Chapter 14

From Nakhshab to Neo-Shariati

Three Generations of Iran's Modern Muslim Left

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INTRODUCTION

"What does it mean to be contemporary?" and "of whom and of what are we contemporaries?" "Contemporary," Giorgio Agamben argues, "is the untimely": a "relationship with time that adhere to it through a disjunction and an anachronism." It is the ability to know how to observe the "obscurity" and the "darkness" of our time, disallowing "to be blinded by the lights" of the epoch.[1] In other words, "those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it."[2] For Agamben, "the contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time."[3] Hence, "contemporariness inscribes itself in the present by making it above all as archaic."[4]

This chapter asks whether and how a post-Islamist and postrevolutionary reading of Ali Shariati's thought—known as the *neo-Shariati discourse*—remains "contemporary" in the Agambenean tradition. "Of whom and what" is the neo-Shariati discourse contemporary? In answering this question, the chapter first traces back the historical origins of this discourse followed by its conceptualization. It examines epistemological and ontological underpinnings of this discourse, namely the trilogy of "freedom, social justice, and civil spirituality." It problematizes whether the neo-Shariati's progressive post-Islamist stance and its quest for a homegrown *democratic socialism* would make it a "contemporary" alternative to the "exhausted epistemics"[5] of

nativist Islamism, hyperethnic nationalism, neoliberal capitalism, right-wing populism, and autocratic socialism.

THE NEO-SHARIATI DISCOURSE: GENEALOGY AND HISTORICAL ORIGINS

At the risk of generalization but with a merit of some clarity, one could trace back the genealogy of the Muslim left in modern Iran to Jamal al din al-Afghi/ Asad Abadi, egalitarian Muslims in the *Ejtema'iyoon-A'amiyoon* (Social Democrats) during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, Mirza Kouchek Jangali, and Sheikh Mohammad Khiabani, among others. However, it was Mohammad Nakhshab (1923–1970) whose novel and noble idea of *Socialist Theism* marked the first historical episode of the Muslim left in modern Iran. Nakhshab's *Socialist Theists Movement* was a truing point.

Mohammad Nakhshab (1923–1970): A Socialist Theist

Socialism made a profound impact on young Muslim activists in the 1940s. It was in this context that Mohammad Nakhshab, Jalal ed-Din Ashtiyani, and Hossein Razi founded the *Socialist Theists Movement* (*Nehzat-e Khodaparastan-e Sosiyalist*) in 1944.[6] 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.'"[7] 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 va'seteh*); 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 socioeconomic base. For the Socialist Theists, the spiritual element of Islam provides a strong incentive for people to fight for freedom and social justice. Moreover, it is much easier to disseminate socialist ideals in Iran, he argued, through the Islamic concepts.[8] 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." Furthermore, "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."[9]

The Socialist Theists challenged the hegemony of any privileged class over others and fought simultaneously at least on three fronts: first and foremost, they were anti-clerical 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."[10] 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.[11]

It is worth noting that their idea of *the affinity between Islam and socialism* inspired many young Muslims in the 1960s and 1970s. Ali Shariati (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.[12] The Socialist Theists, known as the *intellectual father of Iran's modern Muslim Left*, contributed immensely to the cause of a social democratic interpretation of Islam.

Second, the Socialist Theists were critical of the "actually existing" Western liberal democracy. Jalal ed-Din Ashtiyani, one of the founding fathers 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.[13]

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."[14]

Third, the Socialist Theists challenged the state-centered Soviet-style socialism, or "actually existing 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 Union 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.

The Socialist Theists, in sum, were among a very few modern social forces in Iran who pioneered the idea of a *humanist and indigenous democratic socialism*. They were far ahead of some of their fellow Iranian Marxists who were intimidated by the Soviet and later by Maoist Marxism. Although not quite sophisticated in a philosophical term, their contribution to transcend false dichotomies of religious tradition and modernity, freedom and social justice, democracy and socialism, and the local and the global paradigms was profound. Their simultaneous critique of the clergy, Soviet Marxism, and capitalism did inspire the second generation of the Muslim Left, particularly Ali Shariati.[15]

Ali Shariati: A Gramscian Moment! On the Emancipatory Trinity of Freedom, Equality, and Progressive Civil Spirituality

Ali Shariati (1933–1977) was the most sophisticated and influential socialist Muslim in modern Iran. Like many other thinkers, Shariati's ideas were in the making and developed over time; he shifted his positions on a number of issues. Hence, one has to make a clear distinction between the *mature* Shariati, especially in his post-prison period (mid-/late 1970s), and the *young* Shariati, especially before and during the Ershad period (1960s and early 1970s). Moreover, it is crucial to make another distinction between Shariati's *core* and *contingent* thought. While Shariati's contingent ideas are less relevant to postrevolutionary Iran, some of his core ideas require new interpretations and may contribute to the current post-Islamist social condition in Iran.[16] Last, Shariati's core ideas/thought contain some *unthought*, which needs serious and sophisticated rethinking. For the purpose of this chapter, I suggest that Shariati's core ideas/thought are twofold:

Return to khish (Self) Not to khish (Plough)!

For Shariati, "social objectivity creates religious subjectivity," not the other way around.[17] This is how the sociopolitical 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 sociohistorical terms, is the struggle for human emancipation; it aims at self- and social awareness and responsibility. For Shariati, 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*, Shariati 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."[18] One could argue that there is an elective affinity between Shariati's future-oriented approach toward religion and how the European neo-Marxist Ernest Bloch (1885–1977) examines the role of *hope* and *utopia* in society.[19]

Shariati made a clear distinction between his indigenous and authentic idea of "Return to the Self" (*b'azgasht beh khish*) and a regressive, nativist, 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—institutionalized religion of the clerical class as well as the autocratic/colonial modernization. The second approach, however, is best represented by "Return to the Plough" (*b'azgasht 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.[20]

A Counterhegemonic Trinity of Emancipation: Freedom, Social Justice, and Civil Spirituality

Structures of domination, Shariati 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 (*estesm'ar*), political dictatorship (*estebd'ad*), and religious and other forms of cultural alienation (*estehm'ar*). Shariati offers a three-dimensional ideal type—"a trinity of freedom, social justice, and civil spirituality" *(azadi, barabari, 'erfan)*—in opposition to the "trinity of oppression" and in recognition of self- and social awareness.[21]

The problem, argued Shariati, 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.[22] These ideals turned into regressive forces, new means of domination, and served the status quo. The solution to this problem, Shariati 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*."[23]

More specifically, the core of Shariati's discourse is threefold: freedom and democracy without capitalism and neoliberal market fundamentalism, social justice and socialism without authoritarianism and materialism, and civil spirituality and ethics without organized religion and clericalism.

Democracy and Freedom

For Shariati, the "actually existing" democracies offer only a minimum requirement of an ideal radical democracy. Shariati is more inclined toward *demokr'asi-ye showra`i* (consultative democracy), advocating active and effective participation of citizens in the public sphere. However, Shariati's position on democracy and the role of intellectuals in the state is controversial and needs further inquiry.

For Shariati, the *rushanfekran* as Iran's organic intellectuals are the critical conscience of society and obliged to launch a "renaissance" and "reformation." As such, in his theory of *Ummat va Imamat* (Community and Leadership), the young/early Shariati advocated the idea of "committed/guided democracy," implying that the *rushanfekran* are obliged to take a political leadership to raise public consciousness, and guide public opinion only in a transitional period after the revolution. Such a revolutionary leadership would transform the ignorant masses (*ra's*) into citizens with an informed opinion (*ra'y*), and a procedural formal democracy into a substantive consultative democracy.[24]

The early Shariati was skeptical of procedural democracy in the Third World/postcolonial countries. His skepticism was primarily informed by the experience of the newly independent countries after World War II where the ignorant and conservative masses "would not be attracted by a progressive leadership concerned with the total transformation of society's old modes of thought, concepts and ways. If the people were to vote under such circumstances, Shariati argues that their vote would be for ignorant and conservative leaders like themselves."[25]

More specifically, Shariati's position should be examined in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Bandung in 1954, where the postcolonial revolutionary leaders advocated "committed/guided democracy" to stop the manipulation of public opinion in the electoral process in new postcolonial states. In the initial transitional phase from the old order to the new "the principle of democracy (was) considered to be in contradiction with the principle of revolutionary change, progress and leadership."[26]

Nonetheless, the mature/late Shariati seems to have changed his earlier position and explicitly rejected dictatorship of any form or of any social class. The late Shariati often quoted Rousseau in that "Do not show people the 'path,' and do not assign them [what to do]; just give them 'sight' [vision]! They will find the path properly, and will know their own obligations."[27] For the late Shariati, like Antonio Gramsci, the main mission of intellectual is not to lead but to enlighten the masses. The responsibility of intellectuals, he argued, "is not political leadership; it is to give masses awareness, that's all"! Once a *rushanfekr* (intellectual) awakens and enlighten society, champions and leaders will emerge from the society.[28] Hence, the theory of "committed/guided democracy" does not capture the core of Shariati's political theory.

Did Shariati advocate a religious state? Did his ideas contribute to the theory of *velayat-e faqih*? Shariati articulated a humanist Islamic discourse in that people are the only true representative of God on earth. According to the late Shariati, the principal agents of change in history and society are people, not political or religious elites. He even explicitly argued that in society and social issues, "we can always substitute the people for God."[29] In *Religion against Religion,* Shariati accused the clergy of a monopoly of the interpretation of Islam and a clerical despotism (*estebd'ad-e ruhani*), which, he argued, is the worst and the most oppressive form of despotism possible in human history—the "mother of all despotism and dictatorship."[30] The religious state, he argued, is a clerical despotism/oligarchy. It is not accountable to people, because it projects itself as God's representative on earth. In the religious state, nonreligious and the religious other are perceived as God's enemy and devoid of basic rights. Brutal injustice is justified in the name of God's mercy and justice.[31] Nonetheless, for Shariati, modern and civil progressive spirituality, not organized religion, may play a constructive role in the public sphere.

Social Justice and Equality

Shariati's egalitarian leaning and constant critique of social injustice/inequality makes him a socialist thinker. For Shariati, however, socialism is not merely a mode of production; rather, it is a way of life.[32] He is critical of state socialism, *worshipping personality*, *worshiping party*, *and worshipping state*; he advocates *humanist socialism*. He was critical of Soviet and other forms of state-centered socialism and was clearly influenced by the idea of democratic socialism.

There is an elective affinity between Shariati and the European neo-Marxism, anarchism, and cultural humanist Marxism. Shariati was among a very few pioneer Iranian intellectuals who introduced European cultural/humanist neo-Marxism to the Iranian society when the dominant discourse of Iranian Marxism—with the exception of very important but marginalized

figures—was Soviet and/or Chinese Marxism. Shariati was clearly influenced by the Hungarian neo-Marxist philosopher Georg Lucacs (1885–1971), German neo-Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885–1977), and certainly German-American critical philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979). It is not clear to what extent Shariati was familiar with the Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937); what is clear, however, is that he has been influenced by Gramsci's sociocultural approach to transform the society as well as Gramsci's concepts of cultural hegemony and counterhegemony. The affinity between Shariati and Gramsci, argues Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, is profound as Shariati's cultural approach was "a Gramscian moment in contemporary Iranian politics."[33] Furthermore, Shariati studied under European Marxologists such as George Gurvitch (1894–195) and Henry Laufer, and taught their work in Iran. Shariati's humanist, cultural, and Gramscian socialism was critical of not only state-sponsored socialism but also economism, determinism, and authoritarianism in orthodox/conventional Marxism. In his own words:

> It is clear in what sense we are not Marxists, and in what sense we are socialists. As a universal and scientific principle, Marx makes economics the infrastructure of man; but we [hold] precisely the opposite [view]. That is why we are the enemy of capitalism and hate the bourgeoisie. Our greatest hope in socialism is that in it man, his faith, ideas and ethical values are not super-structural, are not the manufactured and produced goods of economic infrastructure. They are their cause. Modes of production does not produce them. They are made between two hands of "love" and "consciousness." Man chooses, creates and sustains himself.[34]

Moreover, Shariati's egalitarianism and his passion for social justice were not merely influenced by European neo-Marxism. He was equally influenced by Iran's national and religious traditions/movements such as Mazdak and Shu'ubiyya movements, as well as the Arab Left scholars such as Judah al-Sahhar, the author of *Abu Dharr al Ghifari*.

Civil and Progressive Spirituality

For Shariati, freedom and social justice must be complemented with modern, civil, and progressive spirituality. Nonetheless, he makes it crystal clear that freedom and social justice remain the top priorities for ordinary people, and spirituality is futile without freedom and social justice. Shariati 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/spirituality may turn into a false conciseness and religious deception: "In the Garden of Eden, 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." Yet in today's world, continues Shariati, "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 a'dami'yat*) 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?"[35] 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.*[36]

Moreover, Shariati is well aware of the shortcomings of official and organized 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."[37] Nonetheless, a civil *'erfan*/spirituality, he argues, is a modern spiritual vision, ontology and epistemology, which is different from religious formalism and passive mysticism. His notion of civil and progressive spirituality remains in a critical dialogue with other religious traditions and modern ethical concepts. It is, in fact, a *postreligious spirituality*.[38]

For Shariati, the trinity of freedom, social justice, and spirituality (*azadi, barabari, '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, Shariati's trinity of *azadi*, *barabari*, and *'erfan*, the most relevant core of his thought, translates into a new polity of *spiritual social democracy*—an *ethical/humanist democratic socialism*. This ideal type clearly needs further conceptualization and clarification of the role of civil spirituality in the public sphere, translating abstract ideal types into a workable synthetic political model.[39]

It may be argued that in Shariati's synthetic trinity, *'erfan*/spirituality has a preeminent status in giving meaning to both equality (*barabari*) and freedom (*azadi*). Equality, in his view, is not simply a just system of production and distribution, but also an ethical philosophy that guides everyday actions and contains a moral/humanist dimension. Emphasis on equality is not simply a

class-based critique of capitalism. It also has important philosophical, ethical/moral implications, which can inform our commitment not only to fight socioeconomic exploitation but also our struggle for human dignity.

Similarly, spirituality can play a critical role in informing the nature of freedom and democracy. Here Shariati seems to be inspired by Mohammad Iqbal Lahori's (1877–1938) concept of "spiritual democracy."[40] In other words, this is not a mechanical amalgamation of liberal democracy and spirituality, but rather a substantive model of democracy informed by a spiritual ontology. Therefore, religion cannot play an official, legal, and institutional role in the state, but as a spiritual ontology it may play a constructive role in advancing a moral and ethical politics. Any effort to establish an organized religion—a Shari'a-based Islam—as a state official ideology seems contrary to the counterhegemonic and emancipatory trinity of freedom, equality, and spirituality.

In sum, Shariati'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."[41] Equally significant, yet, was Shariati's 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: "*Estehm'ar*" and again "*Estehm'ar*"! The first refers to autocratic modernity, market fundamentalism, and alienation by the hegemonic/colonial modernity. The second refers to religious deception and dogma.[42] Shariati seems to invite us to exercise an act of "epistemic disobedience,"[43] "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.[44]

Iran after the 1979 revolution and under an Islamist clerical oligarchy is not the same as Iran in the 1960s and 1970s when Shariati lived. Besides, new discourses have emerged in the contemporary Muslim majority contexts and the world has gone under certain paradigm shifts. These structural and discursive changes require new thinking. Furthermore, there is much *unthought* in Ali Shariati's thought and the new generation of critical progressive Muslims in postrevolutionary Iran need to address and acknowledge these changes.

NEO-SHARIATI DISCOURSE: A PROGRESSIVE POST-ISLAMIST MUSLIM LEFT?

A new generation of the Muslim left, disenchanted with the dominant Islamist ideology/polity and unsatisfied with the neoliberal hegemonic discourse, is again looking to Shariati. Shariati's critical stance toward

tradition and modernity, clericalism and neoliberal capitalism, shallow reformism and militant/violent approach toward change, together with the admiration of *radical and revolutionary reform* both in religious thought and in sociopolitical structure, appeals to this generation.[45] Like the previous two generations of Iran's Muslim Left, the third generation is diverse and composed of different intellectuals and movements. Nonetheless, the neo-Shariati discourse is the most sophisticated representative of this emerging postrevolutionary discourse. The neo-Shariati discourse admires Nakhshab and Shariati's radical critique of the trinity of domination (*zar*, *zor*, *tazvir*) and praises the trinity of emancipation (*azadi*, *barabari*, *'erfan*). They admire Shariati's radical critique of old and new forms of deception and cultural alienation (*estehm'ar*)—religious fanaticism and neoliberal/colonial modernity, or *religious fundamentalism* and *market fundamentalism*—critical dialogue of tradition and modernity, and above all a Gramscian approach toward sociopolitical change by raising people's awareness, and sociocultural transformation.

The neo-Shariati discourse explicitly advocates a "civil society approach," or a "societal" path toward just development and democratic socialism. It opposes a "state-centered" path toward socialism, and regards individual freedom and liberty fundamental to human dignity. While it remains critical of neoliberalism and some elements of liberalism, its critique aims to deepen and broaden the scope of freedom for as many marginalized people as possible. It follows a "social" approach to democracy.[46]

The neo-Shariati discourse, nonetheless, seems to acknowledge that both Iran and the world have changed since the demise of Shariati and therefore, a new discourse is warranted. The rise of Islamism/Khomeinism into power, and a massive sociocultural transformation of the Iranian society have created a new condition, which requires new thinking. The neo-Shariati discourse needs to revisit the intellectual legacy of the Muslim left and gives serious thought to the unthought in this tradition. Hence, this discourse seems to explicitly advocate a secular/*urfi* polity and rejects the Islamist project of an Islamic state. The Islamic state, in theory, is an oxymoron; in practice, it is no less than a clerical oligarchy, a Leviathan, which protects the interests of the ruling class. The new Muslim Left is, therefore, "post-Islamist."[47] It categorically rejects the idea of a divine/Islamic state and discards the Shari'a-based and/or the jurist/*Fuqaha*'s literalist reading of religion, but admires a civil and progressive role of reformed religious values in civil society.

The post-Islamist discourse symbolizes a critical negotiation between tradition and modernity, religion and reason, faith and freedom, sacred and secular, and particular and universal.[48] It is an attempt to make modernity while it critically reinvents and reforms tradition. "The notion of tradition," as Chantal Mouffe argues, "has to be distinguished from that of

traditionalism."[49] A modern vision of tradition remains in a critical dialogue with "tradition" but rejects "traditionalism." It is through articulation and de-articulation, development and deconstruction of tradition that one actively participates in the making of modernity and democracy. The goal of a critical dialogue with culture and mining the tradition is not to reclaim "traditionalism" or to claim that all universal values derive from a local culture; the goal instead is to show that values such as democracy and human rights have deep native roots in the local intellectual soil. By uncovering the local roots of such ideas, democracy, human rights, and social justice will be seen as ideas that are at once deeply local and global; they are genuinely *glocal*. The challenge of post-Islamism is to make a clear distinction between an *alternative modernity* and an *alternative to modernity*. While the former is conducive to the development of a critical *glocal* third way, the latter, Ernesto Laclau argues, is no less than "self-defeating."[50] In other words, "this is the route to self-apartheid." Nostalgic traditionalism is narcissistic retirement within oneself, which can only lead to a suicidal exile and self-marginalization.[51]

The post-Islamist Muslim Left in postrevolutionary Iran clearly acknowledges the limits of the idea of "guided/committed democracy" in Shariati's *Ummat va Emmamat*. It admires and acknowledges a post-Islamist polity, and the necessity of a secular state in Iran.

Moreover, it has shown its commitment to give some thought about unthought in this tradition, namely gender justice (women and LGBTQ) and environmental justice, as well as a radical critique of Islamism/Islamic state, clarifying differences between Islamism as a regressive discourse and a progressive post-Islamist discourse of liberation theology. There is also a debate about whether and to what extent the same methods of religious reform are applicable to the current post-Islamist conditions in Iran.

Furthermore, the neo-Shariati intellectuals have spoken about deepening the philosophical foundations of the Muslim Left. This includes theorizing the idea of radical consultative democratic socialism inspired by spiritual/ethical ontology, and developing a humanist/spiritual epistemic alternative to both nativist Islamism and a market-driven discourse of neoliberalism and other forms of hegemonic modernity.[52]

CONCLUSIONS

"Contemporaries," argues Agamben, "are rare. And for this reason, to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage, because it means being able not only to firmly fix your gaze on the darkness of the epoch, but also to perceive in this darkness a light that, while directed toward us, infinitely distance itself from us."[53]

The neo-Shariati discourse/movement seems to have taken up the mantle of critical "contemporary" Muslim intellectuals in the tradition of Nakhshab-Shariati. They are post-Islamist Muslim social democrats, critical of religious oligarchy and neoliberalism—religious and market fundamentalism. They belong to Iran's deep and diverse tradition of *indigenous humanist social democracy*, critiquing Soviet and autocratic Third World socialism. Their sociocultural approach to societal change would make them a good fit to a "Gramscian moment in contemporary Iranian politics." One could argue that the neo-Shariati's progressive post-Islamist stance and its quest for a homegrown *democratic socialism* would make it a potential "contemporary" alternative to the "exhausted epistemics" of nativist Islamism, hyperethnic nationalism, right-wing populism, militant secularism, autocratic and state-centered socialism, and neoliberal capitalism.

Nonetheless, to be contemporary, this discourse/movement needs "courage" of being "untimely"—the ability to know how to observe the "obscurity" and the "darkness" of our time, disallowing "to be blinded by the lights" of the epoch. More specifically, there remains much unthought and work ahead of this "contemporary" discourse/movement in order to remain an influential progressive trend/force in the twenty-first-century Iran, and possibly in the larger Muslim contexts.

The first task is to clearly and completely confront *Islamism*. We know that Shariati blamed the religious clerical establishment of *ulama* for its regressive and reactionary outlook, looking backward to a mythical glorious age. It is evident from Shariati's writings that he visualized an Islam without the clergy's monopoly of religious inspiration and interpretation. Iran's clerical authority and organized religion (*ruh'aniyyat*), Shariati argued, represented "Safavid Shiism": a passive, apolitical, and distorted version of revolutionary progressive "Alavid Shiism." Organized clerical Islam, he argued, has served as a sociocultural base of political despotism by withdrawing religion from its public responsibilities, depoliticizing it except for legitimizing the current social order, and transforming it into individual piety and asceticism.[54] An Islamic liberation theology and an Islamic renaissance/reformation, he thought, would be a solution to Iran's stagnation and social status quo.[55]

However, the rise of *revolutionary Islamism* in postrevolutionary Iran is probably one of the most significant *unthought* in Shariati's thought. The question is whether Shariati underestimated the socio-organizational power of the clergy and the rise of radical Islamism in postrevolutionary Iran. He seems never anticipated the return and reincarnation of the same regressive and conservative clerical Islam of Safavid Shiism but masked with a revolutionary Alavid Shiism, that is, revolutionary Islamism. Islamism was unthought in Shariati's thought. Hence, the postrevolutionary context requires new thinking about how to challenge Islamist hegemony and its

complex mode of domination, or to use Michel Foucault's concept, an *Islamist* "governmentality."[56] This new condition may also require rethinking about the nature and methods of an Islamic reformation.

The second task is theorizing an *indigenous democratic socialism* driven by a *spiritual ontology*. The neo-Shariati discourse explicitly rejects the concept of an Islamic state and advocates a secular/civil or *urfi* democracy. For Ehsan Shariati, state is a neutral secular entity and must remain neutral to all religions and ideologies. The state's legitimacy derives from public reason and the free collective will of the people. As such, a new reading of Ali Shariati's discourse would affirm political secularism, but remain critical of ontological secularism, and the positivist rationalism of secular modernity. Moreover, to use Mohammad Iqbal Lahouri's concept, this reading would advocate "spiritual democracy," not religious democracy.[57] In the same way, Hassan Yusefi-Eshkevari argues that from a purely Islamic perspective, it may be argued that political power is an *urfi* and worldly question. He explicitly challenges two pillars of the Islamic state, namely, the "divine legitimacy of power" and "full implementation of Shari'a." Political power including "the Prophet's rule in Medina was the result of a social contract." Neither the power of the state nor the Shari'a is divine. An Islamic state is an Islamist human construction.[58] Similarly, Reza Alijani advocates democratic secularism. He identifies two types of religiosity and two types of secularism. While the Shari'a-based religion and radical/fundamentalist secularism are not compatible, the human-based religion and democratic secularism are compatible.[59] Democratic secularization separates the religious and political institutions, but highlights the normative value of religion in the individual, social, and political spheres. Nonetheless, the idea of an *indigenous democratic socialism driven by a spiritual ontology* still needs further clarification. More specifically, the abstract idea of a spiritual ontology and its impact on state and society needs to be contextualized, operationalized, and articulated.

The third task involves the role of *civil progressive spirituality* in the public sphere. Shariati's trinity of freedom (*azadi*), equality (*barabari*), and civil spirituality (*erfan*) is a novel contribution to the idea of an "alternative modernity," or "multiple modernities." It problematizes the conventional discourses, but offers little a clear alternative theory or a practical road map. What is the contribution of *erfan* in the public sphere, and how does this shape or inform the other two pillars, *azadi* and *barabari*? How does such a critical constructive erfan translate into a workable progressive sociopolitical project? More specifically, the question is whether and how the "trinity theory" translates into a workable synthetic political model of *spiritual social democracy*.[60]

Last but certainly not the least task is to devote much thought to develop new and original ideas *about gender, environmental, racial, ethnic, and*

all other forms of justice in the context of an indigenous and progressive discourse of a "contemporary" Muslims of the twenty-first-century Iran—a *glocal* discourse of *comprehensive* social justice informed by progressive ontology of civil spirituality. This is how neo-Shariati public intellectuals would become, in the Agambenean tradition, "truly contemporary," as they "neither perfectly coincide" with "their time nor adjust themselves to its demands." They maintain a "relationship with time that adhere to it through a disjunction and an anachronism."[61]

Feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins has famously coined the concept of "Matrix of Domination" and oppression, referring to the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and other social factors in oppression and domination.[62] In other words, because there are multiple and interconnected sources of social injustice, critical and contemporary organic public intellectuals must acknowledge and challenge such a complex and multifaceted "matrix of oppression," by contributing to the development of a discourse and praxis of comprehensive social justice, or a *Matrix of Emancipation*. It remains to be seen to what extent the neo-Shariati discourse is capable of providing a comprehensive and yet practical progressive post-Islamist alternative to Iran's matrix of religious, gender, class, environmental, ethnic, and political injustice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

NOTES

1. Gorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus*? (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 41–45, emphasis added.
2. Ibid., 41.
3. Ibid., 45.
4. Ibid., 50.
5. Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-European Think?* (London: Zed Books, 2015).
6. Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran Divided: The Historical Roots of Iranian Debates on Identity, Culture, and Governance in the Twentieth-First Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 72; Seyed Mohammad Ali Taghavi, *The Flourishing*

of Islamic Reformism in Iran: Political Islamic Groups in Iran 1941–1961 (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 13–15.

7. Hunter, *Iran Divided*, 72.

8. Mohammad Nakhshab, *Majmu'eh-ye asar-e Mohammad Nakhshab* [The Collected Works of Mohammad Nakhshab] (Tehran: Chapakhsh, 2002); Mahmoud Nekuruh, *Nehzat-e khodaparastan-e sosiyalist* [The Movement of Socialist Theists] (Tehran: Entesharat-e Chappakhsh, 1997).

9. Hunter, *Iran Divided*, 72; Taghavi, *The Flourishing of Islamic Reformism in Iran*, 27.

10. Hunter, *Iran Divided*, 72.

11. Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 25.

12. Yadollah Shahibzadeh, *The Iranian Political Language: From the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (New York, NY: Palgrave McMillan, 2015).

13. Jalal ed-Din Ashtiyani quoted in Hunter, *Iran Divided*, 73; Taghavi, *The Flourishing of Islamic Reformism in Iran*, 32–33, original emphasis.

14. Hunter, *Iran Divided*, 73.

15. Mojtaba Mahdavi, "Iran: Multiple Sources of a Grassroots Social Democracy?" in *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*, ed. Peyman Vahabzadeh (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 271–88, 276–78.

16. Mojtaba Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 31, no. 1 (2011): 94–109, 102.

17. Ali Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 16 [in Persian] (Tehran: Ershad, 1981), 30, original emphasis.

18. Ali Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 22 [in Persian] (Tehran: Chapakhsh, 1998) quoted in Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends," 102–6, original emphasis.

19. Ernst Bloch, *The Principles of Hope*, 3 Vols., trans. N. Plaice, St. Plaice, and P. Knight (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1954/1995); Michael Lowy, "Romanticism, Marxism and Religion in 'The Principles of Hope' of Ernst Bloch," trans. Rodrigo Gonsalves, *Crisis & Critique*, 2, no. 1 (2015): 350–55.

20. Ali Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4 [in Persian] (Tehran: Elham, 1998) quoted in Mahdavi, "Iran: Multiple Sources," 281.

21. Ali Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2 [in Persian] (Tehran: Ershad, 1982), Mahdavi, "Iran: Multiple Sources", 281; Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends," 102–6.

22. Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, p. 37.

23. Ibid., 85–90, Abbas Manoochehri, "Critical Religious Reason: Ali Shari'ati on Religion, Philosophy and Emancipation," *Polylog* (2003), Retrieved 12 April 2016, http://them.polylog.org/4/fma-en.htm; Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends," 102–6; Mahdavi, "Iran: Multiple Sources", 282; emphasis added.

24. Ali Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 26 [in Persian] (Tehran: Amoun, 1993), 461–634.

25. Ali Rahnema and Farhad Nomani, *The Secular Miracle: Religion, Politics and Economic Policy in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1990), 67.

26. Ibid.

27. Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 94, 4257–58, 342.

28. Ali Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 20 [in Persian] (Tehran: Ghalam, 1995), 49–108.

29. Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 22, p. 153, emphasis added.

30. Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 22.

31. Ibid.

32. Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, p. 107.

33. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, "Contentious Public Religion: Two Conceptions of Islam in Revolutionary Iran: Ali Shari`ati and Abdolkarim Soroush," *International Sociology*, 19, no. 4 (December 2004): 512.

34. Ali Shariati quoted in Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1992), 143.

35. Ali Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 33 [in Persian] (Tehran: Agaah, 1995), 1266, emphasis added.

36. Ibid.

37. Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, pp. 52, 60, emphasis added.

38. Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends," 102–6.

39. Mahdavi, "Iran: Multiple Sources", 282–83; Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends," 102–6.

40. Mohammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989/2012).

41. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 124; Dabashi, *Can Non-European Think?*, 20.

42. Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4.

43. Walter Mignolo, "Foreword: Yes, We Can," in Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-European Think?* (London: Zed Books, 2015), viii–xlii.

44. Mahdavi, "Iran: Multiple Sources," 284.

45. They include intellectuals, scholars, and activists such as Ehsan, Susan, and Sara Shariati, Hashem Aghajari, Hossein Mesbahian, Reza Alijani, Hassan Yusefi-Eshkevari, Taghi Rahmani, Alireza Rajai, Mohammad Javad Kashi, Abbas Manoochehri, Ali Ghasemi, and Arman Zakeri, among many others. One could caustically add to the list sociologist Yusef Abazari, political scientist Ahmad Zeidabadi, and other scholars and activists sympathetic to a new reading of Shariati, which challenges clerical oligarchy, shallow reformism, violent/militant path toward social change, and neoliberal capitalist path of development. Sociologist Yusef Abazari and historian Hashim Aghajari have called this a *Re-Turn to Shariati*! Such return, however, addresses and acknowledges differences between NOW-and-HERE and the Shariati's era. Hence, there has been an intellectual critique of Shariati's legacy, giving some serious thought to Shariati's *unthought*. In 2017 and 2018, the neo-Shariati intellectuals organized two symposiums in Iran to examine Shariati's legacy in the postrevolutionary context and to conceptualize the discourse of neo-Shariati. More information is available here: *Now, Us and Shariati*, 22–23 November 2017, http://drshariati.org/?p=14967; *Neo-Shariati and the project of Invention of the Self*, 12 December 2018, http://drshariati.org/?p=20837#more-20837.

46. Ehsan Shariati, "Justice under Freedom," Interview with *Ta'adol Daily*, 19 June 2014.

47. Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends."

48. Asef Bayat, *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends."

49. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*: *Thinking in Action* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 16.

50. Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London and New York, NY: Verso, 1996), 26, 32.

51. Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends," 106–7.

52. Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends."

53. Agamben, *What is an Apparatus*?, 46.

54. Ali Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 9 [in Persian] (Tehran: Chapakhsh, 1998).

55. Shariati, *Collected Works*, Vol. 20.

56. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

57. Ehsan Shariati, "Interview with Sharhrvand," *Shahrvand*, 12, no. 714 (2002): 3–5.

58. Hassan Yusefi-Eshkevari (2011).

59. Reza Alijani, "Pre-secular Iranians in a Post-secular Age: The Death of God, the Resurgent of God," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 31, no. 1 (2011): 27–33.

60. Mahdavi, "Post-Islamist Trends."

61. Agamben, *What is an Apparatus*?, 41–45.

62. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

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