CHAPTER 2
An Emancipated Worker

Before the 1979 Revolution, Iranian intellectuals believed that they possessed the emancipatory knowledge the working class and the exploited required in their struggle for emancipation. Al-e Ahmad and Shariati were among the most enthusiastic intellectuals who tried to bring their possessed knowledge to the working class and the exploited. Their lectures, books, and pamphlets were the means through which they attempted to produce knowledge about the socio-cultural and political situation in Iran and bring it to the people who were entrapped in the situation. Others, such as the founders of the Mojahedin and Fadaiyan, believed that the Shah’s regime was aware of the potential influence of the intellectuals on the working class and the poor. Thus, it would not let the intellectuals mingle with the masses and working class. Iranian intellectuals started the armed uprisings to make themselves known to the working class. Regardless of their methods, the Iranian intellectuals thought that the oppressed people needed their knowledge, since they lacked the intellectual capacity to educate themselves. The oppressed classes needed them because they possessed both an explanation of the social reality and had a vision for the future. What they disregarded was the intellectual capacity of the individual members of the oppressed classes to understand and change their own situation.

Quentin Skinner describes an intellectual historian as “a kind of archeologist, bringing buried intellectual treasure back to the surface, dusting it down and enabling us to reconsider what we think of it.”¹ The intellectual historian should go beyond the impact of the classical texts of political theory on political debates in a particular political situation.² He or she should investigate “the changing political language in which societies talk to themselves.”³ Such a historical approach reveals what

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is possible to do in politics depends on what is possible to legitimize. What is possible to legitimize depends on the “the existing normative principles” that motivate and rationalize particular courses of action. Skinner’s explanation of the relations between political thinking and actions misses important elements of the political language: the way ordinary people’s thoughts and actions enrich a political language and contribute to spectacular political actions and movements. It is not an easy task to compare the impacts of classical texts with the thoughts and actions of ordinary people, since there are little or no traces of them in the past. In the previous chapter, I followed Skinner’s idea of intellectual history as an attempt to demonstrate that present ideas and values are results of historical contingencies and human choices at different times. However, I try to go beyond Skinner’s concerns in this and subsequent chapters. Whereas Skinner’s interests remain limited to the political and intellectual elites, I shall investigate the contribution of the ordinary people to the Iranian political language.

Ordinary people have participated in all significant political events in Iran, and their conception of politics has made enormous impacts on those events since the late nineteenth century. They have always been part of the political struggles for freedom and equality, while at the same time defending the independence of the Iranian body politic. They have never studied neo-Roman theorists, who argued that an independent will of the body politic is expressed in “the rules that regulate its bodily movement.” They have always been thinking that the Iranian body politic “must be enacted with the consent of all its citizens, the members of the body politics as a whole.” Otherwise, “body politics will be moved to act by the will of others than its own, and will to that degree be deprived of its liberty.” Since the constitutional revolution of 1906 to 1909, Iranians have defended the dependence of the movements of the Iranian body politic on the will of its members. In the constitutional revolution, they aimed to liberate the movement of the Iranian body politic from the will of the Qajar Kings. In the movement for oil nationalization, they sought to liberate the will of the Iranian body politic from the will of an external power, namely Britain. In the 1979 Revolution, they aimed to liberate the will of the Iranian body politic from the tyranny of the Shah and his Western supporters. The Reform and the Green movements were the fourth and fifth popular attempts aimed to liberate the Iranian body politic from the dictatorship of conservative forces which governed Iran. Without the intellectual and political contribution of the millions of ordinary people, these political movements would not become a reality. However, we have little knowledge of the way the everyday participants