

Orthogonal Illusions: Freedom, Equality, and the Quiet Fracture of the Diaspora

Iraj E. Ghoochani

This essay is written against a dangerous structural divergence — the one that operates unseen, unnamed, and therefore unthought.

What follows does not argue *for* differentiation; it argues that this differentiation already exists, not as ideology but as structure. Ignoring it does not heal it. It only turns it into illusion. The central claim is simple and uncomfortable: without acknowledging the depth of a problem, we are condemned to repeat it.

This is precisely the mechanism by which *freedom* and *equality* are repeatedly placed in the same register, chanted as if they were harmonizable, while their relation is in fact orthogonal. The illusion of harmony does not unite; it disorients. It produces moral certainty where structural thinking is required, and it invites false resolutions — leaders, symbols, shortcuts, etc.

The same applies to the Iranian condition today, especially in diaspora. What appears as unity often rests on suspended contradictions. What appears as disagreement is often the surface expression of deeper, neglected geometries: institutional, historical, embodied.

This essay is an attempt to make those geometries visible — not to fracture a collective, but to prevent it from being governed by illusions that quietly reproduce the very problems they claim to oppose.

Clarity here is not separation.
It is the precondition of any non-illusory togetherness.

The recent demonstrations of Iranians in the streets of Paris were immediately framed as unity: unity against repression, unity against the Islamic Republic, unity around freedom. This reflex is understandable, but it is also misleading. Demonstrations do not reveal unity; they temporarily suspend difference. What they show is not agreement, but synchronization. Bodies move together for a moment, slogans overlap, voices merge — and then: the differences reappear, often sharper than before.



The cry of thousands in Paris: “Neither monarchy, nor leadership — freedom and equality.” On the evening of Saturday, 27 Dey, thousands took to the streets of Paris in an unprecedented march in solidarity with the struggles of the people of Iran for freedom, equality, and the right to self-determination. They condemned the Islamic Republic’s bloody repression of protesters, any attempt to reproduce authoritarianism from above, and all forms of foreign military intervention. [فریاد هزاران نفر در پاریس: نه سلطنت، نه رهبری؛ آزادی](#)

[«و برابری»](#) This slogan, however, does not resolve a contradiction, but exposes it. Freedom and equality are spoken here in one breath, even as their tension remains unfinished — held together here not as synthesis, but as a shared demand that refuses imposed authority.

Paris was not simply a stage of protest; it was a site where several Iranian diasporas crossed without becoming one. But this plurality is not a weakness. Recognizing our structural differences is precisely what can unite us beyond illusion.

The Iran to come will not be homogeneous. It will be a patchwork family, as it always has been — held together not by sameness, but by the conscious acknowledgment of this very difference.

As Sigmund Freud once wrote:

Wo Es war, soll Ich werden — Where It was, I shall come to be.

Only by bringing what remained unthought into awareness can a collective act without illusion.

The most telling slogan of the demonstration was also the most paradoxical: *freedom and equality*. It sounded familiar, almost natural, as if these two words belonged together by necessity. They do not. They never have.

This tension is not an Iranian problem. It is already inscribed at the origin of modern politics, most explicitly in the French Revolution itself. *Liberté* and *égalité* were not discovered as complementary principles; they were placed side by side as a wager. The wager failed, not because of bad faith, but because the two concepts obey different logics.

Orthogonal Illusions: Ghoochani 1/1

Freedom differentiates. Equality normalizes.

If I am free to act, to train my body, to invest my time, to take risks, to insist on my desire, the result is not sameness but divergence. Muscles grow unevenly. Capital accumulates asymmetrically. Confidence concentrates. Even language begins to separate winners from losers. Freedom amplifies difference.

Equality, on the other hand, works only by limiting freedom. It redistributes, corrects, interrupts accumulation. It slows down some trajectories so others can catch up.

These two movements are not opposed; they are orthogonal. Like two axes at right angles, movement along one does not advance the other. There is no point at which both can be maximized simultaneously. Any politics that pretends otherwise is not idealistic; it is evasive.¹

European societies, historically and institutionally, have leaned toward equality. Not perfectly, not consistently, but decisively enough to shape everyday life: welfare systems, labor protections, public space, even the aesthetics of modesty and restraint. North American societies have leaned toward freedom: entrepreneurial risk, personal optimization, tolerance of inequality as outcome, admiration for visible success. Again, not absolutely — but structurally.

These orientations do not remain abstract. They sediment into bodies.

Posture, dress, relation to time, relation to work, relation to technology, relation to tradition — all of these become subtly but persistently different. One does not need ideology to produce this divergence; institutions do it quietly.

Iranian migration enters this field already uneven. Migrants do not arrive as neutral subjects waiting to be shaped. They arrive with class histories, educational capital, gendered experiences of authority, and long familiarity with both overt repression and informal hierarchy. Migration does not erase these differences. It gives them new coordinates.

Those who settle in Europe often find institutional recognition of demands for equality: legal protections, social safety nets, slower but steadier integration. Those who settle in North America encounter a system that rewards assertion, speed, differentiation — and punishes hesitation without apology. Over time, these environments do not merely host Iranian lives; they reorganize them.

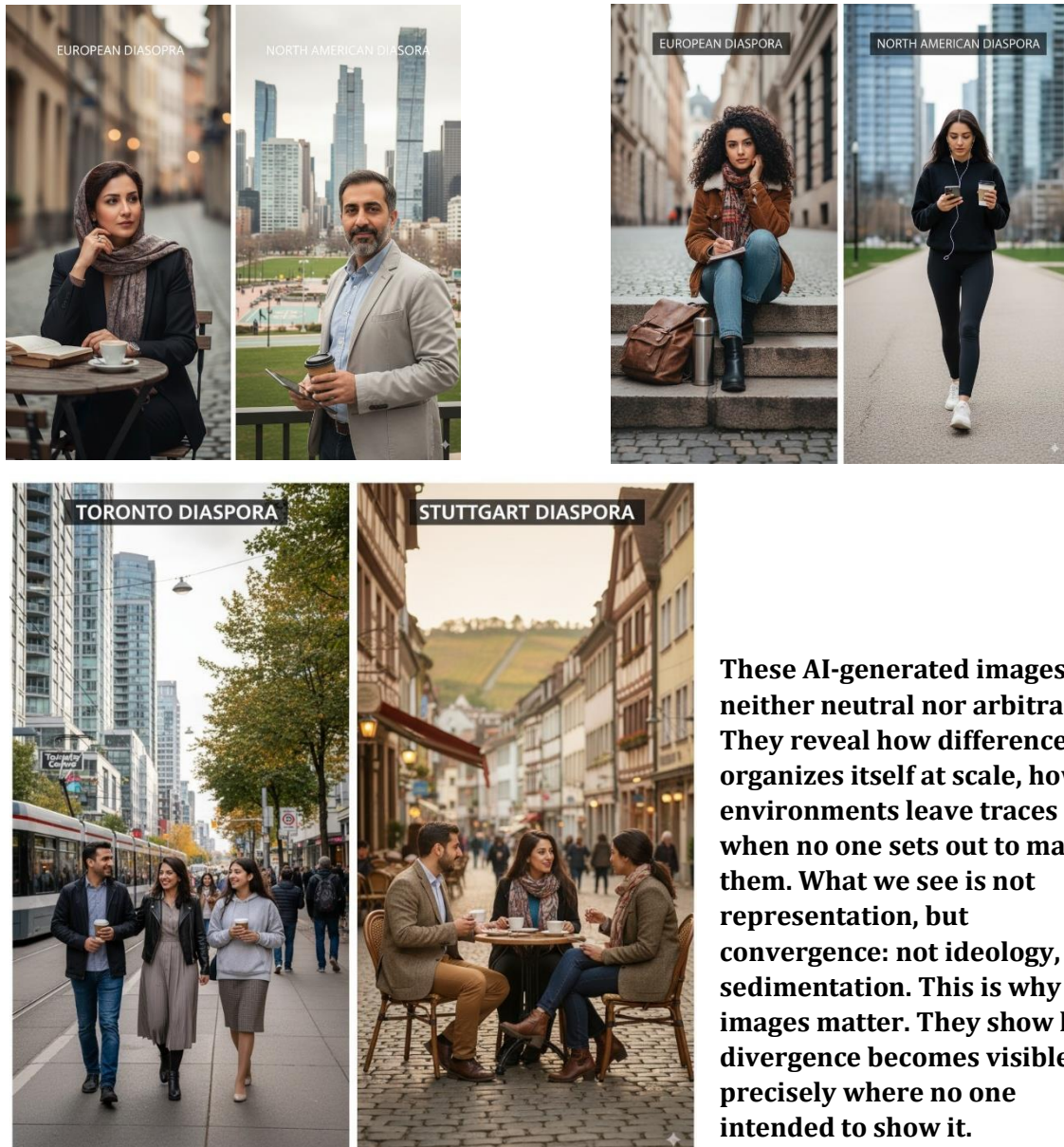
The result is not one diaspora, but several trajectories moving away from one another while still sharing a name.

¹ The philosophical background of this tension between freedom and equality is addressed in the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher: The revolutionary triad *liberté, égalité, fraternité* is often treated as a harmonious chord. Philosophically, it is not. It is a system under strain, closer to an unstable equilibrium than a moral synthesis. Let us isolate the first two terms. *Liberty* names the capacity to act according to one's own determination. *Equality* names the requirement that outcomes, rights, or positions not diverge beyond an accepted threshold. Taken together, they generate a paradox that is not accidental but structural: The Asymmetry of Freedom. Freedom is differentiating by nature. The moment freedom is exercised, it produces divergence. If I am free to train my body—freely, intensely, obsessively— then the result is non-equality. In early German liberal thought—most clearly in Friedrich Schleiermacher—this tension is visible. Schleiermacher does not resolve the contradiction; he *localizes* it. For him, freedom belongs to the singular interiority of the subject (*Individualität*), while equality belongs to the ethical life of the community (*Sittlichkeit*). The problem begins the moment one tries to map interior freedom directly onto social space. Freedom is qualitative. Equality is quantitative. They do not live in the same register.

This divergence becomes visible not only in politics, but in the banalities of everyday life. The AI-generated images make this visible in an unexpected way. They are not documentary, and precisely for that reason they are revealing. These images are not created by intention but by aggregation. They synthesize what circulates, what is repeated, what becomes legible as “European professional,” “North American urban,” “diaspora subject.”

What appears in them is not truth, but probability. And probability has a structure. In statistics, this structure is formalized as the *law of large numbers*: when individual guesses are aggregated in sufficient quantity, error does not disappear, but it stabilizes. The collective, without coordination, often approximates better than any single intention — as in the familiar experiment where a crowd estimates the number of jellies in a jar.

AI-generated images operate according to the same principle. They do not “know” reality; they converge toward what has been most frequently seen, tagged, circulated, and reproduced. What emerges is not accuracy, but *statistical legibility* — the visual average of a culture’s expectations.



These AI-generated images are neither neutral nor arbitrary. They reveal how difference organizes itself at scale, how environments leave traces even when no one sets out to mark them. What we see is not representation, but convergence: not ideology, but sedimentation. This is why the images matter. They show how divergence becomes visible precisely where no one intended to show it.

The European images gravitate toward interiors, slower gestures, layered clothing, density of objects, historical texture. The North American images gravitate toward glass, openness, mobility, fitness-oriented bodies, constant relation to devices. No one ordered this difference. It emerged ethno-topologically: These orientations do not describe moral preferences or cultural essences, but institutional gravitational fields into which lives are gradually drawn. This is not bias to be dismissed. It is data speaking without commentary.

To call this “proof” would be naive. But to dismiss it as meaningless would be equally naive. These images show how *difference* and *distinction* reproduces itself even when we claim universality. Even when we chant the same slogans.

The Paris demonstrations thus appear in a different light. They were not false. They were suspended. For a moment, the contradiction between freedom and equality was held in abeyance, compressed into a chant, carried by bodies that would soon return to very different institutional worlds.

There is no moral failure in this. There is only structure.

The danger begins when this structure is denied — when unity is fetishized, when difference is treated as betrayal, when one axis is declared superior and the other illegitimate. That is the moment when movements begin searching for leaders, fathers, saviors — figures who promise to resolve a contradiction that cannot be resolved.

A more honest politics would accept the impossibility and work within it: freedom knowing it fractures equality; equality knowing it limits freedom. No synthesis, no harmony, no final word.

Only vigilance.

What follows from this is uncomfortable, and that is precisely why it is rarely stated explicitly.

When Iranians in Paris chant freedom and equality together, they are not only addressing Tehran. They are also — unknowingly, unwillingly — addressing each other. The chant travels across bodies that have already been shaped by different political geometries. It lands differently in someone whose daily life is mediated by European institutions than in someone formed by North American regimes of competition and self-optimization. The words are identical; their weight is not.

This is why the Iranian diaspora repeatedly experiences internal irritation that cannot be explained by ideology alone. The disagreements are often framed as political — reform versus revolution, left versus liberal, secular versus religious — but beneath these visible conflicts lies something more basic: incompatible expectations of what freedom *feels like* and what equality *costs*.

In European contexts, talking very grossly, equality is often experienced as protection. It arrives as limits placed on acceleration, as rules that slow things down, as procedures that feel cumbersome but safe. In North America, equality is often experienced as interference, as an obstacle to self-realization, as friction imposed on what is imagined as a natural right to differentiate oneself. Neither perception is wrong. Both are produced.

The Iranian who migrates into these systems does not merely adapt; they internalize these logics. Over time, they begin to evaluate others through them. What appears as irresponsibility to one looks like overregulation to another. What appears as ambition to one looks like aggression to another. These are not misunderstandings that can be clarified by dialogue. They are clashes of calibration.

This is why appeals to unity within the diaspora so often fail. Unity presupposes a shared metric. What exists instead are shared memories projected onto diverging futures. The past may still overlap — language, loss, revolution, exile — but the horizon does not.

Immigration sharpens this divergence because it removes the background noise that once concealed it. Inside Iran, inequality and unfreedom coexist so brutally that finer distinctions are drowned out. Outside, where at least one axis is partially stabilized, differences become audible. Freedom without equality sounds different than equality without freedom. Check the images again if you do not believe me.

The Paris demonstrations momentarily reassembled these dispersed subjects around a common negation: no dictatorship, no imposed authority, no return to imposed forms of sovereignty. Negation is easier than construction. It requires less agreement. But the moment the question shifts from what must end to what must begin, the orthogonality returns.

This is not a call for pessimism. It is a call for precision.

Diaspora politics that refuse to acknowledge this structural divergence end up oscillating between moralism, heroism and disappointment. They accuse each other of betrayal, privilege, naivety, radicalism — without recognizing that these accusations are often translations of deeper institutional differences. What one side experiences as ethical commitment, the other experiences as structural blindness.

If there is a task ahead, it is not to dissolve these differences but to map them. To recognize that Iranian political subjectivity is no longer singular, and that this multiplicity is not a weakness but a fact. The question is not how to unify it, but how to prevent its internal tensions from being hijacked by authoritarian fantasies — monarchic, charismatic, technocratic — that promise false reconciliation.

The danger is not division. The danger is the longing for a figure who claims to resolve it.

This is where the figure of leadership re-enters — not as ideology, but as symptom.

Whenever a contradiction cannot be lived, it demands a representative. When freedom and equality pull in different directions and no shared metric exists to negotiate their tension, the political imagination begins to search for a shortcut. Leadership appears precisely at this point, not as solution but as compression. A person, a name, a face is asked to carry what a structure refuses to reconcile.

This is why leadership returns even where it is explicitly rejected.

The chant “*no monarchy, no leadership*” is not naïve. It is defensive and symptomatic. It speaks from historical/hysterical knowledge. But negation alone does not dissolve the desire that produced the object in the first place. When difference intensifies, when expectations diverge, when coordination becomes difficult, leadership reappears as fantasy: someone who will decide where equality ends and freedom begins, someone who will bear responsibility for asymmetry so others can feel innocent.

In exile, this temptation is even stronger.

Inside Iran, power is experienced as suffocating presence. Outside, power becomes an absence — and absence is fertile ground for projection. The diaspora does not merely oppose authority; it imagines it. And imagination is less constrained by reality than memory.

What is often missed is that different diasporic environments generate different kinds of leadership fantasies. In European contexts, leadership tends to be imagined as *representative*: moral, symbolic, careful, embedded in procedure. In North American contexts, leadership is

more often imagined as *performative*: decisive, visible, efficient, indifferent to procedural slowness.

When these fantasies collide within a shared movement, conflict becomes inevitable. Each side accuses the other of authoritarianism, irresponsibility, elitism or populism — without realizing that they are accusing different answers to the same unresolved problem.

The paradox deepens: even movements organized against imposed authority begin reproducing hierarchical dynamics informally. The danger, then, is not leadership itself, but leadership without reflexivity — leadership that pretends to resolve a contradiction it merely covers. Iranian political history is rich in such moments. Each time, freedom was promised as outcome, equality as justification, and authority as instrument. Each time, the instrument outlived its mandate.

The diaspora is not immune to this repetition. If anything, distance amplifies it.

What would it mean to resist this cycle? Not by purifying slogans, not by policing language, not by insisting on unity — but by accepting that disagreement here is not moral failure but geometric necessity. By understanding that freedom and equality cannot be fused, only negotiated, and that negotiation requires time, slowness, and tolerance for frustration.

This is harder than following a leader. It offers no image, no shortcut, no catharsis.

But it is the only way not to repeat, abroad, the very structure that was rejected at home.

The maturity required now is not the maturity of consensus, but the maturity of coexistence without synthesis. To accept that Iranian political life outside Iran has already bifurcated — perhaps irreversibly — along the very axes it invokes most passionately. To stop treating this as a problem to be solved and begin treating it as a condition to be worked within.

This demands a shift in tone. Less moral accusation, more structural literacy. Less obsession with who speaks for whom, more attention to how environments shape what can be said at all. Less longing for figures who promise clarity, more tolerance for ambiguity that cannot be eliminated.

The diaspora will not become one. It will become legible to itself — or it will remain vulnerable to repetitions it believes it has escaped.

Paris offered no answers. It offered something rarer: a clear view of the problem.

To mistake that clarity for resolution would be the real failure.

Diasporic slogans that invoke freedom and equality together—without acknowledging their tension—inherit this unresolved structure. The danger is not contradiction itself; contradiction is productive. The danger is denial.

A politics that refuses to think this paradox ends up replacing it with: leaders, fathers, monarchs, or technocratic managers. Again, the more honest task is harder: to organize freedom knowing it will fracture equality, and to demand equality knowing it will limit freedom.

No reconciliation. Only vigilance on which all diasporic claims about freedom and equality must stand—or fall.