circulation of certain public objects is associated with the increased circulation of certain terms and whether the decreased proliferation of certain public objects is associated with the decreased dissemination of other terms. My sampling of newspapers is *purposive*—a nonprobability sampling method that enables the selection of newspapers considered to be important (Wells and King 1994; Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005). It is imperative to bear in mind, however, that the research design is not concerned with the editorial attitudes of individual newspapers or even with meaningful content. Rather, the research design aims to illustrate the usage of distinct terms by popular newspapers. The terms searched for in all the pages that were randomly selected are "freedom," "plurality," "rights," "martyr," and "sacrifice." These terms were selected in the light of scholarly and literary contributions by Mohammad Javad Gholamreza Kashi and Morteza Avini. Both researchers highlight the significance of these terms to a liberal vocabulary and the culture of martyrdom in Iran during the 1980s (Avini 1983; Kashi 2002).

I cross-referenced my findings from content analysis of newspapers with interviews and over one hundred hours of films produced in the Islamic Republic, in order to examine whether the terms that were eliminated from newspapers were also eliminated from films and television programs around the same time. I then looked for the objects that were eliminated from the public during this time frame. Specifically, I examined whether the exclusion of certain terms such as "freedom" and "plurality," analyzed in popular newspapers, converged with the elimination of certain material things such as women's hair and skin from the public. As we shall see in the ensuing sections, a time frame was designated during which a positive correlation is shown to exist between certain objects and certain terms that either emerged simultaneously or were eliminated together from the public. This analysis is central to understanding the links between words and their material referents, and their political implication in Iran between 1981 and 1989.

Finally, I use deep interviews and biographical accounts to illustrate how the confluence of materiality and language was lived during the 1980s in Iran. In so doing, I rely on the "biographical narrative interpretive method" (BNIM) (Wengraf 1999), which, in part, draws from the sociological tradition of in-depth hermeneutics (Roseneil 2015). This method is "oriented to the exploration of life histories,

[3]"Hezb" means party. "Allah" means God. "Hezbollah" means the party of God. And Hezbollahies were those who were willing to fight and die for Khomeini.

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lived situations and personal meanings, and seeks to attend to the complexity and specificity of lived experience" (Roseneil 2015, 149). The interviewees have been immersed in the main discourses that came into formation in Iran during the 1980s. So, while each interviewee provides a case study on the "lived experience" of the distinct political field that emerged during this time, it also shows us the objects, languages, logics, and systems of belief and values and their relations that together occasioned a transcendental Khomeini. This does not mean that a discursive formation is experienced in the same way for all—a life history account is always particular because, despite being pervaded by discourse, it is endowed with capitals that generate different experiences of a social field. The same life-history account, however, can also be generalized in relation to a social field, for it emerges *within* the public languages and by way of the public objects—including one's body—that together constitute that field (Cavell 1996, 1–52).

In sum, this paper uses the tripartite approach—that is, the social and historical analysis of the proliferation of things and terms, content analysis of things and terms, and accounts of how these things and terms were lived, in order to illuminate the links between materiality, language, and politics in Iran between 1981 and 1989.

Section Two: Things and Terms in the Islamic Republic

My thesis is that words primarily entered public vocabularies in Iran by way of the proliferation of objects they signified. The regularization of objects from walls to bodies to food was thus central to the regularization of public vocabularies and political discourses. In what follows, I show that relations between objects and language generated what Bayat calls "Islamism," or what the revolutionaries called "the culture of martyrdom." In the process, I illustrate how a transcendental Khomeini came into being at the merger of material things and words. This argument develops in three stages. First, I explore the interconnections between Khomeini and the "culture of martyrdom," and the former's centrality to the latter, by turning to documentary filmmaker Morteza Avini. Next, I show how the regularization of public objects occasioned the culture of martyrdom as a referential system. Second, I illustrate that the further regularization of public objects muffled the liberal background of shared meaning in Iran during the same epoch. Finally, I show the political consequences of the rise of the culture of martyrdom and the elimination of liberalism as referential systems. Specifically, I illustrate that this dual movement impeded processes of performativity and resignification that might have threatened Khomeini's centrality. Let us now turn to Avini, whose endless and spectacular raw footage of the Iran-Iraq battle paints a peerless portrait of the culture of martyrdom.

Proliferation of Dead Bodies and the Politico-Islamic Vocabulary of Martyrdom

The geopolitical conflict that emerged between the US administration and Iran shortly after the revolution culminated in a conflict between Iran and Iraq. While the US initially supported Iraq during this conflict, Washington soon adopted a strategy whereby both states—Iran and Iraq—would balance one another without gaining a clear victory (Hiro 1990). This conflict, as such, dragged on for eight years. Avini put together much of his footage of this conflict in several series of documentaries, some of which followed the journeys of young men as they left their families behind to seek martyrdom on the battlefield. The question Avini sought to answer through each documentary was: what were these men rushing to die for?

Avini postulated that the body and the soul were clearly demarcated and that Western history had been, by and large, both written on and driven by material

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things such as the body, with each era linked to some sort of new material and technological innovation. But the unwritten history was that of the soul. And the history of the soul, Avini explained, was the history of the prophets and imams (referring to the twelve holy Shi'ite imams). Yet Avini had implicitly elevated Khomeini to that same level in his own work by claiming that Khomeini too had arrived to write the next chapter of the soul's record. It was a project of historic significance, spearheaded by a man with revelatory knowledge of the unknown, in need of willing soldiers to help complete this mission. What Avini captured were hundreds of thousands of these soldiers, driven by the same love as his, rushing to die for their master, time after time, in documentary after documentary.

Hessam appears in one of Avini's films (1985, Season 2). The footage of him, a seventeen year-old-boy with thin facial hair, has a 1980s feel. He stands outside of his house in a narrow street. His mother walks out with a full black hijab, a Qur'an, and a bowl of water. "Son, if you are martyred, seek God's forgiveness for us all," she says. Hessam responds, "I am nothing." The young man's sister, also in full black hijab, walks out with a two-year old in her arms. Avini asks how she feels about Hessam leaving for battle. "Honor" and "pride," she responds. She shows her two-year-old to the camera and says, "He will follow in his uncle's footsteps." Avini then asks Hessam why he aims to go to battle. "Imam ordered us to rush to the frontline," he says, stating it in such a matter-of-fact way that it is as though it needs no further articulation. Hessam is smiling. He is relaxed.

The next scene shows a single block of Hezbollahies marching toward the Iraqi border. A revolutionary song has been dubbed on this scene. It runs: *Ay lashkare saheb zaman, amadeh bash, amadeh bash* (Lo, The Army of the Master of Time prepare yourselves, prepare yourselves).[4] Meanwhile, each soldier has a piece of cloth tied around his head, similar to a headband, emblazoned with different words such as *Allah-o Akbar* (God is Great!), *Ya Hussein,* (the third Shiite Imam), and *Khomeini*. The lines between God, Imam Hussein, and Khomeini are thus blurred. The dubbed music drops out and we hear the diminished sound of soldiers chanting: *koja mirim? karbala. Ba ki mirim? Ruhollah.* (Where do we go? To Karbala. With whom do we go? Ruhollah.) Ruhollah is an Arabic word that means "God's soul." It is also the first name of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

The next scene shows a battalion of about six hundred soldiers preparing for an operation. They are in possession of folded portable bridges to cross the wide trenches the Iraqis had prepared and filled with water. A commander speaks among them, stating how difficult the night will be. "Everyone is waiting to see what happens with this decisive operation," he says. "Imam is waiting," he continues; and no sooner does he utter Imam's name than soldiers begin to weep. The commander cries as well. He then says, "I want you to know that I am not your commander. Like our beloved Imam said, our only commander is God." Soldiers initiate a process of immersing themselves into what is already a blurred conglomeration of Khomeini, Imam Hussein, and God by way of preparing for martyrdom.

Hessam is in high spirits. He kisses each of his friends three times. He kisses and then hugs the commander for what seems a minute. None of them are staying behind, they only say farewell in preparation for martyrdom. Avini's camera then zooms onto the river in the background and begins the following narration:

> The Sun burning the edges of this river reveals a historic message . . . That *martyrdom* and *sacrifice* are what keep our revolution alive. Our revolution circulates through the vanes of our martyrs. Therein lies the secret of calling Imam Hussein the blood of God. For he is the blood of *hagh* (Good), which pumped out of the heart of Karbala [where Imam Hussein was martyred in 680]. And if you want the truth, the Sun

[4]The missing twelfth Shiite imam can reappear at any moment's time to inaugurate the just government. For this reason, one of his titles is "The Master of Time."

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> has not set on Karbala. This caravan before us is the continuation of the caravan of Karbala. (Avini 1985, Season 2)

The last scene shows a dot emerging from the distance. From that entire battalion that left for the operation, only one remained. Hessam, who was in charge of his commander's communication system, had these final words:

> Send my Salaam to Imam [Khomeini], tell him we will not let him down, tell him, God willing, we will try to break their line, we will seek martyrdom tonight. (Avini 1985, Season 2)

All of this was an outright triumph for Khomeini. However, things had not started off this way. Many anti-Khomeinist groups rushed to the frontline when Saddam first invaded southern Iran in 1980. These groups had a number of different motivations, from "defending the nation" to fighting against "imperialism," so that anti-Khomineist factions such as the MEK and Marxists, as well as many intellectuals, all fought against Saddam under their own banners. The accumulation of dead bodies, however, enabled the public proliferation of the terms "martyrdom" and "sacrifice," terms that came to be interwoven with Khomeini. Soon, anti-Khomeinist groups were purged from the war. They were replaced by many Hezbollahies, like Hessam, who saw Khomeini as their guide and martyrdom as their objective. Each martyr's image lent itself to the constitution and expansion of the state's media circuit in the process.

Television and radio were hardly the media circuit's only nodes projecting martyrdom. First, city municipalities began to publicize martyrdom by transforming public walls into massive portraits of those killed. As one of my interlocutors recalled, "young faces of dead soldiers began to fill the walls on every block." The Ministry of Education took similar steps. The faces of younger dead soldiers, usually under the age of fourteen, appeared in elementary and middle school books. "My son's fourth grade literature book," said another interlocutor, "had several stories about, and a drawing of, a child soldier." "The most famous of these stories," she continued, "was about a young boy held up as a hero for strapping himself with bombs and detonating them near an Iraqi tank." The Department of the Treasury also disseminated martyrdom by printing pictures of those killed on bank notes.[5] Every day, a new location was renamed after a dead soldier. "Mehr, was the name of my street," said a third interlocutor, "which was changed to Shahid Behjati after Mr. Behjati's older son died in the frontline." He added that, "when two more boys from the same street were martyred, they renamed the block's tiny alleyways after them." Every week, hundreds of corpses arrived back in Tehran; from east to west, north to south, daily public funerals had become the norm. That Avini, the future ideologue of a new generation of Hezbollahies, was more or less unknown at this time was because his documentaries and television programs were lost amid everything else that also generated martyrdom. Thus, dead bodies as public objects and their various signs were central to the proliferation of terms such as "martyr" and "sacrifice," enabling the formation of martyrdom as a referential system (See Figures 1 and 2).

It is often noted that the political environment right after the revolution—that is, between 1979 and mid-1980—was remarkably tolerant. Women were able to protest rumors of mandatory hijab in mass numbers across Tehran, various political factions published their newspapers freely, many anti-Khomeinist groups joined the battle against Saddam, and there was no decisive sign of the implementation of the sort of draconian prohibitions on the body that would emerge later. *It was only with the gradual accumulation of dead bodies from the Iran-Iraq conflict that a particular politicoreligious discourse within Islam was really mobilized.* The daily accumulation and circulation of these dead bodies and the signs that referred to them were complicit in the

[5]Scholars disagree over the death toll from the Iran-Iraq conflict. However, the scholarly dataset, the Correlates of War Project, estimates that 750,000 died on the Iranian side.

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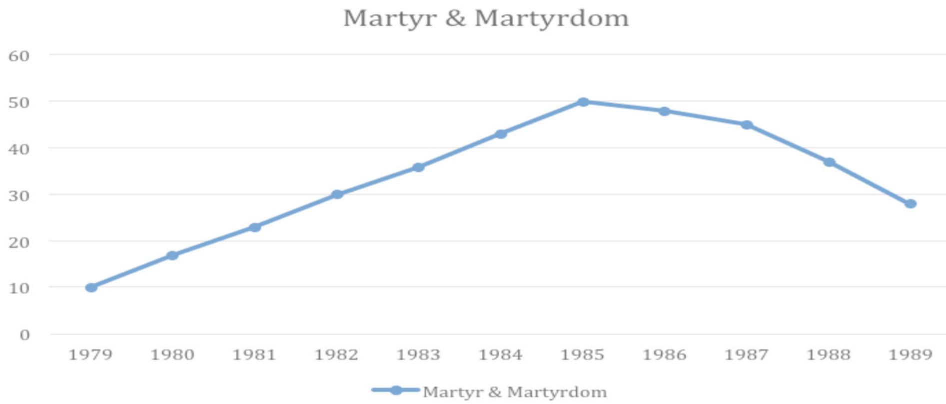

Figure 1. Changes in the number of times the terms "martyr" and "martyrdom" were found in *Kayhan*, *Etelaat*, and *Jomhuri-e Eslami* newspapers by way of purposive sampling (1979–1989).

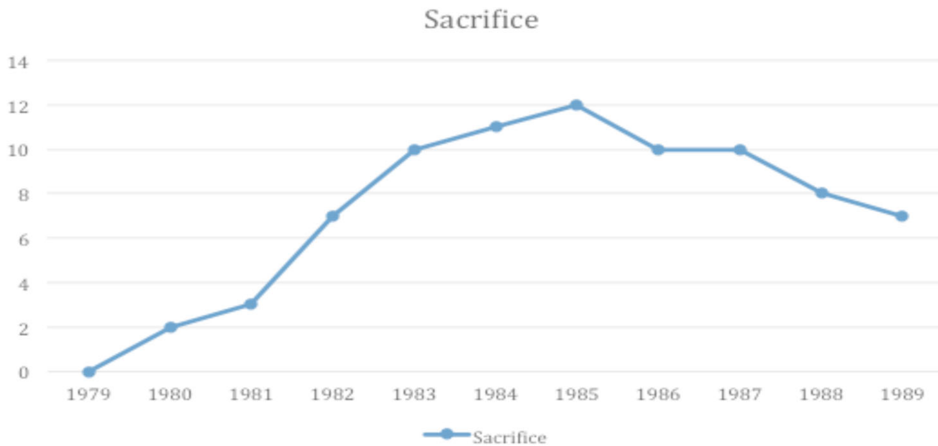

Figure 2. Changes in the number of times the term "sacrifice" is found in *Kayhan*, *Etelaat*, and *Jomhuri-e Eslami* newspapers by way of purposive sampling (1979–1989).

proliferation of martyrdom across the public. The claim by Iran scholars like Bayat that "Islamism" was established in a "top-down" fashion therefore seems only partially accurate. For what Bayat calls "Islamism" and the revolutionaries called the "culture of martyrdom" to have come into formation, they still required public objects (dead bodies) to refer to and through which to proliferate. This is all the truer away from the battlefield and across cities such as Tehran. It would be difficult to consider how the vocabulary of martyrdom would have proliferated across the public in Tehran and been institutionalized in the way it was without the dead bodies it came to refer to and circulate through.

Just as a "culture of martyrdom" proliferated as a referential system, it in turn came to regularize public objects in a distinct way. Recall that Avini had emphasized that the body and the soul were clearly demarcated. From this perspective, the source of all impurity—the foundation for all earthly pleasures—was the body. And martyrdom was the ultimate rejection of the body. Thus, while the act of terminating the body was at the apex of the culture of martyrdom, this referential system,

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on the whole, endorsed as many prohibitions on the body as possible.[6] Let us now turn to how the implementation of prohibitions on the body unfolded and explore the sort of politics this process occasioned.

The Regularization of Public Objects in Iran

This section provides an empirical account of how the referential system of martyrdom regularized a series of objects and mass media infrastructures to constitute a media circuit and thus a certain public. By "public," I mean the space of visibility.[7] Here, public refers to "open" or "available to a multiplicity" (Thompson 1995, 121). What is public is what is visible for all or many to see or hear. What is private, by contrast, is what is hidden from view and restricted to a circle of people (Thompson 1995, 122). Thus, *visibility* at the level of multitudes is key to publicness. A media circuit is that which enables the public. It includes technical media, from print to electronic to digital. And it includes public objects, from the moon to walls to bodies. While this section shows that technical media and public objects worked in tandem to generate a distinct political field, it also focuses exclusively on public objects. Specifically, the ensuing sections show that beyond technical media, public objects played a constitutive role in establishing a new political field in Iran during Khomeini's leadership, in which processes of performativity were muffled. Let us now turn to the regularization of these objects and mediums, before analyzing their political ramifications.

Bodies. Bodies were transformed into the regime's compulsory spokespersons. Unveiled women were gradually prevented from entering government buildings, then schools, and finally taxis, with cab drivers having to pay hefty fines for allowing entry. Hezbollahies also physically attacked the unveiled. With the state law making the hijab compulsory, and women coerced into veiling themselves, their attire became standardized across cities in Iran. Two forms of hijab emerged. First, the *chador*, a long fabric that covered the entire body except the face. Second, the *manto maghnae*, which consisted of a long coat over long trousers, and fabric covering the hair. The only skin visible through the latter is the face, from one cheek to another and from the forehead to the chin. Hands are also visible from the wrists to the tip of the fingers. They came in black, dark brown, dark gray, and shades in between. Thus, on the one hand, women's hair and skin were prohibited and pushed to the realm of the private, while, on the other hand, women's bodies were transformed into the state's spokespersons, acting as billboards of the regime's ideal types (Bayat 2007; Kashi 2007, 2010; Husseinie 2010).

Men's T-shirts emblazoned with English words were targets of physical attacks. Men with long hair were taken into custody by the *commit-e* [moral police], only to be released with two shaved lines right through their hair. Soon, two primary hairstyles became standardized for youth through the enforcement of schools. The length of hair for elementary, middle, and high school teens was no longer than

[6] For more on the culture of martyrdom, see Roxana Varzi's *Warring Souls* (2006) and the Avini Collection at the University of St. Andrews: https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/library/resources/collections/namedmoderncollections/avini/.

[7] The terms "public" and "private" have been articulated in two predominant senses since at least the medieval to early modern periods. In the first instance, "the domain of institutionalized political power . . . increasingly vested in the hands of a sovereign state and . . . the domains of economic activity and personal relations which fell outside of direct political control" (Thompson 1995, 121) came to constitute the dichotomy between the public and the private. From the mid-sixteenth century on, then, the "public" has referred to the domain of the state and the "private" to the sphere of life excluded or separated from it. This definition of the public, however, is not relevant to critical theory for reasons that I do not wish to explore here. The more relevant and useful definition revolves around a second sense in which the public-private dichotomy emerges. Here, "public" refers to "open" or "available to a multiplicity" (Thompson 1995, 121). What is public is what is visible for all or many to see or hear. What is private, by contrast, is what is hidden from view and restricted to a circle of people (Thompson 1995, 122). Thus, *visibility* at the level of multitudes is key to publicness.

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four centimeters. State institutions imposed similar rules on adult men. Men in their early twenties cut their hair to an equal length all over, although there was no limit to the length as long as it did not grow to one's shoulders. Alternatively, the sides were cut slightly shorter than the top (Bayat 2007; Kashi 2007, 2010; Husseinie 2010).

Imported Objects. The postrevolutionary decline in international oil prices decreased Iran's oil revenues from around US$21 billion before the revolution to around US$14 billion in 1984 and to just US$6 billion in 1985 (Nomani and Behdad 2006, 39). Decline in all major economic activities followed. Faced with such circumstances, imports of items of mass consumption declined from US$2.9 billion in 1983 to US$1.5 billion in 1988 (Nomani and Behdad 2006, 46). Half of these imports were deployed for the war effort against Saddam. Which is to say, a fraction of the usual imports was allowed into Iran, so that imported objects were remarkably limited, and the range in consumption patterns became severely restricted. This process, coupled with the referential system of martyrdom, targeted the elimination of certain objects from the public. In what follows, I provide a few examples.

No more foreign cars were imported. Two primary types of car were seen in the streets of Tehran: Patrol, mostly owned by the state and driven by state officials, and Paykan, a modified version of the British Hillman Hunter, which had been assembled in Iran for some time (Hosseinie 2010). The price range between the two Paykan models was narrow.

The newly formed Islamic state endorsed, and at times even promoted, a wave of takeovers of private property as a means of mass mobilization (Bayat 1998; Nomani and Behdad 2006, 38). In the process, many luxury homes were confiscated and turned into "bonyads" (semiprivate charities) and government buildings. The remaining houses were more or less the same architecturally. New apartments were fairly standardized (Bayat 2007).

The imam's pictures, martyrs' portraits, regime propaganda, and revolutionary slogans were scrawled on walls across Tehran. Walls and city infrastructure were transformed into signs of Khomeini and martyrdom.

Two primary brands of chocolate, two primary brands of chewing gum, one brand of sugar, one brand of rice, and two brands of ice-cream (all domestically produced) were available in the national market (Hosseinie 2010). Coupons were distributed among households to purchase foods such as meat, milk, and beans, with the state paying subsidies on these items. Thus, class distinctions were hardly evident through the consumption of material things.

Technical Media (Print and Electronic). Many books were taken off shelves in libraries. Fearing random house searches, numerous families burnt books that they imagined might be viewed as "political." Alternative publications were eliminated, while state sanctioned publications were wiped clean of their capacity to cross the state's "red lines" (Hosseinie 2010).

The state took over television and radio, and all programs were designed to supplement the revolution, the battle against Saddam, and martyrdom. There were two television channels with limited programing, revolving mostly around the war with Iraq, martyrdom, Khomeini's speeches, and other top officials' propaganda (Hosseinie 2010).

Neither the internet nor satellite television existed at this time. VCRs and videotapes containing feature films did circulate in Iran, but they were not widespread. Those that owned VCRs shared them with their extended families. Thus, a VCR would be kept in one house for a limited duration, only to be passed to the next house.

Like television and radio, newspapers were tasked with supplementing the revolution. In addition, the Kayhan newspaper, run by Mohammad Khatami, published

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a daily column exhibiting pictures of all the political prisoners executed the previous day. Not only did newspapers not contain alternative opinions, but their daily reports of executions rendered the regime's threats credible.

Spaces. Heavy policing of public spaces was meant to prevent prohibited things such as women's hair, alcohol, music, political pamphlets, political books, alternative images, and so on from entering into, and proliferating throughout, the state's media circuit. Here I will provide a few examples.

All universities shut down from 1980 to 1983. Closure of universities and colleges was aimed at eliminating spaces in which political groups could be formed (Bayat 2007).

Men and women seen walking together were stopped and questioned as to the nature of their relationships. If they were not siblings or could not provide proof of marriage, they would be arrested on the spot. Hezbollahies roaming the streets on their motorbikes were a constant and familiar spectacle of fear during this epoch (Bayat 2007).

Cars were routinely stopped at roadblocks, or by passing Hezbollahies, and searched for political texts, alcohol, music cassettes, and unorthodox hijabs.

Next, I show how this specific type of regularization of material things muffled the existing liberal referential system, with broad political consequences.

Political Implications of the Regularization of Material Objects in Iran

We see how the media circuit, in terms of environments (parks, streets, etc.), technical media (radio, television, etc.), and objects (bodies, cars, foods, etc.), became regularized in a certain way. It is essential to note that the elimination of certain objects from the public (such as women's hair) was linked to the disappearance of various concepts and terms. The term "plurality," for instance, vanished from public use during this time. This is, in part, because "plurality" no longer had public objects to address. The previous regularization of objects (including items of consumption), along with the division of the remaining objects into conscripts in the battle of "good" versus "evil" (and pushing "evil" objects such as women's skin, alcohol, VCR tapes, etc. out of the public and into the domain of the private), meant that the middle ground was left with no objects to speak of, so it was not an objective space to begin with. Thus, the term "plurality" had no ground on which to emerge and no objects about which to speak. The term "plurality" disappeared from public vocabularies during this time, in part, for that reason (See Figure 3).

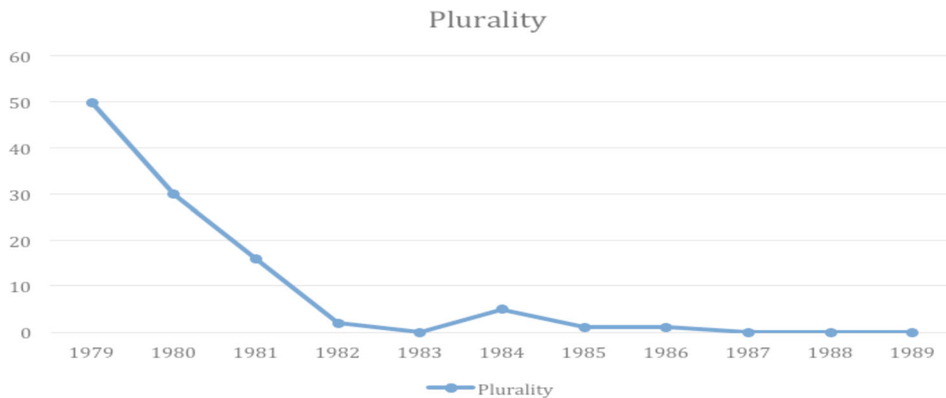

Figure 3. Changes in the number of times the term "plurality" is found in *Kayhan*, *Etelaat*, and *Jomhuri-e Eslami* newspapers by way of purposive sampling (1979–1989).

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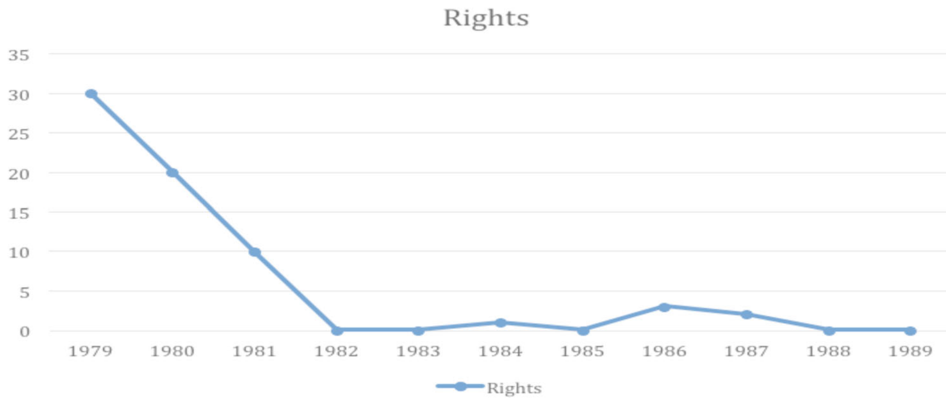

Figure 4. Changes in the number of times the term "rights" is found in *Kayhan*, *Etelaat*, and *Jomhuri-e Eslami* newspapers by way of purposive sampling (1979–1989).

The term "rights" also faded away from the public during this time. While the term "human rights," for instance, proliferated across Iranian media during the Shah's final years, it was seldom publicly deployed between 1981 and 1989. This is, in part, because the battle of "good" versus "evil" had transformed into the primary matrix for ethical questions. This matrix did not simply pervade how the regime viewed "antirevolutionaries," it also permeated how dissenters viewed the regime. The twenty-two former revolutionaries I interviewed all belonged to different factions, such as the MEK, *Aksariat*, *Aghaliat*, and Hezbollahies. And yet, the common thread that connected them all was their fidelity to the battle between good and evil. The diagnosis of who was good and who was evil within this battle, however, was susceptible to constant alterations. Things were fluid, and a Hezbollahie could arrive at the rude conclusion that his camp did not represent good, pushing him to look for it elsewhere, turning his blade against his former allies in the process. What justified this blade, what gave it meaning, was the battle of good versus evil. Thus, despite the many political shifts for so many revolutionaries, what remained constant was the radical act itself. The stick. The slander. On the one hand, then, the regime's secretive courts condemned over eleven thousand political prisoners to execution chambers during this time.[8] On the other hand, the opposition group MEK killed hundreds of Hezbollahies in hit-and-run operations (Institute for Political Research 2013, 170). The pictures of all political prisoners executed were published the next day in a special column in the Kayhan newspaper. The proliferation of these images and the consolidation of the battle of "good" versus "evil" through the prior conscription of public objects into each camp suggests that the terms "human rights" and "rights" had few material referents about which to speak. Both terms vanished during this time (See Figure 4).

I interviewed six journalists who wrote for a range of newspapers, including *Kayhan*, *Etelaat*, and *Jomhuri-e Eslami* from 1980 to 1989. I asked what their experiences had been with top-down censorship. The interviewees explained that while their hiring involved a rigorous filtering process based on how pro-Khomeinist they were and whether or not other prominent revolutionaries had introduced them to the newspapers' editorial boards, little top-down control was exerted from then on. I asked if the editors censored content produced by journalists at the level of words. For instance, were journalists told to avoid using the term "freedom," which almost vanished from public circulation between 1981 and 1989? The interviewees

[8]The following study provides a breakdown of those killed by their city. Council of Human Rights (Sweden), "Over 15 Thousand Killed in One Decade: Number of Those Killed by City." Covered by BBC Persian, http://www.human-rights-iran.org/doc_files/fa/vizhe_edamha/edam_shodagan_60_bbc.pdf.

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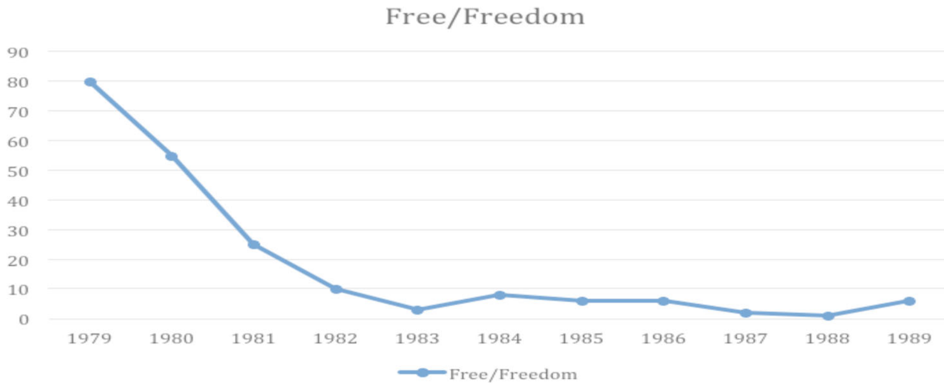

Figure 5. Changes in the number of times the terms "free" and "freedom" are found in *Kayhan*, *Etelaat*, and *Jomhuri-e Eslami* newspapers by way of purposive sampling (1979–1989).

explained that words on their own did not matter so long as they produced an overall content that was in tune with the revolutionary atmosphere at the time. Indeed, one of the interviewees reminded me that *estaghlal, azadi, jomhuri-e eslami* [independence, *freedom*, the Islamic Republic] was the slogan of the revolution during the 1980s so that the term "freedom" was not itself subject to self-censorship or editorial control. Rather, what would have been important was the usage of the term "freedom" in such a way as to bolster the revolution. And yet, the circulation of the term "freedom" was severely muffled during the 1980s (See Figure 5).

Thus, the elimination of certain objects, such as women's hair and bright attire, from the public was followed by the elimination of certain terms, such as "plurality" and "rights," from public use. In sum, once a liberal discourse with terms such as "plurality," "rights," and "freedom" could no longer speak of material things that were visible to the multitudes in Iran, it disappeared from public circulation.

On the one hand, then, the proliferation of certain public objects, such as dead bodies and signs that referred to them, enabled the wide circulation of politicoreligious terms such as "martyrdom," while on the other hand, the disappearance of other objects such as bright attire and women's hair from the public led to the disappearance of a liberal vocabulary, with terms such as "rights," from public use. This dual movement consolidated martyrdom as a referential system and muffled the existing liberal background of shared meaning. This process had consequences for politics.

Take, for instance, the absence of any public debate about whether it was appropriate to send children to the battlefield to die, despite the deaths of over eighty thousand adolescent fighters during the Iran-Iraq conflict. The lack of any such debate had little to do with state censorship. Rather, in the absence of a liberal vocabulary, "children's rights" was not an intelligible concept to the public. This does not mean that the phenomenon of child soldiers did not create ethical misgivings. Shahrzad Ahmadi's (2018) examination of biographies during the conflict shows, for instance, how even war recruiters objected to enlisting some of the children on the basis of how young or small they were. Those who insisted on enlisting the child soldiers, however, often responded by suggesting that the boys were "spiritually ready" or had been trained to use armor, despite their small size. Ahmadi notes that, overall, the biographies she studied worked to craft a tale that supports the idea that the boys belonged on the war front. The point here is that the misgivings about child soldiers, expressed by parents and recruiters alike, was not framed by the liberal language of "rights," in general, and "children's rights," in particular.

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Rather, for grief or critique to be framed within the domain of public intelligibility, it had to be constituted in terms of the dominant referential system of the time—one that was interwoven with Khomeini. The following anecdotal example illustrates this point vividly.

When one of my interlocutors, named Reza, joined a crowd by his house in 1984 to work out what they were staring at, he saw a painting of a young martyr's face on the wall. The martyr was no older than fourteen. Someone had drawn a body below the face using white chalk. This drawn body had two hands, one holding a toy car and the other an ice-cream cone. The drawing perplexed Reza. He looked at others. Most were just as puzzled. Reza found the drawing distasteful. He felt as though someone had belittled the boy. The crowd seemed relieved once an old man wiped the chalk drawing away with a wet cloth.

One might speculate that an elusive artist, a raw Banksy before his time, had tried to make the following statement: "We are sending children to die." That was what the toy car and the ice-cream cone may have meant to illustrate. And yet, this specific interpretation escaped the crowd, whether or not the artist had actually meant just that and whether or not certain individuals within the crowd had understood it as such. For, in the absence of a liberal horizon of intelligibility, the concept of "children's rights" was not a public concept. The boy was a martyr and was either loved by revolutionaries or resented by dissenters for that reason. In the absence of an alternative background of shared meaning, there was no public resignification. There was no public reappropriation. There was no public audience for a Banksy-type subversion.[9]

I wish to move a step further to contend that the remarkable aspect of Khomeini's rule from the perspectives of social and critical theory was that a specific arrangement in the state's media circuit (which involved a unique dispersion of objects across the public) seemed to have impacted private dissent as well. While dissenters had a hidden transcript, as it were, that was spoken offstage, underground, in private, often framed in terms of humor or rage, and forbidden from the luxury of open political activity (Mesdaghi 2006; Parvaz 2013), these conversations did not seem to portray even a conception of how dissenters might systematically push back against the regime.

What we know now of the various private conversations about the future among dissenters *within* Iran between 1981 and 1989 is that they hinged on two negative fantasies. These fantasies consisted of: (a) the regime's implosion or (b) a foreign

[9]The conception that meaning is derived primarily on the basis of the difference between words in language shapes the post-structuralist canon, and implies that since each word has to rely on other words in order to generate meaning, the relations between words and their material referents are essentially unstable (1978). Scholars of the cultural turn inspired by post-structuralist theory therefore view systems of signification as subject to public contestation, and assume an endless notion of agency whereby one can always re-signify ideas and objects in alternative ways. This premise is central to Butler's theory of performativity (1990). This theory contends that since relations between signs and their material referents are not fixed, a subversive kind of speech or bodily act has the capacity to contest the dominant referential system and change the social world. Butler's notion of "parody" is an example of this. Drag queens who parody dominant heterosexual norms expose "the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Butler 1993, 125). In other words, by taking advantage of the instability of the relation between signs and their material referents, parody, as a performative social act, exposes the arbitrariness of heterosexual norms. The problem with this line of thinking, however, is that Butler's conception of performativity presupposes the existence of an alternative referential system. Indeed, when Butler speaks of parody, she speaks of two backgrounds of shared meaning; that is, the orthodox phallogocentric heterosexual matrix, which has previously oriented sex and gender, and the liberal horizon, which enables the very success of parody—thus the "re" in the term resignification. *The presence of two referential systems is, therefore, the condition of possibility for the instability of the links between signs and their material referents, enabling processes of resignification of signs and norms, such as parody, to take place.* This paper illustrates that the regularization of everyday public objects can both enable and forbid the rise of alternative backgrounds of shared meaning. In the process, it argues against the a priori existence of alternative referential systems and the a priori instability of the links between signs and their material referents, showing the political implications of the absence of both conditions for agency, so as to highlight how the specific ways that materiality and language are interwoven can muffle public resignification of signs and objects, severely restricting performative social acts and, thus, a distinct type of political agency.

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invasion. *And dissenters saw no role for themselves in either fantasy*. Rather, they believed that the regime's "backwardness" and its "pure evil" would lead to its own demise. Thus, Khomeini's unraveling seemed inconceivable short of the Islamic Republic's implosion, and the subject could not play—and this is key—any role in bringing about such an outcome. This constituted, to use Derrida's terminology, Khomeini's transcendence.

For Derrida (1978), the "transcendental" is that which appears to be beyond the reach of freeplay (e.g., resignification, performativity, history). God is an example of this. Despite being constructed within this world by historical processes, contingencies, materiality, and performativity, God can still appear as the world's originator and thus its origin, so that it can appear as beyond this world—as *transcendental*. Note, however, that a transcendental God does not mean that it is beyond the structure or the totality—it is not—rather, it means that it *appears* beyond them. But how is this appearance generated? More specifically, how did Khomeini come to attain this appearance, to seem beyond the Islamic Republic's interior, becoming dominant from 1981 to 1989?

Returning to this paper's main thesis, I have shown that the regularization of everyday public objects eliminated an alternative liberal referential system with terms such as "plurality," "rights," and "freedom." In the absence of a rival public referential system, processes of resignification and performativity that might have threatened the centrality of Khomeini were impeded. In the process, Khomeini came to appear as beyond the dissenters' reach, so that, like God, he came to appear as beyond their world. What developed was a field in which Imam Khomeini never seemed to face the possibility of defeat in politics.

In sum, Khomeini's centrality relied on his transcendence. A transcendental center is a matter of appearance. Appearance is generated by objects visible to us, so that Khomeini's transcendence was linked to the distinct regularization of public objects around us.

Conclusion

I have shown the limitations in top-down approaches to understanding political transformations in Iran during the 1980s. Inspired by the cultural turn's schemata, scholars of revolutionary Iran tend to presuppose notions of Islamism and the "culture of martyrdom" as preimagined content that the charismatic leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, imposed on the public space and individuals as a top-down strategy. Bringing the cultural turn into conversation with the recent interdisciplinary material turn, however, I have highlighted the key role that everyday material objects played in bringing about "Islamism" and the "culture of martyrdom" as referential systems and in endowing Khomeini with transcendental status. In so doing, I have offered a new interpretation of one of the most critical epochs in the history of modern Iran.

I began this paper by asking: what are the linkages between objects, words, and politics? I then pursued two parallel inquires. First, I showed that public objects disseminated public vocabularies so that the regularization of the former was the regularization of the latter. Specifically, I illustrated that the vocabulary of martyrdom in fact metamorphosed into a discourse by way of material things. This led to the second inquiry on the specific relations between objects and words. Here I showed that relations between objects and words could be both stable and unstable. What is interesting is that the contingent ways in which public objects came to be woven with words brought about a single referential system in Iran from 1981 to 1989, fixing relations between things and terms at the level of multitudes. What developed was a political field in which public processes of resignification were impeded. This insight explains why Imam Khomeini did not seem to face the possibility of defeat in politics during his rule—because signs and objects were blocked from public resignification and reappropriation in ways that might have threatened his centrality.

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In light of these perspectives, the theoretical cases offered by cultural and material approaches to understanding politics need to be revisited. It is not enough to speak of political change by focusing on discourses and language alone. This is because we cannot really understand how text and language intervene without also analyzing what material things they refer to and circulate through. At the same time, it is not enough to pursue a material approach to politics by focusing on how the senses or the movement of things occasion a distinct imaginary. This is because no political imaginary can be accessed without language. Thus, materiality, language, and politics are linked in such a way that the reduction of one is always already the reduction of the other two. In sum, by focusing on the interrelationships between materiality, language, and politics, I showed how the regularization of everyday material things around us occasions our domains of political intelligibility.

Finally, IR scholars need to bring these insights to bear on their attempts to redefine the international. We must not be content with releasing IR from its subordination to the domains of intentionality, rational calculations, and language. Rather, arriving at a more productive framework for considering the international requires that we analyze the *language* and the *matter* of the international in relation to one another, for it is precisely this linkage that is generative of any political assemblage. By focusing on the connection between matter and language—that is, dead bodies from the Iran-Iraq conflict and a provincial politicoreligious vocabulary in Iran—this paper showed how a geopolitical conflict between the United States and the Islamic Republic was at the center of Khomeini's establishment as a transcendental figure for his followers and dissenters alike.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank John B. Thompson, Henrietta L. Moore, Mazdak Tamjidi, and Serida Lucrezia Catalano for their critical comments and insightful suggestions on different versions of this paper. I also wish to thank Ebrahim Tofigh and his *Gosast* study group for taking this article to task and this paper's third reviewer for he/r constructive engagement with my arguments. Finally, I am grateful to my colleagues in Political Science at Shahid Beheshti University for the various ways they have supported my research.

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