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# An artistic reaction to perceived injustice: Cartooning, resistance and textures of the political in Iran

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**Abstract**

This essay explores the articulations of power, resistance, and aesthetics through an analytical description of cartooning in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Empirically, this text is based on my ethnographic research with cartoonists (and caricaturists) in Iran over the last five years. After a brief overview of the history of political satire in Iran, this essay sketches an ideal-type taxonomy of cartooning-as-resistance in Iran (closely based on my interlocutors' conceptualisations of cartooning as an artistic reaction to perceived injustice). Reformist cartoonists criticise the regime for what they see as excesses of repression; revolutionary cartoonists attack (various versions of) "the West" for what they perceive as its imperial cockiness, its dubious occupation of the moral high ground and its ethical double standards; non-political cartoonists want to refrain from all critiques and distance themselves from overly simplistic binaries such as reformists versus revolutionary. Disentangling the complex simplicity of different types of cartooning-as-resistance and the antagonisms they actualise can offer insights into textures of the political terrain in Iran.

KEYWORDS: resistance, cartooning, satire, Iran

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## Introduction

There is something about humour and laughter that makes it particularly susceptible to interpretation in terms of subversion and resistance. Many have indeed analysed humour and satire as instruments of subaltern resistance, spreading elements of subversive counter-discourses, as a weapon of the weak *à la* James C. Scott (1985),[1] so to speak. However uncertain, dubious, and ambivalent its effects may be, satire appears as a means of protest *par excellence*. When I set out to begin a research project on cartooning in Iran, resistance ranked high among the concepts that I was certain to encounter. Nevertheless, I knew little of the complexity involved. Cartooning, just as satire in general, appears to be a means of protesting perceived injustice, as the title of this special issue implies. The crux of the matter is: Who perceives what form of injustice and what counteractions are taken?

This essay is an attempt to disentangle the complex field of cartooning-as-resistance in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In other words, it explores the articulations of power, resistance and aesthetics through an analytical description of cartooning in Iran. Empirically, this text is based on my ethnographic research with cartoonists (and caricaturists) in Iran over the previous five years. After a brief history of political satire and protest in Iran and an equally succinct dive into the anthropology of resistance and politics, this essay sketches an ideal-type taxonomy of cartooning-as-resistance in Iran. Doing so, it draws closely upon my interlocutors' conceptualisations of cartooning as an artistic reaction to perceived injustice. I show that reformist cartoonists criticise the regime for what they see as excesses of repression; revolutionary cartoonists attack (various versions of) "the West" for what they perceive as its imperial cockiness, its dubious occupation of the moral high ground, and its ethical double standards; non-political cartoonists want to refrain from all attacks and distance themselves from overly simplistic antagonisms such as reformists versus revolutionary.

If the political is to be understood as a form of complex simplicity, as Oliver Marchart in his book *Conflictual Aesthetics* suggests, as 'a multiplicity of lines [of clear demarcation] crisscrossing each other' (2019, p. 19), then cartooning with its technique of simplification and binary opposition seems to be a potentially pure political act. As such, by unravelling its complex simplicity, exploring how different types (and vectors) of cartooning-as-resistance intertwine, contort, and perhaps contradict each other might offer some insight into different textures of the political terrain in Iran.

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[1] See also Ariès, 1996; Aviv, 2013, p. 221; Balaghi, 1998, p. 169; Balaghi, 2001, p. 166; Boime, 1992, p. 257; Göçek, 1998, p. 1; Greenbaum, 1999; Jackson, 2013, p. 7; Khanduri, 2014, p. 16; Kublitz, 2010; Limon, 2000; Lindekilde, 2010, p. 452; Manning, 2007; Olson, 1988; Reichl & Stein, 2005; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995; Schutz, 1995, p. 58; Wilde, 2000.

## A brief history of satire and protest in Iran

Satire (in Persian *tanz*) became an important part of mass media communication in the public sphere in many places throughout the world, including Iran, with the emergence of the industrial printing press in the 19th century.[2] The first humorous magazines in Iran appeared around 1900 and the free press in general, including satirical forms of expression, flourished in the context of the Constitutional Revolution between 1905 and 1911. Since then, short periods of liberalisation have alternated with longer periods of fixed restriction.

The press was far from free during Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign (1925-1941) and when his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi assumed power. It was not until the late 1940s and the early 1950s, with a relatively weakened Shah and Mohammad Mossadegh as democratically elected prime minister (1951-1953), that the press was significantly liberated. This tendency, however, did not last long. After a CIA-induced coup that overthrew Mossadegh and his government in 1953, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi returned to the throne, more powerful than before. The tendency to an increasingly pluralised media landscape came to a halt. In 1957, the intelligence service and political police SAVAK (an "Iranian Gestapo" as some of my interlocutors termed it) was founded. SAVAK infiltrated all social spheres and milieus, tortured and executed members of the opposition; freedom of press and opinion turned into a distant drama; satire—in both its written and drawn forms—became increasingly symbolic and lost much of its previous sting, if only so that satirists could protect themselves from political prosecution behind a mist of artistic vagueness and ambivalence (Föllmer, 2008). The Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 altered little in terms of the restrictions imposed upon press and satire.

It was only in the 1990s that the political atmosphere opened, for the press in general and for satirical formats in particular. One of the first and most important satirical publications in post-revolutionary Iran was the *Gol Agha* journal. It virtually revived political satire and caricature, yet refrained from open critique of the regime (Föllmer 2008). This ambivalent political stance reflected the ambivalent signals under President Hashemi Rasfanjani. Under his presidency (1989-1997), constructive critique was explicitly welcomed, but critical and "unconstructive" voices were still intimidated. Until 1997, satire was at the service of Islamic and revolutionary values (Föllmer, 2008). Thus, satirical commentaries about the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, religion, the war with Iraq, moral issues or laicism were automatically prohibited and entirely off-limits.

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[2] The history of Persian and Muslim literature and folklore is full of humor and satire in all its forms: polite, subtle, intellectual, biting, vulgar, and so on (see Farjami, 2017; Marzolph, 2012).

Mohammad Khatami's victory and that of his reform movement in 1997 brought political satire and caricature in Iran to full bloom, a time when most of my interlocutors were in their late teens and early twenties. However, this trend only lasted until 2005, when Mahmud Ahmadinejad came to power. His eight-year presidency saw uncompromising restrictions imposed on these newly-won freedoms, which made this period all the more painful for many of my interlocutors. After Ahmadinejad, the moderate Hassan Rouhani was elected president, and the tide seemed to change again. Many in Iran became cautiously optimistic about Iran's place in the world, particularly with the international agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme from 2015 and the social and economic promises that ensued;[3] and many—including cartoonists and satirical authors—were optimistic about personal and press freedoms. Many became hopeful, optimistic even, but remained cautious. In the field of satire and cartooning, this caution was well justified and hardly surprising—considering the imprisonment of some well-known cartoonists in that same period.

As I have sketched it here, the history of satire and cartooning in Iran seems to follow a back and forth between short periods of relative freedom of expression and longer periods of restriction. This binary opposition does not do justice to the complex circumstances and ambiguities associated with each of these periods. Nevertheless, this binary is also what the cartoonists, my interlocutors, used when talking about the history of their work in Iran. I am probably reproducing here a particularly liberal or reformist bias, which my interlocutors also showed through this binary form, as many were university-trained members of middle-class families with a strong sense of their sophistication. However, I am also reproducing a rhetoric that characterises many of their cartoons: simplified—if not pointed—binary oppositions. Even when speaking about their fellow cartoonists, binaries were the most frequently used descriptive tool: some are this, others are that; some draw for festivals, others for newspapers; some work with light humour, others with dark humour; and some work for, others against the regime. What this seemingly simple binary structure conceals again, is the ambivalent connection between the two apparent opposites. Working for the regime in Iran always involves a sense of resistance as does working against the regime.

Moreover, the line that separates the two is not always distinct. This terrain of frequently-crossing, shifting binaries is a kind of 'complex simplicity' as described by Oliver Marchart (2019, p. 19). Before we get to the subtleties of this complex simplicity and who

[3] JCPOA: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

perceives what kind of injustice and what kind of counteractions they take, I would like to return to the notion of resistance a bit more broadly.

## Studying resistance, exploring political terrains

Anthropological explorations of politics—political anthropology—began in response to resistance, one could say. Think of Evans-Pritchard's seminal study of political organisation among the Nuer (1940), a segmentary society in present-day South Sudan; or of the edited volume African Political Systems (1940), often described as the birth certificate of political anthropology. These were the first stand-alone treatises on the modes, structures and institutions of political organisation in non-European societies beyond the model of the European nation-state. Furthermore, was not the initial impulse that motivated these research projects (and also delivered funding for them) what the colonial metropoles perceived as local resistance to colonisation?

In a sense, this is also what I will do in this essay: take resistance—or, more precisely, cartooning-as-resistance—as a starting point for the study of the political terrain in Iran. I am not, however, focusing on those subtle and everyday forms of resistance that James C. Scott so famously described as the weapons of the weak (1985; see also 1989), which others have already fruitfully applied to Iran as well (see, for example, Khosravi, 2008). Rather, I draw far more on Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990), Sherry Ortner's (1995) and by extension, the approaches and criticism of Dimitrios Theodossopoulos on the study of resistance.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) criticised the Scott-induced trend in anthropology to study resistance in what she considered its tendency towards romanticisation. Focusing exclusively on everyday forms of resistance would, in her view, lead to a reductionist moralisation and empirical impoverishment of the political anthropological project. She suggests instead exploring practices and discourses of resistance not for their own sake, but as part of a historically broader and more complex diagnostics of power. She inverts Foucault's dictum 'where there is power, there is resistance' into 'where there is resistance, there is power.' She suggests—also in Foucault's words—using

> … resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their positions, and find out their points of application and the methods used. Rather than analysing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analysing power relations through the antagonism of strategies. (Foucault, 1982, p. 780)

By focusing on acts of resistance rather than power, Abu-Lughod emphasises, anthropology first moves from lofty and abstract discussions about the theory of power to the study of power in concrete situations. Looking at power through acts of resistance can tell us much about the different forms of power, how these interrelate and how people are entangled in them (1990, p. 42). In my view, the study of resistance is thus not only a diagnostics of power; it is a diagnostics of the political, a topography of the political terrain.

Sherry Ortner agrees with Abu-Lughod's critique of the anthropological trend in resistance studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most anthropological explorations of resistance were, according to Ortner, both ethnographically thin and conceptually unsound. The key problem was a profound ethnographic ignorance of the internal politics of resistance movements, the social and subjective complexity of acts of resistance, and the ambivalent connections and separations between rulers and ruled (Ortner, 1995, p. 190), which is precisely where, almost a decade later, Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2014) comes in with his explicit call for a rehabilitation of an anthropology of resistance. One of the ways to rid resistance studies of their romanticising, pathologising, and exoticising effects is, according to Theodossopoulos (2014), to explore resistance as experienced in the everyday and to explore its impermanence and incompleteness. How do people switch from resistance mode to everyday mode? How do they experience the complexity and ambivalence of resistance?

This is the backdrop against which I wish to explore the social experience of cartooning-as-resistance in a specific topography of the political: in Iran, a context in which there is no lack of confident declarations of resistance in various forms, some of which appear to me to be highly problematic (see also Smedal, 2018). For both the cartoonists and the anthropologist, the distinction between power and resistance (as well as its sometimes paradoxical connection) seems to be more of a matter of perspective than an essential difference. As a pragmatic, explorative and intermediate step, I am using a working definition of resistance based on a rather broad consensus in the social sciences (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004): firstly, resistance is something people do and secondly in opposition to something or someone. Thus, two main questions arise: how do cartoonists in Iran behave, and how do they participate in different cartooning practices? Also, what kind of message do those actions send in opposition to exactly what?

## Three types of cartooning and resistance in Iran

Many, though not all, cartoonists in Iran describe themselves in one form or another as engaged in resistance. As tempting as this label may be and for an anthropological approach toward cartooning in Iran, it is at least partially misleading. I attempt to sketch out three ideal types (in Max Weber's sense) of cartooning in Iran in the following. I mainly follow the cartoonists' classifications and descriptions.

### *Type 1: Protest, artivism, critique*

When I began my research on cartooning and satire in Iran, I expected the vast majority of cartoonists to be at least critical of the political regime. Indeed, many cartoonists I met had in one way or the other been involved in or sympathised with the "green movement", a political mass protest from 2009 against the contested re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Moreover, many of them were still critical of the religious-political establishment or the Islamic Republic. They described themselves as activists or *artivists,* protesting the regime of the Islamic Republic or its repressive extremes. Cartoons and caricatures was a means of critique, protest, and artistic activism for them.

One of the most prominent cartoonists in that sense is probably Hadi Heidari, who is presently the editor of satire and cartoons at the *Shahrvand* or *Citizen* newspaper. He considers himself a political cartoonist, and many of my interlocutors agreed with that description. His drawings present a liberal-reformist perspective on current political processes in Iran.[4] One of his cartoons, for example, shows a man bitterly crying while casting his ballot—a hint at the ambivalent, democratic character of parliamentary elections (in which only those selected by the conservative Guardian Council of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic can stand for election). Beyond that, his pictures explicitly problematise the limits of what can be said and shown in Iran, for example, with scissors as a widely used metaphor for state censorship. In 2015, Hadi Heidari was imprisoned for drawing a cartoon depicting men in a row, each man tying a black blindfold on the man in front of him. According to the Iranian judiciary, this was a bit too similar to an image widespread during the Iran-Iraq war, namely young men going into battle wearing headbands with religious slogans. Heidari's cartoon, so the argument goes, would suggest that these martyrs went blindly into battle. The cartoon led to a one-year prison sentence for him (Gladstone, 2015).

[4] The seemingly sharp divide between "reformists" and "hardliners" stems from the Khatami era (and his reform movement) and the explicit performance of this political divide by the personalities involved. It is almost too trivial to say that things have been and are much more complicated (see Axworthy, 2013, p. 329-331).

Atena Farghadani is another cartoonist who went too far. In 2015, she was sentenced to twelve years and nine months in prison for a cartoon. It shows Iranian members of parliament with ape and cow heads while voting on a bill that would ban voluntary sterilisation and restrict access to contraceptives. Her sentence was later reduced to eighteen months (Cavna, 2016).

Even Heidari and Farghadani's cartoons appear somewhat symbolically ambivalent when compared to those of Mana Neyestani, an exiled Iranian cartoonist in France.[5] Neyestani's cartoons are blunt. Before he escaped Iran in 2006, he had not exactly been a political cartoonist, but since settling in France in 2011, his drawings have become far more political and explicit and include openly disrespectful drawings of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution. He is hugely popular in Iran and the Iranian diaspora.

All three, Heidari, Farghadani, and Neyestani, at some point, have confronted the limits of what can legally be said and shown in the Islamic Republic. The clergy, the political elite (or rather: political institutions) are off limits. At the same time, it is precisely these against whom and what these cartoonists want to protest because those institutions are responsible for limiting expression in the first place. Most cartoonists in Iran know how to deal with these limits, how to provoke without putting themselves in danger, how to use their artistic wit to evade censorship and worse. They use graphic metaphors and omissions for the observers to interpret and fill. Even a cartoon that consists of nothing but a literal omission—three dots in square brackets—needs no further explanation. The lack of restrictions abroad frees cartoonists from the need for symbolic ambiguity as a means of self-protection; yet, according to some, the blunt depictions of all things forbidden in Iran would also make Neyestani and other exiled cartoonists' drawings weaker and less sophisticated in terms of artistic quality. Drawing the Supreme Leader washing his hands in demonstrators' blood or laughing in a friendly embrace with Adolf Hitler would certainly be off (several) limits in Iran; and some—including some stern critics of the Iranian regime—find such bluntness vulgar, too simple. However, this assessment does not diminish the extraordinary popularity of many exiled cartoonists both in Iran and the Iranian diaspora worldwide—perhaps precisely because they can make clear what many in Iran cannot do. Removed from the Iranian regime's direct control, they can tell the truth about power and protest from the outside against the injustices experienced from within.

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[5] In 2006, one of Neyestani's cartoons led to massive protests among Iranian Azeri, who felt insulted by it. The cartoon contains a cockroach using a word from the Azeri dialect. Neyestani said he never intended to insult the Azeri or any other ethnic minority. The clashes between protesters and the police led to nineteen civilian deaths. Neyestani was arrested and imprisoned. During a short term interruption of his detention he and his wife fled abroad, eventually to France.

### *Type 2: Revolution, defence, resistance*

Beyond this type of cartooning as protest against the regime, there was a strong and highly visible type of cartooning-as-resistance for which I, as a newcomer to Iran, was not fully for. It took me a while to realise that the kind of resistance self-consciously propagated by an artists' association called "resistance art" (in Persian: *honar moghāvemat*), was not the kind of resistance I had initially assumed. It was resistance derived from the image of arrogant power versus virtuous resistance that is so central to the history of Islam and Shi'a Islam in particular (see Axworthy 2013), from the memory of revolutionary resistance to the Pahlavi autocracy, and from the national narrative of the sacred defence during (and beyond) the eight-year Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to1988 (see Bajoghli 2019). 'Resistance means,' the organisers of the third International Art Festival of Resistance from 2013 state,

> defense against all tyrannies and violations, defence against all evils and darkness, … means defense against all exclusiveness, oppression and injustice, … means defending human dignity and freedom, means defense against villainy, terror and aggression… (Wanner, 2013)

This understanding of resistance is shared by most of those outside the resistance art movement, regardless of political position. This abstract position is then often translated into a concrete caricature, cartoon competitions and exhibitions, focusing for example, on Donald Trump's insane political demands, claims and actions, the European Union's borderline-cynical immigration policy and Israel's internationally condemned settlement policy in the West Bank. Nevertheless, the organisation's definition of resistance lives on and takes an explicit political stand against the manifestations of perceived American and Zionist imperialism:

> Resistance … means defense against the Great Satan [i.e., the United States], means defending Holy Quds and Palestinian oppressed nation in the land of prophets, … means displaying the frequent oppressions in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, the secret and terrifying prisons of Capitalist world, means defending humans throughout the world. (Wanner, 2013)

The organisation behind this festival, the resistance art association, has also organised several caricature and cartoon competitions including the International Holocaust Cartoon Contest among others. First held in 2006, it was presented as a direct response to the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad in the Danish newspaper Jyllands posten (IRINN, 2006). Ten years later in 2016, the second Holocaust cartoon competition took place; the preparations for it began shortly after the French magazine Char-

lie Hebdo published more caricatures of the Prophet in the wake of the terror attack on its offices in Paris. The combined prize money amounted to USD 50,000 and was more than twice as high as the awards presented by the internationally-renowned *Aydin Dogan International Cartoon Competition* in Turkey, which many of my Iranian interlocutors called the "cartoon Oscars". For this reason, the Holocaust competition drew massive international interest. In interviews with European reporters (Ziv, 2016), the organisers always stressed that their festival was in no way denying the Holocaust; it merely asked why the innocent Palestinian population should suffer the consequences of a Holocaust committed by Nazi-Germany. Why, the organisers asked, does the Holocaust committed by Nazi-Germany against Jews justify "another Holocaust" perpetrated by Israel against Palestinians?

Beyond that, this festival is supposed to remind people that although "the West" is constantly portraying itself as the defender of free speech, it criticises Iran continually for state censorship even though the West itself is not free of censorship. Why else would "scientists" like Robert Faurisson be prosecuted for their attempt, based on "serious" historical analysis, to draw an accurate picture of what happened in Auschwitz?[6] Why else would cartoonists be arrested in Europe for drawing controversial pictures? The French cartoonist Zeon is the prime example in this context. Zeon was briefly arrested for—in his words—an "anti-Zionist cartoon" and accused of incitement to anti-Semitic hatred in 2015. The following year, he won the first prize at the second Holocaust Cartoon Competition; with a prize of USD 12,000.

### *Type 3: Reporting, sour-sweet, art*

Apart from these two types, some cartoonists engaged in neither protest nor resistance. Quite the contrary, they explicitly called themselves non-political and non-resistant. Cartooning should be about "mere reporting", about a crossover of anthropology and the sweet-sour fruit leather called *lavāshak*, or in a word, about art.

The description of cartooning as *ensān-shenasi bā ezafe-ye lavāshak*, that is, a cross between anthropology and a sour-sweet, leaves room for lightness and laughter. According to one of the elderly cartoonists I spoke with, caricature or cartoon results from the attentive observation of humans, the exploration of their lives and, ultimately, it is about a pointed description of the dissonances of human existence, the human condition, or the

[6] Since 1991, Faurisson has been convicted of Holocaust denial several times in France.

state of contemporary society. As such, a cartoon makes you think, or laugh sometimes, but in any case, it reawakens your spirits like biting into a lemon.

The statement that cartoons should be mere reports or testimonies, in Iran goes back to the famous cartoonist Ardeshir Mohasses (1938-2008). Many cartoonists in Iran hail him as one of the fathers of Iranian cartoon and caricature in the 20th century. In an interview with the poet Esmail Khoi, he famously said of himself: 'I am only a reporter' (Neshat & Nodjoumi, 2008, p. 37). Caricature, or art, does not change a thing. 'The only thing that one can say is that artists in each period of history leave a record so that people in the future will know about their time' (ibid., p. 35). One of my cartoonist interlocutors in Tehran told me something quite similar, but added that this kind of reporting should at least cause a little irritation, perhaps pain among its observers: 'My pictures should give you a shock, like a needle that goes through the layers of fat and then it touches your nerves.'

In the end, cartooning should be all about art. And art is art precisely because it is not political, according to many cartoonists of Type 3. One told me that many cartoonists in Iran do not live up to that expectation and instead lose themselves in the everyday struggles of political and ideological infighting or shadow boxing. Cartooning should be larger than that. It should not be about being *for* or *against* somebody or something. Cartooning should be independent and explore human pain and break free from everyday political struggles. Politics is a field of binary antagonisms and ideological positions. Cartoons and caricatures must be larger than that; must be art.

Cartoonists with that perspective do not think of their work in terms of resistance; they focus less on the limits of what can and cannot be said and shown; nor do they speak out against those who set these limits. They are keen on description, not change; reporting, not activism. What they speak out against—what they resist (or at least try to resist) without naming it as such—is the pressure to take sides. They do not want to be entangled in those black-and-white oppositions that characterise the political landscape in Iran (like protesting versus revolutionary kinds of cartooning). They do not want to be entangled in politics; however, that is easier said than done. The 2015 Holocaust cartoon competition, for example, was one of the most highly awarded international caricature and cartoon competitions of the past decade. The low threshold for participation (because participation meant e-mailing in a digital copy of the cartoon, not the original; knowledge of English was not necessary), the high prize money and the economically precarious situation of many cartoonists in Iran came together and made participation in that contest highly attractive—also to those who did not identify with the competition's

core message. As the list of contestants was due to be published on the organisers' website, as is often the case in resistance art festivals in Iran, participation came close to a political confession; so too did non-participation. It was precisely this politicisation via polarisation that many cartoonists experienced as particularly painful.

The cartoonists' description of cartooning as reporting, sweet-sour anthropology. or art indicates their attempt to resist the pressure of political positioning. Nevertheless, drawing a line between what is political and what is not was not among the cartoonists' prerogatives. The decision for or against competing in controversial cartoon competitions, for or against the appearance at particular festivals, leaves no room for neutrality—a non-political slot, so to speak; this is close to being a perfect example of the power of proto-politics. Determining what is and what is not political is itself a fundamentally political act—if not 'the essential political act, the very essence of power' (Comaroff, 2010, p. 530). Furthermore, this line was not for cartoonists to draw.

## Cartooning in a topography of antagonisms

Cartooning-as-protest—the reformist type of cartooning—takes a stand against the perceived injustice caused by a repressive regime, and it does so through the graphic representation of this repression and through the selective, often unintended, transgression of the limits of expression imposed by the regime. Revolutionary cartooning—the anti-imperialist type—takes a stand against perceived claims to omnipotence by American and "Zionist" political ideologues, and it does so through (the incitement to) the graphic denunciation of this very sense of entitlement and through the ostentatious transgression of the alleged limits of expression in the West. In both cases, cartoons appear as political-discursive interventions against—reactions to—perceived injustices, namely the unjust manifestation of claims to power and domination.

It is difficult to assess the effect of these kinds of cartooning or of any art for that matter, particularly because of the discursive character of these interventions. If anything, there is a deep ambivalence at play. Reformist cartoons are often a direct reaction to the limits of expression in Iran; yet it is through these very cartoons that the repressive regime against which they take a stand becomes visible, tangible, and possibly even in its repressive character. Their productivity, in a way, does not so much result from their agency, but from the reactions they provoke. In that sense, all they do is highlight antagonism.

The case for revolutionary, anti-imperial cartoons is not all that different. The Holocaust cartoon competition, for example, was (presented as) a reaction to the imperialism of the USA and the "Zionist regime", and more broadly to the West's underhandedness. The reaction in the West turned out to be exactly as the organisers expected: public outrage and widespread rhetoric about moral superiority. Precisely this conduct by the West is a key ingredient of the (desired) collective imaginary so necessary 'to keep their revolution alive,' as Narges Bajoghli writes in her book about state media producers in Iran (2019, p. x). They highlight an antagonism without which the revolutionary system would probably die.

Thus, both of these interventions—reformist and revolutionary—are productive not out of their own agency, but through the reactions that they conjure and without which they would not have been possible in the first place. In a sense, both are reproductive: The reactions that they provoke allow them to actualise the actual object of their critique. By actualising antagonisms they raise the visibility of the specific topography of the political in Iran.

Cartooning-as-reporting or cartooning-as-art is different. Cartoonists in that sense do not want to respond to perceived injustices; they do not want to speak truth to power. They want to resist responding to the pressure for political positioning. By trying not to enter political partisanship, not to be pigeon-holed into black or white categories of the political field, into simple *for* or *against* positions—in so doing they are confronted with the profound impossibility of their goal. Often, there is no such thing as a non-response. The publication of the list of contestants in the highly politicised and highly awarded Holocaust cartoon competition leaves no room *for* or *against* positioning. Cartooning-as-non-resistance means searching for a place beyond the political. This attempt might appear futile—and perhaps it truly is, particularly because cartooning is not an art field that can claim total autonomy from the political, at least not in Iran. However, perhaps it is exactly here, in the confrontation of this supposed futility, that cartooning highlights the rigid topography of antagonisms in Iran, one that does not allow for an autonomous, third space.

One of my cartoonist interlocutors compares the effectiveness of cartooning with the subtle, almost unnoticeable, creeping changes that women in Iran are making in the way they dress in public. Since the 1980s, there has been a steady yet subtle liberalisation in terms of women's dress and makeup, not because of a successful political or activist intervention, but rather through subtle tenacity. Not a movement, not concerted action, but decades of individual acts of precision work: pushing the headscarf millimetre by

millimetre towards the back of their heads; the slow yet constant increase in colours and dress patterns, the steady spread of more colourful makeup, the rising popularity of aesthetic surgery. I am reluctant to draw a line of cause and effect here, between uncoordinated and supposedly non-political acts and more liberal dress. Acts of creativity, together with decades-long tenacity, can produce minuscule discursive shifts that open up room for cumulative change. They may change the social experience of the political, but they do not shake the underlying topography of antagonisms.

### Dissolving types and ambivalent forms

These three types of cartooning make for a rather simplistic picture. It is a triad built upon the supposed binary between those cartoonists who work for or against the regime—as they put it themselves—plus those who wish to move beyond this binary. This situation is, of course, highly problematic. As Samuli Schielke and Mukhtar Shehata have shown clearly in their writings about the alleged binary of the avant-guard versus conservative literary circles in Alexandria, 'like all binaries in social science, this, too, is a false binary—or more precisely, it only tells a partial truth about the differentiation of literary milieus' (2016, p. 8). The same applies to cartoonists in Iran and is also true of ideal types in general: they are not actual forms.

The three types mentioned above have specific characteristics in terms of social cohesion. Cartooning-as-revolutionary-resistance manifested, for example, in the organisers of the Holocaust cartoon competition, appears as a highly concerted endeavour, with a clearly stated intention and an organisation of its own, is well-funded and follows a rather straightforward strategy. Cartooning-as-protest in the reformist sense is characterised by informal collaboration at best; a few friendly cartoonists might come together to put up a social media cartoon channel on which to distribute their works beyond the confines of internal censorship, or through social ties and references they happen to contribute (individually) more or less regularly to the same satirical print outlets. Signs of outright organisation or open concertation would be (and have been) strictly forbidden. The non-political kind of cartooning is highly individualistic, completely unorganised, without any political intentions in the stricter sense of the word, one human being thinking and drawing about humanity.

This is, of course, also a caricature. However, if taken as a simplistic means of approaching an understanding of configurations of power and the political, caricatures can be helpful, too. Nevertheless, I am far more interested in showing how the individual cartoonist manoeuvres through these configurations.

No single cartoonist would not cross the types sketched above. Take Mana Neyestani. Together with many of the most popular cartoonists of his generation (such as Hadi Heidari), he was socialised into the Iranian scene via an organisation that is now at the forefront of cartooning-as-revolutionary resistance; he has sympathised with the green movement, a hugely popular political mobilisation against Ahmadinejad's contested re-election, but he was not actively involved in it; he is now considered one of the most outspoken critics of the Iranian regime, one of the sharpest and bluntest cartoonists, who attacks the Islamic Republic at the stroke of his pen. Many hail him as a perfect example of a political cartoonist. Nevertheless, he has repeatedly said that he does not want to be considered one. Like many other cartoonists, he wants to be considered a philosopher with a pen. However, his French publisher showed no interested in this; an Iranian cartoonist living in exile has to be—almost by definition—a political cartoonist. That is what Neyestani is expected to draw and what he is forced to draw to make a living in Paris.

Alternatively, take this young liberal cartoonist from Isfahan: She considers herself an artist, pure and simple, but she also takes part in politically unambiguous events, exhibitions and competitions—sometimes reformist, sometimes revolutionary; sometimes more, sometimes less grudgingly. Take the "Trumpism" cartoon contest, organised in part by the revolutionary cartoonists mentioned earlier, aiming to criticise the arrogant rhetoric of political maniacs-slash-leaders of the so-called free world. Hardly any cartoonist I met would not have (to put it mildly) taken a critical stance toward Trump and MAGA (Make America Great Again) hat wearers. Nevertheless, to speak out against Trump (while also hoping to win lots of money in the competition), out of conviction, but on a platform with which many fundamentally disagree gives only a slight hint at the complexities involved.

Alternatively, take the example of staunch regime media producers beautifully described by Narges Bajoghli (2019) and which are reminiscent of the regime artists I met: Even among the propaganda professionals of the Islamic Republic, there is a broad spectrum of political affiliations and many internal conflicts.

The point is not that ideal types of cartooning are false and that their configurations of the political are false; both cartoonists (and even cartoon events, for that matter) move along the crisscrossing and overlapping lines of demarcation—of antagonism—at the same time, with hardly any room for calm. This is the topography of the political terrain on which individual cartoonists have to manoeuvre.

## Conclusion

The three ideal types of cartooning-as-resistance as sketched in this essay are sterile and, as isolated types, they tell us very little about a single cartoonist's path. It is only by taking their coexistence, overlapping connections, disconnections, and contradictions seriously, that we can get a sense of what cartooning and resistance as a social experience means in Iran. Nevertheless, however tentative and hesitant the individual cartoonist's moves in this landscape may be, without the three ideal types sketched above and the antagonisms at play, understood here as core dimensions of the political terrain in Iran, individual movements would be hard to trace altogether.

Cartoons—either reformist, revolutionary, or non-political—are reactions (at the very least implicit reactions) to perceived injustices. The effectiveness of cartoons, satire and all forms of art for that matter in terms of inducing change in the worlds they inhabit, how they act upon the perceived injustices, how they change the coordinates of the political terrain, are unanswered questions. The cartoonists mentioned above became effective specifically through the responses they provoked. If they have any effect at all, any that can be objectively traced, then it is this: by highlighting injustices they perceive, they actualise antagonisms that might otherwise remain latent. Even non-political cartooning, that does not claim to be resistant at all, does not direct its sting against perceived injustices, but tries to resist the pressure to take sides, and may not highlight specific political antagonisms, but actualises the antagonistic quality of the political terrain as a whole. In that sense, it reveals the agonisingly complex simplicity of the political in Iran.

Future research, including my own, needs to refine its topographical coordinates and explore the internal contradictions and struggles of each of those self-descriptions used by cartoonists in Iran (and probably elsewhere), the boxes (and networks and milieus and institutions, etc.) in which they put themselves. Greater care must be taken when exploring the ethnographic intricacies of individual movements in this landscape. Taking the terrain as seriously as individual movements would essentially mean exploring the social experience of cartooning-as-resistance not as a romanticised or pathologised version of the "weapons of weak", but to make sense of both the hegemonic and the subversive strategies and tactics at play in the constitution of a given political terrain.

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**Povzetek**

Članek obravnava artikulacije moči, upora in estetike z analitičnim opisom stripovstva v Islamski republiki Iran. Empirično to besedilo temelji na mojih etnografskih raziskavah z ustvarjalci stripov (in karikaturisti) v Iranu v zadnjih petih letih. Po kratkem pregledu zgodovine politične satire v Iranu, ta esej orisuje idealno-tipsko taksonomijo risanja stripov kot odpora v Iranu (tesno temelji na konceptualizaciji stripovstva mojih sogovornikov kot umetniške reakcije na zaznano krivico). Reformistični ustvarjalci stripov kritizirajo režim zaradi ekscesne represije; revolucionarni ustvarjalci stripov napadajo (različne verzije) "zahoda" zaradi njegove imperialistične nadutosti, dvomljivega zasedanja moralnega vrha in njegovih etičnih dvojnih meril; nepolitični ustvarjalci se želijo vzdržati vseh kritik in se distancirati od preveč poenostavljenih dihotomij, kot je reformistčnost proti revolucionarnosti. Razstavljanje kompleksne preprostosti različnih vrst odporniškega stripovstva in nasprotij, ki jih sprožijo, lahko ponudijo vpogled v teksture političnega prostora v Iranu.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: odpor, karikatura, satira, Iran

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