PART ONE

Ahmad Fardid and His Legacy

Introduction

This book continues my earlier study on the influence of the Heideggerian counter-Enlightenment in Iran. My last book, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, focused on Ahmad Fardid's thought, as part of the broader circulation of intellectual ideas to Iran (the European counter-Enlightenment tradition), and the reception of Persian Islam in Europe (in Henry Corbin's thought). The book explores the nature of these ideas and tradition as they travel back and forth. More specifically, I examined the ideological hazards of excessive anti-modernity, projected in the *Gharbzadegi* discourse (Westoxication) in Iran.[1] I further discussed the social significance of politicized *Erfan (Persian mysticism)*, or the desire for achieving "Eastern Spirituality," and the violently anti-democratic predicament of what Michel Foucault celebrated as the "politics of Spirituality."[2] The current volume continues this important scholarly investigation, although in a rather different format. This new and complimentary book engages in a dialog on Ahmad Fardid's intellectual legacy, by those who admire him, some who were once inspired by him but are now critical of his thinking, and others who may hold a more mixed and ambivalent view of Fardid and his ideas.

The present volume, in this sense, has multiple authors. It contains interviews with thirteen individuals, each of whom speaks about Fardid's seminal role and influence in the history of Iranian modernity. This invests the book with a conversational quality, as the reader is invited to engage with a variety of intellectual sensibilities and political outlooks. This book presents, ultimately, a critical dialog on the development of modern Iranian intellectual ideas: from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, to the post-revolutionary Iranian reality of today.

[1] Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Thought of Ahamd Fardid*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.
[2] For a detailed discussion of Foucault's writings about Iran, please see, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, chapter, 6, pp. 166–214

These richly insightful commentaries on Fardid's thought offer a unique opportunity for reflection. A vista opens to display the crucial intellectual and political debates which dominated the twentieth-century politics of Iran. Certain of these debates persist into contemporary times, informing a unique but sociologically recognizable Iranian tradition of political post-modernism.

Many individuals interviewed in this book knew Fardid closely during the formative stages of their lives. They include followers, opponents, and neutral witnesses. Many are highly influential figures in contemporary Iranian culture and thought. They include activists, philosophers, and writers. Fascinatingly, these witnesses concur on important points: Fardid's ambitious claims to the absolute, his existential torment, and his uncompromising belligerence toward those disagreeing with his obscure views. They also testify to Fardid's paralyzing perfectionism, which prevented him from committing his thought to writing, and impaired his ability to reach determinate conclusions. However, despite this concurrence upon Fardid's dark side, the interviews also portray a complex and fascinating man, who both lived through and shaped a seminal period in modern Iranian history. Fardid's shaping ideological influence, we must concede, produced disaster for Iran, as for other countries whose intellectuals have embraced a similar discursive legacy of counter-Enlightenment. It is thus imperative to study this sociological case, a core feature of one major twentieth-century national revolution, and learn its crucial lessons for the future.

These collected stories recount Fardid's participation in Iran's emergent twentieth-century civil society, which was dynamic and creative, yet perennially endangered. The book permits appreciation of how Fardid marked Iran's historical trajectory, articulating an ideology that partakes of a broader twentieth-century Heideggerian tradition. It at once inflamed Iran's civil society, electrifying intellectuals disillusioned with the Left and seeking "themselves" and inciting the uprooted masses upon an existentially orienting populist platform. Yet, by denouncing as "inauthentic" the very institutions and principles sustaining Iran's new civil society, themselves already under authoritarian attack, it demolished the future growth of that Iranian civil society. It extended the nightmare of political authoritarianism, based on the false promise of a universal panacea, in the highly concocted notion of Islam as a total ideology. A fantastically modern

project, it aggressively targeted modernism as an alien implantation from the West.

Fardid loathed everything about the modern Iranian avant-garde culture. Yet, in historical retrospect, Fardid appears as one of the more eccentric and outrageous figures of Iran's mid-twentieth-century avant-garde. His eccentric and sometimes tragic personality was captivatingly entertaining, and conspicuously public, with the result that his story caught the imaginations of many. Fardid was a man to be watched, in the best tradition of path-breaking modernist intellectuals. His personal crisis was, in an obscure way, also a national crisis. Fardid thirsted for power and influence, in the classic modern narcissist fixation. He confused his inner crisis for the nation's destiny. As in other national contexts, where Fardid's type of "spiritual politics" were seriously attempted, the consequence in Iran was bleak political oppression. The experiment produced major setbacks for the welfare of ordinary Iranians – socially, politically, and culturally. Fardid's drama, as an influential "Islamic" ideologue, is a socially profound and tragic experience, containing important historical lessons. The social disaster of Iran's Islamist experiment far outstretches Fardid the man in historical importance – yet we cannot understand the 1978–79 Revolution without him. The historical lessons concern a far larger matter: the ideological and political limits in the institutional trajectories of modern nation-making. The Fardidian dream, in our day, has far from exhausted itself as a political pattern. We tragically continue to witness it today, across the Middle East, where state collapse and economic desolation have left millions of children prey to ideologically deformed mentors. These visionaries preach a false utopia based on mass violence, while generously lining their own pockets in a short-term bid for power through war.

Iranian Cosmopolitanism and Its Nativist Discontents

From this biographical and intellectual sketch of Fardid, we see his intervention as an integral moment in modern Iran's history. The development of Iranian modernism, from the beginning, embodied a "new," but counter-Enlightenment, ideology. This was imagined as an authentic project for social change, that is, a "post-traditional" vision, yet embedded within Iranian and Islamic traditions. This entire landscape, in which Fardid's role was central, constitutes a very

important part of Iran's cultural and political genealogy, extending through the last century.

The Iranian quest to achieve modernity has been complex, troubled, and ultimately a tragic experience. Yet there is no denying the modernist dynamism and cultural creativity of Iran's struggle. The Iranians are pioneers, to all appearances, in both embracing modernity, and in producing its intellectual and political alternatives. The Iranian modernist experience is therefore shot through with strange antinomies. Contemporary Iranians seem seduced by the cosmopolitism of modern culture, and participate in creating modern literary, artistic, and political sensibilities. Yet, any observer of modern Iranian culture clearly sees a deeply nativist current, animated by the criticism of so-called "Westoxication." Iran, over the past century or so, as a cultural space, has cultivated a profound ambivalence to modernity. We see a cultural and intellectual landscape, at once hospitable and hostile to literary, philosophical, and political ideas from all parts of the world.

An entire constellation of ideas, desires, hopes, and hate, has been produced and debated, with the rise and fall of key Iranian intellectuals, as the most committed participants in the making of modern Iran. Iranian intellectual discourses, from the middle of the nineteenth century until today, in their incompletion, constitute a vast intellectual boutique, both global and local, ancient and modern, and ultimately postmodern. A place of seduction for those who can risk the utopian intoxication of pure intellectualism, but a place of disappointment for those seeking practical results, these Iranian visions are often at war on general politics. Although Iranian intellectual history is informed by the "uniquely" Persian quality of its cultural history, Persian poetry, Sufism, and spiritual Islam (Rumi, Hafez, Shi'i Messianism, etc.), it is also very cosmopolitan. The circulation of intellectual ideas from India, the Ottoman Empire, and Europe, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the very serious involvement of the Iranian intellectual Left with German Marxism and Russian communism, in the later twentieth century, all constitute deep historical impressions shaping Iran's "unique" intellectual tradition. Consider the major twentieth-century Iranian novel, *The Blind Owl*: half of the novel occurs in India, and the fusion of Iranian and Indian cultures is a central theme. The novel was written in India, by an exiled intellectual critiquing the Pahlavi regime through a dark and oneiric allegory that marked a world landmark in the intractable literature of the surrealist

labyrinth. To top it all, its author died in exile as a suicide victim in a Paris hotel, where he is celebrated as a cultural celebrity of grave modernist importance.

Iranian Modernities

In Iranian cultural and social history, the intellectual category of "the Modern" has undergone three principle stages. There was, first, the "adaptive stage." It initially obtained substance as a transnational and strategic "adaptation," under the intensifying pressures of military inferiority and economic penetration, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It subsequently entered the second stage, the "dialog" mode in the 1940s: widespread public experiments in generating autonomous power, occurring through news media, political parties, labor organizations, and the arts, based on a cosmopolitan cultural orientation. This second historical pattern yielded, following the 1953 coup, to the third phase in bitter intellectual "resentment", dominating the 1960s and 1970s. Produced by the stifling authoritarian violence of the Pahlavi regime, which permitted no public self-expression, this new vision culminated, politically, in the total rejection of "Western" modernity. The upshot of this third and most recent phase was the 1978 creation of the Islamic Republic.

Here is where the intellectual centrality of Fardid should be located, as the obscure philosophical genesis of a "new explanation" for all of Iran's (and humanity's) ills, in terms of "loss" of "authentic roots" and "identity," under the "universalizing" power of "Western modernity." If initially a highly concocted intellectual position, the Westoxication concept became – in the hands of acutely perceptive activists – a powerful populist axis of mass mobilization, appealing to deep-seated national pride and religious prejudice, and a fused notion of transcendental and social justice.

In the first phase, a series of top-down elitist experiments sought to reproduce a lost economic and, above all, military parity with the West, and, also, regional neighbors (i.e. the Ottomans), in a deadly geopolitical arms race. The second phase involved a mass-based and heterogeneous grassroots modernist movement for self-empowerment, upon the institutionally altered terrain of everyday public life. The third embraced an alternative modern tradition, in romantic recovery of the self, as an authoritarian politics aspiring to pure cultural autonomy,

within a hostile geopolitical arena. What immediately strikes any observer about the second two phases is their depth of creative richness as modernist experiments: in their struggles, temptations, contradictions, as well as their dramatic successes and failures.

Strikingly, Iran's modernist experience mirrors the emergence and myriad developments of Western modernism. This is less so in the precise details, but more in the universal modernist spirit which has – in some measure, and however unevenly – conditioned all countries. In a convergence, simultaneously creatively inspiring and highly dangerous, art and everyday life meet. The triumphs of technology and science transform not only our everyday lives, but also our very modes of perceiving reality, and the categories for understanding it. It was from this insight that the Futurists and the Vorticists, quintessential movements of early twentieth-century European modernism, envisioned life as ever-increasing acceleration, mass mobilization, and publicly transfixing spectacles of the fantastic. These artistic visions celebrated mass sacrifice and erotic intensification as a new type of mass spirituality wedded to the machine. They hoped to rescue art from its banal appropriation by the bourgeoisie as mere entertainment and profit, and to restore its fundamental meaning as a publicly unifying power, wedding mystery to the machine. A craving for new forms of belonging sprang from tragic experiences of total war and the ceaseless boom and bust of capitalism.

Fardid requires analysis within this purview. However, like his mentor, Heidegger, Fardid despised the entire modernist movement. Nietzsche, in an earlier generation, also loathed the entire gamut of modernists, from anarchists to avant-garde artists, while heralding the restoration of a higher aristocratic caste, based on the modern reconstruction of the order of rank. This farcical power dream, although attempted tragically in the mid-twentieth century, reflects individual megalomania more than realistic political conditions. Far more often, the aristocratic and elitist visions of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Fardid, despite disparaging the "modern" for its levelling nihilism, becomes the principle ally and unwitting plaything of utopian dreamers and obscurantist Left intellectuals, from millennial socialists (for whom only a genuine "new beginning" will do as the "revolution"), to anarchists (for whom all power must be unceasingly deconstructed and overturned "forever"). Meanwhile, from their darkened sanctuaries of elitist snobbery, figures like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Fardid can

only bitterly bemoan being "hijacked" by the very "shallow modernists" they hate. Their core devotees – in the old manner of biblical disciples – count for little under modern conditions. In a great irony, the very sociological dynamism these elitists have rejected snaps back to encompass them within a mass populist wave whose character is profoundly alien to their intentions.

If these aesthetic movements tilted toward fascism, seeking a new home in unbridled chaos and perhaps a new "order," communism promised a new collective security and belonging as well as unrivalled creative expression and power on the other side of a cataclysmic revolution. The art of modernism, at the popular level, is populations seeking by multiple experiments to find a home in the alienating political and economic turmoil of modernity.

Thus, it happens, that the highly elitist aspiration to a restored "home" (Nietzsche would raise the stony face of ancient Rome anew upon the icefield of his spiritual mountain peak, far above the hated rabble, as Fardid or Heidegger would ensconce themselves as gurus upon a comparable peak holding keys to a lost "eternity" for the few) is embraced within a crude wave of populist nostalgia for a "lost home," reflecting the brutalizing social experience of modernization for the millions. All the elitist aesthetic pretensions, the genteel notion of secret mysteries, are squashed under the bulldozing advance of uneducated superstition, popular culture, and the wildest resentments against those who have illegitimately gained grotesquely more from the modernization process. In short, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Fardid were themselves modernists whose hatred of modernism only comically betrays their inextricable oscillation within a cultural embeddedness which they despise. It is like the old dilemma of the mirror: no matter how fast you approach it, your reflection is always there before you. With that, the dreams of sustained youth, or other vanities, are dispelled by a simple encounter with reality.

This aesthetic history of modernism, with its troubling Nietzschean link between extremist politics with undreamed of heights in human achievement, ratifies Marshall Berman's innovative line of argument. Modernity, he argued, is an entirely new quality of experience, which is public and collective, centered in urban spaces, and anchored in the psychological archetype of multiplying new buildings, railways, factories, etc., all to be periodically destroyed and then rapidly rebuilt in horrifically violent but liberating cataclysms. On the other hand,

Berman also articulated a vision of modernism as an unprecedented opportunity for self-creation and discovery. To be modern, he argued, is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, self-transformation, and ultimately world transformation. At the same time, this condition threatens to destroy everything that belongs to us, whether spiritual or material, and everything we know, ultimately annihilating everything we are. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air."

Within this maelstrom, in the modern Iranian context, stands a bemused Fardid, blinking confusedly in the bright sunlight, wondering, above all, how this private narcissistic cult became transformed into a hurricane of revolutionary passion. Faced with this, Fardid hoped to profit from the occasion and enthrone himself as the chief public intellectual of a new human epoch of a reborn religious politics. Instead, he found himself deftly swept aside by far more competitive and savvy power actors, in a public realm shaped by the deadly ambitions of millions of desperate people, clear sighted because deprived of the refinement of choice. The baroque and delicately crafted fantasies of elites perish instantly when matched against the mass urge for survival.

Fardid's farcical plight doubles Berman's discussions of Russia's revolutionary dynamism, on the one hand, and his idea of the pastoral ideal on the other. For Fardid – despite his suave urbanism, cosmopolitan air, and delectable theoretical creations, completely at odds with the painfully impoverished Iranian mass – was a philosopher of the pastoral. Only, like the Subaltern School, which is his curious modern contemporary, the wretched and unglamorous economic misery of the mass is turned into an accomplished work of theoretical beauty and contemplation for the protected scholarly elite, and a balm for their troubled consciences and lost souls.

The pastoral ideal involves mythical memory based on images of unspoiled rural life. It is contrasted with the corruption of urban development. Often embraced by the first generations of rural migrants to new urban centers, it rejects a modernizing world without social security, guilds, unions, or any meaningful or protective group organization. The pastoral ideology promises deliverance through a restoration of traditional roots.

Fardid, in his romanticism, confused these raw and traumatic social experiences, in which parents may watch their children perish from