Prominent among the many democratic impulses unleashed by the Occupy Movement has been the desire to challenge dominant narratives of the world in which we live, narratives that not only justify the power of the 1%, but that systematically direct our attention away from structural inequality towards other loci of worry, hatred and fear. Constant speculation about Iran's nuclear ambitions, or about the likelihood of war with Iran, functions precisely in this way, perpetuating imperial and Islamophobic notions of “us” and “them.” Replacing the Soviet enemy in the contemporary cultural and political lexicon, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is constituted as the antithesis of America, a repository of the most menacing traditional Orientalist tropes combined with the most terrifying modern nuclear threat. In order to counter such pervasive representations, Western journalists occasionally travel to Iran and compile evidence of friendly Iranians who look to the US as a model to emulate or as a force that might intervene on their behalf.

This limited and skewed framework has contributed to profound ignorance about Iranian society among the American populace. Among progressives, it has also led to a healthy skepticism, marked by a desire to challenge stereotypes and oppose US aggression towards Iran. This is the context in which many Occupy Wall Street activists learned that their movement had been embraced by the “Iranian people,” who apparently held multiple rallies in Tehran in support of OWS. Photos from these rallies were posted on both of the major OWS Facebook pages, which, at the time of this writing, have together received over a thousand “Likes” combined. Hundreds of comments express a lively debate over whether the rallies were orchestrated by the Iranian government or by the C.I.A, and whether the images were faked entirely or reflect earnest expressions of solidarity. A few postings are less speculative, injecting knowledge about the internal politics of Iranian society into the conversation.

In fact, the pro-OWS rallies in Tehran were organized by student members and supporters of the Basij, the paramilitary organization largely responsible for the brutal and ongoing crackdown on the Iranian democracy movement that erupted in 2009. The Basij have become cheerleaders for OWS, launching a website in Persian called “Young Supporters of Wall Street Movement” that reports on OWS, and which features, without a hint of irony, video of police attacks on demonstrators in New York and other American cities. The official state media has also been full of condemnation of US police repression. Fars News Agency reported that Friday prayer leader Ayatollah Jannati decried the use of “heavy-handed tactics” against demonstrators, chiding the US, “You treat your people harshly, you should know that people can’t be treated by force.”

Indeed, the most powerful figures in the Iranian state, including Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have relished the opportunity to highlight America’s violent treatment of its own citizens. Doing so allows them to shift the spotlight away from the war they are waging on all forms of dissent inside Iran and to respond to accusations of human rights violations by pointing the finger back at the US. In early October 2011, General Masoud Jazayeri of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards celebrated the long awaited “American Spring” and predicted that, “[a] revolution and a comprehensive movement against corruption in the US is in the making. The last phase will be the collapse of the Western capitalist system.”

For American leftists unfamiliar with the historical roots and contemporary agenda that underlie such rhetoric, it is all too easy to take these statements at face value. An OWS supporter, blogging on DailyKos, called Jazayeri’s speech a “wonderful development” and went on to write, “No longer can our corporate media hide the truth that the rest of the world knows—the American capitalist system is an abomination and we could learn a thing or two from the countries that understand social justice.” What this blogger and other OWS activists in the US may not understand is that, for Khamenei, Jazayeri and the Basij students the “collapse of the Western capitalist system” heralds the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
Republic capitalist system. This message is often conveyed in ways that may not be entirely legible to Western audience.

As one demonstrator at the pro-OWS rally in Tehran, Ramin Shamsaii, told the state-run Tehran Times, “real democracy only realized under the umbrella of religious democracy.” In the context of internal Iranian politics, such sentiments are expressions of allegiance to the IRI.

The DailyKos blog post and the many Facebook comments applauding the Basiji rallies are indicative of a larger confusion about how OWS activists and the broader progressive community in the US should relate to the Iranian government, a to that catchall category “the Iranian people.” This article unpacks the roots of this confusion while also clarifying the political stakes of the Iranian government’s vocal support for OWS. Three case studies in which activists affiliated with the Occupy movement attempted to show solidarity with Iran illustrate the difficulties involved in negotiating competing state discourses that of the IRI and that of the US. Indeed the dominance of these discourses, even in shaping the world-view of dissidents, can obscure one of the most critical features indexed by the political project of solidarity, namely that it works most effectively as a subaltern practice of challenging oppression from below.

The first case study examines what happens when grassroots activists from the US attempt to forge solidarity “from above,” thus bypassing reflection on the privileged position they occupy in relation to Iranian activists. Feminist scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal and Ella Shohat, have argued that effective transnational movement: always operate across unequal sites of power; they can challenge some forms of difference while reinforcing others at the same time. Differences of place, history, and access to resources must be understood and negotiated as a complex of relations that do not preclude but inform political activity. As David Featherstone, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and others have shown, solidarity is a creative and transformative process through which new forms of identification and organization and new meanings of the universal are brought into existence. The second and third case studies illustrate the inventiveness of solidarity as a subject- and world-making project that emerges from place-based struggles seeking out transnational relationships.

From the first General Assembly at Zuccotti Park, OWS activists were quite conscious that the historical contingency of the occupation created new possibilities for subaltern connections. But while a grassroots and horizontal approach to linking local-level struggles around the world has been a founding principle of OWS, the movement’s approach to existing state-level formations has been far less clear. The Iranian context raises a special set of challenges to horizontalism. While OWS has been explicit in the inspiration it has taken from the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, from grassroots movements in Madrid and in Wisconsin, the Green Movement has been largely absent from this genealogy. This cannot simply be the result of short attention spans or a consequence of the fact that the Green Movement has been repressed the time being and is not immediately visible on CNN. The fact is that, for an activist critical of the US government and corporations, it is relatively politically straightforward to oppose US-backed dictators like Mubarak and Ben Ali. It is far more complicated to think through ways of opposing the aggressive targeting of Iran by Western nations and Israel while also critiquing the IRI, as a consistent and ethical social justice politics would require. Such a politics can only emerge from serious discussions about Iranian history and the internal dynamics of Iranian society. In addition, it is not easy to foster affiliations between people who are supposed to be on opposite sides of a cultural, political and military conflict. As the first case shows, acts of transnational solidarity that do not begin with a rejection of this opposition, and a reconfiguration of alliances from the bottom up, run the risk of reinforcing reactionary forms of nationalism both in the US and Iran.

Case 1. “Opportunity of a Lifetime”: A Cautionary Tale

In late February of 2012, four New York City professors accepted invitations to attend a conference on OWS held at Tehran University. Two first-hand accounts published about this trip dramatically illustrate many potential pitfalls of exacting transnational solidarity. They also reveal how difficult it can be, even for American activists invested in counter-hegemon
The Islamic Republic of Iran Loves OWS: Is This What Solidarity Looks like? 

http://what-democracy-looks-like.com/the-islamic-republic-of-iran-love...

...and non-hierarchical ideologies, to think and act outside of them. While it might seem as if there is an inherent correlation between actions intended to counter negative representations of Iran at a time of increasing US belligerence and actions intended to show solidarity with the Iranian people, this case study troubles such axiomatic logic.

Jack Hammond's self-reflective essay in the journal Societies Without Borders, "Notes from the Field: An American Sociologist in Iran," explicitly links these two impulses as if they are one: "By going to Iran," he writes, "I might demonstrate my solidarity with the Iranian people in the face of possible aggression." 16 Heather Gautney expresses a similar sentiment in her essay posted on CNN's Global Public Square blog, "A Wall Street Occupier in Tehran." She strives to counter assumptions about Iranians' anti-American sentiment in the mainstream corporate media by reporting, "faculty members repeatedly talked about Iranian students' desires to know America, study in its universities, and experience its unique culture." 17 Her essay emphasizes the "human moments" shared with a graduate student chaperoning her tour of Tehran and leaves the reader with the conclusion, in the words of her husband who also made the journey, "We can't go to war with this country. We just can't." 18

What complicates such laudable anti-war sentiments, however, is that the US-based professors also chose, knowingly or not, to participate in an ongoing IRI propaganda production starring OWS. The title and theme of the conference they attended was "The Great Awakening," which referred to the IRI's claim that the Arab Spring, and now OWS, was inspired by the 1979 Iranian revolution. The conference itself was organized and attended by faculty and graduate students aligned with the Basij militia, which is financed by the government and which has hosted many similar conferences on campuses around the country since OWS began. Facing a massive internal crisis of legitimacy brought on by the Green movement government repression and corruption, and worsening economic crisis the IRI is desperate to project itself regionally and internationally as the alternative to Western hegemony. In this vein, the IRI champions the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and denounces the crackdown on the majority Shi'a uprising in Bahrain, but resolutely backs Syrian President Bashar-al-Assad. 19 When thousands of ordinary Iranians used the IRI's stated support for the Tunisia and Egyptian uprisings as a chance to express their own desires for democratic change, many were beaten and arrested. 20 In this context, the desire to be in solidarity with the Iranian people requires more than mere opposition to US-Israeli aggressionespecially from professor-activists associated with OWS. Solidarity demands accountability to subaltern voices and histories.[21] To stand in solidarity with ordinary Iranians requires a commitment to principles of horizontalism that do not stop at national borders or subsume themselves within official state discourses. 21 The Iranian people have understood their struggle for self-determination as one against internal autocracy and foreign intervention two recurring themes in literary and political writing in Iran for at least a century. Opposing one while giving cover to the other falls short of the capaciousness of solidarity, defined by David Featherstone as, "a relation forged through political struggle that seeks to challenge forms of oppression." 22 Of course, this is no simple process, and Featherstone rightly acknowledges that solidarity has its "dark sides," the potential to reinforce forms of power and privilege rather than undermine them. 23

In Gautney's account of her trip, it is important to ask what subaltern voices are silenced by her efforts to bring into representation the hospitality she received from her hosts. For example, her Iranian tour guide takes her to the home of Ayatollah Khomeini's daughter, where she receives a lesson in the official state narrative of the 1979 revolution. The version she is told, however, conveniently elides the ways in which Khomeini's faction ultimately organized to crush strikes and demonstrations, transforming a popular revolution against despotism and imperialism into a new kind of police state. Accomplishing this task necessitated the virtual liquidation of the left, and the violent defeat of the feminist movement. 24 The official story Gauntey references in her essay, Khomeini is not a skilful politician who consolidated a new state capitalist elite, but a wise father who, "waited patiently for a popular awakening." 25 Gautney acknowledges that the Iranian revolution, like many others, "also opened the door to autocracy," but doesn't mention that Khomeini personified that autocracy. 26 Instead, her essay recapitulates the conference theme by making the connection between the state's interpretation of the 1979 revolution and OWS. Learning that Khomeini couched his actions in, "a framework of Arrogance versus The Oppressed," she writes, "I thought of OWS. The 1 Percent is not just a statistic. It is a concept that speaks to..."
the arrogance of power.”

The “arrogance of power” would aptly characterize the behavior of the Basij, who act with utter impunity to terrorize ordinary Iranians into submission. The American professors’ hosts have turned Tehran University and other campuses into sites of deadly struggle, attempting to physically stamp out any independent student organization or voice. The student movement has been one of the strongest grassroots forces in Iranian society over the last twenty years, helping to initiate the reform era of President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). In the aftermath of the disputed June 12, 2009 presidential elections, students were at the forefront of the mass uprising that shook the government to its core, dubbed the “Green movement” for the color protestors wore to proclaim their democratic aspirations. Millions of people across socio-economic classes and geographical regions participated in the demonstrations, making them the largest since the revolution. The Basij provided security forces with shock troops that helped to drive the Green movement off the streets, off the campus and underground. A favorite Basij tactic reserved for campuses has been to attack dormitories, use them as sniper posts, and throw dissident students out of dormitory windows. According to a “Joint Statement on the Right to Education and Academic Freedom in Iran,” signed by human rights organizations and Iranian diaspora student groups, more than 60 student dissidents have been imprisoned in Iran since 2009, over 250 were convicted, and 32 remain in prison at the time of this writing. Two years after the uprising, the crackdown continued. In 2011, 80 students were arrested, 67 received prison sentences, 120 were expelled from university, and more than 100 were injured or killed by security forces or the Basij. Despite this, some faculty and students persist in organizing non-state-sponsored discussions of OWS. These risky endeavors. When Professor Fariborz Raisdana spoke at the University of Tabriz about the connection between the “99%” in the US and in Iran, and went so far as to link the Iranian state’s subsidy cuts and privatization of public resources to broader neoliberal economic trends, he was arrested and sentenced to one year in prison.

It was a battle-scarred Tehran University, dominated by the forces of reaction and repression, haunted by the voices that have been silenced and banished, which received the OWS professors. Jack Hammond’s essay explains that he was aware of these conditions before he went, having been informed by Iranian scholars and activists he consulted with at a conference at a university “completely aligned with the regime.” He also consulted with a member of Raha Iranian Feminist Collective, a New York City-based diasporic solidarity group, which advised him against accepting the invitation. Hammond summarizes this perspective in his essay: “Don’t go: you will be giving aid and comfort to the regime and your words and presence will be manipulated.” In contrast, he points to other friends who told him, “Go: Americans must stand in solidarity with the Iranian people at this time of escalating threat even though we condemn the government’s brutality and repression.” What is not clear from his account of this latter viewpoint is how participating in a conference at a university “completely aligned with the regime” is an act of solidarity with the Iranian people. This is simply asserted as if self-evident. And it is the advice that best suits Hammond’s own desires. As he explains with frank honesty, “Admittedly my decision was in part self-serving. I was eager to see a new part of the world—I had never been to any Muslim country before.”

Gaunteny describes her process of deciding whether or not to accept the invitation in a similar vein. She is, “haunted by news reports of detained journalists and Green revolutionaries,” wonders if she will be, “captured by the fashion police” reference to the security forces who harass and arrest women and men for Islamic dress code violations and worries if her husband, “will bear a deeper brunt, as a Jew.” She then invokes the authority of her “Iranian friends and academic colleagues,” who tell her, “the media … always overblows Iran. Much of the mythology is based on lies. You will absolutely love the people.” Despite the fact that going to Iran feels to Gautney like, “jumping off a cliff,” she seems to share Hammond’s feeling, declaring the chance to see Iran, “an opportunity of a lifetime.”

Solidarity aside, the fact that the desire to travel to one of the few countries not immediately accessible to US-passport holders proves irresistible raises fundamental questions: Are there occasions when the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for
American to visit Iran should be refused? Is the presence of American scholars and activists in Iran inherently an act of solidarity or can it sometimes make matters worse for progressive Iranians? An important historical precedent suggests the latter and interrupts official IRI and US narratives of the 1979 revolution. The Iranian feminist movement emerged as a grassroots formation in the midst of the revolution, and women were among the earliest and fiercest critics of Khomeini’s efforts to consolidate a new theocratic government. At a crucial moment in their struggle, a contingent of North American and European feminists, including Kate Millet, arrived in Tehran, assuming their presence would be an obvious asset to the Iranian women’s cause. The paternalism of these feminists towards their Muslim “sisters” collided with the actual political realities of women’s liberation in Iran with disastrous results. Khomeini’s conservative religious forces used statements made by Millet and others to label Iranian feminists “agents of Western imperialism” and unleashed thugs to suppress the marches with violence.

There is no evidence that the presence of the four New York professors led to direct acts of repression against Iranian dissidents in 2012. But these scholar-activists lent their names and reputations to a state engaged in draconian retrenchment of universities and academic discourse, thereby tacitly abetting official efforts to shore up the legitimacy of the state in a time of crisis. They did this in the name of OWS and under the sign of solidarity. Hammond, at least, reported on his efforts to disrupt the IRI’s party line and, “draw connections between Occupy and movements in Iran, Syria, and Russia.” He writes, “I felt I could in good conscience present my own views, not tailored to what my Iranian hosts might want me to say.” But this goal proves much harder to implement in practice. In Hammond’s detailed account, he delivers the paper he wrote about OWS and the use of social media. He explains, “to salve my conscience, I added that moving that used the social networking media in Iran, Russia, and Syria had been severely repressed.”

What happens next, according to Hammond’s narrative, is a fascinating exercise in futility. His sincere words fall, not on deaf ears, but on the ears of those who actively supported repressing social networking media and the Green movement itself. His audience simply changes the subject, shifting back to the central question of whether or not, “Occupy Wall Street meant the decline of the West.” Strangely, given the warnings he had solicited from Abrahamian, Raha and others, he writes, “I was not sure what motivated the question, but I answered that in my opinion, on the contrary, it affirmed so important western values of democracy and responsive government.” Leaving aside the problem of equating democratic and responsive government with “western values,” Hammond appears to be put on the defensive by the structuring narrative of the conference. He explains that he did “not challenge the Iranian government more boldly,” because, “it would have been an abuse of [his] invitation.” This is quite true, and speaks volumes about Hammond’s compromised position as a guest of the government. However, it would have mattered little if he had gone further in his critique. Indeed, he relents an attempt to censor his paper before publishing it in the conference-affiliated *World Studies Quarterly*. An editor demanded that he remove all references to the Green movement, which he refuses.

To be clear, the conference was not open to the public and all media coverage of it was controlled by state-run outlets, which simply used the professors to tell the story they intended to tell. Press TV, the IRI’s English-language outlet, reported on the conference under the headline: “Experts: Occupy Wall Street likely to topple US administration.” According to the reporter, the scholars from New York predicted that, “in the long run, [Occupy Wall Street] can lead to the collapse of the government.” Here “government” does not mean the Obama administration—the IRI was not rooting for a Mitt Romney victory in November but the entire American capitalist system. Seeming uncomfortable with this discourse, Alex Vitale, Professor of Sociology at Brooklyn College, emphasized an electoral focus for OWS. “I think many people are waiting to see what effect it might have on this year’s national elections,” Vitale told Press TV. Gautney added, “[t]he Occupy Movement is entering more into social institutions and trying to pressure politicians.” The fact that these quotes were selectively chosen and manipulated to conform to IRI propaganda confirms the advice Hammond did not heed: “your word and presence will be manipulated.” The reformist and electoral tendencies these quotes emphasize also indicate a difficulty in translating the more radical elements of Occupy’s critique into a space where anti-capitalist discourse has been so thoroughly co-opted by the state.
When Hammond returns to the US, he writes about being, "assaulted on both flanks, accused of being a terrorist sympathizer for the very fact of having gone to Iran, and censored by the Iranians for not toeing the official line." All four professors were accused by an Iranian exile aligned with neoconservative efforts at regime change in Iran of giving cover to a dictatorship. Hammond argues that his experience of running afoul of both the pro-US and pro-IRI positions leads him to argue that he, "took a coherent position in the trip and its aftermath." It also leads him to support the position advocated by New York City-based Iranian transnational solidarity groups. He affirms the need to, "defend a regime against foreign aggression while at the same time denouncing its treatment of its own citizens." His essay ends with a very different kind of solidarity: he attends an anti-sanctions protest organized by Havaar: Iranian Initiative Against War, Sanctions, an State Repression, joining grassroots activists to "walk [this] difficult line.

The conclusions Hammond drew from his trip enabled him to participate in solidarity actions with Iranian diasporic dissidents. However, it is important to point out that this perspective was available to him before he went. The participation of these four professors in the OWS conference was not an act of solidarity with the Iranian people. Solidarity between social justice activists in the US and in Iran cannot flow through either state’s power structures. Missing from the account of deliberations over whether or not to go to Iran is a political analysis of the relationship between these states and grassroots struggles for democracy and social justice. This is a fundamentally different argument than that made by neoconservatives in the US who, “would extend the ‘No Contact Policy’ of the State Department that bars US diplomats from communicating with their Iranian counterparts to the academic arena.” There is no call for an academic boycott coming from democracy advocates inside or outside Iran; calling for such a legal ban once again would position the US government, rather than struggles from below, as the guardians of democracy in Iran. Imperial aspirations and domestic autocracy may be at war with each other but they have the same enemy: the self-determination of millions of dissatisfied Iranians and Americans. The following two cases attempt to chart back roads of communication between activists in the US and in Iran that bypass official, state-sanctioned routes. In doing so, they offer alternative glimpses of the kinds of horizontalism that solidarity demands.

Case 2. “Iranians Occupy Wall Street!”

On Sunday, October 23, 2011, when OWS was arguably at the height of its popularity to date, approximately twenty Iranians and Iranian Americans gathered for the first “Green” solidarity convergence at Zuccotti Park. Several activists used the occasion to create Persian-language media that could challenge the IRI’s version of OWS, and break out of the US-vs.-Iran binary that had left many pro-democracy Iranians stuck “in the middle.” The occupation at Zuccotti Park opened up a new political location at the intersection of runaway corporate greed and popular democracy, where new ways of talking about Iran became possible. The small Iranian assembly made connections between the economic and political crises in Iran. Although the Green Movement has primarily issued political demands—calling for free elections, an end to dictatorship, and the release of political prisoners—soaring unemployment and inflation also undergird popular frustration with the government. New rounds of sanctions imposed by the Obama administration merge with domestic policies and further undermine the economic viability of millions of Iranians. Sahar S., a feminist active in Iran and New York, talked about how the IRI has used its control over the economy to privatize key sectors (most recently, the oil industry), selling them off to entities run by the Revolutionary Guards, the Basij and other pro-government factions. At the same time, the government has cut subsidies for gas and food, thereby eroding the major economic gains of the revolution and concentrating wealth into fewer hands—a trend Sahar has dubbed, “neoliberalism without the liberalism.”

In the DIY (do it yourself) spirit of Occupy, three of the Iranian activists assembled that day, Saara, Sadra and Ali M., also videotaped a twelve-minute documentary in Persian that was posted to YouTube, attempting to make OWS accessible and appealing to people in Iran. Saara and Sadra are activists who left Iran to study in the US. Ali M. had been part of OWS almost from the first day of the occupation, eventually becoming active in the Education and Empowerment working group.
Saara operates the camera while Sadra describes the twenty-four-hour nature of the protest and the political significance of staging the occupation in the geographical heart of global financial power. Then he narrates footage of tents, the kitchen area, the comfort station and the library, emphasizing elements that suit Iranian cultural sensibilities: attention to hygiene and cleanliness, and the charitable provision of free food and clothing to all who need them. At the comfort station, a blind woman volunteer explains that the purpose of the station is to ensure people "stay clean and stay comfortable." She ends her brief remarks with "God Bless." The camera cuts to Sadra who then translates what the woman has said into Persian. He smiles when he arrives at her parting words, aware of how well they will resonate with his audience, and translates them into the common Persian expression: "Khoda ham rah shoma bashe o hamishe movafagh bashid." (May God be with you and may you always be successful.)

In the middle of this sequence about the organization of the park, a striking image appears without comment. The only reference to the Green uprising in the entire video, it is a close-up shot of a poster made by the artist "lmnop" in the first weeks of OWS (see figure 3). The poster shows a young woman from the waist up, one fist raised, a look of defiance on her face. The words "rise up" appear above her head and the bottom right corner reads, "we are the 99%." The image is black and white—a photograph turned into a stencil turned into a painting—so it is easy to miss the headscarf draped around the woman's head and the thin band around her wrist that was once the color green. In its altered form, this poster of an Iranian woman protesting on a Tehran street in 2009 has transcended its original context. According to the artist's blog, "It became iconic for some people in the movement. It's gone a wee bit viral, I suppose. I heard tell of it being spotted in South America and Iran." The same poster would later become the flyer for the May 1, 2012 "general strike," a rare example of when an image of an Iranian woman became a symbol of active resistance, rather than passive victimhood. Of course, the decontextualization of the image meant that this critique of Orientalism was legible only to those who recognized the original photograph. The erasure of specificity also erased the possibility that the many thousands of people who saw this poster could begin to think about what commonalities might exist between OWS and the Green Movement. Saara lets the camera linger on this image, hopeful that it may inspire such thoughts among an Iranian audience.

The rest of the video is devoted to contesting multiple discourses about OWS circulating inside Iran and in the diaspora. Sadra addresses the aversion to political parties and to the left that exists among some pro-democracy Iranians. Sadra asks Ali if it is only socialists or anarchists or other leftist extremists who have gathered in the park, or if it is "the people who have gathered to talk to each other with a range of different political ideas?" The term "the people" is a privileged one in this discourse, lending credibility to a movement that would be undermined by explicit political affiliations. Ali explains that all kinds of people participate in Occupy, "from the homeless to university professors." OWS has "no center, no leader," he continues, obliquely referencing opposition to the Supreme Leader in Iran. The problem in the US, he explains for those Iranians who do not think Americans have serious problems when compared to their own, is that there has been a "marriage between government and private corporations" that has resulted in a "lack of transparency." Then he counters IRI's claims that OWS is rejecting liberal democracy in favor of Islam: "What people want, within the framework of democracy, what they want is change . . . so the needs of citizens are prioritized over corporations. This is a very natural desire for each citizen, a democratic society." He ends invoking the "very natural desire" he knows millions of Iranians feel as well.

This rebuttal to IRI representations of OWS is so central to the political message of the video that Sadra proceeds to reiterate the point even more explicitly: "Nobody is saying that we don't want freedom of expression or freedom of assembly. No one is saying we are against this regime." He tries to explain the types of issues that are generating protests: "For example," he says, "there is a law for individual freedom of expression, that anyone can come and speak their mind. The problem is that some people are misusing this law and say we have to give that same right to corporations . . . Freedom of expression for large corporations is very dangerous."

Here it is worth pausing to reflect on the narrative Sadra and Ali have constructed about OWS. They present Occupy as...
free of ideology and concerned with reining in corporate excess and protecting the already existing rights of American citizens. The selective nature of this representation is guided by their sense of what will resonate with their audience in Iran. This presumed audience has lived with the traumatic results of an initially popular revolution; because leftist discourses, such as that of revolution, anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism, have long been staples of IRI propaganda, many people adopt a reactive stance which favors the West. Sadra and Ali do not try to articulate the more systemic critiques and radical aspirations of OWS, perhaps because the Persian words they would have to use would make them sound too much like a Press TV reporter and further undermine the possibility of solidarity between pro-democracy Iran and OWS. For very different reasons, then, the New York professors, in their visit to Tehran, and these Iranian activists, their video for Iranians, focused on the more limited and reformist aspects of OWS, together pointing to a real difficulty in translating the revolutionary and counter-cultural elements of the movement.

Case 3. “People to People, Bone to Bone, Flesh to Flesh”

Another initiative launched by “Green” activists who have recently left Iran has focused on creating individual, personal connections between OWS and the Iranian resistance. Called “Campaign 99,” it was intended to be more than just a website featuring ninety-nine messages of solidarity sent from Occupiers to political prisoners in Iran. By collecting these messages from people at occupations in twelve cities across seven countries, this group of Iranian activists hoped to intervene in the polarization between OWS and the Iranian opposition. The Campaign provided Occupiers with a chance to learn about individual dissidents in Iran from other activists and to identify with people in conditions of struggle that are neither identical nor entirely unrelated to their own. This was accomplished through the medium of personal narrative, opening up a set of affective affiliations that might otherwise have been foreclosed by the rigid geopolitical frameworks surrounding Iran and the US. The results gesture towards alternative forms of universalism that do not reproduce imperial racial hierarchies.

As the Campaign's point person in New York City, Ali Abdi spent ten to twelve hours a day in Zuccotti Park motivated by two goals. First, he explained, he wanted “to use the global attention given to OWS for the benefit of Iranian prisoners, since many of my friends back home are in prison.” Second, he hoped “to prevent the Iranian government from hijacking OWS for its own propaganda.” If Occupiers were suddenly speaking out about imprisoned Iranian democracy activists, naming them and holding up their photographs, he reasoned, this might make it harder for the IRI to claim OWS for its own lineage. Abdi was better positioned than most exiles to attempt such ambitious goals. Previously involved with the student, feminist, and Green movements in Iran, he has become a high-profile and controversial figure among Iranian activists in diaspora. Through his networks in Iran, he realized that many pro-democracy activists “dismissed OWS as hippies, silly, serious.” He felt Campaign 99 could help change this perception.

Abdi opened new routes of communication between Americans and Iranians on the front lines of the opposition in each country¾between Zuccotti Park, Evin, and other prisons in Iran. He asked individuals what brought them to the occupation and then tried to connect their stories to those of Iranian political prisoners, whose pictures he carried with him. “Once I talked to a theater director,” Abdi said, “and she told me about the kind of problems theater has in this country, how capitalism has polluted art. I thought of an actress in Iran who was in jail at that time [number 26].” Abdi then shared the story of the prisoner he had selected with the OWS activist. “Many started crying, lost control of their emotions,” he said. Afterwards, using a marker, poster board and the photograph Abdi provided, “they started making a poster themselves. I got this idea from OWS, that each person makes their own poster and sends their own message.” Finally, he asked each Occupier “to send a message as if you were looking into the eyes of that prisoner and talking to them, send a message to Evin prison.”

The results are a seven-minute video and online gallery of photographs of sixty-one OWS activists, each holding a poste
tribute to a different Iranian prisoner. In the online gallery, clicking on a still image leads three English texts to appear on the left side of the page, opposite their Persian translations: a first-person narrative of the Occupier explaining why he or she got involved, a third-person narrative Abdi wrote about a particular prisoner’s life and current situation, and a transcription of the Occupier’s message of solidarity. The video opens with Abdi’s voice, narrating in Persian with English subtitles: “The Occupy Wall Street Movement is the voice of the people, just like our Green Movement is the voice of the people. One day we thought, ‘How can we bring these people closer together?’” The video is a series of edited segments in which different OWS activists make their poster tributes and then hold them silently in front of the camera, while their personalized messages of solidarity are delivered as voiceovers. The lack of synchronization between the video and audio creates the striking visual effect of a silent protest, an act of bearing witness. Some Occupiers gaze into the camera intently, as if dramatizing a symbolic refusal to look away from injustice. The audio hovers over the scene, disembodied and free to travel, perhaps all the way to a prison cell in Iran.

There is a notable lack of pity in these voiceovers; more often Abdi captured expressions of care and gratitude. A homeless Iraq War veteran named Paul, who joined the military to avoid prison, speaks to Shabnam Madadzadeh, who is serving a five-year sentence for participating in a student protest and hunger strike. “Hello Shabnam,” he says, “I just heard your story. I’m in New York City protesting against government oppression. Your strength, your dignity, your honor, the way that you stood by your students to stand up for what you believe in, should have been heroic. You should never have been locked up for that.” Paul situates himself as a protester against state repression in the US before offering his words of respect and admiration for Shabnam. Perhaps because of his personal experience with the American criminal justice system and as a dissenter in the military, he does not sound in the least surprised to hear another example of the terrible things governments do to people who resist. He never mentions Islam or the Islamic Republic. The sound of his voice conveys sadness mixed with a sense of shared, and therefore subdued, outrage, as if he’s talking to a peer. The context of the occupation—the fact that each Occupier interviewed by Abdi is actively engaged in resisting inequality and oppression in the US—seems to interrupt the usual hierarchical and categorical assumptions about freedom in the US versus in Iran, even when real differences are acknowledged. Solidarity here is a process emanating from first-hand experiences of struggle, one that is capable of bringing new subjectivities and affiliations into being.

Abdi thought carefully about how to construct the conditions for Campaign 99. Rather than introducing each Iranian activist with an explicitly political story, Abdi simply said, “this person is in jail for speaking up his mind, for standing beside prisoners.” He explained, “I talked about their children or sick relatives, or their age, tried to make them real human beings and not just icons.” Abdi speculated that this approach, “and maybe the nature of OWS itself, which insists on people-to-people solidarity all the time,” impacted the language and emotional register of the solidarity messages. By circumventing the dominant frameworks that link Iran, Islam, nuclear weapons, and terrorism, he artificially removed many potential sites of confusion and conflict from his interactions with activists in OWS and made the plight of Iranian prisoners into something almost apolitical. Nonetheless, Campaign 99 serves as an interesting experiment in how OWS made it possible for new ways of talking and thinking about Iran and Iranians to emerge. The act of resisting and critiquing the lack of democracy in American society created a context in which Occupiers could feel a personal connection to Iranians who are in jail for wanting to make their society more democratic too.

This was, of course, just what Abdi was hoping for. “People to people, bone to bone, flesh to flesh solidarity,” he said, reflecting on what he had documented. “Although the forms of oppression are different [in the US and Iran],” Abdi theorizes “the nature of oppression and resistance exist along a continuum. Here people would talk against capitalism and I would interpret that to despotism. I wanted to show the similarities and see if people could talk across such distances.” While some Green Movement activists have condemned comparisons with OWS—Iranian dissidents risk lengthy prison sentences, torture, and execution, while Occupiers are quickly released from jail—Abdi defends his approach. “Of course, I’m not saying the two cases are the same, I’m just showing how the continuum exists,” he said.
Abdi’s intention was always to try to get the messages of solidarity he and his collaborators gathered into the hands of Iranian prisoners. He posted the translated transcripts of the Occupiers’ messages on Facebook, where friends and family members of Iranian prisoners read them. A few were able to deliver the translations during prison visits and told Abdi that the messages helped to boost morale. Only once, so far, was a prisoner able to send a message back. Too often acts of transnational solidarity between people in the US and Iran flow only in one direction, from “West” to “East,” and those on the receiving end rarely get to respond. But Zia Nabavi wrote his own message to Alan, an OWS activist who expressed his solidarity from Zuccotti Park. Nabavi is a student activist who went on hunger strike to protest the kidnapping of another student by security forces and was sent to jail for several months. After his release, he and other dissident students organized the “Council for Defending Education Rights” to protest the fact that they had been banned from continuing their studies. Three days into the June 2009 uprising, Nabavi was arrested, placed in solitary confinement and eventually sentenced to ten years in a prison, nine hundred miles away from his family.

Alan’s message expresses his appreciation of Nabavi’s “leadership” and says, “we obviously have to learn from your courage and commitment . . . You are truly a hero.” Nabavi replies that, while he “was quite delighted to receive” Alan’s message, “the condition I’m in is not heroic; and the fact that I should spend ten years in prison for defending the right to education sounds like a stupid joke or a nightmare to me.” He also expresses uncertainty about what conditions Alan faces and explains he cannot return a message of solidarity without more knowledge of the situation. This speaks to a weakness and imbalance in the dialogue: Nabavi did not have access to Alan’s personal narrative of why he joined OWS narrative that describes carrying $160,000 in student debt, his arrest in a police raid of the occupation, and the fact that feels he is fighting a “class war.” In the absence of any personal information about Alan, Nabavi is understandably wary of the notion that they are involved in a common struggle. He writes, “In Iran many like me are fighting for gaining simple rights like the right to choose, the right to freedom of speech or the right to education, and these rights come natural to you or you might even be taking them for granted.” Still he does not foreclose the possibility of solidarity, one that Alan articulated the “hope [that] someday we can meet and shake hands as free men.” Hesitant to embrace this image, Nabavi ends his note with more cautious optimism. “Right now, while I’m writing this message, I’m at least certain that there are sparks of this freedom inside every relationship [that] is empty of fear and prejudice; and this is what invites me to the absolute necessity of a connection with people. Again I’m grateful for your kind message.” For Abdi, the fact that Nabavi went to the trouble of responding at all is significant. “This was not an easy thing to do,” he said. “A person must really believe that human-to-human solidarity is important to do this.”

Conclusion: What Horizontalism Demands

Another story traveled from a prison cell in Iran to Occupy Oakland, where Sarah Shourd, Shane Bauer, and Josh Fattal addressed the crowd in mid-October 2011. Imprisoned in Evin after accidentally hiking across the Iraq-Iran border, these three peace activists refused to demonize Iran or romanticize the “Iranian people” or the IRI. “We sincerely hope for the freedom of other political prisoners and other unjustly imprisoned people in America and Iran,” Bauer told reporters upon release. For him, America and Iran are not on opposite sides of a freedom vs. repression binary but are linked by the existence of political prisoners in both countries and by state practices that routinely imprison people “unjustly.” For these three American activists, the direct experience of state repression in Iran gave them a sense of connection and accountability to other prisoners. This connection found immediate expression in Fattal’s decision to join a hunger strike solidarity with thousands of California prisoners. Subsequently, Mother Jones published Bauer’s investigation into conditions at California’s Pelican Bay State Prison: “Solitary in Iran Nearly Broke Me. Then I Went Inside America’s Prisons.” The title alone shatters American nationalist and imperial binaries between freedom and unfreedom, and Bauer’s moving reporting illustrates precisely the continuum Abdi described above.

Such actions illustrate new possibilities for thinking about state repression and the militarization of every day life in Iran e
in the US, not as categorically different phenomena, but in relationship to one another. In fact, US state discourses about Iran, and IRI discourses about the US, co-produce one another in ways that police the public sphere and repress dissent both countries. The US accuses Iran of sponsoring terrorism and the IRI denounces US imperialism; both charges are always intended to ally citizens with their respective state interests. This mutually constituting discourse does not, of course, alter the definite hierarchy that exists between the two nations, which makes it possible for the US to impose sanctions on Iran, to decry human rights violations there, and even to launch military strikes without the threat of comparable retaliation. In the face of this power imbalance, activists must investigate the relationship between capitalism and authoritarianism in order to locate new sites of affiliation and mutual struggle. A hopeful gesture in this direction can I read in a statement from Havaar: Iranian Initiative Against War, Sanctions, and State Repression encouraging others to join a march against systemic police harassment of young black and Latino men: "As Iranians and allies, we are intimately familiar with racist and repressive police practices pervasive in Iran, and we stand in solidarity with our fellow New Yorkers who face the brunt of such violence and humiliation. From Tehran to New York and beyond, people have a right to the street." 79

OWS has facilitated new connections like these; by popularizing notions of global struggle and solidarity, and tying them to local organizing imperatives, OWS has generated potential for destabilizing racist and Orientalist narratives about Iran. A Campaign 99 demonstrated, a new subject position was brought into being through the figure of the "occupier," a victim of capitalism who has decided to engage in active, collective resistance. This decision was made with the awareness that there were other people also resisting in other parts of the country and world. In this context, there was a loosening of imperial identifications with America as a privileged space of liberty, and with the corresponding mission to spread that liberty to those deemed less free. In the space created, it was even possible to imagine that people in a nation as demonized as Iran were nonetheless engaging in a similar struggle. However, the affective affiliations Abdi captured with his experiment, while refreshing in comparison to the dominant ways Americans tend to view Iran, can only be a starting point. As the first case study shows, there is no shortcut to meaningful solidarity. For progressives in the US, there is no substitute for the time and commitment required to learn about each other’s histories, conditions of struggle, and aspirations. The depth of confusion surrounding Iran cannot be underestimated, and mainstream Western discourse offers a poverty of choices: those who do not want to accept Iranian people as their enemy often end up allying with the IRI. If OWS contributes to a long-term shift in the underlying premise of activism between people in the US and people in Iran away from pity, presumptions about the exemplary role of the West, and illusions in the Iranian state this will be a significant achievement.

At the same time, some of the practices within OWS have also created new hurdles that are not easily overcome. The policy of total openness, wherein anyone can show up to any OWS meeting with equal ability to influence decisions, has enabled a handful of IRI supporters in New York City to block a resolution on Iran in the OWS anti-war working group. In addition, the general suspicion of and aversion to putting forth demands, on the basis of the belief that demands always work to legitimize power and never to undermine it, also forecloses certain concrete forms of transnational solidarity. For example, several groups of activists in Cairo issued a call “to the Occupy/Decolonize movements & other solidarity movements” for an International Day to Defend the Egyptian Revolution, which called on Occupiers to demand the release of Egyptian political prisoners and for the US to stop supporting the ruling junta. 80 These demands force the question of how activists in the US might organize against US government policies that undermine the liberation struggles of others. It is hard to contemplate solidarity between activists in the US and in Iran without the former “demanding” that the US government lift the sanctions, end its war threats, and cease its interference the internal affairs of Iranian society. Such demands are crucial, not only in order to oppose US imperial policies carried in the name of American citizens, but also because America’s constant interference is used by the IRI to cudgel pro-democracy activists with accusations of working for US interests. Actively demanding that the US and Iran free all political prisoners, for example, would make it harder for the IRI to coopt OWS and would undermine representations of I
as one vast prison that must be liberated by the West. How to make demands that facilitate solidarity among resistance struggles while also delegitimizing the particular power structures that entrench inequality in each location remains a formidable challenge. This is the difficulty built into the practice of transnational solidarity as an effective political and geographic relation.

The futures of democracy in the US and Iran are interdependent; while US imperialism continues to undermine progressive movements around the world, the domestic front of the “war on terror” has militarized US society, cut social programs, and strengthened racism and nationalism. The democratic movement in Iran has been driven underground and into exile, with prisoners fast becoming the most prominent symbols of ongoing resistance. Even with an informed political perspective, and a righteous set of demands, these are very difficult conditions under which to attempt to build horizontal relationships between American and Iranian grassroots. Many real obstacles, such as language barriers, censorship, surveillance, sanctions, travel bans, and the blunt force of state power, cannot be resolved solely through a battle of ideas. At the same time, the hegemony of polarizing state discourses emanating from Washington and Tehran can turn efforts to reject one side into an embrace of the other. Any hope of developing strategies and tactics that can begin to tackle these challenges must rely on clarity and knowledge about the internal contradictions in Iranian society. A steadfast commitment to social justice and sense of accountability to those who are also engaged in popular resistance can be our guides, even when the only proof of possibility is a hand-written note from a lonely prison cell.

Footnotes:

1. The web site of the Hoover Institute’s Iran Democracy Project advocates this view: “Today the Iron Curtain has been removed, but another one, equally as unbending, statist, antidemocratic, and oblivious to individual rights has emerged.” The threat is characterized as a “vociferous interpretation of Islam” that is “more nefarious, amorphous, and disparate than Soviet Union ideology.” The IRI is seen as the embodiment of this new threat, but there is nothing new about the proscribed “solution”: “The Iran Democracy Project at the Hoover Institution is part of the Hoover initiative “Diminishing Collectivism and Evolving Democratic Capitalism” http://www.hoover.org/research/institutional-initiatives/diminishing-collectivism), an area of study that includes analysis and documentation of how totalitarian societies transition to freedom, representative government, and private enterprise.” See http://www.hoover.org/research/projects-and-programs/iran-democracy-project/about. ↩


cannot uproot it. Ultimately, it will grow so that it will bring down the capitalist system and the West.”


13. Ibid.


15. The New York General Assembly’s “Declaration of the Occupation” illustrates this vagueness. It asserts that corporations run governments and then lists a series of injustices for which “they”—corporations—are responsible. The declaration ends by promising support to all communities that take action in the “spirit of direct democracy.” Governments or states are decentered here, both in the diagnosis of the problem and in the gestures towards solutions. See Occupy Wall Street Journal, Issue 1, page 3.


18. Ibid.


22. Ibid., 5.

23. Ibid., 12.


26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.


Freedom in Iran,” http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2012/05/joint-statement/.

33. As a member of this collective, the author was among those who contributed to Raha’s collective response that this trip would be in the service of the Iranian state. This feedback was then passed on to Hammond by the Raha member he had initially contacted.
34. Hammond, “Notes From the Field: An American Sociologist in Iran,” 365. Hammond accurately represents the opinions of Raha members regarding his invitation to attend the conference in Tehran.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Naghibi, Rethinking Global Sisterhood, 95.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 366.
46. See the Social Text Periscope dossier on “Social Networking in Iran.” http://www.socialtextjournal.org/periscope/social-networking-and-iran/.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 370-371.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 369.
59. Ibid.
60. “Beheshteh Farshneshani: A Neocon Upstart Attacks Academic Freedom and Iranian American Views.”
61. This is an outlandish proposition given the history of the CIA coup against Iranian democracy in 1953 and the unwavering US support for the Shah’s 25-year dictatorship. The Iranian exile neocon position has no relationship to the politics discussed here.
62. According to Ali Abdi, an activist from Iran now studying in the US, “When they see OWS posting a picture of the Basiji protestors, they think OWS is sympathizer of IRI. Both sides reinforce each other . . . For those of us in the middle,” Abdi said, referring to Iranians who do not support either the US or the IRI, “we are under incredible pressure.” All quotes from Ali Abdi are from a Skype interview with the author, June 2, 2012.
63. All quotes from Sadra and Ali M. are from their video. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4rhnYY3OU.
Translation by author.


67. Ibid.

68. All quotes from Occupiers are taken from http://www.99campaign.com/.


71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid.


77. Ibid.


79. Havaar e-mail announcement, June 16, 2012.

80. See Judith Butler, “So What Are the Demands?” Tidal, Issue 2 (March 2012): 8–11. For example, she argues that if a “company, corporation, or state is not considered a legitimate partner for negotiation, then . . . to appeal to that authority to satisfy the demand would be one way of attributing legitimacy to that authority” (10).