

Tomorrow Was Shahrivar 1401: Notes on the Iranian Uprisings

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1.

On September 13, Zhina (Mahsa) Amini,¹ a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman, was arrested and detained by the Iranian “morality police”² while visiting Tehran with her family from Saqqez (in Iran’s Kurdistan Province). Her charge: allegedly violating the law pertaining to the correct and obligatory wearing of the hijab.³ She fell into a coma on the day of her detention, and three days later, she died. That day, protests against the government’s murder of Zhina began. After a medical team in Tehran pronounced Zhina dead, other demonstrations began to form outside of the Kasra Hospital where her body remained. On September 17, protests continued after her funeral when mourners organized a peaceful rally outside the Saqqez governor’s office. Security forces outside the office responded to protestors with tear gas and opened fire.⁴ On September 18, protests spread to the capital of Kurdistan Province, Sanandaj, with mass demonstrations in solidarity with the protestors in Saqqez. From September 19 onwards, an innumerable number of cities across Iran joined in the struggle, whose main protest chant was the Kurdish-feminist slogan “Woman, life, freedom” (ژن، ژيان، نازادی). According to various human rights groups, since the start of the “Zhina Uprising,” at least twenty-seven minors have been killed by police, while the total number of dead is estimated to be upwards of 207 protestors.⁵ On September 30—i.e., the “Bloody Friday” of Zahedan—government forces killed around ninety-six Balochi protestors and worshipers by using live ammunition, while injuring many more.⁶ As Amnesty International UK reports: “Widely referred to by Iranians as ‘bloody Friday,’ the September 30 onslaught marked the deadliest day of the protests.”⁷

On the first of October, with complete disregard for the threat to their well-being from security officials, shops remained closed as part of a region-wide strike in Iranian Kurdistan (West Azerbaijan Province, Ilam Province, Kermanshah Province, and Kurdistan Province), while students demonstrated in at least a hundred universities. On the following day, plainclothes officers violently raided Sharif University of Technology—the most prestigious technical university in Iran—after students held an otherwise peaceful

¹ Throughout this text, we use Zhina’s Kurdish name (which is also Kurdish for “life”) rather than her legal name as recognized by the Iranian state.

² Established in 2005, the Guidance Patrol (گشت ارشاد) is tasked with arresting anyone in violation of the Islamic dress code as recognized by the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

³ Elsewhere, it has been speculated that maybe it was because her pants were “too tight.” See: <https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/post/2022/10/09/feminist-uprising-in-iran-atlanta-radical-bookfair/>

⁴ In Kurdish, her gravestone reads: “Dear Zhina, you’re not dead. Your name will become a symbol.”

⁵ “Iran Protests: Death Toll Rises to at Least 201/Children Victims of the Crackdown,” Iran Human Rights, October 12, 2022. See: <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5517/>. Reuters has reported similar numbers. For more see Parisa Hafezi, “Protests Grip Iran as Rights Group Says 19 Children Killed,” Reuters, October 9, 2022. See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/protests-continue-across-iran-rights-group-reports-19-minors-killed-2022-10-09/>.

⁶ Cora Engelbrecht, Nilo Tabrizy, and Ishaan Jhaveri, “‘It Was a Massacre’: How Security Forces Cracked Down in Southeastern Iran,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2022. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/14/world/middleeast/iran-zahedan-crackdown.html>.

⁷ “Iran: At Least 82 Protesters and Bystanders Killed in Bloody Crackdown in Baluchistan,” Amnesty International UK, October 6, 2022. See: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/iran-least-82-protesters-and-bystanders-killed-bloody-crackdown-baluchistan>.

demonstration.⁸ In response to the sheer number of students who were injured and/or arrested, several university professors across Iran have sided with the students, whether through strike actions or letters of resignation. At the same time, various calls for strike actions were issued from different segments of Iranian society. On October 11, project workers⁹ from key oil refineries in Abadan and Asaluyeh (located in the provinces of Khuzestan and Bushehr, respectively) went on strike in solidarity with the Zhina Uprising while calling for other workers in the oil, gas, and petrochemical industries to follow suit. Even major news outlets have been forced to recognize the significance of oil workers striking in solidarity with a movement characterized by a society-wide refusal of the double oppression experienced by Kurdish women (for being Kurds, for being women) at the hands of the Iranian state: “The demonstrations [by the project workers] in Abadan and Asaluyeh mark the first time the unrest surrounding the death of Mahsa Amini threatened the industry crucial to the coffers of Iran’s long-sanctioned theocratic government.”¹⁰ On October 15, Tehran’s notorious Evin Prison, where many political prisoners and the arrestees of the uprising are being held, was set on fire under suspicious circumstances. Sounds of gunfire and stun grenades were repeatedly heard and the families of prisoners rushed to check on their loved ones. At the time of writing, there is no clear explanation or report on the possible cause or exact number of casualties. Over the course of a single month, the Zhina Uprising has now spread to all thirty-one of Iran’s provinces.

With each successive week of protest, more and more segments of Iranian society have joined the movement and put their bodies on the line. Over time, these protests have amounted to various modes of collective dis-identification with the social position individuals have been compelled to occupy—examples of what some theorists have called the “human strike,”¹¹ in which one withdraws one’s participation from the demands of the social, political, and economic conditions of life. Put another way, what began as a wave of protests quickly transformed into a series of strikes originating outside the traditional points of production, organized by what can be termed “surplus life”—all those whose daily existence and social activity appear as superfluous in the eyes of the Iranian state. What is more, these *human* strikes by surplus

⁸ Lily Mafi, “Attack on Sharif University Students by an Army of Plainclothes Forces,” *Zamaneh Media*, October 3, 2022. See: <https://en.radiozamaneh.com/32849/>.

⁹ Workers whose terms of employment are precarious, part time, and/or based on a “zero hours” contract. Project workers are “blue collar” workers insofar as they are not directly employed by the National Iranian Oil Company, for whom the term “white collar” is reserved. There is hope that official workers will join the strike but this has not yet happened. For more on the differences between these kinds of workers, see our article “The Bitter Experience of Workers in Iran—On the Oil Workers Strike in Iran—A Letter from Comrades,” *Angry Workers of the World*, July 9, 2021. See: <https://www.angryworkers.org/2021/07/09/on-the-oil-workers-strike-in-iran-a-letter-from-comrades/>.

¹⁰ Jon Gambrell, “Protests in Iran Over Woman’s Death Reach Key Oil Industry,” *Associated Press*, October 10, 2022. See: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-10-10/gunfire-blasts-in-western-iran-amid-mahsa-amini-protests>. “Double oppression” is a concept from the geographical body called Iran and refers to a form of oppression that is simultaneously gendered and ethnic. It finds its closest correlate in the notion of “intersectionality.”

¹¹ In a recent statement of solidarity with the Zhina Uprising, Claire Fontaine shared these words with us: “Thank you so much for sharing thoughts about the human strike with the Iranian comrades. As soon as insurrection happened it felt as if Zhina’s and the other murders explicitly revealed in an intolerable way that a continuous killing of freedom, sexuality, and any positive vital instinct has been perpetrated by this regime during all these unbearable years. Now all this death needs to stop, all of us have endured so much and the world needs to react, there isn’t a minute to spare, nature needs to fight extraction and destruction, we all need to get back the control on our expropriated sensorial and emotional lives, traditional revolts won’t help us: we need human strike. We need to prove that we aren’t who the oppressors think we are and the feminist movements are a precious example for the way forward.”

life have become generalized struggles against the forms of indirect domination that are inherent to the production process and to the forms of direct domination that govern spaces of circulation, domesticity, and publicity. Strikes such as these are not simply organized in brute opposition to the circuits of production. Rather, they seek to “wildcat the totality”—a totality whose structural logic remains bound to the form-determinations of capitalist value.¹²

The orthodox (historically conventional) understanding of the general strike—which cannot integrate temporary and precarious workers (more than 90 percent of Iran’s workforce) or recognize the legitimacy of the demands of the unemployed, housewives, undocumented immigrants, and others—no longer applies to the current situation. Until now, the movement’s contagious fecundity has expressed itself in multiple ways: unemployed workers blocking roads, female high school students walking out of the classroom, as well as strikes by oil project workers. These are unorthodox strikes for unorthodox times.

One could already catch glimpses of a still nascent human strike during the previous waves of struggle in Iran—e.g., the 2021 oil workers strike; the 2022 teachers movement.¹³ That said, whereas before, project workers in Iran’s oil industry went on strike while receiving statements of support from various social groups (other unions and precarious workers, the women’s movement and feminists, pensioners, truck drivers, teachers, and nurses), now it is the oil workers who have gone on strike in solidarity with the Zhina Uprising and the revolutionary potentials found therein. This deceptively simple shift from statements to practices of solidarity already indicates one of the ways in which the current uprising marks a fundamental break with previous waves of struggle and protest: following the lead of Teachers Who Seek Justice, which responded to the killing of Zhina with a statement titled “This Is the Beginning of the End,”¹⁴ Iranian oil workers are currently marching through the streets declaring that “this is the year of blood.”

These calls for defiance, strike, and refusal have now become so widespread that the desire for collective withdrawal from participation in the reproduction of the established order is on the tip of everyone’s tongue. Among the uprising’s various strata, one continuously discovers this uncompromising refusal: the refusal to appear on government radio and television, the refusal to work in government offices, the refusal to work in various sectors of industrial production and supply—so many cultural, artistic, and student strikes.¹⁵ Thus we are in agreement with Collective98’s assertion that the struggle has “entered into an explicitly revolutionary phase in which there is no solution but revolution.”¹⁶

As for Iran’s conservative faction (“hard-liners”), and its reformists who are eager to serve as replacements in the event of regime change, with each passing day it is clear that such a widespread refusal to work,

¹² See “‘Wildcat The Totality’ – Fred Moten and Stefano Harney Revisit *The Undercommons* in a Time of Pandemic and Rebellion (Part 1),” July 4, 2020, in *Millennials Are Killing Capitalism*, podcast. See: <https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/wildcat-the-totality-fred-moten-and-stefano-harney-revisit-the-undercommons-in-a-time-of-pandemic-and-rebellion-part-1>.

¹³ On the 2021 oil workers strike, see Ganji and Rosales, “‘The Bitter Experience of Workers in Iran.’” On the 2022 teachers movement. See: <https://collective98.blogspot.com/2022/04/blog-post.html> (in Farsi).

¹⁴ See: <https://www.akhbar-rooz.com/170366/1401/07/03/> (in Farsi).

¹⁵ See Maurice Blanchot, “Refusal,” *Political Writings: 1953–1993*, trans. Zakir Paul (Fordham University Press, 2010), 7.

¹⁶ Collective98, “Revolt in Iran: The Feminist Resurrection and the Beginning of the End for the Regime,” *CrimethInc.*, September 28, 2022. See: <https://crimethinc.com/2022/09/28/revolt-in-iran-the-feminist-resurrection-and-the-beginning-of-the-end-for-the-regime?fbclid=IwAR1cgeouKmS0p8Ev1VEztbY3rQ6hvLUMv3dBpncbzLJxYcsiHRcWILGWomo>.

combined with a collective exodus¹⁷ from the mechanisms of value production, harbors the potential dissolution of the false oppositions (hard-liner/reformist) by which the Islamic Republic governs. Moreover, among the uprising's most promising (revolutionary) segments, we are witnessing a collective acknowledgement of having nothing in common with the existing regime and finding nothing to respect among the established powers that dominate the present world. And as with every people in transition, the movement can only find its model in itself and in the repressed experiences of revolutionary history.

2.

Even from the most cursory of doom scrolls, one gets the sense that there is something different about this series of protests. They are the expression of a fundamental break, an increasingly generalized rupture with the current state of affairs across the whole of Iran. For those who are witnessing these images from the US: imagine the burning-down of the Third Precinct in Minneapolis in response to the murder of George Floyd, but in every major city in all fifty states over the course of an entire month. This is the seriousness with which protestors have taken to the streets. What is more, the fundamental rupture that has been realized by the Zhina Uprising now opens onto the very possibility of giving a new order to the past, present, and future. Reflecting on the achievements of the revolutionary period inaugurated by the events of May '68, Maurice Blanchot asserted that May was indeed a revolution since it succeeded in putting an end to the compulsion of identifying with one's social function and subject position. Hence his conclusion that *Tomorrow was May*—i.e., that May '68's cardinal political virtue was the genesis of a really-existing possibility of an *other* organization of the past, present, and future.

Regarding the Zhina Uprising, and particularly with respect to its most revolutionary currents, we can say: *Tomorrow was Shahrivar 1401*.¹⁸ Thus far, the uprising has managed to avoid the farcical repetition of the past and the tragic repetition of failure, and has managed to clearly delineate a semblance of a future that still remains sanctioned by the current regime. It is not the future that redeems the past and present, it is only in the present that the past and the future can take on a different meaning. The present is the temporal form of action, of decision, such that what is now being decided is the status and meaning of the past and the future ("time is out of joint"). Moreover, it seems that any articulation of an *other* future-time proceeds by actualizing the unrealized potentials of the anti-monarchical revolution of 1979, of the forty-three years of the Iranian women's movement, and of the decades-long struggle of Kurdish women against double oppression. This is found in Shahrivar's poetics of slogans. These slogans negate the present Islamic Republic and envision the future: "The Islamic Republic, we don't want it, we don't want it," "Neither East nor West, Universal Freedom,"¹⁹ "Woman, life, freedom," "We don't want a king, we don't want a leader, we don't want bad, we don't want worse," "Death to the oppressor, whether he is a king or a leader," "Kurdistan, the graveyard of fascists," "Kurdistan, the eyes and light of Iran."

¹⁷ Blanchot on the biblical story of Exodus: "Everything can be found there: liberation from slavery, wandering in the desert, waiting for writing, that is, for legislative writing, of which one always falls short ... finally, the necessity of dying without completing the work, without attaining the Promised Land, which ... is always hoped for and thus already given ... The vocation of the (committed) writer is not to consider himself a prophet or a messiah but to save the place of the one who will come, to preserve absence from all usurpation, and also to maintain the immemorial memory that reminds us that we were slaves, that even liberated we remain and will remain slaves as long as others remain so, that there is thus no freedom (to put it too simply) except for others and through others." Blanchot, "Refusing the Established Order," in *Political Writings: 1953–1993*, 118.

¹⁸ Shahrivar, the sixth month of the Solar Hijri calendar, the official calendar of Iran, is the name of the month that the protests started.

¹⁹ A revision of the 1979 slogan "Neither East nor West, The Islamic Republic," which was shouted in the context of the Cold War.

Notable among the various promising signs coming from this people-in-exodus are the improvised and transient moments of nonproductive aesthetic expenditure: the sheer volumes of music and video clips, photographs, graffiti, designs, and slogans that continue to be produced, that belong to the war of appearances playing out in the streets, and that function as the semantic partisans of that uniquely communist thirst for abolition—the abolition of the state and private property. Other signs of the formation of new forms of collectivity can be seen in the contagious quality of this exodus: the spread of bold individual actions such as ignoring the authority of the police, burning headscarves, removing and waving headscarves, and closing roads and streets with blockades that double as communal meeting points while others gather on the roofs of residential complexes to announce that death himself may soon be coming to greet Ali Khamenei. Collective rituals are performances that not only violate the intended daily performance of the system but also disrupt its mechanisms. In other words, they are an expression of the suspension of the subject and the suspension of the subjectification mechanisms of the established order; at the same time, they juxtapose bodies in a new relationship. What we see before us is no longer the ruinous heap of the past but so many seeds of redemption.

3.

With the intensification of the revolutionary movement in Iran, Ali Khamenei's supporters have started praising "Father" on their social media accounts. "Here I am, Khamenei" (لیبک یا خامنه‌ای) and "Father, security, peace" have become their hashtags. The essence of this moral identification is the oedipal father-son relationship between the leader and his subjects. The patriarchy of the government in Iran is effectively tied to the patriarchy of the nuclear family. This relationship is stable to the extent that it does not punish fathers' filicide (especially visible in the case of honor killings), thereby maintaining the father's authority. It is not without reason that from the beginning of the Zhina Uprising, the "kind father of the nation" was targeted with "Death to Khamenei" and many other slogans. Given the way that paternal power is delegated to his agents—the police, the army, the judicial system, and the executive system—not recognizing their authority is a clear expression of not recognizing the father's authority.

In 1919, Marxist psychoanalyst Paul Federn, a former student of Freud, analyzed the implications of the symbolic "fatherlessness" of societies that had gone through a revolution or an overthrow of a monarchy. He explained how cursing and insulting the leader and his family and humiliating them were forms of negation in the revolutionary process that unfolded in empires such as Russia and Germany—similar to how disaffected sons may verbally treat their father. Insulting the Iranian supreme leader, sometimes with nasty and sexist curses, has been a constant sign of the collective profanation of the leader's transcendent and divine position in the Islamic Republic. For Federn, the death of the father has a positive meaning: it opens a space for "brotherly" bonds and the formation of new collectivities, which the Marxist psychoanalyst explains with the example of *councils*. In other words, with the disappearance of the oedipal relationship between the leader and his subjects, a place opens up for new social relationships and new collective forms. As Deleuze and Guattari wrote, "The revolutionary is the first to have the right to say: 'Oedipus? Never heard of it.'"²⁰ It is this nonrecognition of patriarchal authority that has become a widespread phenomenon. The new generation in Iran has shown that it is not interested in oedipal servitude to the government: young people have gone on strike in schools, thrown education ministry officials out of schools, attacked the police, turned around the framed pictures of the "Fathers of the Nation" (Khomeini and Khamenei) that hang on classroom walls, and torn out and burned the same pictures from the beginning of textbooks.

²⁰ *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 95.

Revolutionary fatherlessness maintains a specific relation to questions of “leadership.” On the one hand, the term “leaderless movement” is reductive. In every gathering and action and local organization, there are local leaders. On the other hand, one must consider the great advantages of this so-called lack of leadership. No individual face or person will be able to replace the collective face of the heterogeneous people who lead the path of revolution. With this absence of a single leader, both foreign imperial powers and regional actors are left without any immediate means of hijacking the struggle by courting individual figures and entering into secret negotiations in order to pursue their own interests in some future Iran. Moreover, the emphasis on local leadership and the collective face of the movement’s leadership in general progressively eliminates the risk of selecting any leader/father from outside of Iran, such as American conservatism’s favored comprador, the crown-prince of the deposed Shah.

Postscript on the Evin Prison Fires

In the wake of the Evin Prison fire, an account of the first weeks of the Zhina Uprising now serves as an uncanny reminder of what comes next:

The experience of the street suspends thought about death, and this is what creates fear for observers: Seeing people who are ready to die ... We have been liberated from thinking about death. We have left death behind us, in the intimacy of encountering our fears and running ahead of them in the warmth of the body.²¹

While the movement and the rest of the world wait for nonstate media reports to identify the true causes behind the Evin Prison fires, its cumulative effect was immediately clear to those who were present and to the revolutionaries mourning in the diaspora: a ruthless strategy of reinspiring fear in the heart of the uprising. If the regime was indeed behind this attempted massacre, then it had intended to reveal its endgame: torturing the living with unimaginable suffering and the production of untold deaths. This strategy is, however, the oldest story of that particularly despotic unity that is the state, for whom the threat of death is the means by which it seeks to subjugate and govern a free, no-longer-governable people who think of nothing less than of death, and whose struggle is itself a meditation on life. As Spinoza wrote:

The supreme mystery of despotism, its prop and stay, is to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which they must be held in check, so that they will fight for their servitude as if for salvation, and count it no shame, but the highest honor, to spend their blood and their lives for the glorification of one man.²²

Whatever happens next, this much is certain: to mobilize from a position of fear is the trap that has just been laid for the movement, which it must avoid lest the collectives and forms of self-organization that have appeared over the past month lapse into a semblance of struggle, wholly concerned with how to keep from dying such that life becomes a form of death worship. It is by threats of death that the Islamic Republic seeks to persuade the Uprising to fight for its slavery as if it were its freedom. But just ask anyone who has been in the streets. It is not so easy to undo the process by which the people have crossed over to the other side of fear, for “a free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life, not of death.”²³

²¹ L, “Figuring a Women’s Revolution: Bodies Interacting with their Images,” *Jadaliyya*, October 5, 2022. See: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44479/Figuring-a-Women%E2%80%99s-Revolution-Bodies-Interacting-with-their-Images>.

²² Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, in *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Hackett, 2002), 389–90.

²³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, EIVP67, in *Complete Works*, 355.

Jin, Jiyan, Azadi!