Introduction

Between Cultural Essentialism and Hegemonic Universalism

Unsettling a Hegemonic Paradigm

Since the late nineteenth century, discussions about a condition and project code-named *modernity* have occupied a critical space in many Middle Eastern and Islamicate societies at the theoretical as well as the practical level. Throughout this period, a perceived tension between modernity and the Islamic tradition has been one of the defining features of many social, political, philosophical, and cultural debates. The origins of this dichotomous discursive construct can be traced to the historical encounter of Muslim societies with modern Europe during the late phase of European colonialism. Since then, the binary view of Islam and modernity has been operative not only in Islamicate contexts but also in various sites within the West. Throughout the twentieth century, Western scholarship on Muslim politics and social life was largely shaped by two vaguely different articulations of this view. The first, represented by Orientalists such as Gustave E. von Grunebaum, held that Islam and Muslim societies were essentially incapable of reforming and adopting the achievements of the modern world. The second view, represented by modernization theorists such as Daniel Lerner, held that even though Islam lacked the necessary resources for initiating modernity, Muslim societies could still become modern by following the Western path of modernization. Although the second view may be said to have offered a somewhat more optimistic vision of the prospects for progressive change in Muslim societies, it is clear that in both accounts modernity was understood as a Western achievement and something alien and antithetical to Islam and Muslim cultures.

The occurrence of a number of events during the latter half of the previous century and the beginning of the present century reinforced the Western view about the irreconcilability of Islam and modernity. The first was the rise of Islamism during the 1970s and 1980s, which was interpreted by many Western observers as a turn against modernity. It was precisely through this lens that these commentators viewed the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic. Another event was the end of the Cold War. With the implosion of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Eastern bloc Islam and Muslim societies came to be seen as the other of the West and the enemy of its modernity. As Mamdani notes, in the construction of the hegemonic post–Cold War narratives of the modern Western self, Muslim societies came to be seen not only as "incapable" of modernizing, but also as being inherently hostile and "resistant" to modernity.[1] In the post–Cold War context, the assumption of an imminent and inevitable clash between Western modernity and its Islamic nemesis found a clear manifestation in the civilizational clash discourse popularized by Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington.[2] Finally, there were the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent US-led invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, in the aftermath of which the view of an insurmountable discord between Islam and modernity came to dominate both academic and mainstream debates.[3]

The Orientalist and modernist conceptions of Islam and Muslim cultures are often premised on a particular Eurocentric narrative of modernity developed by the leading figures of European Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought. Within this narrative, Europe was seen, in Walter Mignolo's apt description, as the singular "point of reference of global history" and the ultimate "point of arrival of human existence on the planet."[4] Negating the colonial and imperial constitution of

[1] Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2005), 19.

[2] See: Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage: Why So Many Muslims Deeply Resent the West, and Why Their Bitterness Will Not Be Easily Mollified," *The Atlantic Monthly* 26, no. 3 (September 1990): 47–58; Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–50; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

[3] See: Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House, 2004); Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam* (Toronto: Random House, 2003); Salman Rushdie, "Yes, This Is about Islam," *New York Times*, November 02, 2001, A25.

[4] Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011), xiv.

European modernity, and assuming an uninterrupted historical trajectory of Western civilizational development, this narrative privileged Europe's sociocultural and socioeconomic developments during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries over other, non-Western modalities of social, cultural, political, and economic production and change. Among many other examples, the view of European modernity and its underlying Occidental rationalism as the universal expression of human progress manifested itself in Immanuel Kant's natural-historical account of racial differentiation, G. W. F. Hegel's juxtaposition of Occidental and Oriental reason, and Karl Marx's early views about the progressive impact of European colonialism in India and China.

At least since the mid-twentieth century, there has existed a sustained effort by a range of critical thinkers in the colonial periphery as well as in the metropolitan center to disrupt this hegemonic narrative and challenge its reproduction in contemporary debates. The thinkings of Mahatma Gandhi, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and a subsequent generation of postcolonial theorists including Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Homi Bhabha have problematized the monocivilizational and universalist disposition of Europe's Enlightenment modernity. Theories of multiple modernities, which emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, have also critiqued Eurocentric and unilinear conceptions of human progress and development. Other theories, such as those describing modernity as a "global shift" and a universal condition, have sought to delink the category from its Eurocentric accounts and from the colonial trajectory of the modern West.[5] And yet others have rejected the possibility of delinking modernity from coloniality, identifying the latter as the darker side, the hidden agenda, and indeed constitutive of the former.[6]

The multifaceted and ongoing critique of the hegemonic historiography of modernity has further contributed to the unsettling of the Islam/modernity binary in the particular context of Muslim societies. A rich body of literature has emerged seeking to expose the multifarious and contested natures of both Islam and modernity by deconstructing discourses that reduce complex sociopolitical and socioeconomic challenges

[5] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 737.

[6] See: Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highland, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996); Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity*.

in Muslim societies to simplistic formulations such as the absence of modernity or its irreconcilability with Islam. A number of commentators have used the framework of multiple modernities to highlight the nuanced dynamics of lived Muslim experiences in diverse historical and contemporary contexts. Emphasizing at once cultural-historical difference and interconnectedness, these commentators advance a simultaneous critique of blind universalism and cultural relativism.[7] Others have used alternative categories such as post-Islamism to explain the discursive and political exhaustion of the dichotomous discourses of Islamism and modernism, especially in the context of the recent emergence of the Iranian Green Movement and the Arab Spring protests.[8] And yet others have focused on a sustained effort by a range of Muslim thinkers to dispel the view of an inherent clash between Islam and modernity. It is this latter effort that has given increased attention to the works of such contemporary Muslim reformers as Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Fethullah Gülen, Abdolkarim Soroush, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, and Tariq Ramadan.

The present book contributes to the emerging critical literature on the Islam/modernity binary by focusing on the ideas of Ali Shariati, one of the leading twentieth-century Muslim thinkers, and a group of his contemporary intellectual followers known collectively as neo-Shariatis. In its attempt to advance a contextually grounded discourse of progressive social and political change on the basis of a simultaneous critique of the Islamic tradition and Eurocentric modernization, Shariati's thought finds common ground with the projects of many of the aforementioned Muslim thinkers. However, what sets Shariati and neo-Shariatis apart from many of these Muslim thinkers is their concern and critical engagement with the concept of coloniality in relation to modern discursive and institutional formations in global and local contexts. Thus, even though Shariati and neo-Shariatis problematize the dichotomous construction of

[7] See: Nilüfer Göle, "Snapshots of Islamic Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1, *Multiple Modernities* (Winter, 2000): 91–117; Masoud Kamali, *Multiple Modernities, Civil Society and Islam: The Case of Iran and Turkey* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006); Amyn B. Sajoo, ed., *Muslim Modernities: Expressions of the Civil Imagination* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008); Modjtaba Sadria, ed., *Multiple Modernities in Muslim Societies: Tangible Elements and Abstract Perspectives* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

[8] See: Joshua A. Stacher, "Post-Islamist Rumblings in Egypt: The Emergence of the Wasat Party," *Middle East Journal* 56, no. 3 (2002): 415–432; Mojtaba Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 31, no. 1 (2011): 94–109; Asef Bayat, ed., *Post-Islamism: The Many Faces of Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Islam and modernity and argue that the recognition of cultural plurality and difference makes possible the negotiation of diverse experiences of change in the modern world, they are also attentive to hegemony and global power asymmetries. In their radical critique of colonial and neo-colonial relations of domination, Shariati and neo-Shariatis challenge the hegemonic expansion of two particular socioeconomic and sociopolitical formations, namely, capitalism and liberal- democracy, in the course of the expansion of European modernity.

The central argument of this book is that in their simultaneous critique of the Eurocentric accounts of modernity, on the one hand, and the essentialist conceptions of Islam, on the other, Shariati and his followers advance a sociopolitically progressive discourse of indigenous modernity that engages freely and creatively with a wide range of emancipatory projects in the modern world. The book further argues that by stressing the need for the development of a critical consciousness about the operations and effects of Western colonialism and imperialism in the particular context of Muslim societies and by calling for a "return to the self" (*bazgasht beh khish*), Shariati and neo-Shariatis provide a contextually grounded view of cultural, social, and political change that gives attention both to global structures and local histories. A case is made that the search for a third way between hegemonic universalism and essentialist particularism by Shariati and neo-Shariatis opens up a new discursive space in Iranian and Islamic thought for engaging in cross-cultural encounters beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism. Finally, it is shown that for Shariati and neo-Shariatis, cultivating genuine cosmopolitanism requires recognizing diverse forms of locally mediated systems of knowledge production and political agency, and moving beyond the Eurocentric and monocivilizational paradigm that has shaped the interactions between the West and the non-West for roughly five centuries.

The Life and Legacy of a Radical Islamic Thinker

In his observations about the February 1979 Iranian Revolution, Michel Foucault made mention of Ali Shariati, whose invisible presence, he remarked, haunted "all political and religious life" in the country.[9] At the

[9] Michel Foucault, "What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, October 16–22, 1978, quoted in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 207.

time of the revolution, Shariati had already been dead for close to two years. There was (and is), however, little doubt about his significant influence in Iranian society during the 1960s and 1970s and in the formation and maturation of the popular uprising that led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty. It was this iconic and unrivaled status that gave Shariati, in Foucault's words, "the position, so privileged in Shi'ism, of the invisible Present, of the ever-present Absent."[10]

Shariati was born on November 23, 1933 in the desert village of Kahak in the northeastern province of Khorasan.[11] His father, Mohammad-Taghi, was a politically active and reform-minded Islamic preacher, whose religious and political ideas left a lasting influence on the young Shariati. In 1944, Mohammad-Taghi Shariati founded the Center for the Propagation of Islamic Truth (*kanun-e nashr-e haqayeq-e eslami*) in the provincial capital of Mashhad with the objective of disseminating a modernist interpretation of Islamic teachings. Soon after its founding, the center also became a hub for political activism in support of the nationalist leader Mohammad Mosaddegh and his National Front party. When Mosaddegh's tenure as prime minister came to an abrupt end in August 1953 through a British- and American-backed coup, the father and son were among the founding members of the Mashhad branch of the clandestine pro-Mosaddegh organization, the National Resistance Movement (*nehzat-e mogavemat-e melli*).[12]

In 1955, Shariati entered the newly inaugurated Faculty of Literature at the University of Mashhad. Upon completing his Bachelor of Arts degree, he received a government scholarship to continue his graduate studies abroad. In 1959, he arrived in Paris, where he enrolled at the Sorbonne, and four years later, in June 1963, he received a doctorate degree (*doctorat d'université*) from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.[13] Despite majoring in History of Medieval Islam, during his doctoral studies Shariati reportedly created a program of study tailor-made to his own specific interests.[14] He spent much of his time at the Collège

[10] Ibid.
[11] Pouran Shariat-Razavi, *Tarhi az yek zendegi (Portrait of a Life)* (Tehran: Chapakhsh, 1376/1997), 3.
[12] Ibid., 41.
[13] Shariati's doctoral research, which was carried out under the supervision of French linguist and Iran scholar, Gilbert Lazard, included translating, correcting, and writing a commentary on *The Merits of Balkh (Fazayel-e Balkh)*, a thirteenth-century Persian work in Islamic hagiology by Safi al-Din Abu Bakr Balkhi.
[14] Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 117.

de France, auditing classes by French sociologist Georges Gurvitch and Islamic scholar Jacques Berque.[15] According to his political biographer, Ali Rahnema, aside from Gurvitch and Berque, three other figures left a deep and lasting impression on Shariati during his years in Paris. These included prominent French Orientalist Louis Massignon, Martinique-born revolutionary Frantz Fanon, and existentialist French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.[16]

In Paris, in addition to his involvement with the National Front and a number of other Iranian opposition groups, Shariati also immersed himself in various revolutionary debates and radical anticolonial and anti-imperialist activities taking place at the time. He was particularly influenced by the Algerian and Cuban revolutionaries, and even began translating, from French to Persian, Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism* (1959) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), as well as Ernesto Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* (1961). He is also reported to have been arrested in February 1961 while participating in a rally in protest to the execution of Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba.[17] Despite his initial attraction to the Algerian and Cuban models of guerrilla warfare, Shariati gradually came to the belief that radical social and political transformation required not simply a change in power structures through a revolutionary takeover of the state, but rather a deep change in the consciousness of the masses. According to his wife, Pouran Shariat-Razavi, toward the end of his time in Paris, Shariati had arrived at the conclusion that the advocacy of armed struggle by the intellectual vanguard was a futile effort that only led to the further alienation of intellectuals from the mainstream of the society.[18] She believes that while Shariati was deeply sympathetic to a generation of young committed revolutionaries who had raised arms in their fight against injustice, he was nevertheless convinced of the primacy of raising the consciousness of the masses over waging armed struggle.[19] For Shariati, she argues, the task of revolutionary intellectuals was to develop a contextually grounded discourse of revolutionary awareness on the basis of the "extraction," "reformation," and "refinement" of local and popular cultural resources.[20]

[15] Shariat-Razavi, *Tarhi*, 69–70.
[16] Rahnema, *Islamic Utopian*, 120.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Shariat-Razavi, *Tarhi*, 83.
[19] Ibid., 166.
[20] Ibid., 83.

Returning to Iran in 1964, Shariati was arrested at the border and incarcerated briefly for his work with Iranian opposition groups in Europe. After his release, he returned to Mashhad where he began to work as a high school teacher. Two years later, he was hired as an Assistant Professor in History at the University of Mashhad, where he taught courses on Iranian history, history of Islamic civilization, and history of world civilizations. Shariati proved to be a popular teacher and a powerful orator, and very soon he was receiving invitations to deliver talks at university campuses across the country. In the late 1960s, he was invited to Tehran to speak at the Hosseinieh Ershad, a newly established modern religious institution aimed at engaging young educated urban classes in debates about Islamic thought, culture, and history. Between 1967 and 1972, Shariati was one of the main speakers at the Hosseinieh Ershad, and he was also heavily involved in organizing a wide range of activities at the center, from educational classes to theatrical plays and painting exhibitions.

At the Hosseinieh Ershad, Shariati found a site for sociopolitical engagement that was perhaps better suited for his revolutionary objectives than the academic setting of the University of Mashhad. Combining his subversive political message with a modern interpretation of traditional Islamic doctrines, he developed a revolutionary Islamic ideology that called for popular awareness, action, and movement in the face of oppression and injustice. His message was received enthusiastically by many young people, particularly the newly educated and socially and economically disenfranchised classes. His speeches attracted thousands of religious and nonreligious youth, and Hosseinieh Ershad became a major hub for oppositional activity against the Pahlavi regime.[21] Predictably, his political agitation angered both the Pahlavi regime and the traditionalist and conservative religious sectors. The regime's secret police and intelligence service (SAVAK) was alarmed by Shariati's increasing popularity and his revolutionary discourse. Many Shi'i clerics too were enraged by Shariati's radical criticism of traditional religious doctrines and the pro status-quo position of the clergy. By the early 1970s, a number of major Shi'i ulama including Abul Qasim Khoei, Sayyid Muhammad Hadi Milani, Sayyid Sadeq Rohani, and Muhammad Husayn Tabatabaei had

[21] Kamran Matin, "Decoding Political Islam: Uneven and Combined Development and Ai Shariati's Political Thought," in *International Relations and non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism, and Investigations of Global Modernity*, ed. Robbie Shilliam (London: Routledge, 2010), 115.

issued religious rulings (*fatwa*) against Shariati, accusing him of heresy and opposition to Islam. Soon after, the Pahlavi regime followed suit, and by the mid-1970s Shariati's books had been banned and possessing them could have been cause for arrest.[22]

In 1972, Hosseinieh Ershad was closed under pressure from SAVAK, and Shariati went into hiding. He was eventually arrested in 1973 and spent eighteen months in a prison in Tehran. Upon release, he returned to Mashhad, where he effectively lived under house arrest.[23] Unable to teach or to speak at any public forums, and growing increasingly impatient with his restricted condition, he decided to enter into a self-imposed exile. In May 1977, despite a government-imposed travel ban against him, Shariati managed to leave Iran, arriving first in Brussels and then in Southampton, England. Three weeks after his arrival there, on June 19, 1977, he died of a heart attack.[24] The news of his sudden death spread quickly and rumors implicating the SAVAK in a conspiracy to kill him soon elevated Shariati's position to that of a martyr. Fearing that the Pahlavi regime might use his popularity for its own propaganda purposes, a decision was made by Shariati's family and friends not to return his body to Iran. Instead, he was buried in the Sayyida Zeinab Mosque in Damascus, Syria, the site of the burial place of Zaynab bint Ali, the granddaughter of the prophet of Islam and the daughter of the first Shi'i imam.

According to a Shi'i tradition, the fortieth day of his death (*chehelom*) was marked by various ceremonies in Iran and abroad. Of these, the major event attended by Shariati's family and numerous prominent Iranian and non-Iranian intellectuals and activists took place in Beirut, Lebanon. The event, according to Rahnema, was "a mini-summit of liberation organizations." Some of the attendees included representatives from the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Lebanese Amal Movement, the People's Front for the Liberation of Eritrea, the National Liberation Movement of Zanzibar, the National Movement for the Freedom of Zimbabwe, the National Movement for the Freedom of Southern Philippines, the Militant Clergy of Iran, the Organization of Iranian Muslim Students in Europe, America, and Canada, and Iran Freedom Movement. Speaking at the ceremony on behalf of the PLO, Yasser Arafat praised Shariati as "an

[22] Ali Rahnema, "Ali Shariati: Teacher, Preacher, Rebel," in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. Ali Rahnema (New York: Zed Books, 2005), 237–238.
[23] Shariat-Razavi, *Tarhi*, 195.
[24] Since no autopsy was conducted after Shariati's sudden death, the reasons for his heart attack remain unknown today.

international fighter,"[25] and Amal's leader, Musa al-Sadr, described him as a "transnational revolutionary" who sought to develop an indigenous discourse of emancipatory change in the context of Muslim societies.[26]

In the months after Shariati's death, his fiery speeches in support of revolutionary action were circulated widely in Iran, and in the mass protests of the late 1970s many protestors in Tehran and other cities carried banners displaying his pictures and quotes. Just weeks before the February 1979 revolution, one Iranian observer commented that despite the participation of a diverse range of political groups and social sectors, Shariati's portraits and words had become the symbols of the prevailing "ideological dimension" of the revolution.[27] Several other commentaries written throughout the 1980s described Shariati as the "teacher," "ideologue," and "architect" of the revolutionary movement.[28] Be that as it may, his family and friends have often maintained that had Shariati been alive in postrevolutionary Iran, he would have likely ended up in prison for his dissenting views. In fact, although in the immediate aftermath of the revolution the new ruling elites named streets and schools after Shariati and praised him as one of the teachers of the revolutionary movement, in the course of the last three and a half decades Shariati's Islamic discourse has fallen increasingly out of favor with the official guardians of the postrevolutionary regime. Throughout this period Shariati's intellectual followers have often faced censorship, imprisonment, and other restrictions, and various groups and political organizations associated with Shariati's thought have been declared unlawful and counterrevolutionary.[29]

[25] Rahnema, "Ali Shariati: Teacher, Preacher, Rebel," 243.

[26] Musa Sadr, "Sokhanrani emam Musa Sadr dar arbaeen-e Shariati" ("Lecture by Imam Musa Sadr at the Fortieth day of Shariati's Death"), http://drshariati.org/show/?id=182 (accessed on May 27, 2013).

[27] Mansour Farhang, "Resisting the Pharaohs: Ali Shariati on Oppression," *Race & Class* 21, no. 1 (July 1979): 31.

[28] See: Ervand Abrahamian, "Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," *MERIP Reports*, no. 102, *Islam and Politics* (January 1982): 24–28; Abdulaziz Sachedina, "Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 191–214; Mehbi Abedi, "Ali Shariati: The Architect of the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 19, no. 3–4 (1986): 229–234.

[29] Among the groups that claimed to follow Shariati's social and political path in postrevolutionary Iran, the largest was the Organization of the Vanguard Fighters of the Oppressed (*sazeman-e razmandegan-e pishgam-e mostazafin*), also known as Aspirations of the Oppressed (*arman-e mostazafin*). Some members of the group including the group's leader, Mohammad Bagher Borzoui, were jailed in the early 1980s. Another group with which some of Shariati's followers, including Reza Alijani and Taghi Rahmani, were involved during the late 1970s and early 1980s was the Organization of Revolutionary