

Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization

Negotiating Modernity in Iran

Ali Mirsepassi



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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 Foucault¹

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

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

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.

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

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,

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

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

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

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 obviously 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

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

have been viewed both as an undesirable “other” and, if Iran is to have a viable future, as an inescapable fate. At the same time, Islam has been viewed as the authentic cultural identity of Iran, the imagined traditional community of the disappearing past. The Islamic discourse of authenticity embodies both aspiration for change and the Iranian encounter with modernity. Therefore, it offers an excellent case study of a modernizing society torn between a desire to achieve material advancement and trepidation over losing its unique national, moral, and cultural identity.

It is with the imposition of Eurocentrist “universalism” by the West that the emphasis on the “local” has become important in non-Western struggles for modernization. Narratives of modernity, by constructing an ontologically differentiated universe between “West” and “East” or “modernity” and “tradition,” set the stage for the clashes which are proliferating in the contest between champions of “authenticity” and defenders of “universalism.” It is in the ingrained, universalistic precepts of modernity to do violence to local cultures – and for this reason, local cultures become natural and effective axes for politicization in any society coming to terms with the universal-modernist scheme. Nineteenth-century colonial efforts at modernization are indicative of the self-definition of modernity through an abjection of the “traditional” other. Society is divided into two parts: an elite class, drawn into the cultural orbit of the West through political and economic ties, and the mass of people. The former constitutes the “modernized” and “Westernized” while the latter constitutes the “traditional” and “backward,” with this binary corresponding invariably to the divisions between rich and poor, ruler and ruled. This scheme inherently linked “tradition” with failure and pointed out a *single road* to prosperity and power. The explicit delegitimizing of local culture by an outside invader, who in turn insisted upon the singular universality of their own culture and practices, is especially relevant for our purpose because such a division led to the complete loss of the Shah’s state power and the ruling class’s legitimacy in pre-revolutionary Iran.³²

All forms of resistance to the dominant political forms of modernity have in one way or another turned to the “authenticity” of the local, because only a critical attitude toward the dominant narrative of modernity can effectively resist domination by the imperial West. It would be misleading to conceive this local resistance, based on notions of cultural authenticity, as isolated and spontaneous demonstrations of identity based on the obstinacy of roots. We should interpret “local” politics based on local “identities” in the “Third World” as the invention of resistance against Western power, but not for this reason as anti-modern. A more precise account of this dynamic in Iran is given in chapters 2 and 3.

The broader theoretical question here is whether modernity is a totalizing ideology and inherently hostile to “local” social and cultural experiences (as Weber would have it) or whether there is any possibility for different paths to modernity. The history of modernity embodies this tension. The intellectuals of liberal enlightenment, the radical romantics, reactionary modernists, third worldists, socialists, have all, in different ways, written the story of how modernity came into being, its purpose, its ends, and so on. Against whichever surface it brushes its universal yet malleable form, a slew of new stories regarding its origins proliferates. Most of these stories live a strange and hidden life in the shadow of the standardized, self-appointed “scientific” version of modernity and its unique origins developed in the West. Yet, against the backdrop of a profound crisis in the discourse of Western objectivity and authority, as the totalizing hierarchies and dogmatic singularities of interpretation that accompanied the colonial, imperial, and bipolar superpower political eras slide away, an ever increasing proliferation and influence of multiple narratives points towards a more diversified, far less predictable, perhaps more “dangerous,” at least as hopeful, and above all utterly irreversible phase in the stories of modernity. To whatever extent these stories may or may not conform to the “facts” – indeed, they often fly on the wings of imagination – we may certainly venture that they nevertheless contain within their imaginings the true, unacknowledged history of modernity as it has never before been allowed to voice itself.

The trajectory of the work

Modernity, as articulated since the Enlightenment by intellectuals such as Montesquieu, Hegel, Marx and Weber, depends for its self-definition as rational, universal and enlightened on the presence of an “other.” In chapter 1, I present detailed critiques of their writings, showing how an “Oriental” other, passive, traditional and irrational, is contrasted to the modern world of the “West.” Deep within the discourse of modernity we find a hostility to non-Western cultures that both operates to exclude them from the realm of meaningful participation in the making of the modern world, and positions them as in dire need of whitewashing and “civilizing” by the West. Instrumental in the ideology of colonialism, this configuration continues to wield a powerful influence in contemporary theories of the Orient and of modernity, such as Bernard Lewis’s theorization of an Islamic Mind, consumed by the rage of ancient hostilities. This quintessential modern binary between an essentially un-modern and irrational “East” and the heroic, enlightened “West” has only gained strength in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and the rise of so-called

“Islamic Fundamentalism,” leading Samuel Huntington, among others, to characterize the future as a “clash between civilizations.”³³

Yet, the Iranian encounter with modernity – the major subject of this study – is both temporally significant (spanning a century and a half) and too complex to be characterized in the dramatic and militaristic language of a “clash.” Chapters 2 and 3 offer studies of Iranian intellectual and social movements from the constitutionalist movement of the beginning of the twentieth century up to the Islamic Republic of today, the establishment of modernity, and the question of the Iranian accommodation of modernity as the central pillar of Iranian intellectual efforts in the nineteenth century. For my purposes, three phases of Iranian modernity are particularly important: (1) an uncritical embrace of modernity as a Western model designed to totally replace Iranian culture; (2) a shift to a leftist paradigm of modernity critiquing imperialism and capitalism; and (3) the turn towards Islamist discourses of authenticity.

The Shah’s decidedly unpopular “modernization” projects, the consolidation of an authoritarian state apparatus, and the subsequent massive social upheaval, severely recontextualized the meaning attached to “modernization” and “modernity” in Iran. The systematic suppression of secular opponents created a political vacuum for the emerging Islamic movement, and its attempts to articulate an alternative to oppressive Western models of modernization. Chapter 3 explores the social conditions leading to this vacuum, and the process of the politicization of Shi’ism as a revolutionary ideology. The ideology of the Iranian Revolution, when viewed in detail, emerges less as a monolithic clash between “modernity” and “tradition,” than as an attempt to actualize a modernity accommodated to national, cultural and historical experiences.

Chapter 4 continues and extends the argument that political Islam is best interpreted as an attempt to reconfigure modernity by focussing on two of the most prominent intellectuals of contemporary Iran, Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shari’ati. Al-e Ahmad developed the concept of *Gharbzadegi* (“Westoxication”) and a powerful call for redeveloping a romanticized “authentic” Islamic identity. Al-e Ahmad, however, did not reject the project of modernization, but argued that such modernization should take place under the cultural and ideological base of an “authentic” Islamic culture and government. Ali Shari’ati’s intellectual project was likewise an effort to reconcile Shi’i Islam with modernization. Shari’ati contended that a nation must regain its cultural and religious traditions as a precursor to modernizing on its own terms. Both Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shari’ati construct a “local” image of Iranian culture in opposition to the “universal” West, but do so from within modernity, not from a “resurgence of ancient impulses” or “religious fanaticism.”

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

Chapter 6 has a double function, showing first the depth of the Left tradition in the modern Iranian political setting, and secondly how the failings of the Left resulted from a dogmatic refusal to see beyond the limits of their ideological scheme. This amounted to a naive support of Islamic politics, by some leftist organizations, based on a mistaken belief that religion could never constitute anything more than a peripheral element in popular struggle. Ironically, this blindness to the momentous power of religious politics – based on “modernist” certainties – was all but a reflection of the Shah’s own dogmatic refusal to see a reality unfolding before his eyes but beyond the limits of his overly confident conceptions. The chapter documents in close detail the rise of the Left in Iranian politics throughout the twentieth century, examining its social bases in the period leading to the Revolution and after. It also relates the emergence of new radical discourses in the modern era to the rise of modern social classes, expanded education, and international communication. All of these developments are considered in relation to Islamic political discourses and ideologies, taking note of the tendency for Islamic ideologies to freely appropriate the ideas of the Left – ironically, in a far more flexible, pragmatic and creative way than the Left itself was ever able to manage. Finally, the chapter traces the role of the Left in the Revolution of 1978–79, leading to its being politically crushed in the revolutionary aftermath, and its subsequent efforts to reorganize either in Iran or abroad.

Beginning with interviews with Iranian intellectuals conducted in Tehran in 1995, the final chapter explores the possibilities of plurality in modernist narration. Contrary to Orientalist assumptions, the “Islamic Mind” is shown to be open to, interested in, and committed to an appropriation of modernity into a “local” context of Iranian culture and history. A reconfigured modernity, open to the experiences of those long considered as marginal or outside the pale shadow of modernity altogether, and capable of escaping the universalist trappings of current models, is necessary to assure that the positive qualities of modernity will survive. In conclusion, I assess the possibilities of secularism and democracy in the Middle East generally, and Iran in particular.

1 Western narratives of modernity

What does need to be remembered is that narratives of emancipation and enlightenment in their strongest form were also narratives of *integration* not separation, the stories of people who had been excluded from the main group but who were now fighting for a place in it. And if the old and habitual ideas of the main group were not flexible or generous enough to admit new groups, then these ideas need changing, a far better thing to do than rejecting the emerging groups.

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. xvi

Introduction

As recent debates surrounding the phenomenon of “post-colonialism” have amply demonstrated, the European “other” played an important role in Western self-definition of its modernity. In order to understand the complex dialectics of modernity in Iran, it is essential to explore the Eurocentric and imperial narrative entrenched deep within its liberatory promises. This chapter, through readings of Montesquieu, Hegel, and Marx, explores how modernity created and preserved a conviction that the non-Western world could exist only as modernity’s other. Although this narrative has recently come under serious challenge by critics such as Edward Said, Timothy Mitchell and Gayatri Spivak, it continues to hold remarkable hegemony in the media, popular culture, and among academics. As I show in my interpretations of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis, and Bernard Lewis’s explication of the “roots” of Muslim rage, efforts to re-envision modernity will be doomed to failure unless modernity’s troubled genealogy is acknowledged, critiqued, and engaged.

Orientalism and the Occidental discont

The publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978 marked an important intellectual challenge to the then prevalent Eurocentric scholarship in Middle Eastern studies.¹ Functioning as a powerful trigger for self-criticism within the academic community, Said’s critique of Orientalism

provoked many scholars of Islam and the Middle East to reevaluate long held precepts concerning the relationship of scholars to their texts.² More specifically, Said challenged Orientalists to reexamine the role of representations in the production and legitimation of political and cultural supremacy, and in the practice of excluding non-Western cultures and peoples on the basis of essentialized difference. Upon subjecting their own studies to Said's critique, some serious scholars of the Middle East found it difficult to acknowledge their deep entanglement in a dubious political tradition and to offer their studies as "objective" representations. A long established and unchallenged discursive tradition suddenly found itself reeling with criticisms and undergoing fundamental reevaluation. Even contemporary Orientalist scholars, such as Bernard Lewis, became self-conscious of the hitherto hidden implications of their positions as Western scholars and felt compelled to explain their thinking about the Middle East. One may even say that there was hope in the air in the early 1980s that scholarship critical of Orientalism would become the dominant mode of writing with regard to Middle Eastern issues, after a long century framing analysis around stony, unyielding, and unassailable "objective certainties."

Yet, as Said points out, critical writings on Orientalism did not effect profound changes at the public level.³ While academia began to dismantle Orientalism there occurred a simultaneous and energetic resurgence of stereotyping and ridiculing of Muslims and Islamic societies in the media and popular culture. Representations of Islam and Muslims on television, in newspapers, films, and other arenas of popular culture reinforced tacit Orientalist notions of Middle Eastern people as fanatically Islamic, portraying Islam itself as essentially irrational, antagonistic to change, and incompatible with the modern world. Intellectuals, poets, artists, and other professionals in the mainstream of public culture revitalized Orientalist images of the Middle East as the West's inferior "other."⁴ How can the ironic discrepancy between academic efforts at self-reform and the fanning of these fires of public prejudice be explained? Said has pointed to a revival of colonialist nostalgia among the literate public:

In England, France and the U. S., there had been a fairly massive investment in colonialist nostalgia – the Raj revival stuff like *Jewel in the Crown* and *Passage to India*, the film *Out of Africa*. It is a simple, colorful world with heroes and prototypes of Oliver North – the Livingstons, the Stanleys, the Conrads and Cecil Rhodes.⁵

The literary and artistic intelligentsia, more so than academics, draw upon this romanticized colonial memory and glorify colonialism in the context of the tragedy of post-colonial realities. Political violence, communities in conflict, and the collapse of nation-states are often contrasted

to the “tranquility” of colonial order. It may be that the call for the “good old days” of the colonial past reflects a desire to reinvent or revitalize earlier modernist certainties.

The regeneration of intense Orientalist rhetoric in Western popular culture foreshadowed the tenacity of Eurocentric structures of knowledge. The Iranian Revolution, and the subsequent rise of Islamic movements, exploded at about the same time that Said’s book appeared, posing a different type of challenge to the West and its intellectuals. The media, academia and public were overwhelmed by the vision of a modernizing and pro-Western monarchy being overthrown by a mass movement under the leadership of men whose image matched the most deeply entrenched Orientalist stereotypes. The self-reflection spurred by Said’s text largely collapsed, as Western intellectuals reverted to interpretations of contemporary Middle Eastern politics heavily indebted to Orientalist presuppositions. The nature of this revolutionary movement had the unfortunate effect in the West of unleashing a conservative modernist backlash which suppressed critical thought about the troubled genealogy of modernization in the Third World. A number of other events that followed, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and its periphery, and civil wars and conflicts in Africa, the former Soviet Republics, and Afghanistan, seemed to justify empirically the call for a return to the “serene” and manageable world of colonial times. The traumatic and rapid intensity of such events exacerbated already existing Western anxieties over the order of things in the post-Cold War world. Not only were these events difficult to access using the conventional models of analysis, but more importantly they pointed to the general unfolding of a new global situation with unforeseen and relatively unknowable consequences. The reserve of myths which form a culture’s “instinctive expression of self”⁶ come to the surface above all to cover any complex or threatening situation *in order to cover up* what the “experts” don’t comprehend but feel compelled to. The types of crisis that shake a world provide a perfect location for viewing the intersection between “scientific apprehension” and the mythical substrata of historical existence applied on a global scale. Prevalent Western reactions to these events set the context for the analysis that follows and the ingrained precepts we intend to disclose within the conventional narratives of modernity. These precepts – ostensibly concerning the “other” yet reflecting fatally back on oneself – reveal a legacy of exclusion and domination which survives to this day (and certainly not only in the West). Such precepts must be called into question.

The discourse of modernity, as a self-defining project in the West, encompassed a wide diversity of purposeful interests; yet the construction of an imagined “Other” endured as an availing and fundamental tool in nearly all of these proceedings. The writers in the following study provide

seminal examples of this tradition. Their work will be viewed in the political context of their time, especially the expansion of imperial empires unprecedented in scope and power. This development climaxed in the period between the 1880s and World War I, with 85 per cent of the world's surface under Western domination on the eve of World War I. The writings of Edward Said, Timothy Mitchell, and Thierry Hentsch have demonstrated how "Orientalist" discourse functioned to shape the Western imagination in order to establish a normative framework for imperial practices. To an equal degree such discourses – particularly in the context of "modernist self-understanding" – have served to consolidate a sense of "Western identity" in the context of a tumultuous world in permanent transformation. We can trace this self-defining mechanism back to "modernity" at its very inception, at the site of the West's sudden and urgent need to consolidate an identity in the face of its own experience of modernization. In multiple and fundamental discourses, a new identity was seized by means of *contrast*: a totalizing ideology was constructed upon the notion of a non-Western Other in the defining moment of modernity itself. Modernist self-understanding established the dialectical presence of this "Other" as a prerequisite for the internal solidarity and durability of its own innermost structure. This is the dark side of modernity, both intellectually and politically. Most scholars who emphasize modernity's universalism point to modernity's democratic qualities. I do not deny these qualities; however, a glimpse into the systematic imperial practices of modern Western states shows the very opposite of these qualities inflicted upon vast sections of the world. The ascent of modernity, in its imperial dimension, has depended on a deep entanglement with those authoritarian values which are allegedly the very opposite of its most cherished democratic ideals.

Diverse responses to this mythical tower of reason have emerged in the context of anti-colonial struggle and post-colonial social reconstruction. In many cases the paradigm of modernity has been preserved, yet relativized with its diffusion among different cultural subjectivities. Specific cultural/moral meanings, from diverse local/historical contexts, have replaced the spatio-temporal "neutral" core which professed a universal rationality, while covertly privileging European culture. Frequently modernity has been retained in form, yet transformed into a weapon of emancipation against those who initially conceived it. In certain cases – as with Iran – there have been vain efforts to dispense with this "totalizing" paradigm altogether.

Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*

Long before the paradigm of modernity was enshrined in the positivist-scientific discourses of, for example, Max Weber, the intellectual founda-

tions for its empirical constructions were laid down on a more abstract level in the rationalist discourses of the Enlightenment. Whereas positivism requires the furnishing of proof (albeit selectively and in patterns designed to reproduce preconceptions), rationalist discourse is more at liberty to employ the imagination as a means of confirming imagery. The Enlightenment set universal and normative standards of human behavior and ethics based on a rational, democratic, and humanist model of society. One of the ways that the Enlightenment discourse legitimized its discourse of modernity was to construct the Enlightenment's "Others." Among the most influential of Enlightenment thinkers was Montesquieu, whose *Persian Letters* brilliantly imagined an essential interconnection between the religious forces of reaction in European society and the fanatical world of the Muslim Orient. In the context of a dawning age of Reason which promised to give birth to a new world, his work vividly invoked the Orient as the culmination of the Irrational in history and hence the antithesis of the emerging spirit of freedom in the West. The true brilliance of Montesquieu's story lies in its power to insert the voices and opinions of Frenchmen into invented Persians, who thus inevitably "discover" the ultimate superiority of Western modernity over their traditional homeland. The odyssey of consciousness experienced by these Persian characters is an almost Hegelian articulation of modernity, in which the "Eastern mind" realizes through a series of rational steps that the truth is to be found only within the narrow limits prescribed by Western modernity.

The *Persian Letters* weaves a cast of characters in an imagined world, known to the reader through the constellation of letters they exchange. Set between 1711 and 1720, the voices circulate in an orbit between Paris, France and Ispahan, Persia, with reports from various locales along the way. The book centers on two Persian friends, Usbek and Rica, as they embark on a nine-year migration to the West ostensibly for "love of knowledge" and so they "should [not] see by the light of the East alone."⁷ Over the course of their journey from Persia to France, their letters become the camouflage for Montesquieu's own critical observations of Oriental stagnation and decline, particularly with regard to the Ottoman Empire. Upon arrival in Paris, their voices become the author's covert mouthpiece for criticisms and praises within his own society. These criticisms and praises are addressed from a supposed "Oriental perspective," making full use of the Orient as a negative model of comparison for praising incipient democratic elements in French society and chastising intransigent authoritarian ones. Montesquieu aligns himself within the contending social forces of his time on the side of modernist secularism, and the *Letters* are used to combat the overbearing religious power in

French society. The “Oriental voices” therefore become the cheerleaders of European modernity in opposition to blind tradition, condemning despotism in their native land and implicitly in France. The utility of this “Eastern model” in launching his attack is not incidental: by making the comparison, Montesquieu equates the forces of reaction in his own society with an “Orient” that runs deep in the Western imagination.

The main character, Usbek, presents all the essential qualities of “modern man.” Despite his inner resistance, he finds himself estranged from the spirit and institutions of his native culture. His departure is prompted in equal part by malaise within his harem at home, and indignation at the corruption and flagrant vice of the court in his public life. These twin factors – private and public – drive him to devise the pretext of leaving his own country to instruct himself in Western knowledge. This initial pretext conceals the instinctive desire to embark on a “quest for self,” to locate a system of meaning which will transcend the disappointing and rotten structure which commands his home country. His adventure is in principle a leap from tradition into the flow of “modernism,” as defined by Jonathon Friedman:

Modernism can be defined in Goethean terms as a continuous process of accumulation of self, in the form of wealth, knowledge, experience. It is a dangerous state where in order to survive the person must be in constant movement. It is an identity without fixed content other than the capacity to develop itself, movement and growth as a principle of selfhood.⁸

Usbek leaves behind the traditional world of Islam, with its complexities of predetermined social roles and rules located within elaborate institutional machinery. His immersion in the headlong “modernizing” process dissolves his blind obedience to custom and carries him across the world to an ultimate realization of Western superiority over the East. His embrace of reason leaves him no choice but to concede this “reality,” and we are meant to believe that any thinking person would have no choice but to do the same. Yet even this realization cannot prevent him from being sucked back into the vertiginous and licentious demise of the harem, when from afar his inexorable “Oriental sensibilities” inflict bloody havoc on the world he has attempted to leave behind.

Usbek’s journey begins with a conventionally modernist “crisis of conscience.” His doubts concerning the validity of his own society gradually swell into a full-blown rationalist critique once he experiences Parisian intellectual life. This development is frequently kindled by the intervening voice of an important character known only as “an intelligent European” or “a man of sense.” No details, names, or even any context are provided for this repeated encounter; the disembodied voice simply

materializes to highlight the general supremacy of the West. Usbek never once challenges or takes exception to these proclamations. Instead, he relates them to his friends in letters in overwhelming detail:

A man of sense said to me the other day: "In France, in many respects, there is a greater freedom than in Persia, and so there is a greater level of glory. This fortunate peculiarity makes a Frenchman, willingly and with pleasure, do things that your Sultan can only get out of his subjects by ceaseless exhortation with rewards and punishments . . .

"The difference between French troops and your own is that the latter consists of slaves, who are naturally cowardly, and can overcome this fear of death only by the fear of being punished, which causes a new kind of terror in their souls and virtually stupefies them; whereas ours gladly face the enemy's attacks, banishing their fear by a satisfaction which is superior to it."⁹

This classic conception of "Oriental despotism" – that no relation exists between individual subjectivity and external authority in the East – is but one of the illuminations bestowed upon Usbek by the mysterious voice. On another occasion an "intelligent European" tells him: "People are surprised that there is scarcely ever any change in the methods of government used by oriental sovereigns: what other reasons can there be except that their methods are tyrannical and atrocious?"¹⁰

After this remark the voice continues to tell him that change in the Orient is impossible because the sovereign's power is unlimited. Yet this "unlimited power" can be freely exchanged from individual to individual, based on whoever is ruthless enough to seize it by force of violence. Finally, the voice says, people in the country will not recognize any difference between one ruler and the next: "If the detestable murderer of our great King Henri IV had carried out his crime on some Indian king, he would have been in control of the royal seat, and of a vast treasure accumulated."¹¹ This exaggerated caricature is less interesting for the fact that it is inaccurate than because it shows the use of "the East" as an imagined world in rationalist discourse. A world at once geographically distant yet imaginatively charged can be manipulated with unrestricted freedom and for any purpose. In this instance, it is used to evoke an entire world where unbridled brutality and power reign supreme, and as an omen should certain forces gain ascendancy.

We are supposed to believe that Usbek experiences these caricatures as enlightening remarks on his native society. Yet it seems that Usbek's "Western sensibilities" lay tacit in his mind even prior to his arrival and "enlightenment" in Paris. His letters concerning the journey through the Ottoman Empire reveal a perspective which resounds with the imperial appetites and prejudices of a colonial administrator, rather than those of a Muslim traveler who has yet to tread foot on European soil: