

Iran: Multiple Sources of a Grassroots Social Democracy?

Mojtaba Mahdavi

Alternative discourses to the (neo)liberal agenda, above all the social justice alternative, are often marginalized and demoralized; we are told to tailor our imagination to what is available/possible and to think of change in the realm of the hegemonic discourse or within the margins of the status quo. The politico-intellectual crises in orthodox Marxism and the prevalence of the neoliberal discourse have dashed some hopes for the rise and realization of social democracy in Iran. This chapter is an attempt to challenge this ahistorical position. It suggests that the quest for social justice and social democracy is neither new nor restricted to a particular socio-intellectual trend in modern Iran. It is as old as the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, and as broad as secular and religious socialists of Muslim, Marxist, and nationalist origins. The idea of a grassroots social democracy in Iran holds deep and diverse socio-intellectual roots.

More specifically, in this chapter, I will first problematize the limits of liberal paradigm and highlight the merits of the twin pillars of a grassroots social democracy: social justice and societal empowerment. In the second part, I will shed light on Iran's deep and diverse local tradition of social democracy. The chapter briefly demonstrates the contribution of intellectual discourses of Mohammad Nakhshab (1923–1970), Khalil

M. Mahdavi (✉)

Department of Political Science, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada

Maleki (1903–1969), and Ali Shari‘ati (1933–1977) to a *social* approach to democracy. The conclusion suggests that contemporary Iran can learn from the global and local experience/tradition of egalitarian/social democracy. It also sheds light on the possibility of a discourse building toward a grassroots social democracy in Iran.

LIMITS OF LIBERAL PARADIGM AND MERITS OF TWIN PILLARS OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

The limits of liberal paradigm of democracy have been extensively examined in the literature. This include Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s alternative discourse of *radical democracy* (1985), Jacques Derrida’s powerful concept of *democracy-to-come* (2010, 2005) and Jürgen Habermas’s theory of *deliberative democracy* (1996), among others. In this section, I will examine the major limitation of liberal paradigm of democracy/democratization: the liberal discourse ignores the substance and social character of democracy. It overlooks the twin pillars of *social* elements of democracy, namely *social justice* and *societal empowerment*. Social justice and societal empowerment give substance and a tangible meaning to the abstract, ahistorical, and often elitist concepts of rights, liberty, and democracy. They liberate demos from an elitist, state-centric, and, more importantly, a market-driven democracy. The social pillars of democracy facilitate a bottom-up, grassroots approach to democratization, help *empower* the ordinary people, let the “subaltern speak,” and disarm and defeat right-wing populist demagogues whose rhetoric of social justice often misleads the masses.

There is a negative correlation between democratic aspiration and social inequality. “Poverty can trap societies in its grip” and most often “breeds dictatorships” (Przeworski et al. 2000: 270–277). *Social* equality gives meaning and substance to political democracy; it makes the value of democratic ideas tangible to the public. By contrast, social inequality leads to a gradual decline of democratic aspirations in civil society; it gives rise to populist–authoritarian trends and pushes democratic ideas and institutions at bay. The “middle class poor” (Bayat 2009) is often the main victim of neoliberal market economy. However, the abstract liberal discourse of rights and freedom is not attractive to this class, and they sometimes turn into the foot soldiers of right-wing populist demagogues who use social justice in their political platforms. A critical *social* approach to democracy/democratization challenges the orthodox class analysis; it

contest the liberal idea of the *myth of the middle class*, in which middle class is perceived as the *only major* driving force for democracy. Instead, it highlights the significance of middle-class and the poor for the rise and realization of democracy.

Furthermore, a meaningful social democracy requires not only an open and inclusive political society, but also an open and inclusive economic society (Walzer 1990: 160). Social injustice and (neo)liberal market fundamentalism undo democracy. In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown argues that “neoliberalism, is a particular form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms and is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy. These elements include vocabularies and principles of justice, political cultures, habits of citizenship, practices of rule, and above all, *democratic imaginaries*” (2015a: 17). More specifically, the catastrophe is simply beyond “degrading democracy” into “plutocracy”; it is “normative economization of political life” (2015a: 201). The (neo)liberal “reason” produces extreme social inequality, reduces human agent into a “market actor,” and empowers capital, not the citizens (Brown 2015b). The liberal reason is asocial. It is extremely fragile in politics of social justice and is negligent of societal empowerment.

Societal empowerment is about strengthening civil society and establishing democratic procedures based on engagement, dialogue, and deliberation of civil society. In “Three Normative Models of Democracy,” Jürgen Habermas (1996: 23) introduces a “deliberative” concept of democracy where politics is about deliberation of civil society and democracy aims at the “institutionalization of a public use of reason jointly exercised by autonomous citizens.” In the liberal paradigm, argues Habermas, society is perceived as a “market-structured network of interactions among *private* persons.” Politics is the function of “pushing *private* interests against a government apparatus” (Habermas 1996: 21; emphasis added). Civil society is subordinated to the state because the state is the “guardian of a market-society” (Habermas 1996: 26). In deliberative democracy, however, civil dialogue and deliberation in the public sphere provide a societal network and a fair and inclusive process of “democratic will formation” (Habermas 1996: 26).

The liberal paradigm, Habermas (1996: 27) argues, “hinges not on the democratic self-determination of deliberating citizens but on the legal institutionalization of an economic society that is supposed to guarantee an essentially *nonpolitical* common good by the satisfaction of *private* preferences.” In the liberal model, “the rule of law is applied to many isolated private subjects.” In deliberative democracy, however, the “normative

content arises from the very structure of communicative action” (Habermas 1996: 28). It challenges the liberal notion of apolitical private citizen.

In the deliberative model of democracy, “the boundaries between ‘state’ and ‘society’ are respected”; however, “*civil society provides the social basis of autonomous public spheres that remain as distinct from the economic system as from the [political] administration.*” This implies that civil society “should gain the strength to hold its own against the two other mechanisms of social integration—money and administrative power” (Habermas 1996: 28; emphasis added). Deliberative democracy enables a “de-centered society” where power “springs from the interactions between legally institutionalized will-formation and culturally mobilized public” (Habermas 1996: 28;). Deliberative democracy provides a medium for a “*conscious integration of the legal community*” (Habermas 1996: 30; emphasis added). It works with “the higher-level inter-subjectivity of communication processes that flow through both parliamentary bodies and the informal networks of the public sphere” (Habermas 1996: 28).

Habermas’s concept of deliberative democracy, in sum, aims “to bring universalistic principles of justice into the horizon of the specific form of life of a particular community” (Habermas 1996: 25). In other words, “the content of political decisions that can be enforced by the state *must be formulated* in a language that is accessible to all citizens and it *must be possible to justify them* in this language” (Habermas 2006: 9; emphasis added). To this end, we need to place civil society in the center by keeping distance from (neo)liberal elitism and empowering social forces in their quest for socio-political changes. The elitist conception of politics has resulted in the institutional weakness of democratic social forces. The repressive nature of the state has certainly reduced the opportunity for intellectuals to mobilize the social forces. Equally important, however, is the formulation of progressive ideas in a language accessible to ordinary people. This brings us to the significance and relevance of culture, tradition, and history in quest for social democracy.

If the *social* approach is central to the success of a sustainable and meaningful democracy, the same approach should be applied to the question of tradition, culture, and religion. The social approach implies that tradition/culture is a living phenomenon. Social agents/actors give meaning to the abstract ideas. Hence, as Asef Bayat (2007) argues, rather than asking abstract, essentialist, and cliché question of whether the local culture and/or religion is compatible with democracy, we would need to ask *how*

ordinary people can make their traditional, cultural, and/or religious values compatible with democracy? In other words, under what *social conditions* can they accomplish such a significant task? How can they participate in this process? How would they transcend the *theological* categories of the religious and the secular into a larger *sociological* context of daily life? This social approach acknowledges the power of *social agents* in Iran's quest for a social democracy from within.

Moreover, as Jürgen Habermas (1987) has famously argued, modernity is an “unfinished project.” Some social theories suggest “‘tradition’ is likewise a perpetually unfinished project—that is how people understand their traditions and apply them to practical situation” (Anderson et al. 1998; Monshipouri 2003). The notion of an *unfinished project of tradition* implies that tradition and change are not mutually exclusive concepts, and there is a constant and critical dialogue between the local tradition and a global quest for social justice. A discursive dialogue with culture, and mining the tradition could show that modern concepts of social justice and democracy are universal and have native roots in the intellectual soil of every society. Habermas (2006) even suggests that under certain conditions “the secular citizens must open their minds,” in order to learn from “the normative truth content of a religious expression” and enter into “dialogue” with their fellow religious citizens. Such a dialogue serves societal empowerment, and thus the success and stability of a grassroots democracy. A dialogue with people's traditions and cultures, in sum, empowers civil society, facilitates active and deliberative engagement, and provides the most effective path to challenge the status quo. It brings change from within.

IRAN: MULTIPLE SOURCES OF A GRASSROOTS SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Like many other nations, Iranians “are the inheritors and the carries of three cultures at once.” These triple cultural heritages “are of national, religious, and Western origins. While steeped in an ancient national culture, we are also immersed in our religious culture, and we are at the same time awash in successive waves coming from the Western shores. Whatever solutions that we decide for our problems must come from this mixed heritage” (Soroush 2000: 156). In socio-political terms, three major social forces in modern Iran—nationalists, socialists, and Islamic

forces—represent such a mixed and complex cultural/intellectual heritage. Despite their different origins, these social forces/trends are neither monolithic nor hold a pure identity. There are elements of Islamic culture and Western ideas of socialism and liberalism among the Iranian nationalists; socialists have been exposed to nationalism and Islamic culture; and Islamic forces have adopted elements of nationalism and Western ideas of socialism and liberalism. With such a complex and crosscutting identity, these trends need to have a *critical* dialogue with each other.

Each of the three socio-intellectual trends in Iran is represented by a number of thinkers and public intellectuals. In each trend, however, there is only a handful of original, authentic, and independent thinkers whose legacy/tradition could still contribute to Iran's grassroots social democracy: Khalil Maleki (1903–1969) from a nationalist discourse, Mostafa Sho'a'ian (1936–1975) and Bijan Jazani (1937–1975) from a Marxist tradition, and Mohammad Nakhshab (1923–1970) and Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977) from a progressive Islam. In this chapter, however, I will briefly examine the discourses of Mohammad Nakhshab, Khalil Maleki, and Ali Shari'ati.

“To find one's own way one cannot depend on the words of the master,” argues Walter Mignolo, “one has to delink and disobey” (2015: xxiv). Mohammad Nakhshab, Khalil Maleki, and Ali Shari'ati disobeyed and delinked from the dominant discourses of their time: Soviet Marxism, Pahlavi's autocratic Western modernism, and orthodox/traditional Islam. They were original thinkers and exercised an “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo 2015). They began to think independently about Iran and the world. They dared to discover and experienced failure and success in their intellectual journeys. They challenged the “gatekeepers and regulators of thought,” those who claimed the monopoly over the “word of God” or the “word of Reason” (Mignolo 2015: xv). They “delinked” from the establishment and that is why we may dare to (re-)discover their approach.

Mohammad Nakhshab (1923–1970): A Socialist Theist

In the 1940s, socialism made a profound impact on young Muslim activists. Mohammad Mekanik (known as Mohammad Nakhshab) and Jalal ed-Din Ashtiyani were founding fathers of the Socialist Theists Movement (*Nehzat-e Khodaparastan-e Sosiyalist*) in 1944 (Hunter 2014: 72; Taghavi 2005: 13–15). The Socialist Theists synthesized “Islamic spirituality and socialist ideas and thus developed what they called a ‘middle school of

thought' between idealism and materialism; they characterized this as 'positive socialism'" (Hunter 2014: 72). According to Mohammad Nakhshab, the leading ideologue of the Socialist Theists Movement, freedom and social justice are the core values of both Islam and socialism. Islamic discourse, he argued, is a mediated worldview (*maktab-e vasete*); it stands between idealism and materialism, and between communism and capitalism. More specifically, there is more affinity between Islam and socialism than between materialism/Marxism and socialism. There is an inherent contradiction, he argued, between socialism as a humanist/ethical ideal and materialist philosophy of Marxism. Socialism, it was argued, is a sacred struggle of selfless individuals whose ethical responsibility and political ideals are not correlated with their socio-economic base. For the Socialist Theists, the spiritual element of Islam provides strong incentive for people to fight for freedom and social justice. It is much easier to disseminate socialist ideals in Iran, he argued, through the Islamic concepts (Nakhshab 2002; Nekuruh 1997). The Socialist Theists boldly and confidently believed that "in terms of advocating justice and progress, Islam does not lag behind Marxism. On the contrary, because of its emphasis on freedom and democracy it is superior to it." Nonetheless, "socialism or the public ownership of means of production," they argued, remains "the shortest way of overcoming injustice, poverty, ignorance, self-alienation, misery, and exploitation" (Hunter 2014: 72; Taghavi 2005: 27).

The Socialist Theists challenged the hegemony of any privileged class over others and fought simultaneously at least in three fronts: first and foremost, they were anticlerical in the context of Islamic tradition. There is no clerical *class* in Islam, they argued. "The clergy, instead of emphasizing Islam's progressive social and economic messages, had focused on metaphysics and has imbued Islam with bizarre mysteries, miracles, and in general, superstition" (Hunter 2014: 72). Socialism, they argued, was the essence of Islam; they interpreted the Quranic concept of *showra* (consultation) as a form of democratic socialism and reinterpreted the Quran in light of *humanist* (not Soviet) socialism (Rahnama 2000: 25). It is worth noting that their idea of *the affinity between Islam and socialism* inspired many young Muslims in the 1960s and 1970s. Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977), Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani (1911–1979), and others were influenced by such a novel and revolutionary discourse. The impact of the Socialist Theists in Taleqani's book, *Islam and Ownership* (1953), is evident (Shahibzadeh 2015). The Socialist Theists, known as the intellectual

father of the Islamic Left, contributed immensely to the cause of social democratic interpretation of Islam.

Second, the Socialist Theists were critical of Western liberal democracy. Jalal ed-Din Ashtiyani, one of the two founders of the Movement, offers a very interesting critique of Western liberal democracy:

Western societies, which form a small part of the family of nations, enjoy the state of affluence at the expense of poverty and suffering of many others. Nevertheless, the signs of decline and self-alienation can also be seen in the West. The role of capitalism and *misguided democracy* have turned people into machine-parts and into talking ballot-papers, which can be sold and bought ... Political parties are turning into election shops. (Ashtiyani quoted in Hunter 2014: 73; Taghavi 2005: 32–33; original emphasis)

As Hunter points out, “the Socialist Theists were essentially against the domination of a particular class over others, but they had no clear idea of how to reconcile the requirements of safeguarding individual freedom and the running of a society” (Hunter 2014: 73).

Third, the Socialist Theists challenged the state-centered Soviet-style socialism and instead offered a *humanist* and *social-based* socialism. They clearly opposed Iran’s pro-Soviet Marxist political party, the Tudeh Party, both for its materialist philosophy as well as for its Soviet-style socialism. Equally important, they contested the Tudeh Party’s political dependency on the Soviet Unions policy. The Tudeh Party’s support to the Soviet’s demand for oil concession in Iran’s northern provinces (the proposed Caspian oil concession) contributed to the split within the Tudeh Party in 1944. The emergence of the Socialist Theists coincided with the rise of anti-Soviet socialist trends among other social forces in Iran.

Khalil Maleki (1903–1969): A Pioneer of Indigenous Socialism?

The Soviet Union adapted an interventionist and neocolonial policy toward Iran in 1942 and 1943. The Soviets were instrumental in creating two secessionist/separatist governments of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan and the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad. The Tudeh Party blindly supported Moscow’s policy. For the Tudeh party, “a socialist government by nature could not have colonial or neocolonial tendencies” (Hunter 2014: 67). The Tudeh Party’s blind submission to the Soviets was challenged from within. A number of prominent members of the

Tudeh Party such as Khalil Maleki (1903–1969) and Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) left the party and supported the government’s nationalist policy as an expression of Iran’s national sovereignty. Maleki left the Tudeh Party and joined the *Hezb-e Zahmatkeshan* (Toilers’ Party) in 1947 where he published his newspaper *Niru-ye Sevvom* (*The Third Force*). He became interested in the Toilers’ Party since the party program was against “all forms of imperialism including Russian imperialism.” Soon, however, he left the Toilers’ Party as the Party began opposing Mosaddeq’s oil nationalization policy. Maleki founded his own party.

Khalil Maleki developed a novel theory and created a new political party to pursue his authentic social justice and indigenous socialism. Maleki’s theory of “Separate Roads to Socialism” was materialized in the formation of a new party called The Third Force (*Niru-ye Sevvom*). The Third Force Party distanced itself from a pro-Soviet Leninist Marxism/socialism and a right-wing/centrist nationalism. For Khalil Maleki, Soviet socialism was nothing short of a state capitalism (*kapitalism-e dowlati*). It is quite remarkable that Maleki opposed antidemocratic nature of Stalinism as early as 1940s, and opposed, in the same manner, Maoism, which became the new Marxist fashion in the late 1960s. In a letter written in 1967, he criticized the Maoist tendencies among Iranian intellectuals in Europe: “The gentlemen do not retreat one step from their scientific socialism of Marx in its Leninist interpretation. Unfortunately, they are incapable of understanding the significant events that have taken place since Marx and Lenin. We fought against Stalin once, and we came out victorious” (Maleki quoted in Pishdad and Katouzian 2002: 9; Shahibzadeh 2016: 24).

The Third Force did not become a major political party, but its democratic socialism with an anti-imperialist/anti-American character had a profound impact on the struggle for democracy in Iran after the 1953 coup. The Socialist Theists and the Third Force made a considerable impact on the rise of the secular and Islamic left/social democrats in the 1970s. Maleki’s Third Force turned into a symbol of support for an indigenous democratic socialism vis-à-vis Soviet socialism; it successfully synthesized the idea of socialism with respect for national sovereignty and dignity of indigenous culture. It is worth noting that it was Khalil Maleki who for the first time proposed and promoted the discourse of “Return to the Self” (*bazgash t beh khish*) in Iran (Vahdat 2002: 110). His indigenous approach contributed to the prominence of the discourse of “Return to the Self” in Iran in 1970s. What makes Khalil Maleki relevant today, in short, is nothing but a core of his argument: *Socialism would be the result*

of every society's indigenous experiences (Burhan 1997; Katouzian 2004: 165–188; Katouzian 2003: 24–52; emphasis added.).

It is crucial to acknowledge here the impact of Maleki's indigenous or “nonalignment” socialism on young and enthusiastic Iranian Marxist Mostafa Sho‘a‘iyan (1936–1975). As Peyman Vahabzadeh (2007a,b) argues, “in a situation parallel to Maleki's split from, and criticism of, the Tudeh Party, Sho‘a‘iyan's iconoclastic engagement with *Fada‘i-ye Khalq*” demonstrates “his principled originality as well as his lone reassertion of the role of dissident intellectuals” (2007a: 406).

In his work, *Revolution (Engelab)*, Sho‘a‘iyan problematized the ideological roots of the Soviets' betrayal of the Jangali Movement in the Caspian region (1920–1921). “What is significant about *Revolution*,” argues Vahabzadeh (2007a: 409), “is that it stems from a particular experience and then emerges as a universal theory that refuses canonical Marxism.” It is probably safe to argue that Sho‘a‘iyan's grassroots approach for change is best encapsulated in his own words of “relying on the Iranian nation” (Sho‘a‘iyan 1976: 15; Vahabzadeh 2007a: 416). He was a radical critique of “tradition of killing thinking” (Sho‘a‘iyan 1976: 22; Vahabzadeh 2007a: 419), that is, a blind imitation of the foreign agendas/platforms, turning the intellectual Left into the “idle consumers” of “any nicely-packaged imported theory” (Vahabzadeh 2007a: 418–419). Sho‘a‘iyan identified “democratic openness as the Achilles's heel of dogmatic and Stalinist rule of ideologically blinded individuals at the helms of leftist groups” and thus boldly broke away with this tradition (Vahabzadeh 2007a: 413). The conventional Left of the time penalized Sho‘a‘iyan. He was accused of being “American Marxist” by the Fada'i Guerrillas who deployed the term in order to intimidate him and undermine his indigenous and independent thinking (Vahabzadeh 2007a: 409). His original, bold, and independent thinking—though it certainly suffers from its limitations—cost him to live in a harsh and isolated life until his death in 1976. As Peyman Vahabzadeh (2007a: 405) argues, Mostafa Sho‘a‘iyan's “maverick and uncompromising thinking and singular leftism” and his unconventional and “uncanonical” leftism, which “challenged all doctrinal versions of Marxism,” makes him relevant in today's context.

Ali Shari‘ati (1933–1977): Toward a Spiritual Social Democracy?

Ali Shari‘ati (1933–1977) is probably the most sophisticated and influential socialist Muslim in modern Iran. For Shari‘ati, “social objectivity

creates religious subjectivity,” not the other way around (1981: 30; original emphasis). This is how the socio-political hierarchy creates polytheism. The struggle between monotheism (*towhid*) and polytheism (*shirk*) is a social, not a theological, conflict between two social forces in history. Polytheism is a religion of polytheistic social formation such as class, race, or other forms of domination; it aims to justify the status quo. Monotheism, in its socio-historical terms, is the struggle for human emancipation; it aims at self- and social awareness and responsibility. For Shari‘ati, institutionalized religion has always undermined the emancipatory aspect of religion. Religion is “human awareness,” a “source of existential responsibility,” which would lead to social responsibility. In *Religion against Religion*, Shari‘ati argues, “if I speak of religion, it is not the religion which has prevailed in human history, but a religion whose prophets rose for the elimination of *social polytheism*. I speak of a religion, which is not realized yet. Thus our reliance on religion is not a return to the past, but a continuation of history” (Shari‘ati quoted in Mahdavi 2011: 102–106; original emphasis).

Shari‘ati (1998a) made a clear distinction between his indigenous and authentic idea of “Return to the Self” (*bazgasht beh khish*) and a regressive and nostalgic return to the past. The first approach, he argued, involves a critical reexamination of our tradition/historical legacy in order to liberate the nations’ tradition from all kinds of hegemonic discourses—institutionalize religion of the clerical class as well as the autocratic/colonial modernization. The second approach, however, is best represented by “Return to the Plough” (*bazgasht beh khish*)! The two homophones *khish* (self) and *khish* (plough) in Persian were used to conceptualize and characterize the discourse of Return to the Self.

Structures of domination, Shari‘ati argues, have constantly hindered self- and social-awareness of human beings in history. In his Gramscian approach/formulation, structures of domination rested upon a triangle of economic power, political oppression, and inner ideological/cultural justification. He provides a critique of the three pillars of “trinity of oppression,” *zar-zur-tazvir* (gold-coercion-deception) or *tala-tigh-tasbih* (gold-sword-rosary), meaning material injustice (*estesmar*), political dictatorship (*estebdad*), and religious and other forms of cultural alienation (*estehmar*). Shari‘ati offers a three-dimensional ideal type—“a trinity of freedom, social justice, and spirituality” (*azadi, barabari, va ‘erfan*)—in opposition to the “trinity of oppression” and in recognition of self- and social-awareness (Mahdavi 2011: 102–106).

The problem, argued Shari‘ati (1982: 37), was that freedom without social justice degenerated into a freedom of market, not a freedom of human beings. Social justice without freedom undermined human dignity, and spirituality without freedom and social justice ignored the core/essence of our humanity. These ideals turned into regressive forces, new means of domination, and served the status quo. The solution to this problem, Shari‘ati argued, is to synthesize the three ideals, making a three-dimensional self and society/polity. In other words, the unity and harmony of three ideals of freedom, social justice, and spirituality bring about self- and social awareness, human emancipation, and harmonizes the relationship between nature, man, and God. The unity of three ideals would free human being from the bond of divine and materialistic determinism. It “frees mankind from the *captivity of heaven and earth alike* and arrives at *true humanism*” (Shari‘ati 1982: 85–90; Manoochehri 2003; Mahdavi 2011: 102–106; emphasis added).

More specifically, the core of Shari‘ati’s discourse is threefold: freedom and democracy without capitalism and neoliberal market fundamentalism, social justice and socialism without authoritarianism and materialism, and spirituality and ethics without organized religion and clericalism. For Shari‘ati, the existing democracies offer only a minimum requirement of an ideal radical democracy. Shari‘ati tends to agree with *demokrasi-ye showra‘i* (consultative democracy), which relies on active and effective participation of citizens in the public sphere. Shari‘ati’s strong egalitarian leaning and constant critique of all forms of social injustice/inequality makes him a socialist thinker. For Shari‘ati (1982: 107), however, socialism is not merely a mode of production; rather, it is a way of life. He is critical of state socialism, and worshipping personality, party, and state; he advocates *humanist socialism*. For Shari‘ati, freedom and social justice must be complemented with modern spirituality. Nonetheless, he makes it crystal clear that freedom and social justice remain the top priorities for the ordinary people, and spirituality is futile without freedom and social justice. Shari‘ati (1995: 1266) uses the symbolic story of the Adam and the Forbidden Fruit in the Garden of Eden to highlight the significance of civil rights and social justice, and to demonstrate how mysticism may turn into a false conciseness and religious deception: “In the Garden of Eden,” argues Shari‘ati (1995: 1266), “Adam was blessed with every gift from God. Every fruit in this bountiful garden was permitted, with the exception of one fruit, [the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil], which had been forbidden” (1995: 1266). Yet in our world, continues

Shari‘ati, “the ordinary people are denied access to most every fruit. *The permitted fruits have become forbidden for us.*” He then asks, “How are we to go after the forbidden fruit when our basic human rights (*hoquq-e adamiyat*) has not been recognized, when we have been denied the God given gifts of this garden, when we have not tasted even its permitted fruits?” (1995: 1266; emphasis added) Then he forcefully makes his point:

To preach about love to those who do not have bread is nothing but a nasty deception dressed as piety and asceticism. And to tell those with no drinking water the story of Alexander’s search for the fountain of eternal life is nothing but a bad joke! Intellectuals must remember that in our context, our mission is to *help people find the permitted fruits, not to send them after the forbidden one.*

Moreover, Shari‘ati (1982: 52) is well aware of the shortcomings of official mysticism: the established/institutionalized religion and mysticism “became a shackle on the foot of the spiritual and material evolution of mankind.” It “actually separates man from his own humanity. It makes him into an importunate beggar, a slave of unseen forces beyond his power; it deposes him and alienates him from his own will. It is this established religion that today we are familiar with” (Shari‘ati 1982: 60). Nonetheless, modern critical *‘erfan* and spirituality, he argues, provide a modern spiritual vision; ontology and epistemology sharply differ from religious formalism and passive, apolitical mysticism. It provides us a synthetic spirituality in a critical dialogue with other religious traditions and modern concepts. It is, in fact, a *post-religious spirituality* (Mahdavi 2011: 102–106).

For Shari‘ati, the trinity of freedom, social justice, and spirituality (*azadi, barabari, va ‘erfan*) is not a mechanical marriage of three distinct concepts. Rather, it is a dialectical approach toward self- and social emancipation; it puts together three inseparable dimensions of man and society. In sum, Shari‘ati’s trinity of *azadi, barabari,* and *‘erfan,* the most relevant core of his discourse, translates into a new polity of *spiritual social democracy.* This ideal type clearly needs theorizing the role of spirituality in the public sphere so the theory could translate into a workable synthetic political model of *spiritual social democracy* (Mahdavi 2011: 102–106). Nonetheless, Shari‘ati’s original approach to the self- and social emancipation could contribute to the idea of a grassroots social democracy in Iran.

The “iron cage” of modernity, Max Weber (2001: 124; Dabashi 2015: 20) argued, might well produce “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.” Ali Shari‘ati’s three-dimensional alternative discourse of freedom, social justice, and spirituality was an attempt to overcome the dark side of modernity and to liberate/emancipate modern humanity from modernity’s “iron cage.” Equally significant, yet, was his radical critique of *resilient fence of tradition*. In his own words, two equally destructive and deceptive forces/discourses captivate us, and each produces a different form of false consciousness, cultural alienation, and deception: “*Estehmar*” and again “*Estehmar*”! The first refers to colonial modernity, market fundamentalism, and alienation by the hegemonic/colonial western modernity. The second refers to religious deception and dogma (Shari‘ati 1998a). Shari‘ati invites us to exercise an act of “epistemic disobedience,” “delinking” from the establishment—“the gatekeepers” of “word of reason” and “word of God.” His approach is an invitation to think through a solution from within.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD DISCOURSE BUILDING AND DECOLONIAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Western liberal/capitalist democracy does not represent, contrary to the views of its advocates, “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” (Fukuyama 1989: 271). The liberal paradigm remains in a profound crisis. The liberal discourse undermines the twin pillars of socio elements of democracy: *social justice* and *societal empowerment*. Social justice gives meaning and substance to democracy; it makes the value of democratic ideas tangible to the public. Social inequality results in a gradual decline of democratic aspirations in civil society; it gives rise to populist-authoritarian trends and pushes democratic ideas and institutions at bay. Social justice brings the abstract value of democracy into the daily life of the people. Societal empowerment strengthens and promotes dialogue and deliberation of civil society. In this chapter, I examined Habermas’s concept of deliberative democracy as one among several alternative egalitarian/social approaches to liberal democracy, and I argued how it may contribute to the rise of a grassroots social democracy in Iran. A deliberative model of democratic will-formation can empower civil society, guarantee an equal and inclusive participation, and generate a democratic ethics of citizenship. Democratic ideas are ineffective if ordinary people do not reach them. As

Max Weber (1998: 61–63) reminds us, ideas are powerless unless fused with material forces. Democratic ideas can last longer if strong, active, and engaged social forces participate in the public sphere.

The popular quest for *edalat-e ejtema'i* (social justice) has a long history in modern Iran. *Adalat* (Justice) was the first socialist party in Iran around the turn of the twentieth century. Popular demands for *Edalatkhaneh* (House of Justice) during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, the significance of *Ferqeh-ye Ejtema'iyun-e 'Ammiyun* (Social Democratic Party) in the first Parliament (*Majles*) and the *Ferqeh-ye Demokrat* (Democratic Party) in the second *Majles* are well known. The contribution of Taghi Errani's Group of 53 to the growth of socialist discourse in Iran is a fact. Other secular and religious public intellectuals and socio-political forces/movements in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s advanced the discourse of social democracy in Iran: Nakhshab's Socialist Theists, Maleki's Third Force, Shari'ati's discourse of spiritual social democracy are indicative of deep and diverse roots of a quest for social justice and social democracy in Iran. Moreover, the idea of social justice was one of the central slogans of the 1979 Iranian revolution. The quest for social justice continues to surface in a number of social movements in postrevolutionary Iran: women, students, workers, and middle-class poor remain the focal point of social movements for social justice in postrevolutionary Iran.

Multiple sources of social democracy from the global experiences and the local traditions can contribute to a birth of Iran's genuine and bottom-up social democracy. In this chapter, I examined how intellectual discourses of Mohammad Nakhshab, Khalil Maleki, and Ali Shari'ati could contribute to the rise and realization of a grassroots social democracy in Iran. Nakhshab, Maleki, and Shari'ati disobeyed and delinked from the dominant discourse of their time. Their "epistemic disobedience," independent thinking, authenticity, and indigenous approach toward a grassroots social democracy remain relevant for today's Iran. We certainly must problematize their legacy, acknowledge their achievements and failures, and learn from their limitations. These public intellectuals did dare to discover new ways, indigenous approaches, and alternative modernities that are attentive to local and global experiences. They dared to discover a third way—a *glocal* approach. They delinked from the omnipotent of the local Tradition and the juggernaut of the Universal West. Their "decolonial horizons," to use Mingolo's words, made them to aim at "epistemic pluriversality." They were pioneers of the Iranian version of what

Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel (2012: 28–58) would describe as “transmodernity.”

Argentinian scholar Rodolfo Kusch (1922–1979) in his work *Indigenous and Popular Thinking in America* asked “what could be the meaning of [Heidegger’s] *Dasein* in America, given that it was a concept nourished and propelled by a certain ethos of the concept of the German middle class between the two wars” (Mignolo 2015: xxiii). He then used an indigenous word “*utcata*,” which “has certain parallels with *Dasein*, a word that Heidegger picked up from popular German” (Mignolo 2015: xxiii). The lesson to learn, argues Walter Mignolo (2015: xxiii), is that an “indigenous ways of thinking” requires a “simultaneous process” of engagement and “delinking.” In this process, the point is “not to reject” or dismiss the West “but, on the contrary, to know it in order to delink from it.” In other words, as Hamid Dabashi (2015: 2) argues, we need “a declaration of independence,” from local and global “exhausted epistemics” in order to think and act boldly and independently.

“Historical conditions are the bedrock of ideas,” writes Dabashi (2015: 6); the Muslim world, Iran included, “is changing; these changes are the *conditio sine qua non* of new ideas that are yet to be articulated” (Dabashi 2015: 6). There is much *unthought* in the original thought of these scholars. What is needed today is to expand their original ideas *beyond their intension* in order to materialize Iran’s century-old quest for a grassroots social democracy.

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