CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521650003 - Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran
Ali Mirsepassi
Excerpt
More information

Introduction: modernity and "culture"

> Many here [in the West] and some in Iran are waiting for and hoping for the moment when secularization will at last come back to the fore and reveal the good, old type of revolution we have always known. I wonder how far they will be taken along this strange, unique road, in which they seek, against the stubbornness of their destiny, against everything they have been for centuries, "something quite different."
>
> Michel Foucault[1]

Identifying a tension

Michel Foucault welcomed the Iranian Revolution and its "Islamic spirit" as an intellectually exciting revolt against the rigidity of modern-secular imagination. He sarcastically asked, "What is it about what happened in Iran that a whole lot of people, on the left and on the right, find somewhat irritating?"[2] Answering this question requires a serious exploration into the genealogy of the Western narrative of modernity and its dichotomizing representation of non-Western cultures and societies. Is modernity a totalizing (dominating and exclusionary) ideology primarily, and inescapably, grounded in European cultural and moral experience, and therefore incapable of understanding other cultures as anything other than as its inferior "other"? Or, is modernity a mode of social and cultural experience of the present that is open to all forms of contemporary experiences and possibilities?[3] The dilemma here is how to reconcile the tension between modernity's promise of openness and inclusive qualities (the Enlightenment moral promise and the modernist radical vision) and the blatant Eurocentric narrative of modernization that forecloses the possibility of real "local" experiences and of their contribution in the realization of modernity.[4] This study lays out a story of Iranian modernity, intending to explore this troubled, and troubling, situation.

This critical and complex question is at the heart of social theories of both modernity and postmodernity.[5] The liberal tradition of modernity (Montesquieu, Hegel, Weber, Durkheim, Orientalism) privileges Western cultural and moral dispositions, defining modernity in terms of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521650003 - Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran
Ali Mirsepassi
Excerpt
More information

Western cultural and historical experiences. The liberal vision of modernity, as we will see in the next chapter, considers Western culture an essential part of modernization, viewing non-Western cultures and traditions as fundamentally hostile to modernity and incompatible with modernization.[6] A more radical vision of modernity (as articulated by Marx, Habermas, Giddens, Berman) envisions modernization as a practical and empirical experience that liberates societies from their oppressive "material" conditions.[7] While the radical vision of modernity shares many important intellectual assumptions of liberal enlightenment (as we shall see shortly), its emphasis on modernity as a material condition leaves some room for the possibility of a more "locally" imagined interpretation of modernization.[8] Marshall Berman, a contemporary radical modernist, lays out an interpretation of modernity grounded in the everyday life experiences of the present:

> There is a mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils – that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this "modernity." Modern environments and experience cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.[9]

Berman goes on to suggest that the various experiences of modernity only become meaningful in the reflexive experience of their context (what Berman calls modernity of the street) and therefore, that the culture of modernity is not and should not be necessarily based on Western experience or cultural beliefs. For Berman, a blueprint of modernity is unnecessary: modernity is part of the experience of everyday life, of a life in which "all that is solid melts into air." This experience, Berman contends, is "spread all over the world," and cannot be understood as an essentially Western experience.[10] Indeed, Berman explicitly argues that people in the "Third World" experience this shared world culture:

> If this culture [modernity] were really exclusively Western, and hence as irrelevant to the Third World as most of its governments say, would these governments need to expend as much energy repressing it as they do? What they are projecting onto aliens, and prohibiting as "Western decadence," is in fact their own people's energies and desires and critical spirit.[11]

For Berman, the continuing demands of the world market system, namely the injunction to "develop or disintegrate," compel Third World nations to enter into the dynamics of modernization and modernity. Thus, modernity is not exhausted, but rather "just beginning to come

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521650003 - Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran
Ali Mirsepassi
Excerpt
More information

into its own."[12] The encounter with modernity will presumably engender a "drive for free development" in the Third World, a drive that Berman includes among the most important characteristics of modern peoples.[13] Berman's model of modernity is this shared experience of continual disintegration: "To be modern . . . is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration . . ."[14] This perpetual disintegration, however, is not a source of despair; indeed, Berman's effort is to recuperate the human potential of this ambiguity and anguish as a source of affirmation and strength.[15] Modernization, then, is understood as a world-historical process resulting in the entire world crossing the threshold of this shared experience. After crossing this point, all that remains is an affirmation of the potential of modernity. This should not be misconstrued as an entirely utopian projection. Berman is well aware that modernization can be exploitative, but he deems the continual chaos of modernity as a perfect forum for the process of a potentially unlimited self-development.[16] As he puts it, "the process of modernization, even as it exploits and torments us, brings our energies and imaginations to life, drives us to grasp and confront the world that modernization makes, and to strive to make it our own."[17]

Jurgen Habermas's theory of modernity also attempts a rejuvenation of modernity. For Habermas, the "crisis of modernity" is not indicative of the final collapse of the Enlightenment project, but instead reveals the deficiencies of what has heretofore been a one-sided and inadequate modernity. Thus, modernity is an "incomplete" project, and the question of modernization becomes central to completing modernity.[18] Habermas argues that our contemporary experience of modernity has been unduly dominated by a single type of rationality, specifically by purposive or instrumental rationality.[19] The discontents of modernity, then, are not rooted in rationalization or modernization as such, but "in the failure to develop and institutionalize all the different dimensions of reason in a balanced way."[20] This (re)opening of modernity to different means of rationalizing the life world has led John Tomilson to suggest that Habermas's vision denies an inevitable path of modernization, that ". . . the sort of modernity that the West has developed and passed on to the 'developing world' is not the only possible historical route out of the chains of tradition."[21] However, Habermas makes this opening while retaining a commitment to the Enlightenment project of universal modernity. His modernization of modernity would re-route towards a model of communicative action, and a more open rationality of ideal speech acts. Thus, modernization becomes an intellectual/rational project working towards an ideal speech situation.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521650003 - Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran
Ali Mirsepassi
Excerpt
More information

Anthony Giddens shares with Habermas the view that modernity as an institutional design is in fact a "Western project." He points out that the two unique institutions of modernity, the nation-state and capitalism, are Western in origin. However, he believes that the globalization of modernity across the world introduces new forms of world interdependence, in which, once again, there are no "others."

> Is modernity peculiarly Western from the standpoint of its globalizing tendencies? No, it cannot be, since we are speaking here of emergent forms of world interdependence and planetary consciousness. The ways in which these issues are approached and coped with, however, will inevitably involve conceptions and strategies derived from non-Western settings. For neither the radicalizing of modernity nor the globalizing of social life are processes which are in any sense complete. Many kinds of cultural responses to such institutions are possible given the world cultural diversity as a whole.[22]

Berman's populist theory of the modern experience, Habermas's hope for a complete modernization, and Giddens's reflexive modernity may offer more inclusive approaches to modernity. Yet what do their theories of modernization offer the "Third World"? This is not the time to attempt a full critique of these theorists, but we must explore what – for my purposes at least – is the most glaring weakness in their respective schemata. This weakness is a historical one. Modernity as both an intellectual and a political project has a long history of differentiating, excluding and dominating the non-Western parts of the world. What kind of understanding about the relationship between modernity, Eurocentrism and modernization does this history suggest?

Initially, colonialism can no longer be considered a minor period in the history of modernity. This argument goes far beyond the fairly familiar analysis of the economic importance of the colonies in the development of capitalism and the material basis of modernity by noting the importance of colonialism to the cultural, literary and scientific culture of modernity. Edward Said, among others, has painstakingly charted the importance of the colonies in the self-definition of Europe and in the constitution of modernity, showing in great detail the importance of colonialism in the development of the "modern" realist novel.[23] For Said, modernity needs to be re-theorized in light of an increased awareness that:

> In the same period as the construction of divided colonial capitals, a similar operation was being made on a global scale, in the form of a cultural and historical "break" dividing the modern West, as the place of order, reason, and power, from the outside world it was in the process of colonizing and seeking to control.[24]

At the very least, the radical modernists can be accused of ignoring the colonial terrain of modernity and universalism. A major aim of this study

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521650003 - Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran
Ali Mirsepassi
Excerpt
More information

is to theorize carefully the relations between the legacy of imperialism, modernity and modernization.

The failure to adequately theorize colonialism leaves radical visions of modernization perilously close to, and open to appropriation by, the Eurocentrism of mainstream theories of modernity and modernization. Habermas, who has acknowledged his "eurocentrically limited view," is instructive in this regard.[25] His notion of an ideal communicative rationality is undermined by his insistence that if the Third World acts passively in modernization, its "lifeworld," transformed by the pressures of universalism and individualization, will be rationalized, its "traditional nuclei" shrunk to "abstract elements."[26] Here at least, Habermas's prescriptions ring eerily with the discourse of development that has monopolized the discussion of modernization since roughly the end of World War II. This is not to argue that radical visions of modernity should be considered as in every respect "the same" as the ideologues of development, but to suggest that modernization is not just a structural or material transformation, but a practice grounded in discursive assumptions (most glaringly of the economic, cultural and institutional superiority of the West). Recent attempts at revitalizing modernity from the Left share with liberal and conservative modernists an inadequate reading of these assumptions, leaving them on disturbingly similar ground as the dominant narrative of modernization, to which we now turn.

Problems in the discourse of development

Early modern Europe defined its own modernity in opposition to the colonial "primitive" living in the "state of nature." A tangled web of discourse, in diverse genres including philosophy, literature and theology – similar to the discourse of Orientalism, but with the Americas as a primary referent – represented colonial others as inferior and in need of "civilizing" from Europe.[27] Colonialism was represented, as in John Locke's *Second Treatise* for example, as beneficial to the colonized "primitive" who will gain the benefits of civilization and Christianity.[28] Operative from the literal beginnings of European colonialism, the opposition between savage and civil forms an important link in the genealogy of the modern/traditional opposition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and also to theories of modernization circulating since the 1950s.

Modernization theory rose to the fore in the wake of multiple successful movements for national independence in the Third World. Retooling both the savage–civil and modern–traditional binaries so integral to colonialism, this new discourse deployed a distinction between the liberal,

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521650003 - Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran
Ali Mirsepassi
Excerpt
More information

modern, and economically "developed" nations and the (recently decolonized) "undeveloped," or "underdeveloped" nations. The project of modernization becomes one of "development," or "catching up" with, and homogenizing into, the economically, politically and culturally modern West. A major support to these projects is a group of theories presenting modernization as a rational and universal social project, superior to any other societal model in history.

This is the "scientific discourse" of social theory which, despite the turbulent and energetic clashes marking contemporary sociological debate, still holds tight reins on the voices whose narratives define modernity. "Scientific" theorists ground their tacit theoretical assumptions about the nature of reality on a materialist epistemology. The central truth claim of this epistemology is considered a scientific claim: our knowledge can only come from an "objective" reality that may be identified independently of subjective and cultural norms. Culture, within this discourse, does not have an independent existence: instead, the root source of human consciousness is in "empirical" and "actual" experience. Within our daily life experiences ultimately the "productive" economic activities are the most meaningful aspects of life. Thus, economics are at the root of culture and politics, and economic transformations are critical to development. In this regard, Marxism does not really differ from liberal or conservative modernization theory in its views of knowledge. They differ only in their conception of the ends to be achieved: for modernization theory, the goal is to bring the Third World into the orbit of the capitalist economy, while for Marxism the goal is to do the same thing so that both the First and Third Worlds can attain the universalist utopia of socialism. The materialist epistemology is not merely one theoretical construct among many which happen to be espoused by Marxist and other scholars of Third World development. For modernization theory "native" cultures represent false (illusionary) consciousness functioning to impede successful development, while for Marxism they are a mask which prevents class awareness; for both they are a self-delusional fantasy.

The impact of developmentalist discourse can be measured in its embodiment in colonial and post-colonial states. The offensive simplicity of modernity's categories and prescriptions, applied with a gruesome and dogmatic determination, could scarcely be enacted except through the sheer coercive might of a centralized authoritarian state apparatus. A coercive, powerful, we may say almost transcendental force is required to bridge the chasm between the intention, the imaginary, and existing reality in any and every "traditional" society which fell prey to the modernizing designs of colonialism. The massive and brutal overhaul of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521650003 - Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran
Ali Mirsepassi
Excerpt
More information

society and tradition, the tyrannical and almost childish lust for the raising of a completely "new world" upon the decimated remains of the "old," the broadest and shallowest conceptions of "human progress": such "ideals" could only be achieved with the aid of a modern state in all its darker and more sinister dimensions.

It is little wonder, then, that these "universalizing" and "civilizing" states emerged as the most brutal and repressive regimes in power today. Colonial states were set up with absolute power in order to control every aspect of society. With political independence, these state machines were passed on to the modernized elite frequently drawn from a particular ethnic set. In societies where the arbitrary national borders drawn up by colonialism contained a diversity of ethnic groups, these dynamics inherently instigated – indeed established – inter-ethnic struggle as the inevitable pattern of politics.[29] There is no reason to stare in surprise or wonder from the pluralistic shores of the West at the blatant elitism and brutality of post-colonial states constructed or influenced by colonial and imperial powers on the basis of ideals of modernization.

However, in recent decades a community of scholars has suggested new approaches towards understanding the epistemological underpinnings of the "development" discourse. These critics, Edward Said, Arturo Escobar and Timothy Mitchell, to name a few, charge the discourse of "development" with excessive Eurocentrism, questioning its continued relevance to the study of non-Western societies.[30] They understand "development" as part of a strategy to preserve Western hegemony, rationalize relationships of exploitation, ignore external determinants of "underdevelopment," and further imbricate an image of the non-West forever in need of guidance by the "developed" world. Their criticisms see "development" discourse as representing non-Western cultures as the First World's "other," and call for this discourse to be subjected to a critique within the power/knowledge frame of analysis. As Escobar notes in his recent book *Encountering Development*:

> Once Third World communities became the target of new and increasingly detailed interventions, their economies, societies, and cultures were appropriated as objects of knowledge by modern development disciplines and subdisciplines that, in turn, made them into new targets of power and intervention. The productivity of development thus must be seen in terms of this efficient apparatus that systematically links knowledge and power as it deploys each one of its strategies and inventions. The depiction of the Third World as "underdeveloped" has been an essential and constitutive element of the globalization of capital in the post-World War II period; perhaps more importantly, a cultural discourse began that not only placed the Third World in a position of inferiority but that, more clearly and efficiently than ever, subjected it to the "scientific," normalizing action of Western cultural-political technologies . . .[31]

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521650003 - Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran
Ali Mirsepassi
Excerpt
More information

In developmentalist discourse, the "Third World" (itself a developmentalist term) is treated as lacking some of the most essential institutional and cultural characteristics of Western modernity, and as lacking the cultural and ethical imagination to achieve modernity by itself. The "discourse of development" is a specific historical construct based on a colonial imaginary that evolved in conjunction with the Western theorization of desire for dominating the Oriental "other." Somewhat generally stated, the various critiques of development argue that constructing the "Third World" as the First World's "other" is both harmful and misleading for several reasons. (1) It defines the "Third World" as a singular, essentialized entity not in terms of its own existing qualities, but in terms of "First World" qualities which it lacks. In this depiction, the First World is the ideal model while the non-Western world's existence can be summed up in terms of what it *is not* in relation to this ideal. The cultures of the "Third World" are constructed as the "local," existing in opposition to the universalist ideals of Western modernity. This implies an underlying teleological historical scheme of progress; a universally linear struggle for the attainment of an ideal based on a metaphysic of development. In addition, it frames the West as having an unchanging cultural essence, and "East" and "West" as disconnected, static, and ontologically separate "things," each an unfolding of its own timeless essence. An endless logic of reductionist binaries springs from these obscure and essentialized categories. (2) It defines contemporary conditions in the Third World in terms of abstracted conditions of European historical experience; the Third World is seen as *embodying* aspects of Europe's past (feudalism, etc.). The application of theories based on stages from Europe's past rests on the assumption that contemporary Third World conditions correspond to these stages, but without examining those conditions in their specificity and detail to see if there is any truth to this general comparison. (3) It makes the assumption that only one essential path to modernity exists in the world, and Europe has experienced this path in advance of the non-Western world. Taking into consideration the tacit assumptions and attitudes which compose this prevailing model of development and the original historical conditions under which its main concepts were conceived, a case can be made that the model is fundamentally informed by the residual narratives that defined modernity throughout the era of colonial domination in the "Third World." The deconstruction of these development models unmasks their "scientific/universal" pretensions and reveals an underlying cultural-conceptual content which is decidedly Eurocentric and geared toward continued Western domination.

Such new critical studies are usually challenged and even ridiculed for a supposedly excessive emphasis on culture and subjectivism, for lacking

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521650003 - Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran
Ali Mirsepassi
Excerpt
More information

analytical rigor, and for extending a discourse concerning the whims of Western intellectuals (postmodernism) to an inappropriate Third World setting. A frequent charge raised by Marxist and mainstream scholars against the new literature is that it is "culturalist" and "subjectivist," and thereby almost totally ignores material and structural realities. For those who take a Marxist or political economy approach, the post-structuralist emphasis on power/knowledge relations is perceived as placing excessive priority on secondary factors (i.e., culture), while the more fundamental and determinate structures are disregarded. At the harmonious intersection between liberal and Marxist development theories, then, we locate the core conception of modernization theory as it stands in opposition to the "cultural" approach. It is in the shared belief that they are engaged in a scientific effort and that their theories, concepts, and categories are objective, culturally neutral, and universally applicable to all societies. Based on these observations, we can see how it is that culture cannot be the first issue on the developmentalist agenda for this reason: culture, values, morality, and religion, represent only particularisms, aspects of the superstructure, masking the underlying empirical truth to be found in economic structures. If all other modes of knowledge – as every cultural system in some sense claims to be – are masks and the materialist epistemology provides the *only* objective truth, then developmentalism would naturally have difficulty appreciating a central role for culture in any social movement, theory, or practice. It is ironic, however, that the dismissal of this new literature is occurring simultaneously with a confession by abundant social scientists, many of whom have produced volumes of writings about the "Third World," that something is seriously and fundamentally wrong with the development discourse.

We may say, for all those "scientists" who sternly and impatiently refer everybody to "reality" every time the issue of culture or subjectivity (or power) is mentioned in sociological debate: *the Iranian Revolution was the reality*. Contrary to every scientific and obliviously optimistic forecast of Iran's steady arrival into the calm waters of modernity and secularism – "everything is going according to plan . . ." – reality intervened in the form of a revolution and completely shattered the ill informed and arrogant presumptions/predictions/world views nurtured by authorities in the West until the very eve of the revolution. Yet however ill informed their views might have been with regard to the actual reality taking place inside Iran, they were all too well founded upon the entire discourse of modernity and development in its abstract and trans-historical form. We may say, with regard to that paradigm: *every expectation was defied*.

More interesting still is the response on the part of these "scientific" scholars. Rather than reconsidering their system of interpretation (which

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521650003 - Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran
Ali Mirsepassi
Excerpt
More information

is almost sacrosanct and no mere analytical tool) in light of its newly revealed limits and grossly mistaken calculations, there was instead a dramatic reversion to the very rudiments of the system's logic deep in the outdated colonial imagination. They begin blaming the "reality": "these people are so backward and fettered by their traditions that even modernity cannot save them!" All the veils of enlightenment and tolerance were cast aside, and the "scientists" threw up their hands in a frank concession that all humanist virtues were a purely "Western" quality, while the "other" must be left to fend for itself amidst the blood-curdling savagery of its own cultural-traditional inheritance. The irony of this discursive turn is that the revolution in Iran was fought most emphatically for modernity and all of its promises as a social ideal, but also against the perverted modernity imposed under the Shah which betrayed every humanistic principle modernity is supposed to represent. And yet the Iranian experience of modernity under the Shah was no mere deviation or corrupted moment in an otherwise flawless and morally pure design; the discrepancy between ideal and reality under the Shah – and dictators like him – is a revelation of the interlocked "other" face of modernity, the unspoken one whose brutal intrusions have decimated all corners of the world. It is this "other" face of modernity, in its systematic and historically interrelated unity with the much touted modern face of Western freedom, that we intend to lay bare in this study. For silent though it may be – and silence is simply that which is unspoken – we may count its enforced silence among the systematic strategies for perpetuating egregious forms of injustice upon the world, under the concealing gaze of one, dominant tradition of conceptualizing modernity. In the act of articulating it, of flushing it from the darkness of its systematic disguises and cover-ups, we thereby hope to hasten its exposure, rectification, and demise.

Recovering the local: the Iranian Revolution

The history of the encounter of Iran with modernity is relatively long and quite extensive. Since the 1850s, Iran has invested its intellectual, cultural, economic and political resources, and desires in the hopes of transforming itself into a modern nation-state. Political elites and intellectuals representing variations of the modern project, including liberal and nationalist ideas, radical discourses, and Islamic reformist movements, have worked through mass movements, intellectual trends, political parties and other institutional and imaginative formations to shape their country in the image of European modernity. Yet this longing for modernization has been ambivalent from the start. Modernity and the West

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org