

Transition from Orient to the Third World: Sketch of a Phenomenological Study of a Historical Fall

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The “Third World” as a term with a referential object became prevalent in the early 1950s. It designated, primarily, the neutral political situation of the countries not belonging to the two hostile blocs of power, East and West, a division emerging out of the victorious allied powers in the Second World War. The period of the ideological and political strife between the two blocs, in its earlier phases, witnessed the process of achieving political independence by previous European colonies in Asia and Africa. Later, these emerging powers were politically categorized or designated as Third World countries.

These old colonial, or semi-colonial, countries gradually attained their independence through political, and in some cases, military struggles under the leadership of their modern intelligentsia, or the main transmitters of the modern revolutionary political and social ideas into their native lands. The anti-colonial movements of the

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Third World strove to shape their formally independent states after the modern concept and model of the nation-state, originating from nineteenth century Europe. But this aspiration encountered great obstacles emanating from their economic, political and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the next related term emerging in this period, or somewhat later, was “underdeveloped” countries which complemented the concept of the Third World, and underscoring, comparatively, the economic situation of those lands. The new term, which replaced the older and ambiguous term of “backward countries”, with its quantitative economic and social measures, assessed the underdeveloped against the developed countries in the atmosphere of the Cold War era which witnessed the restless competition of the two main blocs of power for “development”. However, for decades the concept of the Third World, contained “underdevelopment” as its componential notion, echoing the existence of the poor, non-industrial countries, desperately entangled in seemingly unsolvable political, social, and, worst of all, economic problems on the way to establish the modern nation-state and achieving a developed industrial economy.

However, the twentieth century, in its closing decades, witnessed radical changes in the international scene. The downfall of the Soviet empire, by putting an end to the bipolar system of rival political and military powers of the Cold War era, made the concept of the Third World devoid of its international political connotation as a third party in this relationship. Subsequently, the vast industrialization of a considerable number of the previously underdeveloped countries in East Asia and, later on, other parts of the world to the point of the emergence of the great world economic powers among them, rendered obsolete the term “Third World” connoting “underdeveloped countries”.

In spite of all these processes, from a certain point of view, the “Third World”, as a useful term, still seems applicable in a new context, not by far alien to its old usage. That is, its capability to express the social psychological and cultural situation of those nations still entangled, embarrassingly, between their historical past, usually termed as

“traditional”, on one hand, and on the other hand, involvement in the process of modernization. This paradoxical status could be formulated, in my terms, as transition from the Orient to the Third World. In this discussion, my focal point of view, obviously, is my native country, Iran, as my immediate source of knowledge and personal experience of a psychologically and culturally Third World status, as such. Iran, alongside other Middle Eastern countries, in spite of all apparent material developments achieved by the immense influx and dispersal of petrodollars, could be considered as the most expressive representation of this phenomenon.

During the height of Orientalism, an earlier title for “Oriental Studies” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European scholarship categorized old Asiatic empires and cultural domains as “Oriental”, vis-à-vis their own Occidental region. The bipolar concept of Occident-Orient in the nineteenth century obviously put into contrast two geographically and culturally opposing worlds: on one side the prosperous, self-confident Western European modern nation-states, enjoying the tremendous boom of the scientific and industrial revolutions as dominant world powers encroaching upon all oceans and continents; on the other side, the rest of the world still lived in their enclosed local cultures and premodern or primitive economies and political systems, encountering the shocking presence of those coming from unknown or extremely remote lands with unimaginable material and intellectual means of power for dominance.

Modernity, by its revolutionary philosophical and scientific achievements, created a totally new meaning and prospect for being human, reflected in the term “humanism” in modern thought, promoting free will for modern individuals. However, the Industrial Revolution, alongside the social and political revolutions that had changed fundamentally the economic and social life of the Western world, by its contagious nature gradually changed all pre-modern human societies that came into permanent contact with Western Europe through European colonial encroachments and political expansionism. The great transforming power of modernity manifests

itself in the actions of modernization: there is now nowhere in the world that has not been “discovered” by European explorers, and no human society left without, somehow, being touched by material, technical modernization.

This historical story is normally formulated under the sociological terms as transition from *traditional* to *modern* society. But a sociological approach doesn't take into account a fundamental aspect of this phenomenon which might be called the *ontological transition*. The colonial and military encroachments of the modern commercialist, rationalist world equipped, in the first instance, with achievements of natural sciences and then, cultural and historical sciences, alongside amazing inventions and productions of the Industrial Revolution, has had a fateful role in displacing peoples from their imaginary focal geographical and historical locations. That is, places which were once defined by mythological ontologies and which, through oral or literary traditions, described their place on Earth and in the Universe. It is well known that all pre-modern cultures and civilizations, geographically, felt themselves being at the center of the World. But, the modern European geographical knowledge, following the naval adventures to explore the entire globe, based on empirical science and exact calculations, inevitably deposed mythological imaginations about the Earth and the place of everything on it. That signaled the first great step toward modern civilization, the demythologization and disenchantment of Nature, and its gradual submission to human domination. These achievements, noticeably, had shocking effects on the minds of the peoples who had no part in these discoveries and still lived in their legendary place at the center of the World. The demythologization of geography was the first step for putting all traditional human cultures out of their imaginary centrality and relocating them in the periphery of a Eurocentric world totally defined by modern European scientific mentality.

The demystification of nature by development of the natural sciences and demythologization of history through human sciences were integrated processes reinforcing modern rationalism and humanism

in their European homeland. The European modern mind not only re-read its native history through scientific approach, but at the same time, through universal notions of modern science, undertook the project of compiling world history as a general encyclopedia of the human race on Earth. This all-inclusive approach following natural history as general history of all natural beings, integrated all dispersed local histories into a universal scheme of general human history. As mentioned before, until the development of the universal human history by European scholarship, all pre-modern human cultures and civilizations had their own oral or written local histories rooted in mythological times and traditional legends. But by being enforced to transit from pre-modern countries or empires into modern nation-states, as a prerequisite for becoming a *nation*, following the model of the secular modern national historiography, all newly borne states, or those transformed from pre-modern into modern states, were engaged to compose their own specific national histories to define their own national identification. To this purpose, traditional local historical narratives were re-read and re-written to articulate a “national” history which, explicitly or implicitly, evaluated their place in the modern universal human history.

The forced openness of the Orient to the modern Occidental world through the actions of European colonialism, created, as a sub-product, the intelligentsia of the Oriental type. A basic characteristic of the early generations of the fledgling Oriental intelligentsia who were often reared at the service of their colonial masters, was losing confidence in their own native world views and style of life, and showing great fascination for European way of life and thought. They tried to learn languages of their masters, received modern European education, and adopted European-styled attire, in an effort to imitate every detail of the sophisticated modern European social conduct. These behaviors obviously demonstrated the alienation of this newly-arrived privileged social and political layer from their own native historical past and their aspirations for quickly changing their “uncivilized” peoples and countries according to the civilized European model. Thus, the early

generations of the Oriental intelligentsia in China, Japan, India, Iran, Egypt, or elsewhere, by absorbing certain ideological elements from the mentality and knowledge of the modern European intellectualism and following the enlightening role of the intellectuals in Europe, recognized the historical mission of transforming their native worlds in accord with modern values and way of life produced by the European Enlightenment. This task demanded the *awakening* of their slumbering societies and offered to people a modern historical consciousness by encouraging them, or forcing them by revolutionary actions, to abandon their backward way of life drowned in ignorance and superstition, mental and material poverty, and thereby embracing Europeanization as the path to economic, intellectual, and, moreover, higher moralistic prosperity.

In this way, the resentment of the newly borne intelligentsia against their traditional culture and way of life gradually transmitted to other layers of the “Oriental” societies. In later historical developments, the transmutation of the Oriental man, originally submissive toward his own eternal destiny, to a human being in search of another meaning and means of life, is one of the essential causes for the disintegration of the Oriental world and its ultimate dissolution into Third World conditions. All contributions to the “underdeveloped” world, in the form of reorganization of the governmental system through the introduction of bureaucratic, educational, military, and other kinds of modern national institutions, in general, was not effective for the realization of the intellectual ideal of Europeanization of the Oriental worlds. In contrast, the presence of the clumsy and imbalanced elements of modernization aggravated the situation. Heterogeneity between the mentality of the native peoples and their traditional morals and manners made the achievement of those expectations almost impossible. Exposure to the modern world and its humanistic attitudes and aspirations played an essential role to push these societies further toward their doomed, chaotic Third World destiny.

The post-Second World War era, with the rise of anti-colonial enthusiasm for political freedom from Western dominance, turned the

previous fascination for everything “European” into a sense of anger and resentment. Presence of the extreme leftist movements, leaning toward Soviet bloc and communist ideology, intensified these feelings. By so-called “scientific” theorizations, proponents of extreme leftist ideologies, by absolute demonization of the Western world, depicted it as a monstrous, voracious, capitalist entity with an unbridled thirst for plundering the natural resources of other parts of the world and exploiting their societies. Communist propaganda presented the Western world as ultimately responsible for all the misery and poverty of the people in other parts of the world by keeping them forcefully deprived of all technological means necessary for modern life.

By keeping in mind this general depiction of the historical situation in the Third World, in this short presentation, as a concrete example, I turn to review briefly the multiple stages of reactions in the Iranian world versus the West and modernity. Iran, in spite of its long history of foreign invasion, permanent destruction and reconstruction, had kept until recent times the Oriental spirit of its culture, based on strong religious and mystical inclinations in its way of life and thought. This mystical spirit of Iranian culture reflected itself best of all in the immense output of its vast inventory of poets. Some of them, like Rumi and Hafiz, stand at the top of the illustrious names in the Persian literary world. The prevalence of the irrationalist, illuminist way of thought in this cultural world, from the remote historical ages to modern times, manifestly demonstrates the original “Oriental” nature of Iranian culture. Now, disregarding all interfering political, military, and economic factors, we may say that the encounter with the Occidental world and its rationalist spirit, imposed by direct or indirect influence of European ways of thought, had been destructive to a culture which had self-confidently and proudly preserved its unique spirituality throughout its pre-modern times. This culture, by means of the Persian language and, properly, its poetic genius reflected in the works of its great mystical poets, had created an immense sphere of influence in the central, south, and western parts of the Asiatic continent, extending to the Ottoman Empire’s occupied

territories in south-east Europe.

The damaging effects of the influence of modern ideas and ways of life on this Middle Eastern empire is a painful story which, might be said, had been experienced in the same way, and almost at the same time, by all spheres of Asiatic cultures and civilizations. As a formally independent state, Iran was never officially colonized by European powers but, in the nineteenth century had been left to exist as a buffer zone between two great European colonial powers, Russia and Great Britain, under their strong political influence. Under this semi-colonial situation which gradually witnessed the transition of Iran from Orient to the Third World, the early generations of its emerging intelligentsia, like their analogues in other Oriental lands, aspired for Europeanization of their people and country in every aspect of their life. Their attempts to remodel the old political structure of Asiatic despotism into the modern nation-state led to the Constitutional Revolution which, without palpable results for democratization of the country and rule of law, resulted in total chaos. The essential needs for building modern governmental, educational, social and cultural institutions, and basic industrialization of the country demanded an iron hand demonstrated by the dictatorial reign of Reza Shah. But the Second World War and subsequent occupation of Iran by Allied powers shortened this period. By the polarization of the main world powers into Eastern and Western blocs almost immediately after the war, Iran found itself under the newly defined category of the “Third World” and its associative concept, the underdeveloped country. Nevertheless, by initiating a political movement for the nationalization of the British Oil Company in the early 1950s, Iran stood amongst the first nations to push back against European colonialism and dominance.

The period of the revolt against the West amongst the Third World nations bore in Iran a semi-modern intellectual movement, with strong appeal among younger generations of educated people in search for a national identity based on original Oriental spiritualism radically in contrast to the so-called Western materialism. This intellectual movement later played a complementary role to a politically active

religious movement which brought about the 1957 revolution. Under the pressure of opposing political forces and imbalanced projects of modernization, at last the country fulfilled its Third World destiny by way of a revolution under religious leadership, an event that astonished and later stunned the world. The final question, however remains: What is the meaning of an “Islamic revolution” in the context of an apparently demythologized world haunted by the humanistic aspirations of modern times?