

1 | *The Allure of the “Anti-modern”*

The worth of the legacy of Sufism. It is a fact that Sufism is a deep-rooted and precious tradition. But it is also mystifying and sinisterly ominous [*shum*]. It is a prized treasure, of new and original ideas and literature. Assortment of mysteries of human wonders. However, this cherished tradition also has a troubling legacy. It is for those who produced this cultural capital and for those who have received this tradition. The destiny of Sufism, that is, the story of those who created this tradition, has both dazzling moments, but also some dark corners.¹

Abdolhossein Zarrinkub, *The Worth and Legacy of Sufism*, 1983

These words hail from Abdolhossein Zarrinkub (1923–99), a distinguished Iranian scholar of Islam and Sufism. The above quotation is from his book *The Worth and Legacy of Sufism*. Zarrinkub, in two volumes (volume II is called *Trail of the Search for Sufism*),² celebrates the Iranian Sufi and *erfan* (Persian mysticism) traditions, evincing sympathy for Sufism. However, being also a fair-minded scholar, he routinely maintained a healthy distance from his study topics. Zarrinkub knew that he could neither uncritically worship the Persian *erfan* nor permit himself to become the unconditional adulator of the Sufi tradition. In both his volumes, Zarrinkub makes sure to discuss the troubling history and flaws of major Sufi figures, and the ideas they spread, by analyzing their thought in critical detail.

Despite his personal interest in and admiration of this cultural tradition, Zarrinkub attempts to remain impartial and avoids making one-sided judgments about Sufism. He writes:

¹ Abdolhossein Zarrinkub, *The Worth and Legacy of Sufism*, 5th edition (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1983), p. 151. All translations of quotations are the author's own, unless otherwise stated.

² Abdolhossein Zarrinkub, *Trail of the Search for Sufism* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1978).

In fact, throughout the history of Sufism, there were many naïve people, as well as charlatans. Hence, an arena of claims has unfolded among them [Sufis], with many making claims, and others denying them.³

In a second book on Iranian Sufism, *Trail of a Search*, Zarrinkub points to the critiques that Iranian and Islamic scholars have made of Sufism. He clearly shows that important critiques of mystical thought and Sufism exist in the literary and intellectual history of Iran and Islam.⁴ Zarrinkub especially emphasizes social critiques of Sufism, noting that “some have looked at Sufism from social, ethical, or literary and historical perspectives.”⁵ He even refers to several contemporary scholars, such as Mohammad Ghazvini and Ahmad Kasravi, and their critiques.

Iran’s complex historical and literary context – a strong mystical and spiritual understanding of Islam (in Henry Corbin’s idiom, Persian or Spiritual Islam), combined with the cultural prominence of Persian poetry in its manifold sophistication – provided the ideal seedbed for a flowering of wild images and flirtations with the irrational in a modern world darkened by war, poverty, and disorder. Yet the twentieth-century appropriation by Westerners and Iranians alike of Iran’s heritage as the citadel of modern irrationalism occludes and whitewashes multiple critical and rationalist streams in Iran’s national traditions. This chapter highlights how the irrationalist construction took place, in a transnational dynamic based on an anti-modern ideological core that was both barren and capable of responding to human emotional needs.

The role of Sufi cheerleader was reserved for, and most eagerly embraced by, certain Western scholars, who celebrated Persian and Islamic spirituality as a refuge from the secular liberalism they despised within European society. This Eastern temptation constituted an inception in Iranian society that paradoxically fostered a proudly nativist revolt of indigenous authenticity. These Europeans included the celebrated scholars Henry Corbin and, to a lesser degree, Michel Foucault, among others. It also included those Iranians who, while studying in the West, happened to discover “mysticism” during disorienting

³ Ibid., p. 152.

⁴ Abdolhossein Zarrinkub, *Continuation of a Search for Sufism in Iran* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1983), pp. 9–47.

⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

periods in Europe or the United States. With a renewed sense of purpose, they imagined mysticism as integral to their own yearning for Iranian authenticity. Upon returning to Iran, they bore the European counter-modernist ideologies that would buttress the Islamist revival in its mission to suppress local inauthenticity in left-wing and liberal Iranians. They were either Heidegger’s children, including Ahmad Fardid, Daryush Shaygan, et al., or ideological anti-modernists, seeking to re-create “traditionalism” as an alternative to modernity for the Iranian situation in contemporary times. Seyed Hossein Nasr and Ehsan Naraghi are two important examples. Other Iranian intellectuals, more radically inclined, such as Ahmad Kasravi or Taghi Arani, were critical of the political or social use of *erfan*. These individuals were equally critical of the anti-rationalist tendencies, and disturbing practical implications, of embracing a politicized *erfan*. These latter figures, however, have become marginalized.

The blandly uncritical celebration of *erfan* by Iranian scholars is a more recent intellectual fashion. This new wave of scholars is above all “anti-modern” and hostile primarily to modern secularism. They hail the Islam of pre-modern Persian Spirituality, a convenient means of vocalizing their hatred of the modern world.⁶ Ahmad Fardid’s lifelong embrace of *erfan* provides a good example. Fardid preached and celebrated *erfan* as a moral and conceptual weapon, suitable for undermining so-called *elm-e hosuli*, i.e. rational and analytical thinking. Despite this, he scarcely followed the “softer and kinder” side of the Sufi tradition, in lifestyle, politics, or the treatment of others. As a man, he was dogmatic, harsh, self-centered, and politically reckless. Following the revolution of 1978–9, Fardid attacked Mehdi Bazargan and developed a political alliance with Ayatollah Khomeini.⁷

Fardid’s intellectual profile exemplifies a certain template. His embrace of “mysticism” derived less from a spiritual sensibility than from a strong desire to reject modernism in all its aspects. He found his model in the Heideggerian confrontation with modernity, whose strange intellectual innovation recast traditional conservatism as the

⁶ Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton University Press, 1999); Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷ For more details on Ahmad Fardid’s political views and activities, see Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, Chapter 8.

new radicalism for a troubled twentieth century. It follows that traditional "mysticism" and contemporary "anti-modernism" have been invested with common core assumptions and sentiments, in a growing transnational movement united by a postmodern revivalist attitude. Mysticism's core elements are well-known: anti-rationalism, and a creative primacy of intuition over empirical science, of spirituality over the material, of community over the individual, and of the local over the cosmopolitan. The idea of mysticism, both historically and in its recent "spiritual" incarnation, overlaps with various anti-modern discourses, and this has been especially so in modern Iranian political experience. Indeed, the 1978–9 Revolution seems to have produced a new paradigm of popular revolution, attracting a wide section of the traditional radical left under the rubric of postmodernism. In this study, I want to point to two less-acknowledged similarities:

1) Their ambiguous and almost "fairytale"-like language embodies certain binary opposites: the appeal to beauty and love doubles with a celebration of harsh violence, moral cruelty, and intellectual rigidity. The promise of achieving a heightened level of human reality doubles with the denial of "man" as a subject or agent, and an insistence on "his" being a vehicle for a more transcendental force. A radical general vision for the present time combines with conservative sentiments, with a correspondingly confusing vision for the future. The "fairytale" future is often difficult to distinguish from the past, making the "postmodern condition" a dead ringer for the historical pre-modern.

This intellectual ambiguity invests the mystic and anti-modern sensibilities with an almost poetic quality, one that is potentially very attractive. It presents a kind of mystery to be solved, a blank canvas upon which to paint. Simultaneously, it proposes a set of ideas that potentially permits everything. In this space, the creative mind can enjoyably thrive in the absence of clear boundaries (social or political). What is less often noted is the potentially tragic political possibilities of this field, for it provides a realm for deception and ungoverned power. Michel Foucault's fantastical writings about the 1978–9 Revolution, and the possibilities of the Islamic state, are only one sorrowful example.

2) As attractive as the mystic, anti-modern discourses may appear on an abstract and rhetorical level, they can produce tragic practical results and massive violence. It is axiomatic that many totalitarian

political movements, leaders, and intellectuals, by invoking the authentic, the spiritual, and the aesthetic, create the political conditions for hell on earth. There is an almost total break between ideas and practice. And, strangely, this is consistent with the type of thinking they advocate. If one is to believe that “myth” represents the truth, or, as Henry Corbin argued, that the “imaginal” is the only truly objective reality, while the material is disparaged, then everything is permitted. No compelling reason exists for providing hard evidence or social facts. More importantly, no difference exists between lies and empirical truth. In this context, neither truth nor reality derives from reason or logic, facts, or evidence, but are instead intuitively grasped – very likely, by the chosen few (as Corbin would have it).

As Mark Lilla has argued, these transnational intellectuals viewed “modernity” as a catastrophe, experiencing nostalgia for earlier periods, infused with mystic fervor, when societies were coherent wholes invested with rich symbolic orders. The thirst for redemption has repeatedly pushed public intellectuals to embrace authoritarian regimes, secular or religious, because they promise to resolve the grand themes of creation, mortality, the soul, the sacred, and the End of Time. Ernst Bloch embraced the German Democratic Republic as the real New World, and, accepting an East German teaching post, declared the country the fulfillment of the messianic promise of Moses and Marx.⁸ This political recklessness culminated, in 1957, in his being banned from teaching in East Germany, despite publicly abasing himself before the regime. In 1961, he was forced to seek asylum in West Germany. There, denouncing Western capitalism and the Eastern bloc, he became a university-based guru for radical students, urging packed lecture halls to reject the existing world and focus upon the horizon of the “not-yet-conscious” world, which was to emerge from the jungles of the developing world. Bloch’s intellectual and political profile is strikingly comparable to his Iranian anti-modern and millennial contemporaries, who similarly blundered into naïvely utopian complicity with a regime prepared to destroy them.

⁸ Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 291.

The Reckless Seduction of the “Anti-modern”

Even a cursory scan of twentieth-century history provides a disturbing historical landscape, replete with examples of precisely such ideologically conditioned political tragedies. Anti-modern ideas and movements in Germany, Japan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere grew from the sublime ideological ideal of restoring the idealized indigenous community as a spiritual project. Although these historical experiences have left us with the starkest of memories, and never a shred of success, we see the politics of the mystic anti-modern continuing to attract populations and intellectuals. What makes the “anti-modern” worldview so powerful and produce such an appealing and exciting set of ideas?

What makes these ideas appealing, firstly, is they represent the antithesis of everything as it now exists. As such, they are utopian and express a widespread attitude of revulsion against an unjustly set-up world, a visceral rejection of deep inequities in the present world political order, and anger over its coercive but whitewashed history. The modern hegemony of the West, exemplified by colonialism, is based on capitalism and the plutocratic power of the rich. Mass society is coldly selfish and individualistic, and nobody cares as millions perish in misery. The smug superiority of the Western ruling classes, upholding a superficial, money-driven Western culture, claiming superiority in metaphysically empty science while taking the moral high ground in the name of liberal democracy and justice, has sickened people the world over with its anonymous violence and hypocrisy. Look how the poor go to work in deadly factories and construction sites like slaves, like Indians in Qatar, dying anonymously and buried in shallow graves, without even a letter to their families fading away in ghettos at home, while the elite get wealthier.

The anger over such perceptions occludes the subtler reality of a world of interweaving circuits of power, ideas, and images, a world that undermines the underlying imagining of a monolithic West and a supinely vulnerable East more representative of the colonial era. We must vocally recognize these crimes while yet formulating a more updated and realistic theoretical template. For populations have been attracted precisely to the prosperity and freedom seen in Western societies, while states have been forced to modernize to survive. The anti-modern mystic ideology teaches that this modernist attraction is based on an illusion. It appeals to our desire for purity. Modernity is the

root of all the worst evils in the world: environmental destruction, poverty, prejudice, and the crisis of cultural meaning. It also includes an aesthetic attraction: the beauty of being among the gods, of seeing our innermost feelings united with stars and sunrises, is a consolation for suffering. This aesthetic has a political corollary in fostering collective power and belonging among countless estranged people. For millions at the losing end of ruthless mass job markets, it replaces existential confusion with order. In its name, people create networks that provide help and support. There is a forgotten spiritual power that promises all that capitalism denies most of us: solidarity, equality, meaning, identity, status, self-worth, and mobility. Here is where the radical utopianism enters. This wonderful life awaits us in the revival of our indigenous cultures, the network of the honest and humble masses who are the wretched of the earth. We have but to wipe out capitalism, the urban middle classes who prey upon the misery of others, and live together in a restored community of spiritual meaning – because these cultures are ontologically sanctioned, and not merely the cold product of epistemology and instrumental rationality. Just as the utopianism of these fashionable theoretical postures illustrates their irrelevance to change in the practical world, we can analyze their sociological coherence in appealing to intellectuals on a transnational level.

The “anti-modern” ideologies are not necessarily a coherent collection of ideas. It is more of a shared attitude and cultural sensibility that has emerged the world over, with its roots in religious thought and traditions. It has been labelled “reactionary modernism” by Jeffrey Herf,⁹ while Raymond Williams regarded it as “pastoral modernity.”¹⁰ It is the idea of “Religion after Religion.”¹¹ It is a militant desire to “invent” the tradition after it no longer exists in historical form.

In French post-structuralism, these ideas received a more sophisticated expression. The post–World War II generation, coming of age in the 1960s, were sickened by their national Enlightenment and secular republican traditions, which they equated with the hypocrisies of colonialism, class rule, Americanization, and the empty universalism of reason. They plunged into the Heideggerian reservoir of “politics as

⁹ Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

¹¹ For an excellent discussion of this subject, please see Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*; Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*.

being" to create a radical alternative to Marxism, which they identified with the unfashionable Sartre and the shocking excesses of Stalinism and Maoism (although some of them also had their brief romance with both). Communism and capitalism were two expressions of a single Western metaphysic. A nebulous spirituality arose in "discourse analysis" committed to the "rebirth of language" and the "death of man." Because of this fanfare, when Foucault saw the 1978–9 Revolution he interpreted it as the first great postmodern revolution. The Iranian masses had broken through the colonially inspired "limits" of "modernity," creating a new society based on Sufi-like traditions of belonging and spirituality.

In more recent times, we see the emergence of more nuanced and sophisticated varieties within "postmodernism," notably in "postcolonialism," touted excitedly by left-wing American university professors in the 1990s as "this new radical theory coming out of India." Under the leadership of the mysterious Ranajit Guha, it was a "critique of the entire Western tradition of thought and politics." Subaltern studies were celebrated by these professors as the "first authentic voice of South Asian historiography about itself," as if the entire history of modern Indian historiography (nationalism, Marxism, etc.) were nothing but "West-struck" colonial lackeys. They were no different from their pro-Empire adversaries in the Cambridge School, for they too unconsciously embraced the "Western paradigm." They thought themselves autonomous, but were mentally colonized. Identity was the key word. The irony was that these "new theories" had drunk deeply from Heideggerian waters. Emerging in the 1980s, they drew inspiration from Foucauldian post-structuralism. Their debt to Heidegger and Foucault was vocal (they administered fierce tongue-lashings to any who dared criticize Heidegger for his "Nazi past"). Their unspoken inspiration was undoubtedly the 1978–9 Revolution, for their works centered on the "new" revolutionary power of traditional religious mobilization in hastening the doom of the hated Third World national bourgeoisie and global capitalism. In some nebulous way, this "new theory" was linked to the radical legacy of Marx (supposed discoveries in Marx's final writings revealed a conviction that a "new beginning" was fated to emerge from the non-Western world of the colonies).

Meanwhile, beyond the luxurious theoretical ruminations of the academy, similar religious-identity-based mass movements emerged (Muslim, Hindu, etc.) to be embraced, be seduced by, and even to die

for, among countless youths seeking a utopian alternative to the dead-end world of late capitalism, and the increasingly nauseating recurrence of futile hypocrisy in cynical liberal political machines. The genuinely radical potential of these movements revealed itself with the 9–11 attacks, embraced by excited left-wing academics as the “first genuine and last remaining real challenge to the survival of global capitalism,” as Osama bin Laden sat, like the cat that ate the cream, upon a colorful carpet in Afghanistan, on video, inviting US forces to come and confront us – “if you are real men.” What guts and authenticity! This guy abandoned a life of US-backed wealth and privilege to live in exile in a cave! Meanwhile, conversion to the new Islamist networks raged apace in the jails and ghettos of the wastelands of late capitalism. This reveals an astonishing elective affinity between the lost but vaguely left-wing elites of the ivory tower and the equally lost but infinitely more wretched Global South, exiled underclass languishing in cells and ruined streets.

Theoretically, as this panoramic sketch suggests, the anti-modern mystic exists on the borderline dividing, on the one hand, the quest for good and justice and, on the other, the nihilistic violence of self-destruction. Our reflections on “anti-modern” ideas, movements, and sentiments therefore should not take them too lightly, as a fad or a simple sojourn in evil, for they derive from innermost human psychological dynamics. Yes, they are dogmatic and ideologically narrow, and ugly to confront, yet they also have the simple persuasive power of TV to souls adrift in the wasteland, where lifetimes slip humiliatingly by in impotence and emptiness. They have the magic quality of music or the cinema, shocking and electrifying, yet seductive in their multiple forms and shades of promises of belonging, status, social mobility, cosmic connection, family, revenge, truth, moral rightness, and love. In this way, they reflect other cults, including the appeal of “white nationalism,” with its shocking Nazi ideological basis for extended networks of family belonging (a force in economically and culturally devastated Eastern Europe), and above all the sociological logic of street gangs. They provide the opportunity to be someone, to be loved and prosper, and to be right, from having been a marginalized dog, and there is no more powerful drug than this chance to “come out of the dark” and “enter the light.”

If everything about the anti-modern seems counter-contemporary and deeply impractical in its totalizing rejection of everything, it also

reflects the basic desires and cherished ideals of human communities.¹² It calls for the fulfillment of cultural and moral authenticity, offers communities the familiarity of shared values and moral sentiments, and calls for a more “real” and “meaningful” way of living and, more importantly, of dying in the world. This is the core message of the widely popular *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, with its constant digs against the shallow Western and modern culture of denying death, written by a popular and successful Tibetan exile in France. The appeal of this book (recounting how poor and traditional Tibetans face pain and death with a cheerful smile) among the literate middle classes of Europe and America, being told they are shallow, inauthentic, and empty, remarkably demonstrates the pervasive depth of the anti-modern sensibility – and not just amongst political radicals. The elective affinity extends beyond university left-wing radicals and recruits to twisted hypermodern versions of Islamist jihad – it encompasses the average Westerner in their everyday quest for meaning in modern life. All three categories are consumers of the anti-modern utopia which, while undoubtedly a dream, yet temporarily fills some hole. The anti-modern privileges what is fantastic and mystical over the dullness of the measurable and calculable. The north Indian Tibetan exile city of Dharamshala is filled with young Americans who, having “fled” prosperous homes in a vocally impassioned anti-materialist revolt, seek spiritual enlightenment in the expanding “spiritual market” of the city’s labyrinthine backstreets. Most importantly, the anti-modern always tells captivating narratives about humanity, its desires, and, still more vividly, all that we most deeply fear. It is about political spirituality – the archetypal fascination of ascent beyond what is bureaucratically routine, moderate, boring, and uninspiring. The anti-modern is more attractive by far to the elite, political or cultural, and helps them to mobilize the poor, or the unhappy middle classes. That is, beyond being another drug on the global capitalist market, it is also a government strategy for managing and diverting populations in a bid to avoid substantial political change with real consequences for the future.

The anti-modern seems hostile to the materialism of the modern world, and looks down on wealth and power, seeing these as petty or

¹² Alexander S. Duff, “Heidegger’s Ghosts,” *The American Interest*, Vol. 11, No. 5 (February 25, 2016).

inhuman, embodying the modern quest for material gains and the “will to power.” Instead, the ideology of the anti-modern offers a boutique of moral ideas, justice, authenticity, meaning, and higher forms of existence in the universe of “spirituality.” The “spirituality” discourse is offered as the fantastic prescription for all that is wrong and evil in the modern world. The traditionalists understand it as the revival of the glorious past tradition, the modern middle classes find it a refuge from the dullness of ordinary life, the “Western elite” is attracted to it because of its exotic quality, and the Eastern elite see it as a tool for its own survival and a return to the golden days when everyone knew what they wanted.

But there is also a sociological reality to the anti-modern desire. That is, the anti-modern discourse is aristocratic, projecting the upper-class desire for authenticity and high tradition, but it is also populist and even anti-intellectual. It is the royal road to authoritarianism, unconditional loyalty, and the narrative that empowers the racketeers of the earth. This is its “spiritual” quality.¹³

Post-mythical humanity is not, and will never be, perfect. It cannot even promise to be so. Because of the “fall of God,” it is also the end of the mythical. If only man knows what is possible, as Kant argues, then there is no way for ideas outside of the modern tradition to come and claim absolute meaning and be received enthusiastically. Kant suggests that only “reason” can know what is rationally possible, while also acknowledging that there are other areas of knowing outside of the rational. Therefore religion, or other forms of thinking, can help us to understand. What is important, for Kant, is that these remain two separate realms of knowing.

Here, anti-modern “anti-rationalism” can potentially fulfill essential values, namely, the acknowledgment that the human condition is in part inherently “mysterious” or inaccessible to rationality and scientific method. This “vacuum” is more imagined than real. In modern democratic societies, there are spaces for the arts, creativity, and the “non-rational,” and the possibility of going beyond cognitive experiences. It is in music, cinema, art, fashion, literature, the private sphere, and even the visual media in general (e.g. the entire world of graphic design,

¹³ Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton University Press, 2001); Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (The New York Review of Books, 2001).

video games, IT). Upon reflection, it is the very diversity of centers of meaning that causes moderns – the rich and the poor – to feel lost in a polarizing and unsettling world. To live in peace with difference in the clustered hyper-sensorium of modern societies is a difficult challenge. However, the anti-modern imagines the non-rational (aesthetic and intuitive) as the central and principle organizing spiritual force of our lives. This is personal escapism and political disaster. All that modern democratic societies offer can be dismissed as distraction and entertainment, occluding the all-important encounter with “being” or God. In the political sphere, this leads to the collapse of the public sphere and some form or other of authoritarian rule. Life is to be lived by eternal rules, with consequences in worlds beyond, and this life is merely a bridge and a trial. Secular expressions of creativity are seductions, destroying our true purpose as the created beings in a cosmic design. Certainly, respected American academics vocalize this view, such as Bruce Lawrence, who expressed euphoria over the 1978–9 Revolution. Lawrence’s rhetoric, in a more educated idiom, echoes the ranting of the adolescent Dharamshala hippies against the empty trap of materialism, the urgency of escaping the “US drag” to obtain higher enlightenment, and the invariably hostile jostling among multiple would-be gurus who all dream of outdoing their rivals and enthroning themselves at the summit of a marginal cult. In all seriousness, our contemporary universities are in danger of becoming such cults, and the students minds thereby poisoned for a new generation.