

Book Reviews

Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran

*'Ali Mirsepassi, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
xiv + 193 pages. Notes to p. 215. Bibl. to pages 223. Index to p. 227.*

This book examines the Islamic revolution of Iran and presents a cultural approach to analyzing the events that resulted in the collapse of the monarchical system and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The book contains seven chapters. An introductory chapter explores the genealogy of the western narrative of modernity and its dichotomizing representation of non-western cultures and societies. The author poses several questions in an attempt to provide a definition for modernity, and in the process explores the story of Iranian modernity. Is modernity a totalizing ideology grounded in European cultural and moral experience and incapable of understanding other cultures? Or, is it a mode of social and cultural experience of the present that is open to all forms of contemporary experiences and possibilities?

These questions are addressed in chapter 1, where Mirsepassi examines the process of development of the concept of modernity in the West. He analyzes some of the writings of such thinkers as Montesquieu, Hegel, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Marshall Berman, Jurgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, and more recent works by critics of modernity theories such as Edward Said, Arturo Escobar, and Timothy Mitchell. He demonstrates quite convincingly, how in the western conception of modernity, an "Oriental" other, passive, traditional, and irrational, is contrasted to the modern world of the West. At the depth of the discourse of modernity, he finds a hostility to non-western cultures that excludes them from the possibility of meaningful participation in the making of the modern world. He criticizes the western conception of modernity because it is Euro-centric and denies other cultures a positive role in the making of the modern world. These theories all share the belief that "they are objective, culturally neutral, and universally applicable to all societies." (pp. 6-9) Therefore, the core conception of modernity theory

stands in opposition to the cultural approach because culture is not an important issue on its agenda. In such a worldview, cultural and moral values, as well as religious beliefs, only represent aspects of a superstructure, masking the underlying empirical truth to be found in economic structures. If the materialist epistemology alone can provide the only objective truth, he concludes, modernity and development would naturally have difficulty appreciating a central role for culture in any social movement, theory, or practice. Therefore, it is in the ingrained, universalistic precepts of modernity to do violence to local culture. For this reason, local cultures become natural and effective axes for politicization in any society coming to terms with the universal-modernist scheme. (p. 11) Thus, he sees the West failed to understand, let alone predict, the Iranian revolution mainly because of its inability to understand and appreciate Iran's native culture. That is why the Iranian revolution came as a shocking surprise and shattered the ill-informed and arrogant presumptions nurtured by authorities in the West, because those assumptions were "all too well founded upon the entire discourse of modernity and development in the abstract and trans-historical form. We may say that with regard to that paradigm, *every exception was defied.*" (p. 9)

The development of the intellectual discourse on modernity in Iran and its impact on the social and political movements from the constitutional revolution of 1905-11 to the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 is discussed in chapter 2. Dr. Mirsepassi rightly rejects routine stereotyping and classification currents under the "*traditional-modern*" or "*Islamic-Western*" dichotomies. Instead, he suggests that a more useful approach must be adopted to explore Iranian efforts at *localizing* (reflexive) modernity within Iran's own contemporary cultural experiences and contexts." (p.55)

Mirsepassi divides the decades between 1905-1979 into three distinctive periods. These include a period of uncritical embrace of modernity as a western model designed to totally replace Iranian culture, followed by a shift to a leftist paradigm of modernity critiquing imperialism and capitalism, and finally, the turn toward Islamist discourses of authenticity. The first period coincides with the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11. Although many intellectuals of this period were deeply influenced by the ideas of the European Enlightenment, as Mirsepassi himself states, nonetheless, neither the culture nor politics of the Constitutional era nor its intellectuals were homogenous or monolithic. Therefore, not every

intellectual figure of this period was "directly influenced by the colonial British idea of modernity," nor were all so naive as to be the mirror image of a colonial administrator. Indeed, with a few exceptions, the idea of *Iraniyyat* and *Islamiyyat* were present and very much alive in the minds of many of those intellectuals.

Chapter 3 discusses the crisis of secularism and the rise of political Islam in the post-World War II period in Iran. The most important characteristics of this era were the emergence of numerous trade unions and political parties with different political and ideological orientations. While secular groups and parties, such as the Tudeh, have been examined in detail, surprisingly, Mirsepassi speaks of "the relative invisibility of religious politics" in this period. There is no discussion of religious parties, including such groups as the *Fida'yan-i Islam*, *Mujahidan-i Islam*, and religious activists like Ayatullah Kashani and Nawwab Safavi. These groups and individuals greatly influenced the course of secular politics and were as important as the National Front and the Tudeh Party. Was the assassination of a Prime Minister, a Court Minister, an alleged attempt on the life of the Shah, and struggle against Musaddiq's government by those groups a proof of their invisibility! A discussion of these groups and individuals is particularly relevant because of their reaction to modernization and opposition to modernity and their part in the demise of secular nationalism. Even more important were their activities after 1953, their participation in the Khomeini-led uprising of June 1963, their alliance with other religious forces, and their participation in the events that paved the way for the victory of the Islamic revolution of 1979.

Of particular importance in the contemporary history of Shi'ism are several attempts at reform initiated by the middle ranking *ulama* in Qum and Mashhad to assess and reorganize religious institutions and functions in light of the government's drive toward further modernization after the Coup d'Etat of 1953. When the Grand Ayatullah Sayyid Husayn Borujerdi, the sole *marja'i taqlid*, died in March 1961, there emerged a vacuum in the leadership of the Shi'ite community. The crisis over the selection of the *marja'* was particularly serious because the Shah favored the Najaf-based Ayatullah Mohsin Hakim while the clergy in Qum wanted to select one of their own and maintain Qum as the center of religious power. A series of discussions and seminars were initiated in Qum and its proceedings were later published under the title of *Bahthi dar barah-yi marja' iyyat wa rouhaniyyat* (Debates on the institution of *marja' iyyat* and the [Role of the Shi'ite] Clergy). The main concern of the seminar was to provide a

solution to end the crisis over *marja' iyyat*. The attempt was as much religious as it was political. Subsequent developments, the revolution, and the establishment of the Islamic government to "*uphold and enforce Islamic laws and practices*" all indicate that Mirsepassi's conclusion is not valid when he maintains that. It is more pertinent to describe the movement as a political reform movement which was trying to come to terms with modernity than a "traditionalist" movement to restore Islamic values in Iranian society." (pp.88). Also, there is no mention of another important movement in Mashhad, namely, *majma'i tafakkuri shi 'i* (The Society for Spreading Shi'i Thought), which survived until the revolution and was instrumental in promoting religious activities in Khurasan.

Chapter 3 also explores the formation of an autocratic state after the *Coup d'Etat* of 1953, the socio-psychological alienation of many Iranians in reaction to modernization, and finally, the transformation of Shi'i hierarchy and the construction of a new "*Islamic ideology*." The author maintains that the Shah's systematic suppression of secular opponents created a political vacuum. This vacuum enabled the emerging Islamic movement to articulate an alternative to the oppressive western model of modernization and paved the way for the clergy's leadership of the opposition movement.

By focusing on the careers, writings and activities of two contemporary intellectual figures, namely Jalal Al-i Ahmad and Dr. 'Ali Shari'ati, chapter 4 argues that political Islam is best interpreted as an attempt to reconfigure modernity. Both of these intellectuals, the author states, represent an Iranian, "local" image of Iranian culture in opposition to the "universal" West. They do so from within modernity, not from a "resurgence of ancient impulses" or "religious fanaticism." Al-i Ahmad was initially a secular, leftist essayist who had once been a member of the Tudeh Party and had left the party after being disillusioned with its capitulation to Soviet demands. He was not an Islamic scholar or reformer in any way or shape and never claimed to be one. He had limited knowledge about Islamic tradition and history, and possibly was not a practicing Muslim, as has been noted in the book. His "return" to Islam was, as Mirsepassi explains, a complicated political discourse that advocated modernity in the context of and in accordance with Iran's Islamic tradition. The author rightly calls his attitude toward Islam "Shi'i romanticism", an embodiment of the self-realization of a modern secular intellectual lost in the plight of modern life, (more) than a return to traditional Islam." (p. 105) Al-i Ahmad "appeared to understand

spirituality [i.e. religion] as limited to the human world, that is, in 'a secular' mode." (p.110)

Dr. Shari'ati, in contrast, was a religious person, came from a religious family background, considered himself a Shi'ite revolutionary, and intended to bring about radical change in Shi 'ism. His struggle was against the clergy's monopoly over Shi 'ism and their "*reactionary interpretation*" of Islam. He called theirs *Tashayyu'-i Safavi*, (i.e. Shi'ism of the Safavid kind) and intended to replace it with his "*pure, untainted, revolutionary Shi'ism*" which he called *Tashayyu'-i 'Alavi*, (i.e., Shi 'ism on the model of Imam 'Ali). Unlike Al-i Ahmad, he saw himself in the camp of the Islamists and not as an outsider. Yet, the tragic destiny of men like Shari'ati and Al-i Ahmad was that while they succeeded in attracting people's attention to the political and revolutionary character of Shi'ism and in mobilizing them, they were not able and qualified to lead them. They were caught between the hostility of the secular intellectuals and the mistrust of the clerical opposition leaders, and were pressed from both sides. (p. 110)

In contrast to Mirsepassi's assertion, modernist and reformist trends in Shi 'ism did not start with Al-i Ahmad or Shari'ati, nor did they end with their departure. One wonders why the decades between 1911-1941, which were crucial in terms of development of the concept of modernity and the Shi'i modernist movement, have been completely ignored. Any discussion of modern trends in Shi'ism in Iran is incomplete without dealing with the Reza Shah era and individual thinkers, clergy and non-clergy like Ayatullahs Shari 'at Sangalaji and Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani, and Ali Akbar Hakamizadah, Yadullah Sahabi, and Mehdi Bazargan, who preceded both Al-i Ahmad and Dr. Shari'ati. Three decades before Al-i Ahmad and Shari'ati, these men in fact attempted to present modernist views on Shi 'ism and show that Islam was compatible with modernity and the modern world.

Chapter 5 presents a discussion of a comparative study of the "discourse of authenticity" as a response to modernization by examining the works of German writers and philosophers in the 1920's, showing that the politicization of the "local" in Iran is not a unique occurrence. It is part of a pattern of response to modernity. Friedrich Nietzsche, Ernest Junger and Martin Heidegger receive particular attention as their works helped to shape the views of many Iranian intellectuals discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

In post-World War II Iran, the secular leftist movement started with the

establishment of the Iranian Tudeh Communist Party in 1941. In the 1960's and 1970's a younger generation of leftist groups emerged. They remained very small until 1978. The unfolding of the revolutionary process witnessed the rapid expansion of these groups. Chapter 6 deals with the main characteristics, ideological composition, and political behavior of the left during the period under review. Several tables provide important information about the age, sex, occupation, and affiliation of some of the leftist individuals killed in clashes with government forces in 1981-82. Mirsepassi's findings confirm those of other scholars (i.e. Sepehr Zabih, Ervand Abrahamian) that the left in Iran was composed primarily of male and female, urbanized, highly educated individuals recruited mostly from among modern middle and lower middle class elements. (pp. 162-173).

Finally, chapter 7 is the most interesting and original part of the book and deals with modernity in contemporary Iran. This chapter is based primarily on the observations the author made and interviews he conducted when, in 1995, he visited Iran after 16 years of living in the United States. His observations on this trip, and his interviews with many intellectuals of varying backgrounds and orientations about issues such as modernity and Islam, convinced him that: "Much has changed in the Iranian intellectual, and perhaps, public scene in the past decade." (pp. 181) Other visitors to Iran have also made similar observations. However, it is not clear how many people Mirsepassi interviewed to come up with this conclusion, and how representative of the society at large are the new "*Islamic mind*" and those two intellectuals whose names and opinions he presents in this chapter.

The book concludes with a discussion of the possibilities of pluralities in modernist narration, and the future of modernity in Iran and the potentials for dialogue with the modern world. The author finds the intellectual environment in Iran conducive for such a dialogue but places the responsibility for understanding the new environment in Iran on the West, which must find a new and broad definition for modernity, because the era of Euro-centered modernity has come to an end.

The most disturbing issue in this book, in the opinion of this reviewer, is that the author freely uses clichéd terms invented by the very same Euro-centered modernist scholars he is criticizing in the book; i.e. "*Islamic revival*", "*political Islam*", "*Islamic ideology*", "*Islamic fundamentalism*", "*Islamic fanaticism*" and the like. His treatment of Islam as a "*political ideology*" behaving like any other ideology in the course of revolution

is particularly disturbing. Ideologies are man-made tools. Their success or failure in the arena of political action is the judge of their authenticity. They are products of certain social and political situations and usually disappear as quickly as they appear. It is one thing to say that intellectuals like Al-i Ahmad and Shari 'ati tried to "ideologize" Islam to mobilize people, it is quite something else to see Islam as a "political ideology" *per se*, no matter how similar Islam's political behavior may be to an ideology.

It is regrettable that a prestigious publishing house like Cambridge University Press is so negligent in editing an important book like the one under review. The book is replete with misspelling of names and terms, errors in notes and citation of bibliography, some factual errors, mistranslation, and a strange transliteration system. While editors are to be blamed for some of these errors, for some others the author as well as readers and evaluators of the manuscript must be held responsible. For example, there are inconsistencies in the citation of names in the bibliography. Some authors' full first, middle, and last names are mentioned. For some others, only the last name and the initial of the first name are mentioned. Sometimes for the same author both forms have been used. (p. 219) Sometimes in a single page, a source is recited in its original Persian and its English translation as though they are two different sources. (p. 217). On occasion, acronyms and titles are taken as last names of authors where they were available. Confusion on compound names is particularly disturbing and misleading. For example, the author of *hayat-i yahya* (Yahya Dawlatabadi) is listed once as (Abadi) and on other occasions as (Dowlatabadi) Similarly, the author of the *tarikh-i inqilab-i mashrutah-yi iran* (Mahdi Malekzadah) is listed as Malek-Zadah in the text and Zadeh in the bibliography. (pp. 58, 223). The author of *fursat-i buzurg-i az dast raftah* (Muhammad Anwar Khomeh'i) is listed as Anva Khomeh'i on page 201 and as A. Khomeh'i on page 221. Jalal Al-i Ahmad, who occupies a chapter, is listed as Ahmad, J. Al-e in the bibliography. Ayatullah Taleqani's first name was Mahmud not Mohamad (pp. 227, 90, 85); Dawlatabadi was *one* of the leaders of the Constitutional revolution of 1906 and not "*its leader*." (p. 59) It was Ayatullah Aqa Sayyid Reza Zanjani, not his younger brother Aqa Sayyid Abu al-fazl (p. 85) who was a liberal political activist and an ally of Musaddiq. The list can go on and on.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization* deals with an important subject in a thought-provoking manner. Mirsepassi's arguments are convincing, lucid, and

stimulating for further exploration of the issue of modernity in Iran and the entire Islamic world. It is a significant contribution to the literature on modernity, culture, and social change in general and on Islamic revolution of Iran in particular.

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