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against opportunity structures is “parsimonious” (p. 13), in their words. The weak correlations among the dimensions and indicators of SSF, and the probability of changes at the individual and state levels, render rational decision making somewhat hazardous. Furthermore, the homo economicus–based rational-choice model of (bounded) subjectively expected utility excludes the nonrational emotions, motives, desires, wishes, needs, and anxieties that people face when they consider giving up the modest conditions they know for the uncertain promise of a better life elsewhere. The book takes little notice of the psychodynamics of personality or the quality and stability of couples’ intimate relationships.

Aging across the United States is an unorthodox book presenting a plethora of very useful information about SSF; it is well written and worth reading for scientists, professionals, and the broader public. The drawbacks of the study are its restriction to aggregate cross-sectional data, its lack of longitudinal data (cohort and life-course analysis) and biographical interviews of the couples instead of ideal-type essayist portraits, and the “parsimonious” theoretical model of rational decision making that disregards personal psychodynamics.

On the Sociology of Islam. By Ali Shari’ati. Translated by Hamid Algar. Berkeley, Calif.: Mizan Press, 1979. Pp. 125.

Marxism and Other Western Fallacies. By Ali Shari’ati. Translated by R. Campbell. Berkeley, Calif.: Mizan Press, 1980. Pp. 122.

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Whether we trace the roots of metropolitan sociological theory to the so-called classics of the late 19th century or to the much deeper tradition of early modern jurisprudence, we do not escape from liberal social theory. The premises of that theory are ever the same. They comprise four ideas: a (common) human nature that is rational but also passionate and un-governed; a social world of distinct, diverse, and often conflicting institutions and groups; a body of internally consistent law; and the incarnation of social order in some sovereign form that by this law unifies the passionate people and diverse groups on the basis of a few essential things that they share in common. These premises become starkly visible when we read social theory from outside the liberal tradition, as we must if we are to encounter the true diversity of the social imagination.

The work of Ali Shari’ati well illustrates this alternative to liberalism. At the center of Shari’ati’s thinking is Islam, and not an Islam simply embodied in a theocratic state, but an Islam conceived as a relation to

*Another review from 2050 to share with readers.—Ed.

God that shapes everything from individual consciousness to personal relations to state policy. In the social thought of Western Europe, we must return to Jean Bodin at the latest to find such opinions, and even Bodin limited the sovereign with natural law, of which there is no obvious analogue in Shari'ati. And as for religion authoritatively governing social life, the history of Europe after 1500 is a two-century debate over that question, a debate conducted not only in the treatises and tracts of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, but also on battlefields from Naseby and Lutzen to Moncontour and Muhlberg, not to mention the long list of horrors with names like Magdeburg and St. Bartholomew. By 1685, when Louis XIV revoked the last vestiges of the Edict of Nantes, no one in Europe other than the Sun King himself really imagined that Christendom could be recreated as a unified religious, political, and personal system. Absolutism might endure, but Christendom would not.

Even the early modern period, then, contains no real parallel to the utterly comprehensive theoretical project of Shari'ati. We must rather return to the Middle Ages, to writers like John of Salisbury and John of Paris, to find European thinkers who take as given the inherent unity of all social, political, and religious life. And even John of Paris aimed to split the spiritual and temporal powers, as did his subversive successor, Marsilius of Padua.

It is such an indivisible social matrix, however, that Shari'ati aimed to recreate in 20th-century Islam. In the metropolis, his efforts were read as traditional theocracy and Islamic nationalism. But to a less political eye, his work sometimes reads more like quietist Protestant pietism. It roots itself in the Qur'an. It emphasizes personal discipline and growth. It decries theocracy as wrongheaded, materialism as vacuous, Marxism as tyranny. It decries elites and leaders and upper classes. Yet for all its self-conscious, pedagogic simplicity, it is at the same time both literate and articulate. Its critique of metropolitan life is thoroughgoing and acute, even as it shares many themes with metropolitan arguments like Marxism and existentialism. All these facts make the long-standing ignorance of Shari'ati puzzling, although, to be sure, his work saw some revival after the great transitions of the 2020s.

Even now, three-quarters of a century after his death, the details of Shari'ati's life remain unclear. He was born in 1933 in northeastern Iran (the exact location is not certain), then under the modernizing dictatorship of Reza Shah Pahlavi. Shari'ati's father and grandfather had been active Islamists, the former having founded the Center for the Propagation of Islamic Truth in Mashhad around 1940. After high school, Shari'ati studied in a teacher-training college and early took up a vocation as a teacher. While teaching in the early and mid-1950s, he finished his bachelor's degree and began active involvement in nationalist politics, then in crisis over British claims about oil concessions. Such political involvement led Shari'ati to radicalization and arrests. But in the late 1950s he surprisingly won a fellowship for travel to France for further education. There he

pursued a degree in letters, eventually submitting a thesis in philology, but also reading widely in Western literature, social science, and philosophy. On the political side, he also read the work of Frantz Fanon and became active in the latter phases of the Algerian independence conflict. On his return to Iran in 1964 he was again arrested, apparently because of his Parisian activities. On his release, he taught at Mashhad and other Iranian colleges for some time, then lectured at Husayniah Irshad, an informal university in Tehran, in which he played a central role.

In 1972, Shari'ati was again arrested (the arrest of his father seems to have been used to persuade him to give himself up). After months in confinement, he was released to house arrest in 1975. After two years, he went to England and died there under unknown circumstances in June 1977. Accounts of his death are many and various, ranging from natural death to assassination by the Shah's agents to assassination by the clerical branch of Islam. There remains no scholarly consensus on the matter.

More than most theorists, Shari'ati must be read both in context and out. He must be read in context to understand what he might have thought he was actually saying, to which interlocutors, and for what reasons. Above all he must be read in context for a sense of what he might have thought he was saying to himself. Yet he must also be read out of context because his work quickly floated free of its original venues, being widely distributed and read for the plain content of the texts, shorn of the unwritten understandings Shari'ati himself may have brought to them.

As a first context, we must remember that Shari'ati's writings were those of a young and active man rather than those of a mature man and an academic. They are notes to himself, or lectures explaining complex insights in simple terms, or celebrations of common religious stories and events. They are not systematic, disciplined arguments. Moreover, he wrote under a regime that permitted no overt political critique. Thus, for him Islam was not only his faith, but also the only available language for political and social discussion. In this connection, it is striking that Shari'ati's contemporary Martin Luther King, Jr., used the same homiletic style and the same invocation of religious symbols and language. (That King's successors abandoned this stance may signify less a difference between King and Shari'ati than a difference in their successors' appropriations of them.) Immediate context also sometimes shapes Shari'ati's remarks in more specific ways; his occasional contempt for Marxism no doubt reflects his having met it during one of its more extravagantly silly moments—French academia in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Shari'ati did not leave any single systematic work. There is, to be sure, no reason he should have. Shari'ati's intent in social theory was to midwife the *umma*, not to win renown as a social theorist. But as a result his writing often lacks consistency, a fact particularly noticeable in his attitude toward the other Abrahamic religions. Sometimes for him Judaism and Christianity join in the common religious critique of secular liberal society.

At other times, they are part of that liberal society, themselves secularized and baleful.

Yet there is a coherence of vision underneath. Shari'ati's thought has two basic moments. The first is directed outward, at the litany of philosophies, ideologies, and religions that is the recorded history of the world culture Shari'ati confronted when he left Iran. The second is directed inward, at a particular moment in the history of Shari'ati's own faith. The first is objective and external. The second is subjective and internal. More important, the first is mainly concerned to judge the past, while the second aims to make the future.

Marxism and Other Western Fallacies contains the crucial elements of Shari'ati's judgment of what he viewed as the alternatives to Islam. The first essay, "On Humanism," notes how ostensibly secular versions of humanism invariably smuggle transcendent values into their core arguments. It also begins a specific quarrel that runs through much of Shari'ati: his demonization of the medieval Catholic church, here derided for beliefs that are in fact not medieval at all, but rather Augustinian and (later on) Protestant. The medieval Catholic church was a problem for Shari'ati precisely because the Christendom it animated was the last Western equivalent of the encompassing religious society that he sought to recreate in a new *umma*. He could not afford to recognize medieval Christendom as having been a prior example, lest its degeneration serve as an unwelcome prediction of a potential future for his new Islam.

In "Modern Calamities," Shari'ati begins with a denunciation of capitalism and communism little different from that later articulated by the environmental radicals of the 2000–2020 period. Then, after a deft rejection of Marxism and various transcendental religions (including the Islamic caliphate) for their degeneration into routinized, self-interested societies of ideological officialdom, Shari'ati moves to a quite amusing demolition of existentialism (and particularly its Marxist variant) for its pretensions, its internal contradictions, and its not-occasional racism. The essay is a triumph of invective, containing nonetheless enough home truths to be well worth reading.

"Humanity between Marxism and Religion" is a much more serious and extended work. Here Shari'ati clears the ground quickly of the various alternatives; only Marxism and Islam, he feels, remain as serious alternatives for the advance of humanity, since only those two schemes are comprehensive views of the religious, social, and material worlds. As I noted earlier, Shari'ati could not take Christendom as a model or precursor because of the heritage that followed it: Reformation, religious war, and the privatization of religion under the ensuing liberalism. Christendom thus figures in his essay only as one of the several degenerations of (good) religion into self-interested officialdoms. That the caliphate also figures as one of these degenerations should not be seen as "fairness" (as one might think, because Shari'ati appears to judge Islam as harshly as he does Christianity), but rather as a reminder that the concept of "Islam"

as used in the text refers to Shari'ati's never fully stated but quite particular version of that religion. In this connection, it is also noteworthy that Shari'ati's language sometimes relegates Sufism to the status of "non-Islam."

Shari'ati's chief arguments against Marxism concern its internal contradiction and surreptitious borrowing of religious and transcendent language, criticisms that no serious reader of Marx can deny. Marx's worship of man the maker, of the artisan desiring his unalienated product, is evident enough. Through much of this section Shari'ati reads the Qur'an as if it were a text by, say, John Dewey, urging the realization of human potential, the expression of free desire, the facilitation of personal and social growth. That the Qur'an is full of specific injunctions about specific social practices simply disappears. But this is not so much an inconsistency as it is simply the result of Shari'ati's turning inward to the fundamentals of his own religion. Specific injunctions are only means to a greater end. He sees through requirements and injunctions to the promise of fulfillment that is at the heart of Islam: surrender to the will of Allah the All-Merciful and acceptance of the prophecies and the project of the Prophet. Here Shari'ati finds the same burning heat of values and personal realization that other devout people have found in a dozen other transcendent religions. For long stretches of the latter parts of this essay, one could substitute "Christianity" or "Mazdaism" or "Buddhism" for "Islam" and have a text completely acceptable to another faith. We are all the more aware of this issue because Shari'ati has been so religiously tolerant in presenting the polar opposition of religion and secularism in the opening essays of the book.

This is indeed the fundamental puzzle of Shari'ati's work. His critiques of materialism and its vacuity resonate with dozens of contemporary and later writers, both secular and religious. His insistence on the meaning-creating heart of human activity echoes themes in Marx, Weber, Boas, and a hundred other classical social scientists. But his remedy—Islam—immediately raises the question of whether Islam can avoid the terrifying history of Western Europe: the renewed religious commitment of Protestantism, the grisly wars and repressions of the 16th and early 17th centuries, and the liberal pacification that followed, with its agreement to limit religion to private life. One imagines that Shari'ati would have immediately pointed out that privatization was followed by the systematic dehumanization discussed by Marx, by the militant and indeed often "religiously" inspired colonialism of the late 19th century, and by the triumph of illiberalism in the fascist dictatorships. One seems damned either way.

By contrast with the outward-looking Shari'ati of *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, the Shari'ati of *On the Sociology of Islam* turns inward. He is here talking to fellow Shi'i Muslims in Iran, speaking the language of religious reform, urging a return to deep and heartfelt faith. In fact, he often sounds like a Protestant revival preacher calling the faithful to

renewed commitment and self-discipline. The discussion of non-Iranian traditions is here aimed purely at local listeners; Shari'ati is a returning voyager whose collected intellectual souvenirs will become helpful if purified of their errors and redeployed in the local, Islamic world. In that new context, they become revolutionary, because they are informed by proper, purely Islamic values. The toleration evident in *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies* is largely absent from this book.

Thus, in the essay translated as "Approaches to the Understanding of Islam," Shari'ati tells us that the Qur'an contains a revolutionary theory of migration: the notion that all civilization arises in migration. But that idea has been argued often enough before. Or again, he tells us that Western history focuses too much on accident. But then he makes accident one of the four pillars of an Islamic theory of social development, alongside personality, tradition [later, norms; he means here the Herderian inner logic of a people], and *al-nas* (the people). Such a view is by no means absent from historiography outside Islam, and conversely Shari'ati has at times rejected thinkers who have focused on each of these themes. But again, the issue here is not sociological abstraction, but practical theorizing. We must read this essay as a call for Muslims—in particular for Shari'ati's countrymen—to awaken their faith and study it: "It is shameful that after fourteen centuries, Ali should be made known to us through a Christian, Georges Jourdaq" (p. 40).

In my reading, the most important tenet of Shari'ati's theory of social life is however contained in the essay on *tauhid*. Shari'ati argues that *tauhid* means not only the unity of God, but also the unity of all things with God, of now and eternity, of natural and supernatural, of all things in the world. By contrast, *shirk* denotes polytheism and multiplicity. For Shari'ati,

[*Shirk*] . . . is a worldview that regards the universe as a discordant assemblage full of disunity, contradiction, and heterogeneity, possessing a variety of independent and clashing poles, conflicting tendencies, variegated and unconnected desires, reckonings, customs, purposes, and wills. *Tauhid* sees the world as an empire; *shirk* as a feudal system. (P. 82)

Immediately, one recognizes in *shirk* two of the premises of liberal social theory with which I began: a human nature uneasily compounded of passion and reason, and a bickering melee of diverse social groups. Shari'ati finds the very imagination of liberal social theory to be mistaken. Or, rather, he finds the premises of liberal social theory to denote a state of social life that is inherently wrong.

Shari'ati prefaces this passage with a long list of dualisms he feels *tauhid* cannot accept. Many of these were the enlightenment dualisms also rejected by the Nietzscheans of the late 20th century: spirit and body, ruler and ruled, noble and vile, logic and love, inherent virtue and inherent evil. Others were the divisions of the Marxists: capitalists and proletarians, elite and mass, learned and illiterate. Still others are cultural differences:

Arab and non-Arab, Persian and non-Persian. All these differences are for Shari'ati so much *shirk*.

Given the internal audience, however, one does not know what Shari'ati intended by saying this. Did he simply mean that these distinctions, however important or unimportant in the eyes of humans, were not distinctions in the eye of God, and so were in the long run quite unimportant, much as the Christian apostles insisted when they claimed that on Pentecost everyone miraculously heard the Gospel in his own language? That these distinctions are mere accidents, harmless enough in their own way, but sometimes distracting our attention from a more fundamental unity? That would be the liberal reading. Or did he simply envision the annihilation of difference altogether: of Arab and non-Arab along with capitalist and worker, of black and white along with clergy and laity, of virtue and evil along with this world and hereafter? One hears in Shari'ati a note that becomes quite chilling out of context:

Tauhid, by contrast, which negates all forms of *shirk*, regards all the particles, processes, and phenomena of existence as being engaged in harmonious movement toward a single goal. Whatever is not oriented to that goal is by definition nonexistent. (P. 87)

The metropolis and indeed the rest of the world knows well that human things that are "by definition nonexistent" often become nonexistent in a more concrete way: repressed, enslaved, executed, starved—the list is long.

In Shari'ati, then, we face the great conundrum of social theory. The values that animate humans arise in differences. They are created in the crucible of particular experience, of optimism, excitement, and passion. But differences have a trajectory that often ends in inhumanity, a trajectory that becomes more and more marked precisely as the values involved claim to define the project of humanity itself. As critique of modern society, Shari'ati's work is quite effective. His portrayal of its emptiness echoes the many others who have argued that liberal society tends to relapse into meaninglessness and materialism. And he is right too in emphasizing the creation of new values, the making of new differences. Human life is about the positing of differences. The values that animate and drive humans are values they themselves seem to invent. But the problem lies in the word "seem." Humans cannot know, in the last analysis, whether their values are inventions or not. Even the wildly successful materialist project of Western science came up against dreadful proofs of its own undecidability from Kurt Gödel, Niels Bohr, Ludwig Fleck, and many others. The most powerful of values, then, are those that can deny this knowledge of their own invention and pretend to transcendence. Shari'ati speaks for one of them. In his view, values are not invented. They are simply discovered. There is no real difference, no passion and diversity, only a failure to see the one thing that matters: the fundamental unity of human life under the rule of the All-Merciful. If all humans would see that, it would be a new world. Indeed.