

# The -Alchemist of Revolution: Ali Shariati's Political Thought in International Context

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## ABSTRACT

This article challenges essentialist conceptions of "political Islam" as the ideology of an internally generated rejection of modernity through reconceptualising Ali Shariati's idea of "revolutionary Islam" as an internationally constituted mediation of modernity. It argues that "the international" was central to Shariati's artful combination of western and Shi'i-Islamic ideas and concepts. This hybrid character, the article argues, underlay the remarkable political appeal of Shariati's discourse of revolutionary Islam to broad sections of the population whose subjectivity had, in turn, been re-shaped by the ideological ramifications of the formation of the novel phenomenon of "the citizen-subject", a hybrid sociological form produced by Iran's experience of modern uneven and combined development.

**Keywords:** The Citizen-Subject, International Relations, Iran, Islam, Shariati, Substitution, Uneven and Combined Development

*My Lord ... tell my people that the only path towards you passes through the earth, and show me a shortcut.*  
Ali Shariati

*If there are obstacles the shortest line between two points may well be a crooked line.*  
Bertolt Brecht

## Introduction

Ali Shariati is widely regarded as the ideological architect of the Iranian Revolution.<sup>1</sup> His portraits were often carried side by side with those of the revolution's charismatic leader Ayatollah Khomeini during anti-Shah mass demonstrations. Shariati's ideas have also been highly influential in post-revolutionary period. A number of important political organizations active in post-revolutionary Iran drew directly on Shariati's political ideas. More recently, many religiously minded students, public intellectuals, and members of the political elite, including prominent reformist figures have sympathised with Shariati's

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<sup>1</sup>This article is largely based on "Decoding Political Islam: Uneven and Combined Development and Ali Shariati's Political Thought" in Robbie Shilliam, (ed.), *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 108-124.

alternative vision of Islam, especially his vehement opposition to Shi'a clergy and advocacy of social justice both of which are central to his ideology of "revolutionary Islam".

What are the intellectual and social sources of Shariati's political influence? The existing accounts tend to answer these questions in terms of Shariati's creative appropriation of modern western political philosophies in re-imagining the Shi'a Islam. Accordingly, Shariati's ideology of "revolutionary Islam", which is an instance of the wider phenomenon of "political Islam", has been categorised under the rubrics of "liberation theology", "Third world populism" or "Islamic fundamentalism".<sup>2</sup> These ideological typologies are analytically illuminating but they arguably provide only a political-discursive morphology and not a theoretical comprehension

In this article I suggest that a more adequate account of Shariati's political thought requires a social theory that registers, at the most fundamental level, the mutually constitutive relation between international relations and intra-national social change. Accordingly, I reassess Shariati's political thought using Leon Trotsky's idea of "uneven and combined development".<sup>3</sup> I argue that Shariati's political thought can be best understood as an amalgamated political-ideological discourse that was more effective than existing monolithic political discourses, both secular and religious, in engaging and animating cultural, ideological, and political sensibilities of the "citizen-subject", a novel hybrid agency that was generated by Iran's modern uneven and combined development. Through a brief account of Iran's modernization under the Pahlavi regime and a close reading of Shariati's writings I therefore show that Shariati's "revolutionary Islam" was fashioned with the aim of mobilizing the politically important social stratum of Iran's new intelligentsia whose ambivalent subjectivity, incorporating both western and indigenous elements, poised them for revolution. The transformation of this revolutionary posture into revolutionary action, however, required a radical and modern but readily recognisable political discourse. Shariati most effectively met this requirement through his imaginative reconstruction of key elements of Shi'i-Islamic thought and practice.

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<sup>2</sup>Nikki Keddie, *The Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 217; John Esposito, "Foreword", in Ali Shariati (ed.), *What Is To Be Done: The Enlightened Thinkers and An Islamic Renaissance* (Houston: The Institute for Research and Islamic Studies (IRIS), 1986), pp. ix–xii, xi. See also Mansoor Moaddel, *Class, Politics and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Mansoor Moaddel, "Ideology as Episodic Discourse: The Case of the Iranian Revolution", *American Sociological Review* (Vol. 57, No. 3, 1992), pp. 353-379.

<sup>3</sup>Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 1985); Justin Rosenberg, "The philosophical premises of uneven and combined development", *Review of International Studies* (doi: 10.1017/S0260210512000381); Justin Rosenberg, "Why is There No International Historical Sociology?" *European Journal of International Relations* (Vol. 12, No. 3, 2006), pp. 307– 340; Kamran Matin, "Redeeming The Universal: Postcolonialism and the Inner Life of Eurocentrism", *European Journal of International Relations* (doi: 10.1177/1354066111425263); Kamran Matin, "Uneven and Combined Development in World History: The International Relations of State-formation in Premodern Iran", *European Journal of International Relations* (Vol. 13, No. 3, 2007), pp. 419–447.

I present the argument in three main parts. First, I show why despite its profound international origins and impact non-western political thought has been marginal within the discipline of International Relations (IR). Second, I sketch a brief history of the relation between Islam and politics in terms of the ulama's attitude towards the state. This forms the background against which both the continuity and ruptures in the formation of political Islam as a modern ideology become evident. Third, I interrogate Ali Shariati's political thought through the concept of "substitution"- a native element of the idea of uneven and combined development - and show how his innovative combination of elements of modern European political thought, Marxism in particular, and Shi'a-Islamic ideas and beliefs produced a hybrid ideological discourse irreducible to either, and eminently effective in exhorting and mobilising Iranian "citizen-subjects" for the purpose of a revolutionary resolution of Iran's socio-economic and cultural ills.

### **International relations of/and non-western political thought**

Bassam Tibi makes the poignant point that unlike their western ancestors, Third World ideologies, including "political Islam", cannot be domesticated.<sup>4</sup> This impossibility of ideological nativism is, I contend, a feature of all forms of intellectual production since they are all activities with a distinctly *international* dimension that renders them resistant to theoretical comprehension in singularist, cultural, or more generally, internalist terms. This international dimension of intellectual production is particularly strong in modern period due to the intensification of the interactive coexistence of societies caused by the rise and expansion of capitalism. In very general terms this international dimension can be sketched as follows.

Capitalism is inherently claustrophobic. Moving away from its English epicentre through colonial and imperial projects, of which it was both an engine and a product, capitalism, and various ideologies associated with it, became systematically and fundamentally implicated in the development of social, economic, cultural, intellectual and ideological forms in all societies. Thus, what Marshall Hodgson called "the great western transmutation" also became the pressure point on the Islamic world in a variety of ways.<sup>5</sup> Thus, what the west/non-west encounters involved in ideological terms were not "authenticity" or "nativism", as claimed by some non-European intellectuals and Eurocentric and orientalist scholars, but hybridity and amalgamation.<sup>6</sup>

Logically, it therefore follows that the discipline of International Relations (IR) can be an, if not *the*, ideal intellectual site for the study of non-western political thought. However, the dominant approaches within IR have paid scant

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<sup>4</sup>Bassam Tibi, "Islam and Modern European Ideologies", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Vol. 18, 1986), pp. 15-29, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup>Hamid Dabashi, "Review: The Revolutions of Our Time: Religious Politics in Modernity", *Comparative Sociology* (Vol. 13, No. 6, 1984), pp. 673-676, p. 673.

<sup>6</sup>Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for A New Ummah* (London: Hurst & Co., 2004); Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

attention to non-western political thought in both their construction of international theory and theorization of international relations.<sup>7</sup> This is highly curious given the fact that for much of its history IR has been directly concerned with non-western geopolitical and developmental challenges with distinct intellectual and political articulations. One of the institutional sources of this problem, i.e., the link between mainstream IR and US foreign policy, has long been recognized.<sup>8</sup> More recently, it has been shown that classical political theory, on which IR systematically, albeit uncritically, draws occludes, distorts and suppresses cultural difference through its mono-linear schemas of historical progress away from a pre-historical "state of nature".<sup>9</sup> The resulting eurocentric conceptions of modernity construe all instances of developmental difference as "aberrations", "deviations" or "anomalies", which are consequently reduced to diachronically anterior and normatively inferior modes of rationality and civilisations.<sup>10</sup>

But within both the west and its colonies, the intellectual challenges to eurocentrism's Procrustean universal history were coeval with, and largely produced by, concrete socio-political struggles which they supplied with political compass and ideological edge. For the "effacement of heteronomy"<sup>11</sup> that modern historicism envisaged theoretically also mandated concrete socio-political projects, e.g., colonial reforms and modernization programmes. A key element of these projects was the multifaceted processes of "primitive accumulation": the separation of direct producers, most often the peasants, from their means of reproduction, the land. In most semi-colonial or post-colonial countries this process was introduced by indigenous ruling elites who considered it central to their industrialization strategies aimed at maintaining geo-political and economic independence in the face of the imperial onslaught of modern and modernizing western states.

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<sup>7</sup>Notable exceptions include: Robert Cox, "Towards a posthegemonic conceptualization of world order: Reflections on the relevancy of Ibn Khaldun", in Robert Cox and Timothy Sinclair (eds.), *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 144-173; Mustafa Kamal Pasha, "Ibn Khaldun and world order", in Stephen Gill and James Mittelman (eds.), *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>Stanley Hoffmann, "An American Social Science: International Relations", reprinted in Stanley Hoffmann (ed.), *Janus and Minerva: Essays in Theory and Practice of International Relations* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 3-24.

<sup>9</sup>E.g. Beate Jahn, *The Cultural Construction of International Relations: The Invention of the State of Nature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (London: Routledge).

<sup>10</sup>E.g. Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. vii. See also Enrique Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity: Introduction to the Frankfurt School", *Boundary 2*, (Vol. 20, No. 3, 1993), pp. 65-76, pp. 67-68; Emmanuel Eze, *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1997); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Fred Dallmayr, "Beyond Monologue: For A Comparative Political Theory", *Perspectives on Politics* (Vol. 2, No. 2, 2004), pp. 249-257, p. 250.

<sup>11</sup>Louiza Odysseos, *The Subject of Coexistence: Otherness in International Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. xxix.

These instances of “conservative revolution” also involved a general process of social differentiation, individual alienation, ethical estrangement and cultural corrosion. In some cases, they imploded into the kind of intellectual responses that involved the invention of *Übermensch* and *volk*, arguably the most consequential surrogates for the God of tradition slain at the hand of modern reason.<sup>12</sup> These were German prototypes of a new discourse of uniqueness in response to the socio-cultural and economic upheavals that were brought to a cataclysmic culmination with Germany’s defeat in the First World War.<sup>13</sup> Similar discursive and ideological projects that sought to mediate the tension between “culture” and industry became the hallmarks of various strategies of national revival in almost all postcolonial societies, including Iran. Nonetheless, the resulting “native” shield of endogenous cultural authenticity against exogenous western modernity became the spear of modernity itself. Crucially, these emergent discourses of authenticity were indeed strategies for a successful co-existence in the world, not self-insulation from it. Discourses and ideologies of culturally authentic existence and modernity’s purported universal homogeneity have been co-constitutive.

The discernment and conceptualisation of this mutually constitutive relation between internal “tradition” and external “modernity” - generating unanticipated but often consequential amalgamations - has been a defining character of recent versions of post-colonial critique.<sup>14</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, argues that the idea of the “the universal” is subverted/mutated precisely when it is actually universalised, i.e., when they are imposed on, or adopted by, a social formation different from the one in which it was originally formed.<sup>15</sup> For this actualisation involves the process whereby the analytically distinguishable dimensions of a concept, i.e., its discursive aspect represented by the apparent semantic purity, merges with, and is reconstituted by, its figurative dimension, that is, its practical visualisation and enactment in a different time and space.<sup>16</sup> Yet, although these critiques do successfully reveal the violent character of modern western “civilisation”, camouflaged and justified by its universalistic claims and singularist ontology, they tend to refrain from formulating a non-eurocentric theory of history which is indispensable to a decisive defeat of eurocentrism. This is so because they tend to equate general theory with the idea of a homogenous universal. As I have shown elsewhere this equation is flawed.<sup>17</sup> For it takes the internalist and homogenous conception of

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<sup>12</sup>Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press); Bernhard Giesen, *Intellectual and German Nation: Collective Identity in An Axial Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>13</sup>Larry Eugene Jones, “Culture and Politics in the Weimar Republic”, in Gordon Martel (ed.), *Modern Germany Reconsidered, 1870-1945* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>14</sup>But unfortunately the representation of this interactive relation has, arguably, often been insufficiently affirmative. An important example is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge, 1978). For IR-related literature see Philip Darby, *At the Edge of International Relations: Postcolonialism, Gender and Dependency* (London: Pinter, 1997).

<sup>15</sup>Chakrabarty, op. cit., p. xii

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Matin, “Redeeming the Universal”

the universal in eurocentrism at face value. This in turn rules out the logical consummation of postcolonial critique's internationalist methodology, which implies a general theory of the social. Moreover, postcolonial approaches tend to over-culturalize the relations between global north and south as being primarily about "discourse, language or identity [and] not armaments, commodities, exploitation, migrant realities, debt, drugs".<sup>18</sup>

The above discussion was intended to highlight two crucial considerations with respect to the analysis of non-western political thought. The first consideration concerns the danger of essentialism that lurks behind any ontological inside/outside binary opposition. The second pertains to the centrality of power relations in the processes of western modernity's global expansion. This international power asymmetry has consistently given rise to political and ideological resistance, which have in turn codetermined the processes, forms and trajectories of modernity itself. In short, there is in modernity a transformative tension between the putatively abstract and concrete that is often activated most energetically and consequentially on the terrain of "the international" understood as "that dimension of social reality which arises specifically from the coexistence within it of more than one society".<sup>19</sup> The idea of uneven and combined development best captures the condition of possibility and key strategic dynamics of this process through its conceptualization of societal multiplicity and interactivity at the level of general abstractions.<sup>20</sup> For by departing from the ontological premise of societal *multiplicity* (unevenness) it also registers as a general abstraction the constitutive ramification of the *co-existence* of multiple societies into their *existence* and internal development and *vice versa* (combination). Accordingly, the specificities of the modern non-western political thought cannot be derived from hermetically conceived cultural traits and idioms –though these are always appropriated for reasons to do with the construction and mobilization of an effective political agency, as I shall show below with relation to Shariati. Nor would they be seen as representing mere resistance to cultural corrosion and religious erosion – again even though these are also real and important phenomena and always part of the wider process. Rather, from the perspective of uneven and combined development modern non-western political thought, like any form of modern intellectual production, should be conceptualized as attempts to mediate capitalist modernity, as an international and intercultural process, through a selective importation of western intellectual products and their incorporation into the non-western cultural, ideological and political discourses in a process of reciprocal mutation. The immediate agents of such attempts formulate them as discourses of authenticity intended to protect

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<sup>18</sup>Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Discontent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 161.

<sup>19</sup>Rosenberg, "Why is there no International Historical Sociology?", p. 308

<sup>20</sup>Rosenberg, "Philosophical Premises"; Matin, "Redeeming the Universal".

an allegedly pristine culture.<sup>21</sup> But in practice, as it was intimated above, such ideological strategies often synthesize the "native" and the "foreign", the 'internal' and the "external" reconstituting them in novel forms. Shariati's 'revolutionary Islam' is an important and illuminating case in point. But before a close examination of Shariati's political thought a brief account of the relation between Islam and politics and Iran's uneven and combined development is in order.

### **Islam and the State: A Potted History**

What are the historical character, determinants and modalities of the relation between Islam and the state? To start with, there are important differences between the Sunni majority and the Shi'a minority with respect to the conditions of the legitimate rule. In Weberian terms Shi'ism is the expression of, and based upon, the institutionalized perpetuation of charismatic authority in the doctrine of *imamat*, the belief that the right of legitimate post-prophetic rule belongs to a particular line of male descendants of the prophet Mohammad or *imams*.<sup>22</sup> The Shi'i belief in the occultation of the last imam is therefore essentially a device for pre-empting the routinization of the charisma. By contrast, Sunnism routinizes charismatic authority in its theory of caliphate, whose institutional procedures are heavily influenced by pre-Islamic Arab tribal conventions.<sup>23</sup> In both Sunnism and Shiism there is, however, the abstract-theoretical idea of the co-extensiveness of religious and political spheres and their subsumption under the Shari'a. But for much of Islamic history the Sunni ulama, the compilers, interpreters, and guardians of the Shari'a, have been implicated, often in a subordinate or auxiliary position, in the operation of existing Muslim states whose strategic behaviour was essentially determined by the secular exigencies of *raison d'etat*.<sup>24</sup>

Shi'a Islam, the specific subject of our discussion, too has a largely similar collaborationist legacy in spite of its apparent doctrinal rejection of all temporal powers during the absence of the twelfth imam, Mahdi. Its prolonged political marginality combined with the fatalism of its passive millenarianism gradually attenuated Shi'ism's original egalitarian political militancy while inflating its scholastic-philosophical character; a process that was greatly aided by the Safavi state (1501-1721), which elevated Shi'ism into Iran's state religion. Consequently, Shi'ism's anti-status-quo belligerence was structurally softened. Shi'a ulama acquired considerable power and influence during the reign of the weak monarch of the Qajar dynasty (1791-1925). However, with the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty the situation began to change radically. Reacting to Iran's massive loss

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<sup>21</sup>See *inter alia* Roy, Failure of political Islam; Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2007), pp. 9-13; cf. Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup>Said Amir Arjomand, "The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shiism: A Sociohistorical Perspective", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Vol. 28, No. 4, 1996), pp. 491-515.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>Jung, *op. cit.* in note 4.

of (geo)political autonomy and prestige under the Qajars, the first Pahlavi Shah, Reza Shah (1878-1944) embarked on a modernization project. In a classic case of combined development Reza Shah built a centralized, secular nation-state in the absence of capitalist socio-economic relations. This involved a considerable, but still tolerable, encroachment on the Shi'a ulama's prerogatives, especially in educational and judicial domains. With the weakening of the ulama's institutional basis of power some members of the Shi'a ulama began to review their approach to, and relation with, the Pahlavi state; a process of reflection on the political status and role of the Shi'a ulama that had already begun in the late nineteenth century and gathered pace during the constitutional movement (1905-1911).<sup>25</sup> But crucially this change occurred in the context of a decidedly pluralistic politics marked by three broad political tendencies with different and changing socio-political weight: Shi'i modernism, liberal nationalism, and socialism. Two fundamental and inter-related issues more than once brought these trends into political cooperation: foreign domination and monarchical autocracy. The Constitutional Revolution and oil-nationalisation movement were important instances of such successful, albeit temporary, cooperation.

However, radical land reforms and rapid, oil-lubricated industrialization of the second Pahlavi king, Mohammad Reza Shah (1919-1980) during the 1960s and 1970s) accelerated and deepened Shi'a modernists' political radicalism. An implicit consensus on the necessity of the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime had emerged among the radical Shi'a modernists, still a relatively small minority within Shi'a establishment. The key issue for these radicals was the reinvigoration of Shi'i-Islamic thought so that it can appeal to the widest spectrum of ordinary Iranians in their struggle against the Pahlavi regime. The reactionary and obscurantist discourse of orthodox Shi'a ulama in an Iran undergoing rapid modernization in all spheres of life was completely ineffective. For this rapid modernization had a distinctly combined character. It involved a mutated form of the "separation of the economic and the political" - the hallmark of the original development of capitalism in England. This was due to the fact that there was a pervasive process of socio-economic abstraction of direct producers. But this process was politically inflected due to the strategic intervention of the state, which, paradoxically, rendered these new socio-economically abstract subjects politically determined in an unmediated fashion. I have conceptualised this new subject as the "citizen-subject".<sup>26</sup> The "citizen" part of this concept signifies the traits and dynamics arising from the "primitive accumulation", i.e. disentanglement from pre-capitalist relations of personalised political dependency, which is the real historical basis of the juridically equal and autonomous liberal subjects. And the "subject" part signifies the consequential retention of traits and dynamics pertaining to precapitalist personal forms of

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<sup>25</sup>Kamran Matin, "Democracy without capitalism: retheorizing Iran's Constitutional Revolution", *Middle East Critique* (Vol. 21, No. 1, 2012), pp. 37-56.

<sup>26</sup>Kamran Matin, *Recasting Iranian Modernity: The International Dimension of Social Change* (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming), Chapter 5.



political dependency, and their associated ideological forms, reproduced and valorised as a result of the political containment of the ramifications of the former transformation by the centralised-bureaucratic Pahlavi rentier-state.<sup>27</sup> The task facing the Shah's diverse opposition was the fashioning of an ideological language resonant with the ambiguous subjectivity of the "citizen-subject" as a hybrid agency. The Shi'a intellectual-activists proved to be more successful in constructing precisely such an ideology and discourse. Two figures in particular played a key role in this process: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Dr. Ali Shariati. Elsewhere, I have analysed Khomeini's invention of the concept of "Islamic government", i.e., direct rule of the qualified Shi'a jurist.<sup>28</sup> Here I concentrate on Shariati's construction of "revolutionary Islam".

### **Ali Shariati: The Ascetic Ideologue of Revolution**

*It is in becoming that we can be. ... It is in action that truth manifests itself. ... Faith is [to be] turned into a conscientious ideology.*

*Ali Shariati*

Dr. Ali Shariati (1933-1977) was born into an old professional religious family reputed for their piety, social service and asceticism.<sup>29</sup> He received a bachelor's degree in French and Arabic from Mashhad University in 1960 and then went to Paris where he obtained a doctorate in sociology and religious history. While in Paris Shariati avidly read western socio-political thought and philosophy and was highly influenced by Marx, Sartre, Gurvitch and Massignon. Shariati also actively participated in the student movements in support of anti-colonial struggles in the third world, Algeria in particular. He was also actively involved in the anti-Pahlavi activities of the Iranian students abroad. Upon his return to Iran in 1965 Shariati was briefly imprisoned. Shortly after his release Shariati took up a lectureship at Mashhad University where his politically charged lectures attracted large student crowds. In 1967 he moved to Tehran where he became the principal lecturer-preacher at Hosseyniyyeh'i Ershad, a newly founded religious institution which strove to introduce a modernised Islamic curriculum. Shariati's lectures at Hosseyniyyeh were hugely popular not only with the religiously minded high-school and university students but also with many secular-leftist intellectuals. In 1972 he was imprisoned but upon interventions by French and Algerian governments was released in 1975. In May 1977 he was allowed to leave Iran for London where he died of a heart attack the following

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Kamran Matin, "International relations in the making of political Islam: interrogating Khomeini's "Islamic government", *Journal of International Relations and Development* (doi: 10.1057/jird.2012.15, 2012).

<sup>29</sup>For a brilliant and comprehensive political biography of Shariati see Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

June.<sup>30</sup> Shariati's collected works number 35 volumes mostly transcripts of his lectures published posthumously.

Shariati's immense influence on modern Iranian politics was the result of his reconstruction of Shi'a Islam as a revolutionary ideology and political practice. Central to this arguably Jacobin conception of Islam was the goal of a universal socialist society in the form of a "monotheistic classless society" (*jame'í-e bi-tabaqeh-ie towhid*) where "oppression" in all its manifestations, would be abolished. Shariati believed that the consciousness of Iran's "oppressed" multitude or "the people" was deeply marked by Islamic political imagination. He attributed the longevity of this circumstance, despite Iran's experience of rapid and systematic modernisation, to the specificity of Iran's modern development, which had, according to Shariati, left the unproductive mercantile bourgeoisie (the bazaar) still economically dominant while creating a modern working class that was small and fragmented.<sup>31</sup> But to varying degrees both classes, especially their younger generation, were, he believed, exposed to, and influenced by, western culture and thought. This recognition, Shariati continuously argued, highlighted the indispensability of a "modern" language with an effervescent and energising "traditional" accent. "If a nation cannot know its [sic] own cultural and spiritual resources and is incapable of extracting, refining, and turning them into energy", Shariati argued, "it will remain ignorant and backward..." (Shariati 1981). Thus, Shariati argued that a modern and familiar language and ideology would secure the vital requirement of a revolutionary ideology that was popular in agency but class-conscious and professional in leadership. Fashioning such a language and ideology was Shariati's political leitmotif and the distinctive character of his revolutionary Islam.<sup>32</sup>

However, Shariati's project immediately confronted two main contenders: the Shi'a ulama and secular forces. Shariati ruthlessly indicted the Shi'a ulama for cultivating a socio-political imagination and disposition permeated by passivity, resignation and fatalism, ills which Shariati attributed to the formation and domination in Iran of the "evil triangle" of "wealth, force and deceit", his euphemism for the historical collaboration of the bazaar, the monarchy, and the Shi'a ulama.<sup>33</sup> The radical left was, however, a different matter. Intellectually Shariati had a deeply ambivalent attitude towards Marxism oscillating between

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<sup>30</sup>The Iranian opposition groups and Shariati's followers always maintained that he was killed by the Iranian secret police.

<sup>31</sup>Ali Shariati, *Religion versus Religion* (Tehran: Safir, 1986).

<sup>32</sup>Shariati often uses epithets of "revolutionary", *Alavi* (pertaining to Ali) and "red" interchangeably for distinguishing the radical ("true") Islam: Ali Shariati, *Alavid Shi'ism and Safavid Shi'ism* (Tehran: Hosseyniyeh'i Ershad Press, 1971); Ali Shariati, *Red Shi'ism vs. Black Shi'ism* (The Union of Islamic Associations of Iranian Students in Europe, 1972).

<sup>33</sup>For Shariati's vehement attacks on the Shi'a ulama see Ali Shariati (ed.), *Man and Islam* (Solon, OH: The Union of Islamic Student Associations in Europe, America and Canada, 1977); Shariati, *Alavid Shi'ism*; Shariati, *Red Shi'ism*.

great admiration and ethical-philosophical discontent.<sup>34</sup>Marxism, Shariati argued, remained uni-dimensional, unbalanced, and incomplete in its interpretation and evaluation of "man" on the sole basis of production.<sup>35</sup> As such, Marxism, Shariati argued, retained 'the world-view of Western bourgeoisie'.<sup>36</sup> Politically, however, Shariati had deep sympathy for Iran's new left. He shared their basic goals and admired their ideological devotion and revolutionary zeal. But he insisted on the incorrectness of their strategy, criticised their out-of-touch language and inability to communicate with the masses. He also criticised their cultural aloofness, which resulted in a self-imposed detention by a highly incestuous political discourse and practice.

Nonetheless, Shariati saw the new left as a potential ally that ought to be engaged. This aspect of Shariati's practice partially explains his appropriation of Marxist, and more generally modern, political and philosophical vocabulary. For Shariati did believe, probably due to his misreading of the Leninist tactic of the "vanguard party", that the revolutionary leadership must be at the hands of the "committed intellectuals". A key social stratum that Shariati sought to engage and influence was university and college students among whom Marxism, in its both Soviet and "revolutionary" varieties, was highly popular.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, for both Shi'a intellectuals and ulama Marxism was a formidable rival that needed to be confronted intellectually. For as Hamid Dabashi argues if the Pahlavi state marginalized Shi'ism socio-politically, Marxism was "robbing [it] of both its metaphysical claim to truth and its ideological claim to political mobilization".<sup>38</sup> However, Shariati's appropriation of Marxist vocabulary was not merely or primarily a pragmatic decision. It was an organic product of the ramifications of uneven and combined development into the processes of ideology formation in Iran, which unfolded in a mutually reinforcing relation with the politico-cultural exigencies of the citizen-subject. In what follows I demonstrate the ways in which the specificities of the citizen-subject, the dominant component of Shariati's central category of "the people", informed, and were rearticulated in, Shariati's fashioning of the ideology of revolutionary Islam.

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<sup>34</sup>Shariati's most sustained critique of Marxism appears in Ali Shariati, *Reflections of A Concerned Muslim: On the Plight of Oppressed Peoples* (Houston: Free Islamic Literatures, 1980) 80a). For a counter-critique see Asef Bayat. "Shariati and Marx: A critique of an 'Islamic' critique of Marxism", *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* (Vol. 10), pp. 19-41. On Shariati's dilemmatic relation with Marxism see Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2006), pp. 135-140.

<sup>35</sup>Brad Hanson, "The 'Westoxification' of Iran: Depictions and Reflections on Behrangi, al-e Ahmad, and Shariati", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Vol. 15, No. 1, 1983), pp. 1-23.

<sup>36</sup>Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam: Lectures by Ali Shariati* (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1979), p. 117.

<sup>37</sup>Ali Shariati, *What Is to Be Done: The Enlightened Thinkers and An Islamic Renaissance* (Houston: IRIS, 1986), p. 46 and *passim*; Ali Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique* (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press); Ali Shariati, *Religion versus Religion. Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Khalq-e Iran* (Iranian People's Mojahedins Organization) more than any other political group represents the organisational expression of Shariati's ideas. See Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (London: Taurus, 1989).

<sup>38</sup>Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, p. 156

In justifying his radical politicization of Islamic thought and practice Shariati consistently deployed arguments that in effect invoked the condition of inter-societal differentiation (unevenness) and its consequences of inter-national interaction and intra-national differentiation (combination). He consistently argued that inter-societal difference meant that in formulating their political strategies to overcome backwardness and bring about national-cultural regeneration radical intellectuals of the Third World must bear in mind that they cannot imitate western experiences of modern socio-economic development. This was because

... [The] European intellectual is dealing with a worker who has gone through three centuries of the Middle Ages and two centuries of Renaissance. ... [and] lives in an atmosphere not dominated by a religious spirit. ... He lives in a well-developed industrial bourgeois system ... and has attained a higher stage of growth and self-consciousness. .. [European industrial proletariat] has formed a ... distinct and independent class. ... I live in a society in which the bourgeoisie, except in big cities, is in its nascent stage. The comprador bourgeoisie is a middle-man, not a bourgeoisie of the genuine producing system. ... We still do not have a workers' class in our society. What we have are just groups.<sup>39</sup>

Shariati believed human aspirations could have universal credence and reach. But he also believed that developmental and cultural difference subverts the universality of any particular notion of the political deployed for the realisation of those aspirations. This highlighted the necessity for political strategies attuned to the specificities of the socio-cultural contexts within which the political agency for the realisation of those strategies must be mobilised. This polysemic conception of political strategy logically necessitated "native" and "authentic" instances of "revolutionary ideology".<sup>40</sup> Such an ideology must, in a dialectical fashion, combine and convey universal human ideals and culturally-specific collective imaginations through a re-articulation of the entrenched present in order to supersede it. Such supersession *ipso facto* also supplanted linear conceptions of how this supersession had previously been attempted or achieved. Thus, in a striking statement Shariati argued that "a conscious and alert individual [could] grab history by the collar [and] propel it from feudalism to socialism".<sup>41</sup>

Expectedly, this transformative consciousness was, for Shariati, a product of ideology. And this ideology was Islam. "Islam as an ideology", Shariati asserted, "is not a scientific specialization but is the feeling one has with regard to a school of thought as a belief system and not as a culture".<sup>42</sup> However, any ideology, Shariati argued, required two fundamental elements: a "world view"

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<sup>39</sup>Shariati, *Intizar*, p. 1. See also Shariati, *What is to be done?*, pp. 9-23.

<sup>40</sup>On 'discourse of authenticity' see Mirsepassi, op. cit. in note 26.

<sup>41</sup>Cited in Rahnema, op. cit., in note 34, p. 291.

<sup>42</sup>Ali Shariati, *Islamology [Islamshinasi]* (Mashhad: Chap--i Tus. 1968), p. 5.

and a “philosophy of history”.<sup>43</sup> In fashioning these elements from Islamic thought and history Shariati deployed intellectual tools that had unmistakable Marxist provenance. However, his interpretation and deployment of these tools involved a translational translucence that produced a conception of Islam that coincided with neither Marxism nor pre-existing Islam. Crucially, this new hybrid conception was still readily visualisable through an Islamic imagination whose ethical and cosmological integrity were kept intact. Shariati described his strategy as one which retained the traditional *form* of Shi’i-Islamic theological and philosophical categories and discourse but reconstituted their *content* in the service of revolutionary praxis. Shariati claimed that this strategy was also used by the prophet Mohammad in relation to pre-Islamic Arab society. Moreover, its use was facilitated by what Shariati described as Islam’s “symbolical language”.<sup>44</sup> Shariati’s reinterpretations of the Quranic story of “Abel and Cain” and the Shi’i concept of *imamat* provide important demonstrations of this strategy in fashioning the essential ingredients of an Islamic philosophy of history as the intellectual basis for the ideology of revolutionary Islam.

The story of Abel and Cain is commonly seen by Muslims as an essentially ethical anecdote on the consequences of greed. But therein Shariati discerns a certain “historical determinism” that is generated by the “dialectical contradiction” between “two hostile and contradictory elements’ showing that ‘the history of man, God’s vice-regent on earth, began with contradiction”. In elaborating on this contention Shariati introduces modified forms of the Marxist notion of class struggle. He argues that

Abel represents the age of a pasture-based economy, of the primitive socialism that preceded ownership and Cain represents the system of agriculture, and individual or monopoly ownership. ... Abel the pastoralist was killed by Cain the landowner; the period of common ownership of the sources of production .... [t]he spirit of brotherhood and true faith, came to an end and was replaced by age of agriculture and the establishment of the system of private ownership, together with religious trickery ... .<sup>45</sup>

Shariati immediately distinguishes his approach from the Marxist “mode of production” analysis by contending that contrary to Marx, the transformation of the egalitarian pastoralist society into an unequal, class-divided and property-based agriculture was not the result of the development of productive forces or the division of labour but the direct outcome of the uneven distribution of *power*.<sup>46</sup> This contention is crucial to Shariati’s overall project because it involves two modifications of Marxist approach. On one hand it becomes the basis for Shariati’s attribution of primary causality to the political *contra* Marx’s alleged economic determinism. On the other hand, by legitimising the “political” category

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., Introduction

<sup>44</sup>Shariati, *Sociology of Islam*, p. 71

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., pp. 98-99

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 100

of "oppression" (derived from the centrality of "power" in historical movement) - as opposed to the "economic" category of "exploitation" (derived from the centrality of "production" in historical movement) - he enables an articulation of "the people", "the ruled", "the oppressed" that jettisoned the (working) class as the key agency of (modern) social change.<sup>47</sup>

The other important example in Shariati's practice of "retaining the form, changing the content" concerns the Shi'i principle of *imamat*. For much of its history the doctrine of *imamat* - in conjunction with the concept of *ghayba* (occultation) - was used by the Shi'a ulama as the theological basis for a *de facto* legitimation of the existing states however tyrannical or oppressive they were. This use was particularly entrenched following the adoption of Shi'ism as state religion by the Safavis. Thus,

The burden of the trust of *tawhid* (monotheism or cosmological unity) was entrusted in history, after the Prophet himself ... with the institution of *Imamat*, With Ali and his descendants. But in the course of time, Shi'ism, which had begun as a protest ... became a tool in the hands of the possessors of money and might. ...its true visage became hidden beneath the dust of opportunism, vacillation, and misinterpretation.<sup>48</sup>

Shariati argued that the reactionary ulama had misused the Shi'i notion and practice of the "awaiting" Mahdi, the hidden twelfth Shi'a imam, in order to advocate passivity and fatalism. In sharp contrast, Shariati argued that "awaiting" ought to be a basis for conscious action in order to hasten the last imam's return and hence pave the way for the realisation of Islam's "ideal society – the *umma*".<sup>49</sup> Thus, he argued that 'awaiting' was the religion of protest (*entezaar mazhab-e e'teraz*).<sup>50</sup> It was the revolutionary prosecution of this uninterrupted and conscious action which, according to Shariati, required leadership, i.e., the true and expanded meaning of *imamat*. In this sense Shariati's reconstruction of the principle of *imamat* was similar to that of Khomeini which also involved what Larry Ray describes as "double anthropology", i.e., the "dualistic construction of human nature, which permits political authority to be *legitimised* in the name of the mass, yet *held* by an elite vanguard".<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Shariati also attenuated Shi'i connotations of the concept of *imamat* (as opposed to the Sunni principle of caliphate) through an etymology of the word *umma*, which he identified as Islam's ideal society. He argued that the

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<sup>47</sup>Shariati equates 'the people' in his discourse with the Quranic word *al-nas*, Shariati, *Sociology of Islam*, p. 49.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 119

<sup>50</sup>Ali Shariati, *Civilization and Modernization*. Available at [www.shariati.com/machinehtml](http://www.shariati.com/machinehtml) (accessed 13 January 2008).

<sup>51</sup>Larry Ray, "'Fundamentalism', Modernity and the new Jacobins", *Economy and Society* (Vol. 28, No. 2, May 1999), pp. 198-221, p. 209. Emphasis original. On Khomeini's view on *imamat* see Matin, "International relations in the making of political Islam".

root of the word "umma" was *amm*, which in Arabic meant both "path" and "intention".<sup>52</sup> Shariati argued that the combination of path and intention rendered Islam's normative goal universal and hence beyond and above particularism of blood and soil, i.e., nationalism.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the "infrastructure of umma is the economy" since "whoever has no worldly life has no spiritual life".<sup>54</sup> Umma is therefore based on "equity and justice and ownership by people - a classless society – the revival of the system of Abel".<sup>55</sup> At this point of his ideological exegesis Shariati reintroduced the concept of imamat in a fundamentally reconstructed form:

The political philosophy and the form of regime of the umma is not the democracy of heads, not irresponsible and directionless liberalism which is a plaything of contesting social forces, not putrid aristocracy, not anti-popular dictatorship, not a self-imposing oligarchy. It consists rather of "purity of leadership" *not the leader*, (for that would be fascism), committed and revolutionary leadership, responsible for the movement and growth of society on the basis of its worldview and ideology, and for the realization of the divine destiny of man in the plan of creation. This is the true meaning of imamat!<sup>56</sup>

Through de-emphasising the personal dimension of the imamat and stressing the "path and intention", Shariati widened his audience and engaged Sunni Muslims as well as seculars. Moreover, in his stress on the crucial role of the "intellectuals" "responsibility" and "commitment" Shariati recurrently deployed a modified form of existentialism in that he derived it not from the lack or abandonment of metaphysical truth à la Sartre, but from religious Truth. Moreover, Shariati subsumed existentialism under a politicised form of *irfan* or Islamic mysticism<sup>57</sup>, whose practice, he believed, enabled individuals to achieve extraordinary powers; a quality that was particularly relevant for the elitist and super-committed notion of leadership that his ideology of revolutionary Islam contained.

Shariati's revolutionary Islam was a combined intellectual formation par excellence. Thus, a leftist activist in 1970's Iran was likely to see in Shariati's discourse a series of Marxist concepts camouflaged in Islamic vocabulary: "committed intellectual" (substituted for the absent imam) to lead "the people" (substituted for the absent proletariat) towards the ideal society of the umma

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<sup>52</sup>Shariati, *Sociology of Islam*, p. 119

<sup>53</sup>Shariati accepts that nationalism has been positive 'at certain historical conjuncture in Europe' (Shariati, *What is to be done?*, p. 15). For the complex and only apparently contradictory relation between the ideologies of 'Iranian nationalism' and 'revolutionary Islam' see L. Paul, "Iranian Nation' and Iranian-Islamic Revolutionary Ideology:", *Die Welt des Islams* (Vol. 39, No. 2, 1999), pp. 183-217.

<sup>54</sup>Shariati, *Sociology of Islam*, p. 119.

<sup>55</sup>Shariati immediately adds that *contra* Marxists this infrastructure is only a means and not the end (ibid).

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., pp. 119-120 (my italics). Shariati even argued that Protestantism was essentially an attempt at the Islamization of Christianity (Shariati, *Economic roots*, p. 56).

<sup>57</sup>Ali Shariati, "The Mission of the Intellectual for Building Society", (<http://www.drshariati.org/show/?id=117>, accessed 22 February 2013), p. 1.

(substituted for socialism). On the other hand, young and educated Iranians from more religious backgrounds and persuasions, felt that they had finally found an equally radical and modern yet still Islamic alternative to the left which hitherto monopolised radical theory and ideology. No wonder why Shariati's revolutionary Islam displayed such a strong elective affinity with the citizen-subject.

### Conclusion

The preceding argument suggests that essentialist accounts of political Islam and its various instances are fundamentally flawed because they rest on an internalist conception of modernity that is in turn rooted in an ontologically singular conception of the social.<sup>58</sup> The eurocentric effects of his singularist social ontology can even be seen in the radical Western intellectual traditions such as postmodernism and post-structuralism.<sup>59</sup> This is, of course, not to overlook these intellectual projects' enormous challenge to Western singular "self" and its self-understanding as the unique and singular site of "civilization" and "reason". But their perception of, and reaction to, other non-European, particularly Islamic, societies suggest that their critique of European modernity is primarily driven by intellectual alertness to an essentially intra-European temporality. In other words, they are preoccupied with the ways in which social, political and cultural forms have changed diachronically within Europe. Accordingly, European development is identified and conceptualized in terms of, and with reference to, the specifically European temporalities and forms of subjecthood in isolation from, or in spite of, Europe's constant encounters and interactions with "other" non-European societies and civilizations. As Shilliam has shown, this attitude even marks the work of astute thinkers such as Gadamer and Lévinas, who pioneered the themes of difference and alterity in modern Western philosophy.<sup>60</sup> This is highly significant. For as I have argued, inter-societal relations and interactions, from which successive Western traditions of thought have abstracted, constitute a distinct and constitutive dimension of historic process and social reality. A conceptual incorporation of this specifically international dimension of social change is, I have contended, central to the theory of uneven and combined development. Accordingly, modernity can be retheorised as an internationally produced phenomenon with interactive and multilinear dynamics that underlie its variation across times and spaces

This intellectual move has a crucial implication for the category of "non-Western thought". For once re-viewed as an international category, the negative

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<sup>58</sup>For an extended elaboration of this argument see Matin, "Redeeming the Universal"; Rosenberg, "The Philosophical Premises".

<sup>59</sup>See *inter alia* Ian Almond, *New Orientalists, The: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (London: IB Tauris, 2010).

<sup>60</sup>Robbie Shilliam "Non-Western thought and international relations", in Robbie Shilliam (ed.), *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).



definition of “non-Western thought” - constructed with reference to a singular and discreet West – will instead signify a positive and mutually constitutive inter-relation. In other words, the very notions of the “West” and the “East” that represent concrete instances of socio-cultural constellations turn out to be permeated by each other at all levels. Consequently, ideological, intellectual and political products that arise from these constellations also need to be understood in terms of this basic condition of ontological co-constitution, which is what actually renders them resistant to comprehension through singular categories and linear histories. Shariati’s political thought eminently testifies to this reality. His reconstruction of the “actually existing Islam” in Iran was strategically driven by dynamics only partially internal to Iran. And the final product of this reconstruction, the idea of “revolutionary Islam” that is inscribed on the Iranian Revolution and its ongoing evolution, has had crucial consequences far beyond Iran.

The recognition and conceptual integration of the international dimension of social change has wider and important implications for IR as an academic discipline. For more than two decades now, the detractors of the mainstream IR theory have invoked social (domestic) determinations of international relations and geo-politics in order to challenge the purported timelessness of the behavioural logic of states generated by “anarchy”, the basis of the mainstream IR’s paradigmatic self-definition contra sociological studies. Yet, in their concentrated attempt to de-reify anarchy as a supra-social category, they have tended to neglect a serious engagement with, and social theorization of, anarchy as a distinct field of causality. This recognition, however, needs not to re-entrap us in the mainstream IR’s ontological inside/outside duality. Rather, it essentially invites us to conceive of “the international” and “the social” as inter-related and mutually constitutive without rendering the causal significance of either of them derivative of, or reducible to, the other. This would enable a deep socialization of “anarchy” and pose a much stronger challenge to the mainstream IR.

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