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**Mistaken Anti-modernity**  
Fardid After Fardid

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Ali Mirsepassi

**Mistaken Anti-modernity**

Fardid After Fardid



## Mistaken Anti-modernity

Fardid After Fardid<sup>1</sup>

### The Worth and Peril of Modernity

In this article, I undertake several lines of enquiry in the history of ideological and political movements centered on the “modernity” polemic at the transnational level. By analyzing these movements in juxtaposition, I explore the possibility of more diverse narratives of modernity and anti-modernity than are assumed by conventional dichotomies in contemporary academic writings. The results of my enquiry challenge several pervasive “dogmas” of *post-colonial theory*: that orientalism is a purely modernist intellectual project, while anti-orientalism is by necessity its more “local” discursive counterpart in a dualism of East and West. My principle evidence rests upon analysis of Ahmad Fardid’s thought, a complex and contradictory ideology, philosophically embodying both orientalist and Western at the same time as anti-orientalist and traditional ideas. In this connection, the article explores the idea of *Gharbzadegi* (*Westoxification*), in writings of Fardid, Al-e Ahmad, and Shari’ati. These individuals share an important elective affinity, while each articulating a distinct vision and alternative meaning for the politically influential *Gharbzadegi* concept. This analysis reveals a multi-centered and transnational intellectual space, which can be reduced neither to East nor West in a simple geographic dichotomy.

I have always had conflicting personal views in my reflections upon what once was called the modern West, but today is usually labelled “modernity.” I have long harbored an overall feeling of resentment toward the West’s uncompromising power, the abstract quality of its social vision, and its “universal” self-portrayal as the unique option for the future. Yet, I have also found the modern social project seductive, in providing a narrative on human agency and “cosmopolitan” ethical imaginary.<sup>2</sup> To borrow from

1 This paper was presented at the Conference “Critique of Modernity,” organized by the Centre for Advanced Studies on “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities” at Leipzig University, June 14–15, 2018.

2 John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1991).

John Dewey, it has the promise of a “common faith” for the human community. Modern societies, to a large extent, have opened a road which may lead to a better life, with reduced material suffering for ordinary people. Yet I understand modernity as a hazardous path to certain human existential desires and needs. This conflicted picture describes the new cosmopolitanism of the modern West. The risk here, for a person of my background, is to be excluded, where cosmopolitanism is imagined within the vista of “Westoxification” rather than a “common ethical humanism.”

This tentative view of modernity, in my mind, often vacillates between hope and bitterness. There is hope: I am often inspired by modernist literature and the arts, democratic social movements, and post-metaphysical thought (modern science and rational thought). There is bitterness in the dark experiences of modern colonialism, state violence, and the arrogance of the modern Western view of the wider world. You may rightly conclude that I am undecided, or, less generously, confused and mistaken about the worth of modernity and its possibilities. I would prefer a more humble and modest modernity, but this does not come naturally for a world history making enterprise on this scale.

For these reasons, I am not a highly enthusiastic modernist scholar. I have always worried about modernity’s excessive intrusion into our lived experience, and the means/end dichotomy underlying the intrusion. However, I am by far more terrified of the anti-modernist political wave. Its heroic emotional power, both nostalgic and prophetic, can mobilize the anxious minds and restless bodies of modern populations, in pursuit of the impossible dream of a perfect heaven on earth or hereafter. Whereas modernity is very utopian in its abstract promise, it is objectively constrained by the material reality available to us. Anti-modernity, however, is recklessly fierce in its “calling,” as it refuses to recognize the materiality of our life experience. There are no “outside” constraints. Its extreme “culturalism,” a boundless wave of imaginative language, can capture intellectual and lay psyches equally, and drive us all headlong to its tragically destructive end.

I am envious of my late friend and brilliant scholar of the modern experience, Marshal Berman, who could speak or write passionately, with fantastic enthusiasm and clarity, about modern possibilities and achievements. I am far less nostalgic, and much more troubled by how incomplete, to borrow from Jürgen Habermas, “the project of modernity” is. Those intellectuals and thinkers whom I admire seem to share my hesitation in fully embracing modernity. Dewey, for example, was concerned with the “spiritual” fragility of democratic politics and invited us to embrace a “common faith.” This idea crosses the boundaries of the secular and religious,

while remaining embedded in human labor, and our ability to create and remember to reinvigorate modern and democratic sensibilities. Dewey believed that the “religious” could be liberated from organized “religion,” as the resource of human creativity and intelligence. He also suggested that problem-solving could form a new, cosmopolitan and pluralistic basis for belonging.

Marshal Berman was a genuine product of the Western modernity of the 1960s. The modernity I personally experienced, by contrast, was ironically self-negating. It offered me university education at the Faculty of Law, Tehran University. However, it also kept me in the prison house of the academy. There was little to no space for critical learning, debate, and free thinking or action. As an intellectual space, it was deeply anti-intellectual. In short, my experience in the 1970s at Tehran University was depressingly different to Marshal Berman’s lived experience at Columbia University in the 1960s. He was protesting a mistaken modernity, but, I was working hard to liberate myself from its brutal hands.

It might seem, therefore, natural to expect me to join the anti-modernist, or, say, post-modernist, academic current. Instead, I have been thinking and writing about the anti-modern intellectual trends in Iran for the past 25 years. I have felt, and been reminded by my colleagues, that my work is not very relevant to our time and academic life today. “No one really does these kinds of works anymore, except for Jeffrey Herf<sup>3</sup>,” one academic friend told me in the 1990s. I have continued my work regardless of the pressure by the academic guardians of the current orthodoxy, as I increasingly find my work of more relevance to our life outside of the university.

Of course, while I may admire and share the views of certain scholars in post-colonial or post-modernism, others trouble me deeply. I am above all worried about the anti-intellectualism that some among the post-colonial scholars regularly advocate. A kind of “academic tribalism” prevails today, which has led to the imposition of an orthodoxy, which we are all expected to conform to. The idea that, for example, “one will not read orientalist scholars,” or, take any modernist works seriously, seem very troubling. Even more disturbing is to think of certain scholarly works as “academic taboo,” in an emerging new conformism which forces us to unquestionably follow certain trends and defend certain ideas almost blindly.

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3 Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

A recent book on Michel Foucault's writings about the Iranian revolution provides a good example of academic tribalism, in the anti-intellectual and dogmatic current. This book, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment*,<sup>4</sup> is an extension of an earlier work by the same author, simply sub-titled "In Defense of Foucault on the Iranian Revolution."<sup>5</sup> It is one among assorted published pieces by the great many Foucault admirers defending the philosopher's very romantic exposé of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Almost none of these 'scholars' know much about Iranian history, politics, or culture, and most are familiar only with secondary sources on the Iranian Revolution. However, they seem to feel a "moral" obligation to criticize those who have questioned Foucault, and a personal commitment to defend his legacy impetuously.

Foucault had only crude knowledge of the subject of his writings. He intentionally refused to even talk to secular (liberal or leftist) intellectuals and activists during his two trips to Iran. He praised Ayatollah Khomeini while suggesting that the "Islamic State" might prove a viable alternative to liberal democracy.<sup>6</sup> None of these facts bother any of Foucault's admirers, who insist that the anti-modernist optic is the only meaningful mode of political judgment.<sup>7</sup> I find Foucault to be a brilliant scholar in many ways. While I appreciate some of his works on the interrelated nature of "power" and "truth claim making," his writings on the Iranian Revolution were an eye-opening revelation for me. How can so great a thinker write these very flawed pieces, while never critically reflecting on

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4 Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

5 Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, "When Life Will No Longer Barter Itself: In Defense of Foucault on the Iranian Revolution," in *A Foucault for the 21st Century: Governmentality, Biopolitics and Discipline in the New Millennium*. Ed. Sam Binkley and Jorge Capetillo (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

6 Maxime Rodinson wrote a critical piece about Foucault's writings and pointed out that: "Foucault felt embarrassed to speak of Islamic government as an 'idea' or even an 'ideal.' But the slogan of an Islamic government seemed to express a 'political will' that impressed him. According to him, it concerned, on the one hand, an effort to give the traditional structures of Islamic society (as they appeared in Iran) a permanent role in political life" (Maxime Rodinson, "Khomeini and the 'Primacy of the Spiritual,'" *Le Nouvel Observateur* February 19 (1979)).

7 Maxime Rodinson further wrote: "A very great thinker, Michel Foucault, part of a line of radically dissident thought, placed excessive hopes in the Iranian Revolution. The great gaps in his knowledge of Islamic history enabled him to transfigure the events in Iran, to accept for the most part the semi-theoretical suggestions of his Iranian friends, and to extrapolate from this by imagining an end of history that would make up for disappointments in Europe and elsewhere" (Rodinson, "Khomeini and the 'Primacy of the Spiritual'").



them, and then remain obstinate even when it later becomes clear how wrong he had been? More curiously, what makes so many well-known scholars, who admire him, persist in defending him and, in a sense, re-affirming his flawed writings? This type of scholarly practice is the very symptom of unreflective orthodoxy.

The indifference to ‘Foucault’s arguments’ compelled me to reflect more deeply on Foucault’s articulation of power/knowledge. The idea that power shapes our understanding of “truth” can appear a reasonable interpretation and a productive sociological concept. Institutions and processes of knowledge production do not operate in a vacuum, or outside of power relationships. However, a rather careless understanding of knowledge/power – perhaps misunderstanding – can lead us to a narrowly ideological view of the knowledge-truth relation. All ideas are imagined as reducible to certain political positions. Identity becomes prioritized over objectivity. This can dangerously lead to a sweeping disregard for empirical evidence, historical information, and even the desire for scholarly “objectivity” and fairness. What remains, subsequently, is “the war” of “truth making,” and the policing of ideas, concepts and theories as a moral act. A war of intellectual “tribes,” instead of the desire for clear conceptualization of reality, leaves nothing but an academic culture of group affiliations. Truth and knowledge is no longer about our ‘scholarly’ efforts and labor to know. Instead, it becomes a product of the ‘scholar’s’ identity. This is precisely what frightens me about anti-modernity in scholarship.



*Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*<sup>8</sup>, a study of Iranian anti-modernism, profiles the philosophy of Ahmad Fardid (1910–1994). Fardid was an Iranian philosopher who coined the idea of *Gharbzadegi* (*Westoxification*). He was perhaps the founding father of anti-orientalism and post-colonial theory in Iran and beyond. Fardid was a profoundly conservative man, who waged a radical intellectual assault on modern Iranian ideas and experiences. He advocated an elusive notion of “spiritual politics,” along the same lines as Henri Corbin earlier and Michel Foucault later. After the Islamic Revolution of 1978, Fardid proclaimed

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8 Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

himself the philosopher of the Islamic Revolution. Fardid keenly supported the most conservative faction among the Iranian Islamists.

In the 1960s and 70s, Fardid was at the center of attention for some of the most influential Iranian philosophers, scholars and intellectuals. These included Dariush Shayegan, Hamid Enayat, Shahroukh Meskoub, Abdul Hassan Jalili, Reza Davari, and many others. Such important Iranian intellectuals as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Dariush Ashuri, and Ehsan Naraghi were influenced by him, and they spread his ideas to the public in popularized form.

In my view, Fardid, despite many failings (inability to articulate coherent arguments, and personal flaws), was a pioneer thinker in the anti-orientalist and post-colonial tradition. He was a great Iranian anti-modernist. In this sense, Fardid was true to his own philosophical beliefs during his long life. These included the idea of *Eastern Spirituality* (*Ma'naviyat-e Sharghi*) and *Erfan*, as well as the philosophical embrace of his German interlocutor, Martin Heidegger. Fardid was a true anti-modernist at a formative historical period in modern Iran.

I would like to use my study of Fardid to discuss some theoretical ideas for our reflection, and some key beliefs underpinning post-colonial theory.

*Gharbzadegi* discourse critiques modern and Western ideas as secular and colonial in Iran and the non-West. I would like to argue that the *Gharbzadegi* idea is the complex site of a transnational circulation of ideas, producing a significant discursive formation in the Iranian political imagination. Briefly, two thinkers, Ahmad Fardid and Henri Corbin, are discussed to make my points:

The young Fardid was influenced by the *fin de siècle* French critique of modern Western rationality, pioneered by Henri Bergson. He was also inspired by the notion of *Spiritual Islam*, pronounced by Henry Corbin. These ideas helped Fardid with a platform offering a new interpretation of Islamic and Iranian traditions. At this juncture, Fardid's thoughts were closely related to European counter-Enlightenment ideology. Fardid subsequently spent eight years in post-World War II France and Germany (1947–1955), where he derived inspiration from the Heideggerian critique of Western modernity.<sup>9</sup>

At the Sorbonne, Fardid studied under Maurice de Gandillac (1906–2006), a professor of medieval philosophy. De Gandillac was deeply in-

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9 Fardid mentioned Heidegger and German phenomenology in some of his writings before he left for Europe. It seems he was introduced to Heidegger via reading French early in his life.

spired by Nietzschean thought. His major book, *Geneses of Modernity*, has strong Heideggerian influence. De Gandillac argued that there are at least two sources for the development of modernity. One is the practice of excluding “others”, or the idea of progress. The non-moderns, within the ideal of progress, are the “damned”. The second source is the thirst for knowledge, the defining identity of those modern “progressives” who are saved. He also suggested that in modern subjectivity, the category of knowledge has replaced God (for Fardid, carnal soul, or *nafs-e ammareh*). Modernity is therefore divided, as in a split personality, between “rationality” and “subjectivity.”<sup>10</sup>

Within this context, Fardid coined the Persian term *Gharbzadegi* (*Westoxification*), as a “localized” Heideggerian anti-modernist idea. He explained his intellectual transformation while living in Germany: Everyone knows that I coined the concept of “*Gharbzadegi*.” I was

inspired while I was in solitude somewhere in Europe [Heidelberg, Germany]. I am not suggesting that I am superior to Jalal Al-e Ahmad, nor vice versa. My knowledge, however, is more [than Al-e Ahmad’s]. His way of thinking is different. My lifestyle and my studies are different. From that time [that I offered the concept of *Gharbzadegi*] to now, I have always been on the [same] “path.” I don’t claim that, since I have offered the idea of *Gharbzadegi*, I have achieved a total revolution in my mind. But a kind of revolution has transpired in my thinking.<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously, Corbin, also inspired by Heidegger and the Iranian philosopher, Suhrawardi (1155–1191), presented a new understanding of Is-

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10 De Gandillac’s 600-page book traces “the intellectual and spiritual sources of Europe.” Covering twelve centuries, it traces the duality of metaphysical and mystical paradigms of nature, and projects a “politics of sainthood.” A densely erudite work, locating prophetic premonitions in historical figures and ideas, i.e. Gnosticism, its millennial concluding chapter envisions the “birth of a new world” (Maurice de Gandillac, *Genèses de la modernité: Les douze siècles où se fit notre Europe; de “La cité de Dieu” à “La nouvelle Atlantide”* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1992)). De Gandillac’s interest extended beyond mysticism, to politics. He was a proto-fascist, participating in the *Action Française* party, promoting a royalist, Catholic state, and preaching an anti-Semitic doctrine. This party, born of Dreyfus Affair, foreshadowed the occupation era Vichy regime, and its chief members joined the collaborationist government. Even though a conservative thinker, de Gandillac was a mentor for important post-structuralists during their student days, including Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze.

11 Ahmad Fardid, *Gharb va Gharbzadegi*, Vol. 1 (unpublished, Tehran: Iran Research Institute for Philosophy), 18–19.

lam in Iran as a spiritual tradition. This was based on his interpretation of Shi'a Islam. Soon, Corbin's ideas became influential within the Iranian intellectual scene.

We therefore see a seminal two-way migration of intellectual ideas into national politics, involving Islamic tradition and Heideggerian thought, and French orientalism. The motley cocktail spread from war-ravaged Europe to politically volatile Iran, followed by Iranian Sufi ideas streaming back into Europe, then returning, in newly regenerated form, to their Iranian homeland.

The orientalist Corbin exemplified this amazing concoction: he is known as a French scholar of Persian and Islamic tradition, but, he was also a deeply Heideggerian philosopher who introduced Heidegger's works to French readers. Corbin spent almost half a century surrounding himself with a self-created institution of students and devotees. Editing and translating Iranian and Islamic texts, Corbin established an idiosyncratic interpretation of Iranian Islam that he labelled *Spiritual Islam*. Corbin also belonged to the larger Christian anti-modernist current that grew out of the Cold War era.<sup>12</sup>

Who was Corbin precisely: An orientalist? A Christian anti-modernist? A lover of Islamic mysticism? A Heideggerian? One can pose nearly identical questions for Fardid. These were scholars who crossed intellectual borders, and who are best described as transnational thinkers. While exhibiting certain qualities of the classic orientalists, they also sharply differed from the orientalist model documented by Edward Said. Unlike Said's evocation, they were neither exclusively modernist nor sympathetic to colonial or imperialist desires. On the contrary. Non-Western religious traditions deeply inspired them, and they were radically hostile to the modern West in its secular, imperial, and democratic dimensions.

We need to think through the theoretical implications of these two examples, for they imply something far-reaching about the limits and blind spots of contemporary scholarship.

Let's explain some of these ideas and try to flesh out how they are often related: Ideas, including the apparently "local," "authentic," "traditional," and "non-Western," are part of a broader circulation of intellectual traditions, which travel from West to non-West, and from non-West to the West. Each time these ideas are reconstituted, they take on new meanings. It is important to critically engage them, to grasp the com-

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12 Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

plexity of their place and origin. This applies equally to orientalism and Islam. It is, therefore, necessary to trace the multi-directional migrations as a transnational space of exchange.

Fardid is often represented as a case study of Iranian and Islamic intellectual militancy, an anti-orientalist and anti-Western hero of the authentic. This is certainly how Fardid portrayed himself, and his many faithful associates have extended this one-dimensional myth. Upon critical examination, Fardid's ideas are more derivative of Bergson and Corbin in his early phase, and Heidegger in later years. This is not to suggest that Fardid was merely a passive receptacle for these "foreign" ideas. Rather, I am suggesting that a serious exchange of ideas occurred, and it is important to locate its re-forged boundaries through intellectual exchange patterns.

What is clear, however, is that Fardid's thought is not purely local or non-Western. This is also the case with the Iranian liberal or leftist intellectuals. They are all embedded in a complex circulation of intellectual traditions and ideas, which rather demolishes the entrenched post-colonial myth of a local and authentic culture opposing imported "cultural values." This is simply a falsehood, and yet the cliché thrives in contemporary academia in deeply harmful manner.

We require studies of intellectual migrations from the center to periphery, and back and forth. In the case of Fardid, his notion of *Gharbzadegi* was conceived in Heidelberg, Germany, rather than Tehran, Iran. *Gharbzadegi* travelled to Iran, and we now consider it as an Iranian intellectual production (as Dipankar Gupta's book on Indian modernity argues).<sup>13</sup> The major elements of *Gharbzadegi* – anti-modernism and the return to Iranian/Islamic tradition – were articulated in Europe. The template was largely conceived in Germany's cultural struggle against "Enlightened" Western Europe, and partly within Europe's own counter-modern fringe. Corbin's notion of Shi'ism, as Iranian or *Spiritual Islam*, and Heidegger's confrontation with Western rational and secular thought, were both European intellectual productions. It is, of course, important to consider the anti-Western and "spiritual" ideas in the Iranian intellectual traditions as well. However, it is mistaken to hold – as is routinely assumed – that the idea of *Gharbzadegi* is rooted in Iranian or a non-Western cultural space. In fact, Fardid was annoyed by Al-e Ahmad's use of *Gharbzadegi* precisely because he felt that it failed to appreciate the Heideggerian critique of Western metaphysics. Al-e Ahmad saw an ideological opportunity to mobilize the Iranian masses along nativist lines. For Fardid, however, the core issue was

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13 Dipankar Gupta, *Mistaken Modernity: India Between Worlds* (New Delhi: Harper Collins 2001).

a theoretical genealogy extending to ancient Greek rationalism. In Fardid's mind, this implied the prospect of a total revolution in human consciousness, a remarkable spiritual rebirth.

We need to reflect deeply upon the theoretical implications of Fardid and Corbin, for they have far-reaching significance concerning the orthodox boundaries of contemporary scholarship. These ideas are interrelated in the following manner:

1. It is a false assumption to hold that the Western discourse on the East (in this case, Islam) is a modernist view, imposed mostly from the outside, and frames our knowledge of the East. Corbin was certainly an orientalist and a French gentleman. However, he was also keenly interested in specific traditions within Islam, which he spent most of his life researching and writing about. He was particularly influenced by Suhrawardy's thought. Ironically, several generations of influential Iranian intellectuals – including Fardid, Nasr, Shayegan, and Shari'ati – all embraced anti-modernism, and were critical of Western views of the East, yet were deeply influenced by Corbin's idiosyncratic analysis of Islam. They accordingly produced a view of Islam which took intellectual root in Iran. It is now prized as an authentic and local Iranian intellectual contribution. This version of Iranian Islam is now imagined as either an entirely Western construction, or a purely Iranian version of Islam. The understanding of Islam, in both cases, is limited and analytically problematic.
2. It is problematic that scholars such as Fardid, Nasr, Shayegan, or even Shari'ati, are considered authentically Iranian, while secular intellectuals such as Ahmad Shamlu or Taghi Arani are labeled as westernized. Why is it that European thinkers such as Bergson, Corbin, Heidegger, and Foucault are considered special cases, and no other Western philosophers – such as Locke, Smith, Kant, Marx, and Dewey – enjoy this privilege? There is an orthodox post-colonial optic underlying this routine differentiation, and a false and harmful one.
3. Let us consider Fardid's case more specifically. He studied in Europe for eight years, and, even before, he mostly translated the works of European and American scholars.<sup>14</sup> At Tehran

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14 Fardid's earlier works were almost all on European philosophy, Bergson, Kant, Heidegger or the American educational system, including a piece on John Dewey.

University Fardid only offered classes in European philosophy. He hardly ever wrote or lectured on what is considered traditional Islam (the exceptions are when he presented his ideas in the West).<sup>15</sup> Fardid was certainly not a practicing Muslim. What gives him more Iranian authenticity, compared to liberal or even Left-leaning Iranian intellectuals, say, a person like Nima Yushij? Fardid was not shy in reminding us that he was interested above all in a Heideggerian (phenomenology, hermeneutics) interpretation of Islam. What makes the Heideggerian Islam more authentic or local than say, liberal Islam, or a Kantian understanding of Islam? Is this a political position, or a statement about the production of knowledge? And, if political, what politics precisely?

4. Regardless of our theoretical preferences, we must conclude that hegemonic/subjugated knowledge is more complex than the works of Said or Foucault have influentially articulated. This critical issue requires greater elaboration: why do we assume, in the context of Iran or other Islamic societies, that liberalism and modernism are the dominant and hegemonic mode of understanding the world? Or that, the political order of things is institutionalized within the liberal political and intellectual framework? Is this really the case in all corners of the world? This is either a great simplification, or it is an anti-modernist way of thinking about our time.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that, our understanding of orientalism, in the Islamic context, requires a more complex conceptualization. Said's evocation of a modernist and Western desire to represent the East as an object of domination, as the core of the orientalist scholarship, is at best, incomplete, and, at worst, naive. Corbin was militantly anti-modernist and anti-Western. In many respects, his ideas were perhaps closer to that of post-colonial theorists. Yet, he was also an orientalist. This conundrum requires careful thinking and critical reflection.

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15 The title of Fardid's thesis was "Le problème de l'inexistence netiquette dans la philosophie de l'Islam." Fardid attended, in May 1968, the Congress of Orientalists, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and presented "L'Idée de l'angoisse dans la pensée mystique de l'Islam."

### Many Faces of *Gharbzadegi*: Fardid, Al-e Ahmad and Shari'ati

From the preceding analysis, we may draw a series of preliminary conclusions. At a broad level, the academically popular anti-modern critique of modernity encompasses a wider intellectual and social movement than exemplified in Heidegger and the German tradition affiliated with him. However, there is a deep elective affinity with comparable intellectual movements, and their political logic. In Iran, an important strain in anti-Western ideas precedes Fardid, and has been articulated by other Iranian thinkers including Kasravi, Shadman, and others. These two postulates provide a focus for better explaining the ideological and political logic of the worldwide Islamist movement, as a mode of popular rebellion and an academic posture of ultra-radicalism.

This essay explains Islamism, a modern ideological movement, within the broader context of the nativist social imaginary of *Gharbzadegi* – as a paradoxically universal phenomenon. Weber's "elective affinities" very effectively explains its internal conflicts and contradictions, why it can appeal simultaneously to state elites, capitalists, proletarian revolutionaries, and bohemian artists, and serve conflicting social interests while retaining discursive coherence. It also explains other forms of *Gharbzadegi*, and how they either share features or differ from Islamism.

To make sense of *Gharbzadegi*, in this respect, we need a corresponding explanation for modernity. In this light, the history of neither modernization nor liberal democracy ever developed "naturally," or in a "normal" social situation over time (as Habermas has argued concerning France and England). In every case, society was forced, and, even as they modernized, they also developed a hostile and painful relationship with modernity. Even after becoming modern, or modernizing, an intense and even violent struggle continued, and proceeded to shape the modernization process in a more "rational", or, as post-colonial theorists call it, "local," way. It is within this conjuncture that the 'old regime,' masses, and intellectuals may share similar social and political attitudes, that we may characterize as an "elective affinity." This is the case being made for *Gharbzadegi* as a social imaginary. It is the general sociological source of anti-modern ideologies and social movements. Both the left and conservative, religious and secular, partake of a common social imaginary, while believing they confront each other from irreconcilably opposed ideological divides. The ideology is not the primary mover, but complex and



many-sided institutional pressures, mediated through a traceable social imaginary, where worldview and social interest have “elective affinities.”

It is *Gharbzadegi* as a social imaginary that animates diverse and conflicting social interests. There is only an “elective affinity” between different groups. The masses starve but do not speak (i.e. they have no channel). The intellectuals may be unemployed and hungry, but they are literate, privileged, and partake of a cosmopolitan intellectual culture. Military intellectuals are concerned with performance in war, and the treatment of the masses (because now they come from the masses, unlike before). From these differing vantage points, they recognize themselves.

Discussion of *Gharbzadegi* in post-revolutionary Iran has produced many scholarly, thoughtful, and realistic pieces on the anti-modern discourse in Iran in the 1960s and 70s. There are also studies that focus on some of the leading intellectuals who coined, popularized, and polarized, the concept of *Gharbzadegi* in pre-and post-revolutionary Iran. Ahmad Fardid, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, and Ali Shari’ati are considered the intellectual bearers of the anti-modern and anti-Western discourse in Iran. Some have also presented earlier anti-Western ideas in the work of Ahmad Kasravi, Shademan, and others.

Overall, the explanation for the rise and popularity of *Gharbzadegi* in Iran is attributed to either religion and/or tradition (i.e. Islamic reaction to modern ideas, secularism, democracy, etc.), or leftist and Third Worldist anti-imperialist currents, and Iranian nativism. These are primarily based on the assumption that intellectuals or movements propagated *Gharbzadegi* discourse to undermine the modernizing and pro-Western Pahlavi State. What if, however, the actual roots of *Gharbzadegi* discourse are embedded in the very Pahlavi state ideology? That certainly undermines several generations of consensus on *Gharbzadegi* as uniquely oppositional, or even authentically indigenous.

In an article entitled “Ghost of Heidegger,” Alexander S. Duff provides the context for the Iranian anti-modern discourse, within the global setting of social and material elements interacting as “elective affinities” with the *Gharbzadegi* social imaginary:

A specter haunts the post-Cold War liberal order – the specter of radical spiritual malaise. This discontent with or downright opposition to the Western-originated, universalist claims of the broadly liberal cultural, economic, and political order takes diverse forms. One can detect it among Iranian revolutionary theocrats, Russian imperialist

ideologues, white supremacist “Identities,” European neo-fascists, identity-politics partisans, and anti-foundationalist intellectuals of many stripes. But standing behind some of the leading intellectual and political figures in this mélange of counter-liberalism is one animating mind, that of Martin Heidegger.<sup>16</sup>

This suggests that a broader sociological and material basis exists for anti-modern ideas. The article evokes a “radical spiritual malaise.” By this loose grounding for analysis, the article asks why other alternative ideologies have failed, but the Heideggerian social imaginary is still pervasive? Since the end of the Cold War, an open question has persisted over whether any organizing political principle can successfully compete with the liberal consensus on the secular state, constrained by democratic accountability and rule of law. To date, neither the remnants of Soviet-style communism, nor authoritarian capitalism, reactionary fascism, or Islamic theocracy have achieved a successful combination of military strength and political legitimacy even among their own citizens. But the Heideggerian legacy threatens liberal democracy, because of the breadth of its appeal abroad and at home.

Heidegger’s vision exemplifies the struggle between liberal cosmopolitanism and local cultural or moral claims to identity. It recommends itself to virtually every variety of particularism, while charging universalist claims with being too thin to provide meaningful sources of human identity. Here is a good explanation for why Heidegger’s critique of the modern West is attractive to anti-modern intellectuals and movements, and what is wrong with liberalism.

The Heideggerian template can help to clear up the confusion about the origin and the construction of *Gharbzadegi* discourse. It helps to explain how, based on “elective affinities,” radical, conservative, secular, and religious intellectuals and political figures have all embraced it from varied perspectives. It both corresponded to their perceived interests and seemed aesthetically compelling. This explains how *Gharbzadegi* became a vision of political radicalization, for revolutionaries seeking a new revolutionary ideology faced with political setback. For example, many Iranian intellectuals, known as the third line, *Khate Secom*, who mostly left the Tudeh party to join a new intellectual circle of liberal Islamists (*Nehzate Azadi*), were instrumental in using and popularizing *Gharbzadegi* in the

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16 Alexander S. Duff, “Heidegger’s Ghosts,” *The American Interest* 11, no. 5 (February 25, 2016).

1960s and 70s. Both Al-e Ahmad and Shari'ati belong to these currents, and they are mostly responsible for the radical propagation of *Gharbzadegi*. Others in this current were keen to use *Gharbzadegi* to delegitimize the secular left, or the modernization of the Iranian society. These individuals, however, made an abrupt turn. After the revolution, and without any self-critique, they became champions of anti-*Gharbzadegi* ideology.

It is necessary to clarify the origin and distinctiveness of various usages and meanings for the term *Gharbzadegi*. Fardid, Al-e Ahmad, and Shari'ati shared several important ideas:

1. that "religion," in the Iranian context, involves the tradition of thinking and doing in the local and customary way. Sacred morality, they held, at the center of life, has declined and is being eradicated. They all three realized this and had no illusion about the viability of returning to or maintaining it.
2. Their project was, in a way, a post-Islamic recovery of tradition. To this extent, they relied on a similar intellectual idea in the West, with a similar concern for the twilight of traditional social meaning and organization.
3. They were also either indifferent, or even hostile, to religious scholars who they perceived as "fighting a losing battle," or, unprepared to participate in their new project of a "futurist" traditionalism.

To the extent that these three thinkers are displeased with the decline of religion and tradition, they were, each in their own ways, hostile to modernity and sympathetic to anti-modernism. Yet the three also had substantial differences of outlook. Fardid was less interested in articulating a project for the future, and yearned to defeat the modern world, based on a dark view of the future. His project was apocalyptic. Fardid's attraction to Nazism, his enthusiasm for Khomeini's leadership, and proximity to the state security forces, are the evidence for this.<sup>17</sup>

As an intellectual, Fardid was a deeply obscure figure. He wrote in inaccessible jargon. It is possible that without Al-e Ahmad's popularization of the term *Gharbzadegi*, Fardid would never have been elevated in Iran's political and intellectual history. Fardid's concept borrowed the Heideggerian notion that something intrinsic to Greek rationality had blocked a spiritual core in human experience and promoted an objectifying tendency. By this account, the modern sickness had contaminated the West and Iran long ago. Certainly, in the Abbasid Empire, Islam was already

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<sup>17</sup> Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*.

contaminated by *Gharbzadegi*, and the “ontological roots” in the Prophectic era were cut away. Hence, like Heidegger, Fardid condemned what he called “humanism,” or the priority of the human subject and agency, in favor of a transcendental mode of intervention. None of this far-fetched, almost cultish, science fiction-like cosmic melodrama would have occurred to the more down to earth Al-e Ahmad.

Al-e Ahmad, by contrast, was an Iranian nationalist, a public intellectual, disillusioned by the Mashruteh project and Tudeh Party failures. He sought a native or national project for his country. From having considered the Soviet Union the “world’s most progressive nation,” he became bitterly disillusioned.<sup>18</sup> He was open to borrowing from the West, and, strikingly, considered the Israeli experience as a possible model for Iran. Al-e Ahmad kept a diary while visiting Israel in 1962, writing:

I as an Easterner [prefer] an Israeli model over all other models of how to deal with the West. How to extract from its industries by the spiritual power of mass martyrdom, how to take restitution from it and spend the capital thus obtained to advance the country.<sup>19</sup>

This ‘spiritual vision,’ hinting at future Islamist imaginaries, reveals how Al-e Ahmad saw Israel as “the basis for a power,” an alternative model to either Soviet socialism or Western capitalism.<sup>20</sup> Israel had mobilized religious culture to produce economic prosperity, political independence, and cultural belonging for the national population. In discussions of the roots of Islamism, this Israeli inspiration – amidst narrow Cold War options – is frequently overlooked. Many scholars like to trace Islamist ideology to roots in the Qur’an or the time of the Prophet, but this was hardly relevant to the thinking of seminal Islamist pioneer, sometimes Marxist, and literary modernist Al-e Ahmad.

Al-e Ahmad’s notion of *Gharbzadegi* was a radical and populist one, set upon quite material and pragmatic aims. In this sense, Fardid was correct to repeatedly remind us that Al-e Ahmad had never fully understood the idea of *Gharbzadegi* as a philosophical critique and rejection of the Western worldview. Al-e Ahmad turned the notion of *Gharbzadegi* into

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18 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, “Introduction,” in André Gide, *Return from Soviet Union* (Teheran, Akhtar Shoma Publisher, 1954), 4.

19 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *A Travel to Israel* (Tehran: Nashr-e Araye-Negah, 1978), 50.

20 Ibid.

a less substantial, but ultimately more inclusive and pragmatic, idea: a conceptual optic to analyze and critique “dependent” modernity in Iran.

Al-e Ahmad’s effort was sparked by disillusionment with the socialist Tudeh Party’s capitulation to Soviet demands. Al-e Ahmad articulated a sharp critique of Western hegemonic power centered around the concept of “Westoxification” (*Gharbzadegi*). This critique attacks Iranian secular intellectuals as complicit in Western power, and incapable of effectively constructing modernity in Iran. Al-e Ahmad argued that a “return” to an “authentic” Islamic culture was necessary if Iran was to avoid the homogenizing and alienating forces of socio-technological modernization. Yet, the “return” advocated by Ale-Ahmad is not a simple one. His populist Islam would not reject modernization as such, but re-imagine modernity in accordance with Islamic principles, symbolism, and identities.

Al-e Ahmad undertook ethnographic researches into the Iranian peasantry, inspiring his charge that the “onslaught of machine and machine civilization” would “sweep away” Iran’s entire “local and cultural identity.” This was a primarily sociological political criticism: “Why? So that a factory can operate in the West, or that workers in Iceland or Newfoundland are not jobless.”<sup>21</sup> Yet an epistemic-ontological inversion followed this initially sociological analysis, resulting in Al-e Ahmad’s relegation of objective or universal knowledge to a secondary status behind cultural identity. He did not want his ethnographic monographs to become “a commodity for European consumption” based on “European criteria.” Instead, Al-e Ahmad aimed to produce a “renewal of [Iranian] self-awareness” based on “our own criteria.”<sup>22</sup> By this, Al-e Ahmad meant that he hoped to mobilize the Iranian masses using culturally familiar symbols. This is still a secular orientation. Al-e Ahmad took the step into Heideggerian thought when he started to conceive the Iranian predicament in terms of “a disease,” an “accident from without,” “spreading in an environment rendered susceptible to it.”<sup>23</sup> He thereby depicted Pahlavi modernization as culturally alien, and implied that an authentically Shi’a Iranian path must exist. Yet this had less to do with traditional Shi’ism, and a closer affinity of European Romantic critiques of modern scientific knowledge in favor of instinctive peasant proximity to the earth:

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21 Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The ideological foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 59.

22 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Iranian Society. An Anthology of Writings* (Lexington: Mazda Publishers, 1982), 17.

23 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* (Penang: Citizens International, 2004), 27.

“the peasant’s horse will have bolted to the safety of open land before the seismograph has recorded [the earthquake].”<sup>24</sup> Upon the same basis, Al-e Ahmad rejected shallow ideologies (“all of these ‘isms” leading to “mechanization”) in favor of ontology – Iran’s “historico-cultural character”, in the direct inspiration of “beauty and poetry.”<sup>25</sup>

Ali Shari’ati continued and extended Al-e Ahmad’s critique by articulating a positive theory of Islamic ideology as a modernizing force. Shari’ati, as a young man was a nationalist, affiliated with the National Front. Later he became more radically politicized as a student in Paris, drawn deeply into the Third Worldist movement, the politics of the Algerian FLN, French existentialism, and Franz Fanon. From these experiences, Shari’ati became convinced of the need for a single ideological basis if Iranian national liberation was to succeed. He drew liberally from Marxism to construct a populist and activist Islam. Rather than a binary between East/West, he aspired to a dialogue between the two to articulate a viable modernity. Shari’ati, in *Red Shi’ism*, argued that the best of Iranian Islamic tradition and modern Western radical ideology might be combined in a solution to the modern world’s problems.<sup>26</sup> He observed the trials of Western capitalism and Soviet socialism, seeing both riven with failings. Shari’ati was interested in Iranian identity politics, but less upon an anti-Western than an anti-capitalist basis.

Through these readings, the discourse of authenticity emerges as a dialogic mode of reconciling local cultures with modernity, rather than a stubborn determination to avoid modernity at all costs. Their calls for a revitalized and politicized Islam represent attempts to negotiate with the universalizing tendencies of modernity, rather than the gathering storm clouds of a clash of civilizations.

Shari’ati was more complicated, and perhaps intellectually more naïve, than either Fardid or Al-e Ahmad. In an ironic way, he was both more secular, and more religious, than the other two. He was more influenced by Marxism and radical revolutionary ideas, especially secular Third World discourses of the 1960s. Simultaneously, Shari’ati was far more concerned with offering a positive, or alternative, interpretation of Islam: as anti-capitalist, anti-liberal, and very revolutionary. It is harder to make a case

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24 Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 27–28.

25 Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 136.

26 Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: Iranian Mojahedin* (United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 1992), 116.

that Shari'ati was genuinely a consistent antimodernist. However, Corbin and Heidegger were his important influences.

One can suggest that the Shari'ati approach to Islam can potentially lead to a liberal Islamic discourse. It is a kind of liberalism that is less secular and more communitarian and sensitive to social justice. Some may take this as unrealistic for two reasons: Shari'ati was influenced by Corbin and Heideggerian notions of authenticity, and, particularly, Marxism. "Religious liberalism" contains an inherent tension. While liberalism embedded in religion might seem an attractive idea, it shatters upon the rocks of rival authenticity claims upon being institutionalized.

Addressing the youth and the middle class, Shari'ati reconstructed Shi'a Islam to entail a religious obligation to revolt against regimes based on injustice, i.e. all existing state power worldwide. The only successful revolution, moreover, must spring from authentic religious roots, and not alien Western ideologies. The "backwards looking" Iranian Shi'a clergy were useless for this purpose. Only a dynamic modern intellectual vanguard could assume leadership. Shari'ati envisioned the "modern calamities" in terms of the universal human rootlessness inflicted by the machine: "Humanity is every day more condemned to alienation, more drowned in this mad maelstrom of compulsive speed." He implied that the qualitative, poetic side of human life had been lost: "Not only is there no longer leisure for growth in human values, moral greatness, and spiritual aptitudes," but "traditional moral values decline and disappear as well."<sup>27</sup>

Shari'ati, however, transcends this essentially romantic view to construct Shi'a Islam as a revolutionary organizational machine, based on "the war of religion against religion", i.e. a revived authentic revolutionary Islam versus the existing but inauthentic conservative orthodoxy. Shari'ati used these ideas in explicitly Heideggerian manner, as rival tendencies perennially undergoing battle within the Shi'a tradition, but with only one ontologically legitimated idea. He maintained that "true Islam," the "revolutionary sort," has been "forgotten." Rejecting the superficiality of "one-dimensional facts," Shari'ati based his red Shi'ism on a politics of the "self."<sup>28</sup> The Heideggerian element in Shari'ati is fused with revolutionary Marxism. The true enemy was the "petty bourgeoisie," the "dirty connection" which had spoiled true Islam.<sup>29</sup> The real aim of Islam, Shari'ati held, was the Marxist aim of building a "class-

27 Ali Shari'ati, *Marxism and other Western fallacies: An Islamic critique* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), 32.

28 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 116.

29 Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 122, 141–42.

less society” on earth, to be governed by the modern intelligentsia.<sup>30</sup> The author of “Heidegger’s Ghosts” therefore makes a good point, in arguing that Heidegger’s ideas in Iran, in the anti-modern *Gharbzadegi* discourse, concerned a “futuristic” project:

Several leading Iranian thinkers prior to and following the 1979 Revolution were formed by their understanding of Heidegger, drawing on his thought in both the diagnosis of the toxicity of Western civilization and their aspiration for a future oriented, permanent revolution that would retrieve something of an Islamic past lost beneath the stomping boots of history.<sup>31</sup>

The author of “Heidegger’s Ghosts” only makes certain factual errors. It was not Shari’ati, but Ahmad Fardid, who introduced Heidegger and his philosophy into Iran, and, in the 1930s rather than the 1950s. Also, Shari’ati, while in Paris, collaborated with Frantz Fanon, and was influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre. Shari’ati was also influenced by another Parisian scholar, Henri Corbin, and his idea of Shi’ism as the core Persian spiritual tradition. Henri Corbin was the first person who introduced Heidegger to France, and first translated the works of Heidegger into French.

We see, in this tangle of examples, a circulatory dynamic. The same type of explanation applies to Corbin. He was a product of the crisis of the Third Republic, and the Franco-Prussian War, where the Catholic Royalist movement finally yielded to the secular republican movement – who embraced the Rights of Man, while practicing colonialism. Corbin went to the Middle East, looking for his lost utopia for France. Corbin hated France because it had betrayed the Catholic monarchist tradition, to install a secular republic. The Turkish and Iranian intellectuals Corbin encountered were hostile to France because of its imperialist designs on their national sovereignty. Corbin and these intellectuals found common ground, in being hostile to France. Yet their reasons were entirely different. Despite this difference, together, they helped to spread the *Gharbzadegi* social imaginary, and expand its popularity. To hear Corbin’s criticism of the West, rooted in a deeper tradition, from de Maistre, but above all WW I and Heidegger, was a blessed occasion for many. Not so for the left or liberal streams in the Middle East, but they faced their own tragedy.

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30 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 113–14.

31 Duff, “Heidegger’s Ghosts.”



The new USSR practiced ruthless geopolitics, and the charge of collaboration with Western power hung over those embracing Western ideologies.

To add to the complexity of this picture, Foucault followed the trail of Corbin. This was another French intellectual with very different concerns. A student of Louis Althusser, who had yet grown disillusioned with the “vulgarity” of French Marxism, he hated the secular republic in France. This hostility was not from a religious view, but a disillusioned Left one. The revulsion with “secular humanism” inspired Foucault to seek a “way out” of modernity through revolutionary Shi’a Islam. He associated “secular humanism” with the “disciplinary society” which had destroyed the soul, which had thrived in the relative anarchy of premodern societies (the mad as visionaries, public torture of heroic criminals, unrestrained bucolic sexual pleasures in the villages, etc.). Foucault, visiting Iran during the revolution, wrote articles extolling “spiritual Islam,” and “mythical” or “spiritual” politics, as exciting new political possibilities beyond Western liberal norms. These views derived less from Foucault’s Marxist teacher, Althusser, and, rather, from readings of Louis Massignon and Henri Corbin. Foucault derived from these sources a premonition that something new, unprecedented, and perhaps mystical was emerging in the Iranian revolution. Celebrating the revolution’s “mythical leaders,” Foucault went as far as to castigate Iranian secular and non-religious forces, charging them with reproducing a dull Western model (i.e. constitutional, reformist), rather than entering the new and exciting terrain of spiritual politics. Foucault saw in the Iranian Revolution an instantiation of his quasi-mystical thesis on the “death of man,” i.e. the epistemic reign of the human sciences. In short, he adopted a Heideggerian optic of ontology triumphing over epistemology. Foucault rejoiced at the Iranian Revolution as the escape from an “imposed teleology” – a mystic and irrational outlook, reflecting personal intellectual obsessions more than social reality.<sup>32</sup> It portended, he excitedly urged, “a different way of thinking about social and political organization, one that takes nothing from Western philosophy.”<sup>33</sup> The Enlightenment, he maintained, with “objectivity” and “rationality,” was the “revolutionary enemy.”<sup>34</sup>

Foucault ridiculed Marxism and the Left, declared his hatred for capitalism and democracy (as “modernity”), and ultimately embraced a very

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32 Michel Foucault, *The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, Revised edition (New York: The New Press, 2003), 332.

33 Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 186.

34 Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 185.

similar anti-modernist ideology to Corbin. Foucault, a Bataille and Nietzschean inspired scholar, had an undertow of religious obsessions. There was also a certain elitism – a preoccupation with the beauty of private rituals and experiences, sheltered from the banality of modern mass society. These elements fostered in Foucault, a comparatively privileged and celebrated intellectual, an indulgence for *Gharbzadegi* – the attraction to the arcane, the sacred, a fusion of individual and higher abstract principles like divine oneness, and, above all, a rupture with the money nexus of modernity.

The masses in Iran, and other semi-colonized countries, faced a different reality. They could hardly have been attracted to *Gharbzadegi* for the same reasons as Foucault. Yet they did become attracted to it, from an entirely different horizon of experience. Their social interests were not Foucault's. But the "elective affinity" existed between Foucault and the Iranian masses. Nothing indigenous compelled the Iranian masses to embrace *Gharbzadegi*. Iran's modern history shows another direction. There was genuine multi-class mass enthusiasm for rule of law and national autonomy in the Constitutional Revolution, starting with the tobacco revolt, and culminating in a Constitutional Monarchy. Then, there was World War I, imposing horrible conditions, and, the 1921 British sponsored coup that set up a dictator, to protect British India from Russia. Even so, in the National Front interim, there was still mass Iranian support for a "Liberal" and "Marxist" politics. After the U.S. sponsored 1953 coup against the popularly elected Mossadegh, the second such coup in a century, the real disillusionment with the West viscerally set in.

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