The Sovereign's Confessions: International Relations and the Iranian Post-Elections Show-Trials

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Abstract

Following the controversial 2009 presidential elections in Iran, a series of mass trials were conducted publicizing the confessions of key reformist figures as well as other dissidents. The confessions were widely criticized as theatrical, based on reports of human rights abuses, torture, and judicial procedural offences. This critique, however, often labelled the trials as either barbaric acts of terror, or at best as unintelligent failures of the Iranian government. In this paper, I engage with the most serious of such analyses, arguing that the show-trials are not mere strategic errors on the part of the regime; rather, a more in-depth structural analysis of the concept of sovereignty is required to understand the enabling condition of the trials. Sovereignty both in its domestic and international functions operates paradoxically insofar as it cannot overcome the crisis of representation with respect to the question of foundation. It is thus necessary to understand the show-trials as a sovereign move towards a logic of simulation. Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum is key to understanding the performance of the confession which postulates the unreal sovereign foundation as the latter's hyperreal representation. I further propose that the disciplinary society of the international is not one simply judging the authenticity of the trials, but more importantly, it is judging the reality of statehood and thus sovereignty. In this sense, the Iranian trials can be conceptualized as sovereignty confessing itself into the hyperreal.

On June 12, 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) held its tenth presidential elections. While the elections were distinguishable in many ways from previous ones, what marked their particular significance in the international scene was the civil unrest that followed the vote- counting based on the popular allegations of elections fraud. By conservative estimates, the repression of demonstrations has caused more than seventy deaths and over 4,000 arrests to date.[1] As the unrest continues, the government of Iran has so far conducted five sets of trials, four of which were held in August 2009 and the fifth in September of that year.[2] Each hearing has brought to court over one hundred detainees on charges that can be divided into three groups: "plotters, intriguers, and planners of the riots," "the antagonists and those affiliated to foreign services," and "the opportunists, hooligans, and hoodlums who set ablaze, or destroyed private and public properties, and those that have had a hand in disturbing public security," or, in plain terms, conspirators, supporters, and vandals.[3]

The three sets of charges that have been laid impose three defining characteristics upon the protests: first, that they were organized and planned; second, that they were subject to foreign influence; and third, that they were violent. To this narrative of the unrest, then, the trials add the defendants' confessions confirming these attributes of the protests. The term confession thus refers to statements of guilt and recantation, often obtained under physical and psychological pressures, to serve a politically established motive. While this genre of confessions has been prevalent in Iranian political modernity at least since 1921 and certainly throughout the period of the Islamic Republic, what is peculiar about the August and September trials is

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1 Campaign intensity, presidential debates, and a general relaxation of social freedoms prior to the elections day are significant factors that varied from previous elections. Fredrik Dahl and Hashem Kalantari, "Iran's Mousavi tells Government to end Intimidation," *Reuters* (November 22, 2009), http://www. reuters.com/article/GCAIran/International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "Campaign's UPR Submission" (September 14, 2009), http://www. iranhumanrights.org/2009/09/.

2 Fars News Agency, "Fifth Group of Detainees go on Trial Tomorrow." September 13, 2009. http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php. Fars News Agency, "Iran to Continue Trial of Post-Elections Detainees," August 24, 2009. http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php.

3 Ibid.

that the state's depiction of the protests are diametrically opposed to how people, both domestically and internationally, have understood them to be.[4] For the first time in Iranian history, it is safe to assume that the trials and, essentially, the confessions have no domestic or international audience. With the banning of all foreign media after the first week of the protests in June, citizen journalism set into motion a new wave of independent media which showed the world the sporadic, spontaneous, grassroots, and peaceful nature of the protests. In this light, the texts of the indictments, followed by the confessions, depict a reality far from what the world witnessed, hence their infamous description as "show-trials."

Inside Iran, this sense of disbelief was manifest in protestors' chants: "confessions, tortures, are no longer effective."[5] Further, in Tehran, households collaborated to shut down the city's electrical grid during times of the broadcasted confessions by plugging in all their electronic appliances simultaneously.[6] Furthermore, even officials in the far right, namely Mohsen Rezaie, a former commander of the Revolutionary Guard and conservative candidate in the presidential race, criticized the trials.[7] As Gary Sick, the principal White House aide for Iran during the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis stated, "very few people in Iran or elsewhere are willing to accept the confessions as genuine."[8]

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4 See Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

5 Several armature videos with this chant can be found on YouTube. See for example "Tehran Yesterday," *www.youtube.com* [Tehran, Aug 17, 2009] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W31EtpYu5u0&feature=player_embedded, and "Ghod 3," Video clip, www.youtube.com, [Isfahan, Sept 18, 2009], http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jLDp3d70Y8. Translated from original Persian by the author.

6 Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran Opposition Finds New Way to Protest," TheWall Street Journal (July 8, 2009). http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124701049387008635.html. The article extends only as far as indicating that "protesters have been asked to create a possible electrical blackout in Tehran by plugging in all their household electric appliances exactly at the same time" but multiple Farsi weblogs interpret "same time" to be when either Ahamdinejad's live speeches, or confession shows, are broadcasted from national television.

7 Farnaz Fassihi, "Tehran Court Tries Top Reformists," *The Wall Street Journal* (August 4, 2009). http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124925705086800229.html.

8 Gary Sick, "Iran's Chilling Show-trials," *The Daily Beast* (August 14, 2009). http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-08-14/irans-chilling-show-trials/2/.

Outside Iran, the trials are repeatedly compared with the 1936–38 Moscow show-trials, where initially many thought that the arrests, trials, and executions of "the enemies of the state" were just. By 1937, Stalin had instilled the pervasive fear which came to be known as the Great Terror.[9] The international community, drawing on the vivid memories of Stalin and the Maoist Red Guards, has for the most part condemned the human rights abuses that led to these trials in Iran, or at a minimum, has remained silent on the issue.[10] Needless to say, NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Reporters without Borders, Amnesty International, and many more have repeatedly condemned the arbitrary arrests, detentions, and forced confessions that led to convictions in the show-trials.[11] Finally, in December 2009, the Human Rights Committee of the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the post-elections human rights abuses in Iran including the juridical processes.[12]

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9 *Ibid*. See also CNN, "Iran's Show-trials." August 9, 2009, http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/us/2009/08/09/gps.iran.show.trials.cnn; The Washington Post, "The Spectacle in Tehran" (August 4, 2009). http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2009/08/03/AR2009080302558.html; Cory Flintoff, "Show-trials not Playing Well with Iranian Public?" *NPR* (September 1, 2009). http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112441500; Roger Hardy, "Iran Show-trials Make Sorry Spectacle," *BBC News* (August 27, 2009). http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8223239.stm; Robert W. Thurston , "Fear and Belief in the USSR 'Great Terror': Response to Arrest, 1935-1939," Slavic Review 45, 2 (Summer, 1986), 219.

10 A total of 109 human rights groups appealed to the U.N. General Assembly to support the 25th resolution condemning Iran's human rights record. See International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "UN Resolution Condemning Iran's Human Rights Violations Moves Forward" (November 20, 2009). http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2009/11/un-resolution-moves-forward/.

11 Amnesty International, "Iran Must Overturn Sentences Issued by Post-Elections Show-trials," October 21, 2009. http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/iran-must-overturn-sentences-issued-post-election-show-trial-20091021; Human Rights Watch, "Iran: Show Trial Exposes Arbitrary Detention," August 4, 2009. http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/08/04/iran-show-trial-exposes-arbitrary-detention; Reporters without Borders, "Arrests of journalists since disputed June election now top 100," November 5, 2009. http://www.rsf.org/Arrests-of-journalists-since.html.

12 Articles 3 (c) and (d) of the resolution respectively "express deep concern at" the government's "Interfering in the right to a fair trial by, inter alia, holding mass trials and denying defendants access to adequate legal representation, resulting in death sentences and lengthy jail sentences for some individuals;" and the

As Karim Sadjadpour, an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace explains, when faced with the reality first that the "confessions aren't being taken seriously by anyone but [perhaps] a relatively small group of hard-line supporters of Ahmadinejad,"[13] second with the large backlash of domestic and international condemnation that occurred in response to the trials, and finally that the fear-production amongst the protestors was found to be non-functional,[14] the phenomenon of the Iranian post-election show-trials begs the question of why: Why are these trials being conducted? What purpose do they serve? And how have the Iranian officials come to be so determined to manufacture confessions or truths which are widely acknowledged as lies? Finally, what are the enabling conditions of such performances?

Against this background, I argue in this paper that the Iranian show-trials are a spectacle of sovereignty which functions to serve the unreal reality of realism in international relations. To this end, I first critically examine a prominent academic argument offered by Ervand Abrahimian, an Iranian studies scholar, who attempted to explain why the trials were taking place despite their ineffectiveness. I go on to demonstrate the empirical weakness of this argument and investigate alternative theoretical domains. In the second part of the article, I employ a conceptual framework of state sovereignty in order to understand the operation of the mechanisms of power as understood by Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard within the logic

"Reported use of forced confessions and abuse of prisoners including, inter alia, rape and torture." See U.N. General Assembly, Sixty-fourth session, Agenda item 69 (c), Resolution 64/176, "The situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in the report of the Third Committee (A/64/439/Add.3), December 18, 2009. http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/482/25/PDF/N0848225.pdf?OpenElement. See also, U.N. General Assembly, Sixty-fourth session, Agenda item 69 (c), A/64/357, *The Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of the Secretary General,* September 23, 2009. http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher,UNGA,4ad87b962,0.html.

13 Cory Flintoff, "Show-trials Not Playing Well with Iranian Public?" National Public Radio Website, September 1, 2009. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112441500.

14 Functionality of fear can be dismissed in three respects: first, that the protests have significantly continued after the trials; second, that protestors have repeatedly chanted the confessions to be ineffective; and third, that the trials have often been ridiculed in domestic weblogs and diaspora satire pieces. This argument is also supported by Ervand Abrahimian briefly explained in the NPR article. See ibid.

of the international.[15] In this context, I analyse arguments by R.B.J. Walker and Richard Ashley, Cynthia Weber, and David Campbell, to demonstrate the ways in which the paradox of sovereignty works to simulate itself within the discourse of security in order to produce that which undermines its own legitimacy: the spectacle of sovereignty.[16]

Arguments on the Nature of the Show-Trials

Ervand Abrahimian compared the Iranian show-trials of the 1980s with those of 2009 and found two similarities: the emphasis on the dangers of the "hidden foreign hand" and the emphasis on the superiority of the Islamic ideology, hence on conformity.[17] He argued that in the 1980s, these two objectives were able to be reconciled, within the political context of the time, for four reasons. First, the fear of foreign involvement was ever present; various political factions were openly working with the Soviet Union, and a U.S. reaction to the revolution, similar to the 1953 CIA coup, was expected. Second, the 1980s were a highly charged ideological period, due both to Cold War politics and the domestic rivalry of Islam with Marxism and Leninism. Third, due to the limitations in communication, the general public was unaware of the staged productions that were created for these shows. And finally, the trials assumed an attentive public as the *e'teraf*—which has a double meaning of confession and/ or recantation in Persian—was understood as a sign of weakness, not

15 See Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), and Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*. Intro. and Interview with Sylvere Lotringer. Trans. Nicole Dufresne (CA: Semiotext(e), 2007 [1977]).

16 Richard Ashley and R.B.J. Walker, "Reading Dissidence/Writing the Disciplin: Crisis and Question of Sovereignty in International Relations," in *Critical Theory and International Relations*, ed. Steven C. Roach. (New York: Routledge, 2008); Cynthia Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State and Symbolic Exchange*, (U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1995); David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

17 Ervand Abrahimian, "Show-trials in Iran" (Lecture, Simon Fraser University, Centre for the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies and Cultures, Mirhady Endowed Lectures in Iranian Studies, October 26, 2009). See http://www.sfu.ca/ ccsmsc/past.htm. Most of his premises on the 1980s show-trials can also be found in Ervand Abrahimian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

only of the person but of their ideology. [18]

Abrahimian illustrated that in 2009 none of the above factors were present and this resulted in a boomerang effect of public sympathy towards the confessors. First, the Iranian paranoid psyche had diminished as Iran had built itself as a major power in the region; there no longer was a Soviet column, and conspiracy theories had become too repetitive for a young population that had no memory of foreign involvement. Second, the ideological intensity had dissipated; Marxist theories had already been subsumed by Weber, Habermas, post-structuralism, and feminism. Third, since the birth of the Islamic Republic, the dissidence crackdown of the '80s and the reform movement of the '90s produced a "new genre of prison literature," informing the public of the horrors of prison life. Finally, with the accessibility of such literature, a shift away from the age of heroism had taken place which now associated confessions with torture rather than with truth.[19]

Having outlined this difference, Abrahimian concluded that in 2009, the Iranian authorities were simply following their own footsteps on a path that had proven itself viable in the past, but without any conceptualization of the contemporary sociological transformations of their audience, leading in turn to their failure. To this argument, however, I would propose that the comparison of the 2009 show-trials with those of the '80s misses a series of dynamic transformations in the confession-taking processes which occurred during the show-trials of the reform movement, beginning with those Iranians arrested in the aftermath of the 2000 Berlin Conference on "*Iran after the Elections.*"[20] These trials and confessions can be categorized into four sets:[21] first, the 2001 confessions of conference participants Ezzatollah Sahabi, a seventy-year-old journalist, and Ali Afshari, a

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 The conference was organized by Germany in order to improve Iranian-German relations after the 1997 election of the reformist government of President Khatami. Many reformist intellegencia participated in the conference, most of whom were arrested upon their return to Iran. See Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Richard Tapper, *Islam and Democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the Quest for Reform* (New York: IB Tauris, 2006), 36–38.

21 I owe the intellectual debt of this four-stage categorization to Roozbeh Mirebrahimi, journalist and researcher, who was one of the confessors in 2004.

student representative from the Office of Consolidation of Unity;[22] second, the 2004 crackdown on cyber-journalists, which led to the confessions of Shahram Rafizadeh, Omid Memarian, Javad Gholam Tamimi, and Roozbeh Ebrahimi;[23] third, the 2006-07 confessions of academics with foreign links, namely Iranian-Canadian professor Ramin Jahanbegloo and Iranian-American scholars Haleh Esfandiari and Kian Tajbakhsh;[24] and finally, the 2009 confessions of high-ranking reformist officials Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a former vice-president of Khatami, and Mohammd Atrianfar, a former deputy minister, among other groups of journalists, activists, and protestors.[25] What is interesting in these four waves of confessions is the ways in which Iranian authorities progressed and evolved from one situation to the next, in order to make the confessions more accessible to their Iranian audience. During the 1980s, as Abrahimian describes, the recantations were arranged in the duration of imprisonment, they were referred to as roundtables, discussions, debates, or interviews, and were filmed within the notorious Evin prison's large auditorium in the presence of other prisoners.[26] In the first case involving the reformist,

22 A total of fifteen intellectuals and activists were arrested upon their return from the Berlin Conference, two of whom were forced to confess. Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2002—Iran*, May 28, 2002, http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3cf4bc134.html.

23 In 2004, a total of twenty-one journalists and bloggers were arrested of which twenty accepted the charges against them under extreme pressure. Only four were however indicted and forced to make public confessions. See *Iran's Human Rights Documentation Centre*, "Forced Confessions: Targeting Iran's Cyber Journalists, September 2009, p.11. http://www.iranhrdc.org/httpdocs/english/pdfs/Reports/Forced%20Confessions%20-%20Targeting%20Iran%27s%20Cyber-Journalists.pdf.

24 Ramin Jahanbegloo was arrested in 2006, however, his confessions were broadcast in a documentary along with Esfandiari and Tajbakhsh. Amnesty International, MDE 13/048/2006, http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/048/2006/en/045d6efa-fa07-11dd-b1b0-c961f7df9c35/mde130482006en.pdf. The latter two were arrested in 2007 along with Parnaz Azima and Ali Shakeri, journalist and peace activist, both U.S.-Iranian nationals, but only the academics were forced to confess. *Ibid*., MDE 13/064/2007, http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/064/2007/en/ceffd922-7e65-4c18-b603-c74b3ec33634/mde130642007en.pdf.

25 Amnesty International, "Over 100 Iranians Face Grossly Unfair Trials," August 4, 2009, http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/over-100-iranians-face-grossly-unfair-trials-20090804.

26 Abrahimian, *Tortured Confessions*, 143.

however, the confessions assumed a nuanced form given that, in principle, "reform" could not be labelled "counterrevolutionary," and hence a more lenient audience was expected. In this period, while the prisoners were still incarcerated as they recanted, the "interviews" were conducted in studio-like settings, on a one-to-one basis, and without a live audience. The second wave of the confessions, in 2004, took into further consideration the question of authenticity served up to a transformed public opinion. In order to make the recantations seem more genuine, Mirebrahimi and Memarian's confessions, each publicized after their release from prison, were held as the condition of release for the next prisoner in the group, and were presented as voluntary interviews with the press.[27] It followed that the third wave of recantations, in 2006 and 2007, not only were published once the prisoners had been freed and as voluntary press interviews, but they were published by the Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA), a prominent reformist medium much more strongly trusted by the public.[28]

Thus far then, we have witnessed a series of modifications in the conduct of confessions precisely to make "the truth" intelligible to the domestic audience. In such efforts too, we encounter considerable receptivity by the public, certainly not a massive backlash which was a determining characteristic of the 2009 confessions. In this most recent wave of confessions, however, the progressive contextualization of the mechanisms of the confession spectacle have for the most part disappeared. Their styles are much more similar to those of the 1980s: the confessions are read in courts, in large groups, and with other prisoners as audience, while the confessors remain incarcerated; they are then asked to answer a few questions in group press conferences outside the courts, while they remain in prison uniforms.

This relapse into the original forms of confession performances is thus not indicative of government failure to account for a transformed socio-political body. Rather, given the arguably effective attempts of the state to reconcile confession mechanisms with their audience during the reform movement, this relapse signals something greater

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27 Mirehbrahimi's witness statement, 14. http://www.iranhrdc.org/httpdocs/ English/pdfs/Reports/Forced%20Confessions%20%20Targeting%20 Iran%27s%20Cyber-Journalists.pdf.

28 Reuters, "Iran Sees 'Soft Revolution' in US Academic's Work," May 21, 2007. http://www.reuters.com/article/politicsNews/idUSN2136312520070521.

than a simple miscalculation: it reflects an utter non-concern of the state with society's acceptance of the confessions as such. Whereas in the 1980s, this genre of confessions was structured to produce intelligible truths, in the 2009 trials, they had returned while regarding the concern for intelligibility as irrelevant, replacing it with a performative ideal: the event must be performed within a very short time period, regardless of all intricacies, details, and outcomes.

This procedural return signals a re-strengthening of the enabling conditions of a sovereign performance in the aftermath of the elections. What is obvious is the resurfacing of explicit opposition *en masse* for the first time since the beginning of the revolution and thus the re-emergence of the enemy threat. More interesting however, is the exposition of this threat against the structures of sovereignty and the ways in which the latter's ontological paradoxes allow for paradoxical performances revealed in times of crisis.

The Show-Trials in International Relations

Engaging in a discussion of crisis in the discipline of international relations, Walker and Ashley identify one of its manifestations to be "a crisis of representation."[29] They speak of sovereignty as an "institutional order" which does not assume an absolute presence, thus never occupying the position of an object which can entirely rid itself of active subjectivities. This "institutional order" falls within the multiple domains of social, political, and juridical organization and thus outside of objective, universal, and absolute truths. The concept of sovereignty here is double-edged. It assumes both the Weberian definition of "the monopoly of legitimate physical violence" and the Schmittian decider of the exception.[30] To this end, a "crisis of representation" in sovereignty can be understood as a representation, not of an object present in some time and place, but as "a representation of other representations." Walker and Ashley continue:

29 Richard Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, 346.

30 Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, David Owen and Tracy B. Strong (eds and intro.), Rodney Livingstone, trans. (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2004), 33. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. and intro. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005 [1985]), 1.

> The very possibility of truth is put in doubt….On trial
> is the self-evident reality of the objects which might be
> unambiguously represented, assigned a definite social value,
> and entered into circulation in a system of communication or
> exchange. On trial, too, is the very life of the institutionalized
> subject of the social order.[31]

It is here, in this "representational crisis," that the Iranian trials can
suppose a different function. In their non-relationship to truth, both
in output and input to and from society, the trials implicitly, and, at
times, explicitly, confess the very crisis in the representational nature
of the institutionalized order of sovereignty.

This representation which rests on the foundation of the state
as its condition of possibility, then also claims to be, in Walker and
Ashley's words, "a fundamental principle, a supporting structure, a
base on which society rests, a fund of authority capable of endowing
possibilities, accrediting actions and fixing limitations."[32] What Walker
and Ashley refer to as "the paradox of sovereignty" is realized here as
the very authority which cannot exist objectively in and of itself, grants
legitimacy to a representation of itself in a process of representational
reification.[33] The show-trials, then, can be conceptualized not as shows
in the sense that the actors involved are acting their scripts. Rather,
they are performances of a centre of power, a source of authority, a
sovereign, which is never really present, but *re*-presentations of which
are necessary in order to make-believe its reified presence. Further,
this belief is not, nor is it intended to be, one of the scripts or the
truths produced in the confession. It is however, a manifestation of
a belief on a decider of the truths and the scripts, the norms and the
exceptions.

The "crisis of representation" also projects itself internationally,
unfolding itself in the same manner with respect to the sovereignty
which is self-acknowledged to not be domestically present. Walker
and Ashley discuss a "third world sovereignty, where the anarchy
seems to be on the 'inside' and the center of authority seems to be on

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31 Ashley and Walker, 346.

32 Ibid., 348.

33 Ibid.

the 'outside.'"[34] The case of post-election Iran befits this description, where the centre of authority seeks to reaffirm itself in the trials. The confession, in this sense, becomes precisely one of the sovereign confessing to the centralized source of power on the outside. It is not a case of a simple shift in the burden of responsibility for which the texts of the indictments are over-saturated with the names of Western institutions of knowledge and power.[35] In this language, the confession takes a role of representing the non-present object of the institutional order of sovereignty on the outside, but does so with a claim to temporal and spatial material foundations, which are themselves ultimately representations of representations. While the various Western institutions cited embody the spatial manifestation of such material foundations, references to temporal foundations are illustrated in historical moments which have presumably been determined by Western influences.[36]

Thus, in the attempt to re-allocate the object of power outside of this time and this space, outside of this sovereign state here and now, the sovereign attempts to simultaneously externalize its paradox. David Campbell describes this phenomenon as the "need to discipline and contain the ambiguity and contingency of the "domestic" realm [by] the externalization and totalization of threats to that realm through discourses of danger."[37] In other words, reworking from a Schmittian

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34 Ibid., 356.

35 These include the CIA, MOSSAD, Gene Sharp, Western intelligence and espionage services, Western hegemony, America, Western government agencies, Israeli spy, Open Society Institute, Soros Foundations Network, the Rockefeller Institute, the Ford Foundation, the German Marshall Fund, Freedom House, Council of Foreign Relations, German Association for Foreign Policy, the Institute for Democratic Studies in England, MEMRI, SAE Dutch Institute of Hyves, Dutch oil companies, Harvard University's Berkman Centre, Kronos Foundation, and many more Western government employees, academics, and research institutes. See Iranian Human Rights Documentation Centre, "Complete Transcript of the Prosecutor General's Indictment of the Accused Plotters of the Failed Velvet Revolution," Doc_Number EU000010, and "The Complete Text of the Indictment of the Second Group of Accused in the Velvet Coup Project," Doc_Number EU00002, August 8, 2009, http://www.iranhrdc. org/httpdocs/English/aadel.htm .

36 Ibid. These include the CIA coup of 1953 and the velvet revolutions of Georgia, Serbia, Ukraine, and Croatia.

37 Campbell, 64.

definition of the sovereign as "he who decides on the exception,"[38] it can be derived that the exception necessitates the imposition of a norm, the norm is obtained from an order, "order requires discipline," and disciplining the self necessarily follows a strategy of otherness.[39] This key component of "otherizing," in turn, functions not only to simply alleviate any impressions of domestic difference, ambiguity, or dissidence, but to establish a (non)foundation outside, based on which the paradoxical logic of sovereignty can circulate. This exercise of imagination is entirely distinct from whether there is any reality to the political operation of the institutions listed above, as some of them have in the past and are currently engaged in direct or indirect efforts which threaten "Iranian security."[40] Rather, what is significant in the imagining of the other, is representationally positing it to function as the basis for a paradigm which would otherwise be baseless.

The paradox of sovereignty is hence twofold: on the one hand, it undergoes a representational crisis of the institutional order of the inside; and on the other hand, as a resolution to this crisis, it seeks to locate the centre of power on the outside. But, as that institutional order, as well, is not de-subjectified, it is bound to representations which are built on other representations. The twofold operationalization itself works to mutually constitute each side, working circularly between the domestic and the international, and hence creating a crisis of representation within each, and between the boundaries of the two, destabilizing the categorical operation of each. To this destabilization then, an automatic performance of the confession is reacted, conscious of its own non-attempt to convince its audience of its stories, but to regain its grasp on the underlying logic of statehood, both in the international version of the monopoly of the use of force and the domestic role of the decider on the exception.

This act of re-reaching, itself a representation of a previous representation, may be described, as Cynthia Weber has put it, as a shift from the "logic of representation" to "a post-representational

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38 Schmitt, 5.

39 Campbell, 58.

40 A most obvious instance of these attempts would be the neo-conservative agenda of a US or Israeli military attack on Iran. A common saying is often used in this regard: "Just because I'm paranoid, it doesn't mean they are not out to get me!"

logic of simulation."[41] The logic of representation understands sovereignty to be a representation of a nation based on the ability to speak on behalf of a domestic population in the international realm; it also assumes an *a priori* foundation of "the people," which C. Weber demonstrates to be a discursive construction.[42] C. Weber here follows a Foucauldian line of truth production in relations of power, whereby a truth, operating as a foundation to sovereignty, is historically and geographically enabled. Whether through the production of "God" in the *ancien regime,* or the production of "the people" in modernity, the king or the government become the sovereign representatives of the constructed foundation. As Foucault has established, in the modern "escape" of the Western legal edifice from the monarch, it is only the *limits* of sovereign power that are put in question and never its ontological foundation.[43] C. Weber further explains that the concept of "communities as the foundation for sovereign states" requires a stable practice of boundary-making which is economically, culturally, and ecologically non-sustainable, thus enabling the circular production of the non-present foundation to be re-presented. [44]

Following a failure of the "logic of representation," in effect a failure to produce an authoritative truth, C. Weber looks to Baudrillard to pose the question of "what happens when representation is no longer possible?"[45] What are the ways in which an absence of truth is concealed such that it allows for the operation of the logic of representation and thus the paradox of sovereignty? How do relations such as simulation and seduction work to maintain the paradox?[46]

In her application of Baudrillard to the sovereignty problematic, Weber draws on Baudrillard's critique of Foucault insofar as the case of sovereignty demonstrates that a truth can never be produced, just as a stable sovereign foundation has not been produced; rather it becomes a matter "of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" in an act of "symbolic exchange."[47] Weber continues to explain that "the

41 C. Weber, 10.

42 Ibid., 5, 30.

43 Foucault, "Two Lectures" in *Power/Knowledge,* 94.

44 C. Weber, 4.

45 Ibid., 34.

46 Ibid., 38.

47 Baudrillard quoted in C. Weber, 37.

state is a sign without a referent."[48] The process of symbolic exchange thus occurs as simulation rather than representation. Sovereignty is therefore required to be conceptualized, not in relation to its object of reference, but as a simulacrum, defined by Baudrillard to be "a truth-effect that hides the truth's non-existence."[49] At operation here is not an act of truth production, but one of "seduction," which is concerned with "the manipulation of appearances."[50] From this, the important question arises: "If sovereign foundations could only be seduced but not produced in the discourses surrounding these [trials],[51] what recognizable 'falsehoods' were circulated as proofs of the truth's existence? What were the alibis for representation both domestically (dictators) and internationally (regional communities)?"[52]

The "recognizable falsehood" that is to perform as the alibi of truth's existence in the spectacle of sovereignty in the Iranian show-trials is indeed one of power: the very problem over which Baudrillard "forgets" Foucault. In Baudrillard's words, if understood in terms of a Foucauldian production, then

> [p]ower is an irreversible principle of organization because it fabricates the real (always more and more of the real), effecting a quadrature, nomenclature, and dictature without appeal; nowhere does it cancel itself out, become entangled with itself, or mingle with death. In this sense, even if it has no finality or no last judgement, power returns to its own identity again as a *final principle*: it is the last term, the irreducible web, it is the last tale that can be told; it is what structures the indeterminate equation of the word.[53]

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48 C. Weber, 123.

49 Ibid.

50 C. Weber, 38. For Baudrillard, "*seduction* is that which is everywhere and always opposed to *production*; seduction withdraws something from the visible order and so runs counter to production, whose project is to set everything up in clear view." Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 37.

51 The word "invasions" here is replaced with "trials," as Weber's case study involves the U.S. invasions of Grenada and Panama; but the analytical framework is very much applicable to the project of the Iranian show-trials.

52 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 39.

53 Ibid., 50.

This episteme works to constitute the show-trials as a representation of sovereign power. If power can be produced into the real, then the confession is its mechanism of production. Indeed for Foucault this was the *modus operandi* of the Christian confession. However, in the Iranian trials we witnessed a crisis. The crisis was not only one of representation, but also one of power itself. It was a crisis precisely situated in the contextually particular micro-mechanisms of power, which were increasingly failing at the level of the production of sovereign power as the momentum of resistance worked to redefine power in other ways. The reality of power, thus, can be said to be produced not through the state but by its resistors. The crisis in this way, signals not an ontological deconstruction of power as such, rather it offers an epistemological shift in the way in which we understand, produce, and locate power.

For Baudrillard however, even in this new epistemology, we are still confined to a final principle: the paradox of a non-object working continuously to objectify itself. He questions power as a "*reality principle*… not merely impossible to locate because of dissemination, but dissolved purely and simply in a manner that still escapes us, dissolved by reversal, cancellation, or made hyperreal through simulation."[54] Where for Foucault power is "'to produce something real' or produce *the* real," for Baudrillard this genealogical conceptualization of the produced real is the apparatus through which we can understand power outside of the real: it is either dissolved or hyperreal, either seduced or simulated. Baudrillard posits that

> [i]t is only from this point on that we can conceive of a new peripeteia of power—a catastrophic one this time—where power no longer succeeds in producing the real, in reproducing itself as real, or in opening new spaces to the reality principle, and where it falls into the hyperreal and vanishes, *this is the end of power*, the end of the strategy of the real.[55]

It is in this "simulacrum of power itself,"[56] that the spectacle of

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54 Ibid., 31.
55 Ibid., 45.
56 Ibid., 50.

sovereignty in the trials can be conceptualized: a performance of sovereign power behind which there exists a void, giving it "a last glimmer of reality. Without that which reverses [it], cancels [it], and seduces [it], [power] would never have attained reality."[57]

Such peripeteia is fluid in all points of contradiction in the case at hand. Inversions, cancellations, and the hyperreal are now visible: The confessions no longer participate in the production of the truth, rather they seduce the distinguishing line between truth and falsehood, creating the hyperreal truth/lie.[58] Further, the performance of the sovereign defies, or rather cancels, its own sovereignty, becoming both the non-decider of the exception and the effective "multiopoly" of legitimate force. And finally, the backlash of the domestic and the international reverse the expected effects of the spectacle. This inversion, the very resistance in which Foucault reallocates power, is for Baudrillard precisely the mirror that upholds the image of the real; it is that which simulates power into hyperreality. As Baudrillard asks, "Do you think that power... would have stood up one single instant without a fascination to support [it] which originates precisely in the inversed mirror where [it is] reflected and continually reversed, and where [its] imaginary catastrophe generates a tangible and immanent gratification?"[59]

If we return to the enactment of the paradox of sovereignty in the international, however, perhaps we could imagine this mirror at the juridico-political boundaries of the sovereign state. The show-trials in this sense embody in place and enact in performance such boundaries. In the following depiction of the relation of the self to the mirror by Foucault, I have replaced the pronoun "I" and all its derivates with the subject of sovereignty and the pronoun "it":

> Sovereignty sees itself there, where it is not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface … a sort of shadow that gives sovereignty's own visibility to itself, that

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57 Ibid., 54.

58 Hanna Arendt describes this moment as the point at which "the audience to which the lies are addressed is forced to disregard altogether the distinguishing line between truth and falsehood in order to be able to survive." See Hanna Arendt, "Lying in Politics," in *Crisis of the Republic* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1972), 7.

59 Baudrillard, 54.

enables it to see itself there where it is absent … but … where the mirror also exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that sovereignty occupies. From the standpoint of the mirror, sovereignty discovers its absence from the place where it is supposed to be and sees itself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed towards it, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, it comes back towards itself; it begins again to direct its eyes towards itself and to reconstitute itself there where it is.[60]

For Foucault, a place of both utopia and heterotopia, and for Baudrillard, nothing but a simulacrum, it is here, in the space of the mirror, in this "placeless place," that the juridical and political boundaries of sovereign power are indefinitely simulated. It is in the performative space of the show-trial that such boundaries are seduced to establish the self against its other. It is the mirror, as the condition of the possibility of sovereignty, that externalizes threats only to invert them onto the inside; and through which conversely, the centres of power on the outside can uphold the (non)object of power inside and the latter can in turn re-simulate the former. C. Weber returns to Foucault in that the state's speech acts of justification in the international realm lead to the production of "an international community of judgement."[61] In the case of the trials, this is not a judgement of the truth/lie of the confession, but the performance of the sovereign. But what if we were to imagine the boundaries of sovereign powers as constituting mirrors? For this simulacrum, "what becomes important are the signs of sovereignty."[62]

Much like Valezquez's *Las Meninas*, where the gaze of the painter, the painting, and the observer are infinitely juxtaposed, the realities of the sign, the signifier, and the signified become endlessly intertwined. In the painting, by the invisibility of the subject of the painting and the invisibility of the observer, "the double relation of the representation to its model and to its sovereign" is interrupted.[63] We can perhaps see in world politics how the represerer (the sovereign), the represented

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60 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, 1 (Spring 1986): 24.

61 C. Weber, 125.

62 Ibid., 127.

63 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (USA: Vintage Books, 1994, [1970]), 16.

(the people), and the audience (the international community), are working to reflect one another to simulate the object of sovereignty that is invisible but always already assumed. In this sense, the Iranian show-trials are operating within a firmly knit and thus disciplinary, yet unstable, logic of sovereignty whereby they are utterly destructive to their agents of performance, the Iranian government, but nonetheless are an essential necessity for the survival of the state in the international. This logic is firmly knitted, as it is infinitely simulated, in the web of the multiple mirrors of international relations, such that the removal of any one of the reflections or simulations is impossible. But it is also entirely unstable insofar as the simulacrum reflects a sovereign power that precisely does not exist. As Baudrillard explains,

> [p]ower is truly sovereign when it grasps this secret [of its non-existence[64]] and confronts itself with that very challenge. When it ceases to do so and pretends to find a truth, a substance, or a representation (in the will of the people, etc.), then it loses its sovereignty, allowing others to hurl back the challenge of its own life or death, until it dies at the hands of that infatuation with itself, that imaginary concept of itself, and that superstitious belief in itself as a substance; it dies as well when it fails to recognize itself as a void, or as something reversible in death. At one time leaders were killed when they lost that secret.[65]

Conclusion

I have attempted here to situate the 2009 Iranian show-trials and the resulting forced confessions beyond a weak political judgement of the Iranian authorities and within a broader framework of the international: sovereignty. To this end, I examined a prominent argument on the why's and how's of the trials. Comparing the trials with those of dissidents in the 1980s, Abrahimian argued that, for reasons of foreign involvement, an ideologically charged atmosphere of the 1980s, lack of public knowledge of confession-taking processes

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64 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 58–59.

65 Ibid., 64.

and prison conditions, and the heroics associated with strength under torture, the first set of confessions during the Islamic Republic were successful in convincing their audience of their truth production. However, he established that as these conditions are absent today, the 2009 trials functionally failed, and the Iranian authorities have not yet realized the socio-politically transformed context in which they operate.

To this analysis, I formed a critique positing that the series of trials and confessions that took place well into the Iranian Reform movement—from 2001 onwards—demonstrated a gradual yet steady conformity of confession aesthetics in accordance with the sociologically specific expectations of their audience. Hence, that the 2009 trials failed to persuade the domestic and international publics of their truth-claims is not an effect of miscalculations on behalf of the Iranian government; rather, it demonstrates a lack of concern with such persuasion. In the wake of the mass protests after the 2009 elections, new possibilities for challenges to Iranian state sovereignty were now available, both in the Schmittian and Weberian senses of the term sovereignty.

My argument follows that sovereignty, however, is paradoxical by nature and hence always already in what Walker and Ashley referred to as a crisis of representation. Sovereignty claims to represent a foundational authority which is non-present. Such authority is required to be generated both domestically, in the politics of the exception, and internationally, in the politics of non-intervention. As Campbell argues, this requires a form of discipline by producing boundaries between the Self and the Other, alleviating domestic differences, and externalizing the threats. Thus, a foundation is produced both on the inside and the outside that allows for the circulation of the paradox of sovereignty and its crisis of representation. C. Weber extends this argument further by drawing on Baudrillard's simulacrum to argue that a failure of the logic of presentation has provided for the operationalization of a logic of simulation.

Baudrillard problematizes the Foucauldian historical production of truth, of sovereign foundation through power, proposing that to claim production, however much at the level of the micro, is to claim power to be final, determinate, and ultimately real. While its reversibility, cancellation, and dissolution into the realm of the hyperreal can be traced in the case of the show-trials, sovereign

power is nothing but a seduction, a sign replacing itself for the real, a truth-effect hiding its non-existence. In seeking its own death, however, it is simulated indefinitely in spaces through which it can realize its unreal nature. Foucault's theorization of the mirror is one of such placeless places that shares a striking familiarity with the space in which the limits of sovereign power come face to face. I have posited the juridico-political boundaries of Iranian sovereignty manifested in the trials as the multilayered frames through which the gaze of sovereignty's signs, signified, and signifiers are exchanged in world politics. In this sense, the simulacrum of sovereign power also disciplines its subjects, objects, and itself into simulating the very ordering principle of international relations. The Iranian show-trials and confessions are but one site of this simulacrum, beyond which a void seeks its own termination. Perhaps they are, as Baudrillard would have it, the face of the end of power and the strategy of the real.

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