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Recognition to Come: Towards a Deconstructive Encounter with Iranian Identity in a Globalized World

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Abstract: Considering the “relativization of identity”, “the positive recognition of the other”, “the mutual evaluation of cultures”, and the “creation of a normative world culture” as “four main kinds of cosmopolitan relationships” and, therefore, using the term cosmopolitanism in a “post-Western” register of meaning, I will make a case that Iranian identity in a post-Islamist condition needs a kind of struggle for recognition if it wants to locate itself at the interface of the local and the global. Taking the correlation between the discourse of post-Islamism and a deconstructive theory of identity into consideration, this paper addresses a central question in identity studies: can a downgraded identity rooted in a decent civilization—one in which both “moral” and “material” values for the globalized world have demoted—be reinvented? I argue that being accorded recognition, however, is different from self-congratulation within the boundaries of a local identity. In the former case, a nation’s identity is recognized for something it offers to the multifacetedness and multidimensionality of the contemporary world. In the latter, that identity retreats to the civilizational memory of ancestors now no longer relevant to the world issues. For a nation to reinvent its cultural identity from a universal vantage point, it is necessary to articulate its experiences in particular cultural forms which can be understood by others. It is only then that one’s self becomes known to the other, as well as to oneself. This paper will deconstruct the concept of identity and then discuss the challenges and prospects of reinventing identity in the particular context of post-Islamist Iran. Challenges refer to the crises of an identity that could prevent its revitalization such as a persistent failure to acknowledge the historical crisis of an identity in terms of both “material” and “cultural” measures. Prospects refer to the availability of internal mechanisms that could enable reinvention of an identity, e.g., the availability of internal mechanisms that would allow the reinvention of cultural identity.

Keywords: identity; crisis; challenges; prospects; reinvention; recognition; cosmopolitanism



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1. Introduction

The question of identity can be raised from a number of perspectives. In addressing national identity, for example, many commentators have primarily focused on three types of associations: by land (shared history, geography, state) (Smith 1991, p. 16), by blood (shared ethnicity, race), (Moore et al. 2003) and/or by culture (shared language, religion, arts, and sciences) (Werbner and Modood 1997). To discuss identity from these perspectives, however, would be a redundant and uninspiring exercise. Edward Said properly says that, “Nothing seems less interesting than the narcissistic self-study that today passes in many places for identity politics, or ethnic studies, or affirmations of roots, cultural pride, drum-beating nationalism, and so on.” (Said 1998, pp. 3–7). This self-affirmation fails to take into account the crisis that is responsible for the current tension around issues of identity. Reacting to a perceived threat of annihilation, it often resorts to exaggerations about its history and tries to resolve the present tension by reminiscing about its historical and civilizational past. It is precisely this character that makes the approach unproductive and unsustainable. While such simplifications might be useful for fondly recalling historical

glories, they fail to identify the reasons for the current crisis of identity and the challenges and prospects for overcoming it.

Sustenance requires constant redefining and restructuring. For identity to remain sustainable, it is necessary that first, the nature and causes of its crises are identified, and second, particular responses are articulated for addressing specific issues. It is through these particular responses that an identity answers the questions of who and what it is. This is why many commentators examine the question of identity from the vantage point of its crisis. Kobena Mercer argues that, “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.” (Mercer 1990, p. 43).

It is when identity is in crisis that the need for its renewal and reinvention appears more urgent. According to Cornel West, the first consequence of identity crisis is the rejection of “the abstract, general, and universal in light of the concrete, specific, and particular.” (West 1990, pp. 93–109). This condition is produced by a need for change. What is required in the course of this transformation is self-discovery, textual re-interpretation, and developing particular responses to specific issues. In the same manner that an individual who becomes alienated from himself/herself in the face of crisis would require a rediscovery of himself/herself, this dynamic can also be said to be present at the level of societies and nations. But this rediscovery is not a return; it does not signify a place that exists in advance of the rediscovery. Rather, it is a process of self-finding at the opening of a new existential situation (Mesbahian 2020b). It is from this processual and transformative standpoint that I address, in what follows, the issue of reinventing Iranian identity.

Distinguishing between historical and essentialist approaches in addressing the question of identity, I will make a case that traditional understandings which seek monolithism and homogeneity lead, at best, to a celebration of cultural and civilizational legacies of the past. While this attention may be helpful for historical analysis, it offers very little for resolving the current crisis. Identity is less about identifying and revealing a hidden essence, and more about changes that occur through interaction with an external entity called “the Other”. As Stuart Hall points out, identity suggests an active process of representation, a process through which identity constantly changes by reinventing itself. Identity, then, really means the reinvention of identity, not holding it captive to history or a cultural past. As Axel Honneth rightly points out:

So the real task is to equip the ‘generalized other’ with a ‘common good’ that puts everyone in the same position to understand his or her value for the community without restricting the autonomous realization of his or her self. In this kind of society, subjects with equal rights could mutually recognize their individual particularity by contributing in their own ways to the reproduction of the community’s identity. (Honneth 1995, p. 90)

A new-gained relevance and recognition will not come through useless generalizations and recollections about the past. Instead, it requires developing new and particular articulations of our identity which can be measured against other claims and other identities. This approach to identity is in line with the reconciliatory attitude of post-Islamism discourse that utilizes democratic principles and acknowledgements of the rights of its citizens to engage rationally in questions of civil society to contextualize Islam in the 21st century and thereby save the religion from irrelevance. As Mojtaba Mahdavi argues, post-Islamism is a dialogical discourse that posits a “third alternative” to an essentialist view of Islamism that reduces truth to religious precepts on the one hand, and the arrogance of Western modernity that pushes itself as the superior form of civilization through colonial practices on the other hand; post-Islamism thereby promotes “dialogue between tradition and modernity, faith and freedom [and] religiosity and rights . . . ” (Mahdavi 2019, p. 23).

Similar to a new-gained identity and recognition, post-Islamism spotlights the “legitimacy crisis” of Islamism, which results from its disregard for democracy (Bayat 2013, p. 30). Post-Islamism’s redemption is relevant when “the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism are exhausted even among its once-ardent supporters” (Bayat

2013, p. 8). Mojtaba Mahdavi defines post-Islamism as a synthesis of “Islamism” and “Islamwasm” rather than an “anti-Islamic” or “un-Islamic” project or even “a radical break from Islamism” (Mahdavi 2011, p. 95). Post-Islamism aims to “marry Islam with individual choice and freedom [. . .] with democracy and modernity” (Bayat 2013, p. 8). This does not connote “an Islamic state through the ballot box” (Bayat 2013, p. 26) but is the recognition that “the survival of Islam depends on maintaining and strengthening the democratic order, and “achieving compatibility” with democracy” (Bayat 1996, p. 45).

Taking the correlation between post-Islamism discourse and a deconstructive theory of identity into consideration, my intention is to address a central question in identity studies: can a downgraded identity rooted in a decent civilization—one in which both “moral” and “material” values for the globalized world have demoted—be reinvented? And if the general response is positive, then what are the necessary conditions for this reinvention? In appealing to the idea of a downgraded identity, my intention is not to undermine the importance of Iran’s millennia old civilizational history. The point, however, is that in the modern world, identity is measured against its intellectual contributions. In the modern era, a different understanding about the world and the individual’s place in it has emerged. Faced with this understanding, the Iranian identity has been experiencing a crisis of relevance. A new-gained relevance and recognition will not come through useless generalizations and recollections about the past. Instead, it requires developing new and particular articulations of our identity which can be measured against other claims and other identities. In what follows, I will therefore elaborate on the question of identity and proceed to discuss the challenges and prospects of reinventing identity in the particular context of post-Islamist Iran.

2. Deconstructing the Concept of Identity

Deconstructing identity acknowledges the existence of present cultural identity while challenging the idea that identity “is what it says it is.” Deconstruction of identity does not destroy identity as such; “it simply tries to resituate it.” (Kearney et al. 1984, p. 125).¹ My approach to the project of deconstruction as a whole calls for re-reading, re-interpreting, and re-investigating the cultural pillars of Iranian identity. Western philosophy, which is established by the principle of reason (Derrida et al. 1983, p. 4), is based on the superiority of Western over non-Western, and male over female. Applying deconstruction to identity moves the whole bundle of questions on the subject from as it is to as it must be. Deconstruction stems from Heidegger’s notion of “Destruktion”. Unlike “destruktion” though, deconstruction does not involve a “fixed or expected endpoint”; it “is a potentially infinite process”. Deconstruction is not destruction.

Deconstruction asserts that “things are self-contradictory”. Caputo describes it as a criticism focused on “‘open[ing] and loosen[ing] things up’ (Argyrou 2013), a criticism which is not meant to “destroy traditions”. Deconstruction is “the active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be if one accepts its traditional values and concepts” (Norris 2002). Derrida defines deconstruction as “nothing”. He maintains that deconstruction is not a “method”, or “an act of operation”. It is not “a set of theorems, axioms, tools, rules, techniques, [or] methods”; it is essentially “impossible” and “loses nothing” from admitting it (Derrida 1991). Coined by Derrida in 1968, “différance”, means both to differ and to defer in French. It is the difference that “shatters the cult of identity and the dominance of Self or Other” (Guillemette and Cossette 2006). Derrida asserts that “différance” is the foundation of presence and absence: opposites that depend on each other. Identity obscures the “Self/Other dichotomy”. It requires both differentiation from and identification with the other. To have an identity is to be both different from and similar to the other. “We can see things in relation to opposites, what isn’t as well as what is, by ‘différance’”. Identity, therefore, is not “absolute”; “nothing ‘is itself’ by virtue of its being”.

¹ Derrida cited in Kearney. Here, Derrida explains deconstruction by deconstructing the “subject”. As an example, I applied his example to identity.

Historically, it was in the global South that discussions around identity first rose to prominence. The appeal to identity was made, on the one hand, by intellectuals in those societies who sought to reinvent and restructure historical and cultural traditions and develop a basis for social commitment (in the face of ideological and political divisions), and on the other hand, by the states and those in power who used it to justify authoritarian rule and the monopolization of economic and political realms. Freedom was simply discarded as a Western value, and the factors that contributed to the persistence of conditions of poverty and stagnation were overlooked.

Some have located discussions on identity in the realm of postmodern thought. This is because in developing their theoretical grounds, some of these discussions challenge two key criterion of modern philosophy: first, Descartes' attempt to locate cognition in an unmediated subjectivity ('I think therefore I am', or in Latin, the cogito—'Cogito ergo sum' as the "first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way") (Descartes 1984, p. 195), and second, Hegel's contention that self-consciousness is achieved through the knowledge of the whole. Hegel's fundamental claim is that the certainty of one's self-conscious existence, i.e., consciousness of oneself as an intentional agent with a unique identity, can only be attained in the recognition of another intentional being: "self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged [recognized]" (Hegel et al. 1977, p. 111). Hegel seeks to establish this from an account of an undeveloped self-consciousness, whose dissatisfaction with regard to the certainty of its existence incites its movement—through the stages of sense-certainty, desire, life-death struggle, and the master-slave dialectic—towards its completion in collectivity, where it can "enjoy perfect freedom and independence":

'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'. It is in self-consciousness, in the Notion of Spirit, that consciousness first finds its turning point, where it leaves behind it the colorful show of the sensuous here-and-now and the nightlike void of the super sensible beyond and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present. (Hegel et al. 1977, p. 110)

It is this exact problem, it seems, that Honneth seems to be referring to in the following passage:

The Phenomenology of Spirit allots to the struggle for recognition—once the moral force that drove the process of Spirit's socialization through each of its stages—the sole function of the formation of self-consciousness. Thus reduced to the single meaning represented in the dialectic of lordship and bondage, the struggle between subjects fighting for recognition then comes to be linked so closely to the experience of the practical acknowledgement of one's labour that its own particular logic disappears almost entirely from view. (Honneth 1995, p. 62)

If, according to Honneth's critical interpretation of Hegel, there are two senses of recognition that is ontological and normative, post-modern thought, despite it not necessarily being a rejection of the idea of the whole, is generally understood as a radical departure from the assumption of monotheism and homogeneity. This is evident in the writings of many post-modern philosophers, particularly Derrida.

Based on its internal logic, however, identity can be defined or determined in relation to something external and in light of its differences with the other. A factor like race (as genetic traits) is not a basis for identity, but rather, a floating signifier, the meaning of which constantly changes. It may be argued that this definition ignores the essence (nature) of identity and limits the discussion to its appearances. It must be noted, however, that the essence of identity is in its aptitude to reinvent itself in interaction with the other and to articulate its reinvented self in particular forms. This is the perspective from which I wish to examine the question of the essence of identity.

Identity as belonging takes multiples forms, and any effort to list all of them would be hopeless. An individual can simultaneously feel a sense of belonging to any number of collectives or identities: the sports team one is a fan of, a political party or organization one supports, an ideology or religion to which one subscribes, or the social class with which one identifies. Any of these sources and forms of identity can be discussed separately. In the present discussion, however, I am primarily interested in structures that inform Iranian identity in ways that are relatively beyond our reach and control. Nationality and culture are two examples of such structures.

Over the last few decades, many commentators have insisted that national identity is the primary identity with which one associates and through which one makes sense of other expressions of identity. Even though national identity is not acquired by individual choice, many are willing to sacrifice their own lives as well as the lives of their dear ones for a “national” cause. The display of strong national sentiments is by no means limited to one nation. So what explains or rationalizes such attachments? Johann G. Herder was one of the first theorists of nationalism to attempt to answer this question (Herder and Barnard 1969). While acknowledging the role of social habits, traditions, popular beliefs, and mythologies, Herder insisted that a nation was shaped by its language and culture. In his view, these were not simply aspects of the social environment in which people found themselves. Language and culture were seen as being instrumental in shaping people’s identity and informing the ways in which they make sense of their lives.

While language might provide a partial explanatory model for national identity, it cannot be a sufficient account. A common language can create an expansive network of mutual recognition (through interaction and exchange of ideas), but it alone does not necessarily lead to the formation of a society. Societies often include different linguistic groups and supposedly one function of national identity is to utilize cultural resources and different languages towards some type of a national representation. Multiple expressions and modes of language, culture, and politics exist simultaneously within the boundaries of nations. Unless one regards the assumption of national identity to be somewhat inevitable, justifying its appeal may seem quite difficult. There is no need for us to go down the same path. New ways and approaches can be looked at to explain the persistence of this identity.

The richness of the diverse cultural resources of nations is in part responsible for this persistence, resources which were utilized in the early phase of national formations and which continue to serve as a rich source of meaning and inspiration that help to overcome individual limitations. The internal logic and primary function of cultural resources is to create a collective spirit that can in turn facilitate participation in public life. When public life takes precedence over individual pursuits, participation in national public life is sometimes manifested in voluntary individual sacrifices for the protection of the respective (national) identity. It is argued that “the greater the sacrifice, the more significant the values embodied in the nation.” (Poole 1999, p. 112).

Greg Philo and David Miller argue that for individual members, the concept of the nation incorporates an ethical account (Philo and Miller 1997, pp. 37–39). It is this moral make up that demands commitment and resistance against the temptation of globalization; commitment to the nation presents a stronger appeal than assimilation in a global society. This feeling of attachment and ethical commitment not only provides a basis upon which to develop a better future, but it also demands taking responsibility for mistakes that have occurred in the past. Acknowledging one’s identity necessitates taking responsibility for one’s history and seeking to rectify past injustices. To remember the past can simultaneously serve as a source of pride and shame. The practice of slavery throughout American history, the Nazi genocide in Germany, or the mass murder of people in various episodes in Iranian history, if acknowledged, is inevitably a source of shame. It may be argued that contemporary people should not be held responsible for wrongdoings committed centuries ago. But the same historical continuity that informs the sustenance of identity becomes a source of continued responsibility for the past. Even many of those who display problematic nationalist orientations and who subscribe to a cosmopolitan outlook

acknowledge the ethical implications of national identity. Ethically bounded individuals cannot simply wash their hands of crimes that have been committed in the name of their nation.

Generally, we can say that national identity is a product of all the historical events, turns, and ups and downs that have formed a nation. It was mentioned that the three main tenets of national identity are often considered to be associations by land, blood, and culture. But we can also point to at least three other features of national identity: (1) it is inevitable and not a matter of individual choice; (2) it incorporates a mechanism which makes inevitable its continuation, as well as the passing on of responsibilities that it necessitates; and (3) in different contexts, the discourse of national identity finds different articulations. Faced with discriminations on the basis of racial/ethnic difference, for example, ethnicity and race may be appealing as the representation of a distinct national identity. Similarly, under occupation and aggression land may become something sacred, and faced with a crisis of thought and intellectual production, emphasis may be placed on the cultural tenet.

Cultural identity, on the other hand, cannot be separated from modern individual identity. The latter places the individual at the center of being, granting it agency and subjectivity. In this view, cultural identity is a characteristic of individual identity and does not exist independent of it (Larraín 1994, p. 143). Culture, then, is conceptualized in all of its dynamism and creativity, and modern cultural identity is seen in relation to a human subjectivity that seeks to make sense of the world in which the individual exists. Examining the claims of this approach requires a close look at the notion of culture.

The word “culture” comes from the Latin root ‘cultus’ which suggests a host of actions from care, planting, and harvesting to deeds which relate to worship. In general, “we think of culture two ways: first, in terms of aesthetic matters and second, as a concept used by anthropologists to describe the way people live.” (Berger 2000). At some point in history, however, culture (as a particular form or mode of action) loses its initial meaning and finds a more universal and abstract quality. It is this abstract and universal quality that has found multiple expressions and given birth to diverse experiences. So much so, that in his *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, Herder claims that there is nothing more ambiguous than the term culture. For some time in the 19th century, culture and civilization were used as interchangeable terms. Soon, however, commentators once again began to understand culture as an abstract and independent entity referring to universal notions of intellectual and moral progress. In its most general sense, culture refers to intellectual and cultural products and production.

If *culture* is a defining characteristic of a person’s *identity*, the correlation between culture and identity can therefore be characterized as functioning in two directions: the individual is from one point of view formed by his culture, while, correspondingly, the culture subsists and continues to do so merely when lived through the experience of individuals. Stuart Hall uses identity “to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourse and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’ speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’.” (Hall and Du Gay 1996, p. 5). In light of this definition, we can seek to develop a conception of cultural identity that takes into account the reinvention and rearticulation of identity. In this view, culture is distinguished from cultural heritage, and its reinvention is regarded as being dependent on first, the constant revisiting of its foundations, and second, articulating this revisiting in particular cultural forms. The possibility of reinvention can be examined from either an *essentialist* or a *historical* approach.

Essentialists regard cultural identity as an already evolved truth with a fixed essence. Hall sees essentialist accounts as general truth claims which are artificially located in an imagined history or ancestry. According to him, in essentialist approaches, history is reduced to a set of frozen and coherent series of events. Essentialism assumes a single essence, a common and singular experience that forms an unchanging set of values, con-

cepts, traditions and reference points, with very limited possibility of change (Hall 2014, p. 39). The historical approach, on the other hand, sees cultural identity in a constant process of reinvention with no particular and complete end. Cultural identity is as much informed by the past as it is informed by the future. While it is true that each cultural identity has a particular past and a history, it is also true that all histories are subject to constant change. Cultural identity, therefore, cannot be held hostage to a fixed or a predetermined past; it is shaped by the constant interaction of history, culture, and relations of power. Similarly, identity is not achieved through an authentic reconstruction of the past. Identity is an adjective that determines a particular condition (Hall 2014, p. 40). Cultural identity is a constant restructuring of available methods, symbols, and beliefs. That symbols and beliefs take on new lives does not mean that content and methods are the same. Cultural identity, in sum, is a text that occurs as it is being written.

Today, the discourse of national identity, which became popular with the rise of colonialism, is gradually being replaced with the discourse of cultural identity. The latter is a new form of nationalism which is concerned less with political contradictions, and more with cultural contradictions. With the end of direct colonialism, particular values that had previously served to unite nations in opposition against colonial relations began to be questioned. During the era of anti-colonial struggles, there was talk of the right of national self-determination and establishing independent and powerful national states. Today, however, we speak of the challenges, issues, and the rights that go along with the discourse of cultural identity. Like any other ideology, identity discourse contains certain assumptions (truth claims), which it then seeks to examine, make coherent, and expand upon (Morley and Robins 1995, p. 122).

The discursive shift from national identity to cultural identity presents us with new questions and challenges. As Samuel Huntington rightly writes “In this new world the most pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities.” (Huntington 2011, p. 6) Morley and Robins point to some of these questions: Isn’t the concept of cultural identity itself a problematic one? Doesn’t the rise of cultural clashes put into question the historical continuity of identity? In “Merely Cultural,” Judith Butler lists some of the political objections to discussions of identity and identity politics (Butler 1998, p. 34). Here, I wish to identify three normative approaches for addressing Morley and Robins’ questions.

The first, represented by Jorge Larrain and others, holds that insisting on identity can lead to particularism. The approach seeks to address the question of identity from a universalist vantage point. For instance, while Larrain agrees with Hall’s anti-essentialist conception of identity, he nevertheless seeks to reconcile this anti-essentialism with a Habermasian holism/universalism. In Larrain’s universalist account of identity, it is nations that determine the boundaries of identity and make possible its articulation. The focus of this project is not only solidarity, but also the recognition and toleration of difference. Similarly, Kenan Malik uses this approach to critique particularistic accounts of race and identity and to reveal the link between universalism and approaches that draw attention to some human essence: “Without such a common essence, equality would be a meaningless concept. If humanity did not form a single category . . . the equality between different human individuals and groups would be . . . meaningless.” (Malik 1996, p. 258).

While the second approach is suspicious of the postmodern claim about the death of the subject, it nevertheless favors diversity over homogeneity, thus going so far as to giving recognition to politics of identitarianism. Douglas Kellner, for instance, rejects not only the postmodern “death of the subject,” but also the modern “universal subject”. According to him, the subject is socially constructed and the idea of an inherent, monolithic, and singular subject is only an analytical illusion (Kellner 1995, p. 259). This approach also draws attention to the failure of Marxism in creating a universal class, a failure that discredited the vision of universalism and made possible the rise of diverse cultural identities within nations.

The third approach, advanced by such thinkers as Greg Philo and David Miller, problematizes cultural identity as one of those “dead ends” in cultural studies and social sciences (Philo and Miller 1997, p. 37). According to them, there is no connection between identitarian particularism and humanist universalism. One cannot be simultaneously universalist and particularist. If identity is a social and historical construction, then it cannot be assumed to have any fixed and predetermined essence. Furthermore, according to the advocates of this approach, there is no coherent account of how in the modern world a nation can keep its cultural identity without excluding itself from an expanding network of global relations.

I contend that unless it is advanced from a universalist vantage point, giving recognition to particular cultural identity would contradict the idea of a common human essence, or human sameness (self-otherness). Particularism, as such, undermines the broader demand for equality, and becomes a self-imposed segregation limiting the local culture’s prospects for reinvention and leading to its eventual demise. In addition to its normative contradictions and limitations, the particularist (identitarian) approach to cultural identity pays little attention to the existing and prevailing relations in the modern world. Particularism contradicts cultural identity’s logic of constant reinvention and provides the condition for the rise of dogmatism. On the other hand, in a world where the means of cultural production (as the mechanism which can facilitate and inform the universal conception of humanity) are not distributed equally, universalism ultimately reinforces both the subjective and objective relations of domination. Universalism, as such, presents a particular account of the human experience, detached (from its social and historical context), universalized, and turned into a meta-narrative about human condition. At best, this meta-narrative offers a one-dimensional account of universal cultural identity. In practice, those in positions of power seek to deepen and widen their advantage and access by expanding and globalizing the relations of domination from which they have benefited. This hegemonic universalism is reminiscent of other historical attempts towards the globalization of relations of domination, from ancient empires to Cold War imperialism.

What is urgently needed is to deepen the first approach, that is, particular cultural forms, to address its contradictions, and to identify specific ways for advancing it. In its national expression, cultural identity is faced with two threats: either a retreat to dogmatism and stagnation, or submission to relations of domination. As Charles Taylor argues, in cultural identity the fundamental assumption is that all human cultures have at some historical period made contributions to all of humanity and still have much to offer (Taylor 1997, p. 67). The appeal to national cultural identity is made in order to resist against the negation of plurality and the exclusion, from our collective human memory, of a diverse host of human experiences across various societies. This is a controversial and painstaking process which calls for a strong will and particular conditions. For a nation to reinvent its cultural identity from a universal vantage point, it is necessary to articulate its experiences in particular cultural forms which can be understood by others. It is only then that one’s self becomes known to the other, as well as to oneself.

This approach to identity can be considered as a kind of cosmopolitan understanding of identity and recognition. Delanty identifies “the relativization of identity”, “the positive recognition of the other”, “the mutual evaluation of cultures”, and “the creation of a normative world culture” as the four constituents of the social ontology of cosmopolitanism. He suggests that cosmopolitanism is characterized by “the centrality of openness and overcoming of divisions, interaction, the logic of exchange, encounter and dialogue, deliberative communication, self and societal transformation, critical evaluation” (Delanty 2012, p. 333). Delanty acknowledges that the word itself has a western lineage but insists on using it in a “post-Western” sense, which would allow him to include experiences pertinent to all cultures (Delanty 2012, p. 335). From this perspective, cosmopolitanism is situated not in a solely national or global context, but rather in “the interface of the local and the global”. In Delanty’s view, experiences of cosmopolitanism are “expressed in social reality as particular kinds of experience” and as such are empirical. They also require individual

and specific understandings and are benchmarks for “more reflexive forms of evaluation” (Delanty 2012, p. 336). Broadly and generally cosmopolitanism is defined as “a condition of openness to the world” by Delanty. This openness, he believes, cannot be achieved in the absence of a radical change in the encounter with the “Other” on both the individual and societal levels. “Pluralization and the possibility of deliberation” are thus central. “Cosmopolitanism is not reducible to internationalism, globalization, internationalism or transnationalism”, the latter being “a non-necessary precondition of cosmopolitanism”; it is “better seen in terms of a normative critique of globalization and as an alternative to internationalism” (Delanty 2012, p. 336). This approach to cosmopolitanism is exactly in line with the deconstructive approach to identity. It is crucial to note that this kind of cosmopolitanism is fundamentally different from that of the Enlightenment, which is characterized by individualism and is essentially centered on the Western conception of the “citizen of the world”; the cosmopolitanism referred to here should rather be taken as a movement stemming from the margins pushed by dispersed communities seeking recognition and inclusion (Delanty and Kumar 2006, p. 366). In this light, a more comprehensive theory of cosmopolitanism has been put forth by Ulrich Beck, who criticizes the notion of hybridity as a form of cultural mixing, and instead emphasizes the recognition of difference—a recognition in the other’s own terms—as the proper foundation of cosmopolitanism (Delanty and Kumar 2006, p. 367). On this account, cosmopolitanism signals the end of the “closed society” that is centered on the nation-state, and thereby seeks to adopt a national-global paradigm—in a globalized and interconnected context—instead of a traditional nation-nation paradigm; this should not, however, be taken to refer to the end of the nation-state. Beck thus also speaks of “rooted cosmopolitanism” descriptively, to refer to what is a really existing cosmopolitanism in the world today and which corresponds to multiple attachments and forms of belonging that are reflexively constituted. Just as there is a “banal nationalism”, so too there is a “banal cosmopolitanism”, as in the multiculturalism of many societies and in forms of consumption (Delanty and Kumar 2006, p. 367).

To conclude, there are two very general approaches to identity: traditional and deconstructive. Identity from a traditional perspective is based on shared origins and characteristics, and the “solidarity and allegiance” stemming from them. From a deconstructive point of view, however, it is an ongoing process of construction. Identification, therefore, “is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency. Once secured, it does not obliterate difference. Identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption” (Hall 1996, p. 17). Traditionalists, on the other hand, view it as something that can be “won’ or gained, sustained or abandoned”. While the traditional understanding of identity considers it “a stable core of the self” which remains constant through time, the deconstructive approach sees it as “fragmented”, “produced in specific discursive formations”, “constructed through difference” [and] “in relation to the Other”, and constructed as “an act of power” (Hall 1996, p. 18).

3. The Challenges of Reinventing Iranian Identity

By challenges and obstacles of Iranian identity, I refer to the cultural crises of an identity that would act against or prevent the reinvention and revitalization of cultural/civilizational identity. The first obstacle against reinventing the Iranian identity is a persistent failure to acknowledge the historical crisis of the Iranian civilization in terms of both “material” and “moral” measures which Braudel identifies. Civilization, as mentioned earlier, is not a claim about the past, but an issue of our present and future. Iranian identity and its Iranian–Islamic civilizational base have been in crisis, and acknowledging this historical reality is the first step in the reinvention of our identity.

Civilizational crisis allows for two possibilities: either annihilation, or reinvention. If an identity crisis leads to submission to another, a dominant identity, then the dominated identity is no longer sustainable, and its restructuring would be impossible. If, however, elements within an identity persistently emerge to resist against submission to a dominant cultural identity, arguably the identity in question has the capacity for reinvention. The

critical factor here is the internal capacities and mechanisms of the said identity. There have been numerous philosophical, sociological, and historical contributions about the revival of civilizations. In a very general sense, the weakening of a civilization leads to a crisis which can in turn result in the disappearance of a civilization (in which it becomes merely a historical memory), or to revival and reinvention (whose prerequisite is a careful examination of the crisis and its causes).

The second obstacle impeding the reinvention of Iranian identity is the absence or weakness of a condition that Ibn Khaldoun refers to as *asabiyyah* (solidarity, or social cohesion):

Sometimes leadership goes to some person from the lowest class of the people. He obtains *asabiyyah* and close contact with the mob for reasons that fate produces for him. He, then, achieves superiority over the elders and people of the higher class when they have lost the own *asabiyyah* support. (Ibn et al. 1969, pp. 293–94)

Thus, although shared descent in ethnic communities is the basis of *asabiyyah*, “it is extendable to unrelated but familiar people, with whom social life and experiences are shared, and this can be the basis of political power even in large urban communities.” (Gierer 2001, p. 95). In this vein, one can speak of broad relations of solidarity—which, by virtue of “shared memories, myths and traditions”—that has the power to achieve a form of social cohesion that binds individuals in a national community (Smith 1991, p. 15).

Robert Cox describes this condition as the form of intersubjectivity that “pertains to the founding of a state. It is the creative component in this critical phase of human development, and in this respect *asabiyyah* has (for a westerner) some relationship to Machiavelli’s *virtue*.” (Cox and Sinclair 1996, p. 163). Moreover, *asabiyyah* is a mode of organic belonging, similar to the Hegelian concept of the collective spirit.

The third obstacle against restructuring of the Iranian identity is the tight grip of theological and canonical *sharia* and mysticism. It is true that Islam constitutes the main tenet of the Iranian identity.² It is also true, however, that in the height of the Islamic civilization religious concepts were the subjects of free and vigorous debates. According to Kramer, in the golden age of this civilization, philosophical debates engaged Muslims, Christians, and Jews, and all of them were intimately familiar with the works of pagan Greek philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle. This was a time when:

Philosophers saluted the banner of religion in deference to political and social responsibility. The regnant political philosophy, inspired by Alfarabi, held religions to be symbolic representations of the truth. The true and the good were determined autonomously, not on religious grounds, and those criteria became the measure and standard for religion. Philosophy was viewed as independent of, not as ancillary to, faith and theology. (Kraemer 1986, p. 15 in Mozaffari 1998, p. 41)

Commentators agree that Islam gave birth to a civilization that reached its peak in the period that began around the 9th century A.D. and continued for another three centuries. Braudel even proposes two dates for the rise and fall of this civilization. According to him, the golden age of the Islamic civilization began in 813 A.D, when Al-Ma’mun, the seventh Abbasid caliph came to power, and ended in 1198, when Averros, Cordoba born Muslim scientist and scholar of Aristotelian thought, died in Marrakesh (Morocco) (Mozaffari 1998, p. 36). So what explains the decline of the Islamic civilization and the subsequent decline of the Iranian civilization? The question can be addressed from historical, geographic, sociological, philosophical and many other perspectives. Here, I will only try to provide a philosophical explanation.

According to Kramer, the primary factor contributing to this stagnation is the prevalence of a Platonic approach. Muslims, according to Kramer, were fluent in the ideas of both

² Identifying the reasons why Islamic civilization left a deeper influence on Iranian identity and how it gradually became the dominant aspect of this identity is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Plato and Aristotle. While Aristotelian thought informed their ideas and investigations in the realm of ethics and logic, their political thought was entirely Platonic. Moreover, their approach to philosophy was “textual and philological,” not analytical/critical. Braudel attributes this to the all-encompassing shadow of religion over philosophy: “As admirers of Aristotle, the Arab philosophers were forced into an interminable debate between prophetic revelation, that of the Koran, and a human philosophical explanation.” (Braudel 1994, p. 90 in Mozaffari 1998, p. 37). Also contributing to this stagnation was the emergence of a forceful dogmatism in the 12th century A.D., which regarded philosophy as something incompatible with Islam and sought to get rid of it. This was a movement championed by theologians like al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya. The rise of this movement put an end to the dynamic, cosmopolitan, inclusive, and tolerant view which prevailed throughout Islamic civilization’s golden age (Mozaffari 1998, p. 37). In its present form, Islam has a fragmented structure and needs to find its place in the modern world.

The fourth obstacle against reinventing the Iranian identity is the persistence of what Ibn Khaldun described as the conditions of injustice. In his view, “injustice ruins civilizations”; it leads to decline, destruction and annihilation of humanity. This is why the Islamic canon is centered on life, reason, progeny, and property (Ibn and Rosenthal 1958, p. 103). Ibn Khaldun says that “injustice brings about the ruin of civilization” (Ibn et al. 1969, pp. 103–11). He further says that evil qualities in man are injustice and mutual aggression. There is therefore a need for an authority or a restraining power to hold people back from being unjust to one another. One of the eight words of wisdom mentioned in the above circle of Secretum Secretorum reads “Justice is something familiar, and through it, the world persists”. Ibn Khaldun means that the rise and fall of civilizations has to do with how justice is practiced in a society. He postulates that lack of organized and efficient political leadership announces corruption and injustice (Al-Araki 2014, p. 19).

The fifth and the last obstacle impeding the reinvention of Iranian identity is so called universal reason, which is unable to address the complex problems that are integral to both multicultural societies and to the interrelations of worldviews on the global level. The universalist claims of European Enlightenment have blackmailed non-European culture and debilitated its historiography by engendering a tradition of historical writing that used a dehistoricized and decontextualized “European rationality” as its scale and referent. This is what Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi pursues in his historical study of the nineteenth century Iran. In his book, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography*, Tavakoli maintains that, partly due to the colonizing historical imagination, the history of Iranian Enlightenment has not yet been written. Accordingly, he calls for exploring the uncharted history of Iranian Enlightenment and “Decolonizing historical imagination”:

With the privileged position of poetry in the invented national mentality, the prose texts of the humanities are devalued and scholarly efforts are infrequently spent on editing and publishing non-poetic texts. Thus a large body of historically significant prose texts of modernity have remained unpublished . . . Consequently, Persian language texts documenting precolonial engagement with the modern sciences and responding to European colonial domination have remained nationally “homeless” and virtually unknown to historians working within the confines of modern Iranian nationalist model. (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001, pp. 16–17)

This, according to Tavakoli, has led to a number of historiographical difficulties, such as leaving out of these “homeless texts” from national historical centers has participated to the domination of Eurocentric notion of Enlightenment as something exclusively European. It is thus not surprising that developmental studies too, has operated on a Euro-centric foundation whereby non-European texts have been in large part excluded (Saffari 2016, p. 39).

Alternatively, by neglecting the homeless texts, both Indian and Iranian historians tend to observe Enlightenment merely “under the rubric of a belated Westernization. Such a conception of modernity reinforces the exceptionality of “Occidental rationality” and

corroborates the programmatic view of Islamic and “Oriental” societies and cultures as static, traditional, and unhistorical” (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001, p. 17). With the beginning of Westernization, the reappearance of premodern, ancient styles of life is displaced by the reappearance of Western Enlightenment. Indeed, the exclusion of the non-Western from the foundation of modernity³ belies the fundamental requirement of universality, namely the inclusion of the other. Thus, we must be wary, as Siavash Saffari argues by referring to Walter D. Mignolo (Mignolo 2011, p. 32), of a universalism rooted in colonialism that has commenced a “project of Westernization” and subsequently sustained and legitimized itself under the guise of “civilization, modernization, and development.” (Saffari 2019, p. 290) This can be referred to as “The Dichotomous Logic of Exclusive Inclusion”⁴ which has engendered philosophical and historical criticisms in both non-Western and Western thought (Mesbahian 2020a, p. 145).⁵

Essential to this description of Enlightenment is the belief that the courage of investigation, rationalism, and scientific detection were exclusive to Europe and restricted to European history. As Siavash Saffari argues “the relationship between religion and modernity has been the subject of numerous academic inquiries for well over a century. In much of this literature religion has been seen either as a hostile force or at least a unique challenge to modern sociopolitical development, defined broadly as processes leading to the rule of law, democratic consolidation, and the recognition and protection of civil rights and liberties.” (Saffari 2015, p. 231). Accordingly, the conversation and contact between the West and its others, which were instrumental in the development of modern Europe, are excluded from this structure. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopias⁶ “as alternative real spaces” (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001, p. 3), Tavakoli argues for a revival of the transactions that supplied Europe with the means of “self-recognition and self-refashioning” (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001, p. 2). Tavakoli’s focus is additionally informed by how this orientalist inheritance has been internalized in Iranian historiography:

By claiming that the Persian publication of Descartes in the 1860s is the beginning of a new age of rationality and modernity, these historians provide a narrative account that accommodates and reinforces the foundational myth of modern Orientalism, a myth that constitutes the West as ontologically and epistemologically different from the Orient. This Orientalist problematic has been validated by a nationalist historiography that constitutes the period prior to its own arrival as a time of decay, backwardness, and despotism in this sense Iranian nationalist historiography has participated in its own Orientalizing. (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001, p. 8)

³ The challenge is to make a clear distinction between an alternative modernity and an alternative to modernity. While the former is conducive to the development of a critical global third way, the latter, Ernesto Laclau argues, is no less than “self-defeating.” In other words, “this is the route to selfapartheid.” Nostalgic traditionalism is narcissistic retirement within oneself, which can only lead to a suicide exile and self-marginalization (Laclau 1996, pp. 26, 32 in Mahdavi 2011, p. 107).

⁴ Dieter Misgeld explain this logic as follow: “You only have two options: either a highly exploitative system where some people will have golf courses and swimming pools, which use enormous amounts of water, or as I’ve seen in Latin America, not every household would have water and people would have to walk hours to get water or they get it every second or third day. Massive inequalities: that’s the future. There is no other. No modernization theory or theory of modernity I’ve seen is realistic enough, tough-minded enough, and fearless enough to face these situations. Philosophers are generally not capable of facing realities.” (Misgeld et al. 2010, p. 93).

⁵ For instance, Dieter Misgeld criticizes the Eurocentric perspective of thinkers such as his own mentor, Hans George Gadamer: “I shall refer to representative critical views, views which express reservations about the “distinctiveness” of Europe as Gadamer perceives it and conclude by suggesting that the subtle “eurocentrism” of Gadamer’s reflections on Europe has to be put aside, in order to open the way for a questioning European traditions on the basis of experiences made in the third world.” (Mesbahian and Norris 2017, p. 234).

⁶ Michel Foucault challenges the traditional conception of linear time, stating that notions of time have been recognized in different ways, under changeable historical conditions. He recognizes two distinctive sites: utopias and heterotopias. A utopia is an essentially imaginary space. In contrast, a heterotopia is at the same time mythic and real. All cultures are heterotopias, according to Foucault, who offers five main beliefs to elucidate the concept’s demand in reality: (1) every culture constitutes a heterotopia; (2) heterotopias can alter tasks inside a particular society; (3) (this sentence is unclear) they may have the type of opposing sites, such as the symbol of a holy garden as a microcosm of the world in the patterns of a Persian carpet; (4) they are connected with a break from the traditional era, recognizing spaces that symbolize either a quasi-eternity, like museums, or are temporal, like fairgrounds; (5) heterotopias are not liberally reachable, they are entered either by enforced means, such as prison, or their entry is based on ritual or purification. See (Foucault 2007, pp. 22–27).

Tavakoli suggests in its place a new conceptual framework: “By envisaging modernity as an ethos rather than as a decisive epoch of the nation, historians of Iran . . . may imagine a joint fact-finding mission that would allow for reactivating what the poet Mahdi Akhavan Salis⁷ has aptly recognized as “stories vanished from memory . . . ” (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001, p. 9). Consequently, the essentialist approach recognizes Enlightenment as a home-produced artifact of European rationality, universalized by modernization theorists. Such universalism essentially marked itself as Eurocentrism and comes into consideration when we scrutinize the theories of Enlightenment and the development of modernization in the Middle East and Central Asia. The instant result of such a periodization is the acceptance of Europe as an unspoken referent in non-Western historical knowledge. Quoting Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words:

For generations now, philosophers and thinkers shaping the nature of social science have produced theories embracing the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative, and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind—i.e., those living in non-Western cultures. This in itself is not paradoxical, for the more self-conscious of European philosophers have always sought theoretically to justify this stance. The everyday paradox of third-world social science is that we find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of “us,” eminently useful in understanding our societies. (Chakrabarty 1992, pp. 1–26)

Thus, while Third-World theorists feel a necessity to refer to works on European history, historians of Europe do not want to respond. Consequently, “a third world historian is condemned to knowing ‘Europe’ as the original home of the ‘modern’, whereas the ‘European’ historian does not share a comparable predicament with regard to the pasts of the majority of humankind” (Chakrabarty 1992, p. 19). The incoming of the other, however, as Gadamer argues, is the fundamental “risk” of hermeneutic understanding: to hear the other is to put oneself at risk. “When I try to understand the other, I doubtless bring my own interests to the table” (Gadamer et al. 1989, p. 388 argued in Caputo 2002, p. 513). “I expose myself to the other, putting my own interests at risk, in order to let the other be heard and understood (Gadamer), to let the other come (Derrida), to let the other lay claim to me (Levinas)” (Caputo 2002, p. 513).

To overcome these five obstacles may only be the first step in initiating a project of reinventing our cultural identity. The latter is a much bigger and broader project whose objectives, prospects, and challenges are beyond the scope of the present discussion. To initiate the reinvention process requires, firstly, overcoming the aforementioned obstacles through cultural change, and, secondly, it necessitates a thorough examination of the crisis of identity in order to identify new foundations on the basis of which to develop relevant and particular articulation of the identity in question.

To the extent that the focus of religious reform has been thought to reinvent the Iranian cultural identity, the prospects which philosophy offers can be helpful. The key is to advance an epistemological break from the theological–mystical tradition which has provided the normative justification for various forms of traditional authority and relations of domination. By utilizing modern reason (as the normative basis for science, technology, justice, rule of law, civility, and humanity in the modern world), this social and political project can be advanced through social democratic mechanisms. In the absence of such a project, we run the risk of taking a backwards turn to pre-Kantian metaphysics and pre-Machiavellian politics.⁸

⁷ Mahdi Akhavan Salis (1928–1990) is considered as one of the best contemporary Persian poets. He is one of the pioneers of free verse (new style poetry) in Persian literature, particularly of modern style epics.

⁸ For a detailed interpretation of these suggestions, see (Mesbahian 2010).

4. The Prospects and Capacities of Reinventing Iranian Identity

By prospects and capacities, I refer to the availability of internal mechanisms that would allow the reinvention and renewal of cultural/civilizational identity. By renewal, I do not mean re-production. The latter suggests the remaking of something upon the same grounds, with the same material, using the same plan and the same tools. Reinvention, on the other hand, requires innovation and creativity, as well as a future-oriented vision. It means creating a new civilization for the future, not recreating a civilization of the past. As Kant points out, however, every new civilization is born out of an older one, and in every fall and rise, something from the past is kept: “Each [civilizational] overthrow preserved something from the earlier period and thereby prepared the way for a higher level of life” (Kant 1963, p. 23). In this section, I will try to briefly examine some prospects for the reinvention of Iranian identity by asking how it has managed to overcome its identity crises at various historical turns.

Given Iran’s unique geographical position and historical past, many historians have described it as a country at the crossroad of events. They have drawn attention to various efforts that have made possible a sustained sense of identity and relative balance in the face of constant aggression from all directions (Zarrinkoub [1375] 1997, p. 9). The first major event to challenge the Iranian identity was the invasion by Alexander of Macedon, an event which ended the reign of the Achaemenid Empire and gave rise to the Seleucid dynasty. Notwithstanding the political implications of this event, the cultural crisis that followed is comparable to other historical turning points, including the rise of Islam during the Sasanid Empire and the introduction of Western thought during the early period of the Qajar rule. The result, at every turn, was cultural intermixing and the birth of new cultural and civilizational legacies. Ehsan Yarshater explains this point as follows:

The Iranian identity has been exposed to the peril of extinction many times throughout history; all its constituent elements have been threatened at one time or another. Persian territory has been repeatedly conquered, and foreign populations, primarily Greeks, Arabs, and Turks, have settled there. The national religion has been forced out and even the language threatened. Study of past responses to such threats should prove enlightening and help us to understand better the formidable challenges to Iranian identity today. (Yarshater 1993, p. 141)

It is true that following this cultural challenge, Iranians incorporated elements from the Greek culture (particularly in bureaucracy and governance), but the influence was mutual. Eastern gods like Ahura Mazda and Mitra found their equivalents in such Greek gods and goddesses as Zeus, Demeter, and Apollo. Mithraism emerged out of the interaction between Eastern beliefs and Greek culture; this was a religion which expanded into Asia Minor and from there into the Roman world, subsequently becoming a rival to the Christian faith⁹ (Zarrinkoub [1364] 1985, pp. 308–10).¹⁰

The political and military violence that Greek Seleucids utilized to expand their reign into the East put an end to this mutual process of reinvention. It was this repression that led to the uprising of Arsaces I, the founder of the Parthian dynasty. By appealing to Iranian traditions, the Parthian dynasty sought to end Greek expansionism. In this project, Mitra (the invincible god, protector, and savior) found a central place in the Parthian beliefs about life and afterlife, and served as a major spiritual reference point for fighting against foreign occupiers. “Mithra was the Iranian god of light, justice and the contract. His cult was one of the last to arrive in the Western part of the Roman Empire from the hellenized East” (Gordon 1972, p. 95). The Seleucid violence and Parthian resistance led to the emergence of a condition in which the initial spirit of toleration that had given birth to new cultural experiences including a hybrid religion and artistic innovations was weakened. With the

⁹ See also (Frye 1993; Bashiri 2016).

¹⁰ As Reza Zia-Ebrahimi argues, Zarrinkoub sought to elucidate the catastrophic effects of the Arab invasion on Iranian identity through a cultural lens whereby the consequences of domination and subjugation brought Iranians “on the verge of forgetting their language” in the first two centuries of Islam (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016, p. 209).

dominance of Mazdaism–Zoroastrianism, the toleration of the early Parthian period which had facilitated cultural exchange and progress gradually gave place to the dogmatism of the Sassanid period (Daryaee 2009; Daryaee and Foundation 2014).

With the fall of the Sassanid Empire and the rise of Islam, Iranians embraced the anti-hierarchical and egalitarian message of Islam in a society shaped by extreme class segregation. Additionally, there were similarities between the monotheistic nature of Muhammad’s Islam and Zoroaster’s initial call to Ahura Mazda.¹¹ These factors contributed to the unfolding of the most important event in Iran’s three millennia history, namely the fall of the Sassanid Empire after a 400 year period of rule. With the Umayyad dynasty degrading the status of non-Muslims and separating Muslims into different classes of Arab and non-Arab Muslims (the *Mawali*), and later with the Abbasid effort to revive the glory of the Sassanids, Iranians once again began to revolt. Occasionally, these revolts took the form of armed resistance (including Khurramite and other Mazdakist uprisings). At other times, however, revolt took the form of critiquing prevailing norms and ideas (i.e., in Shu’ubiyya literature and poetry), linking pre-Islamic and post-Islamic Iranian history (i.e., in the writings of al-Tabari), or developing an Iranian brand of spirituality which championed the cause of freedom, and revealed dogmatism, hypocrisy, and corruption (i.e., the spiritual call of Mansur al-Hallaj) (Spuler et al. 2015).

These developments challenged an imported system of beliefs and practices which contradicted Islam’s initial message. As Henry Corbin points out, a particular reading of Islam emerged blended with a uniquely Iranian spirituality (Corbin 1971). This spiritual thought served a dual function: on the one hand it resisted an Umayyad-Abbasid Islam and the dominant Islamic *sharia*, while, on the other hand, it softened and refined the Semitic Islam. The particular reading of Islam that emerged out of this process can be described as distinctly Iranian. While the reclaiming and indigenizing of Islam’s essence found various expressions in Iran, their essence and their common ground was resistance against a distorted religion which brought submission, not salvation.

Notwithstanding the Khurramites and other political and intellectual movements of this period, the primary means through which the Iranian civilization articulated itself was through its literature, and particularly through its poetry. Several books can be pointed to which recorded the experiences of Iranians and their understanding of Islam and Iran. Most prominent among these contributions are four which reveal the literary genius of the Iranian person and offer distinct accounts about the essence of a three millennia old civilization. Moreover, these contributions sought to critique the dominant view of Islam, which had lost touch with the religion’s early message of emancipation, and attempted to offer new understandings about humanity.

The third serious challenge began during the Constitutional Movement (*Mashrutiyyat*) following the encounter with modern ideas about the individual, social relations, and existence. Indeed, as Ahmad Ashraf argues:

The modern notion of national identity, which began to form among Iran’s intelligentsia in the latter half of the nineteenth century, climaxed in the course of the 1905–1911 Constitutional Revolution. From the very beginning, the notions of nationhood, nation-state, country, nationality, citizenship, and national identity were entangled with the idea of modernity. (Ashraf 1993, p. 159)

This was, due in part, to an increase in the political and economic interactions between Iran and the West, Iran–Russia wars, and the subsequent transformation of the country’s economic structure. This encounter was also facilitated through the introduction of certain aspects of modern thought, and later with the propagation of modern political philosophy by various intellectual orientations from social democrats like Mammed Amin Rasulzadeh, secular-liberals like Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Malkam Khan, and centrists like Mirza Talibov Tabrizi and Moshir ol-Doleh, as well as the rise of the religious reform

¹¹ In one inscription in Elamite at Bisotun, the Mazdean and Zoroastrian divinity Ahura Mazda is defined as “the God of *ariyas*,” while in another, “*ariya*” is referred to as a language (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016, p. 161).

movement with Sayyid Jamal Asadabadi. Overall, Iranians embraced some aspects of modern philosophy, in particular those which grounded what we now call communicative action in the recognition of the freedom of conscious, freedom of expression, and human rights. At the same time, Iranians also acknowledged the internal limitations and contradictions of modern rationality and resisted various forms of modern relations of domination.¹²

What we can conclude from revisiting these three events is that at each turning point, Iranian identity resisted the absolutist temptation of either full acceptance or full rejection. It refused to yield and place its fate in someone else's hands. It engaged in dialogue and sought mutual recognition, and the approach was essentially the same in all three cases. On the one hand, the Iranian identity defied relations of domination whether they were disguised as a battle of civility vs. barbarism (Seleucid period), monotheism vs. paganism (Islam), or modernity vs. tradition¹³ (contemporary period). On the other hand, it incorporated many new elements from these encounters, whether it was methods of governance, ontology of *Tawhid*, or critical analysis. To develop a comprehensive and multifaceted analysis about our other(s)—and to discern those elements which may be incorporated into our particular context from other cultural identities—requires a deep and comprehensive understanding about the self. Such a comprehensive conception would regard the self as being in constant self-reexamination and reinvention in a mutual process of interaction and exchange with the other. This interaction, as Gerard Delanty argues, is a main kind of cosmopolitan relationships. Indeed, attempts at rethinking binary understandings of the cosmopolitan dynamic have already been underway since the beginning of the twentieth century; such normative rethinking of the relationship between “religion and modernity, religion and development” is especially important to the Middle Eastern context, as it displaces the traditional notion of the incompatibility of Islam and modernity (Saffari 2015, p. 232).

5. Conclusions

The internal logic of identity is to make people and objects identifiable. There are specific measures for identification, measures which emerged out of and/or are globalized through particular processes. In the modern world, the past is no longer seen as a measure of identification. Civilizations of the past do not constitute the identities of modern nations. Thorough history, many civilizations have come and gone without ever being revived. Few survived, and their internal mechanisms (capacities) of renewal allowed them to give birth to new experiences. Civilizations are not immortal. What is immortal is the possibility of creating new experiences out of, or to replace, the old ones. We may be cynical about the existing criterion of universal validity claims. What we need to do is to develop new measures and standards. To be given recognition is different from self-congratulation within the boundaries of the local identity. In the former case, one is granted recognition for something they have to offer to humanity, something that can contribute to the multifacetedness and multidimensionality of modern humans. In the latter case, and in the absence of the said recognition, one retreats to self-congratulation, the civilizational memory of its ancestors, and other measures that are no longer relevant. The existing framework for discussing identity has obscured the prospects for critique and alternative-building. The debate ought to be reframed and focused on the internal logic of identity, namely, the unity of the individual with the self, with the nation, and with humankind in general.

¹² For a very insightful account on Iran's intellectual encounter with cultural identity during the Constitutional Movement see: (Gheissari 1998) For a historiographical account on Iran in 20th century see (Atabaki and Iran Heritage Foundation 2009).

¹³ By referring to Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe 2005, p. 16) Mojtaba Mahdavi rightly argues that “the notion of tradition, has to be distinguished from that of traditionalism. A modern vision of tradition remains in a critical dialogue with “tradition” but rejects “traditionalism.” It is through articulation and de-articulation, development and deconstruction of tradition that we actively participate in the making of our modernity and democracy.” (Mahdavi 2011, p. 106).

Identity has three interconnected aspects: individual, national (with a cultural focus in modern societies), and human. At the first level, the individual must be given recognition. Recognition means respect and protection for free individual thought and will. In this regard, we must address at a philosophical level, questions of subjectivity, and autonomy in a fashion that allows individuals to live their lives from within, while also curbing absolutist expressions of individual will.

In the post-colonial era, it is primarily culture that informs the identity of a nation. It was mentioned previously that culture is not fixed. It needs constant extraction, refinement, and re-articulation. To reinvent cultural identity, a nation must be able to develop specific articulations of its culture that reflects its understandings in various realms. This point has been addressed in one way or another in post-Islamist discourse. Considering post-Islamism as both a “vision” and a “critical (self) reflection”, Asef Bayat argues that it embraces the capacities of religion when it comes to “value, morality, and societal cohesion” and “understands Islam as important rather than absolute, inclusive rather than rigid, diverse rather than monolithic, and as accommodating difference rather than totalizing”. It is thus a post-Islamist undertaking centred on rights, which stands in stark contrast with the Islamist, responsibility-oriented reading of Islam. It is from this perspective that Bayat criticizes terms such as “Islamic Liberalism” or “Liberal Islam”. They focus only on the vision laid out by post-Islamism and not its criticism of Islamism, he argues (Bayat 2013, p. 27).

While Islamism is more concerned with a fulfilling of duties and responsibilities to the divine state, post-Islamism seeks to merge and marriage *rights* with *duties* of all citizens. The emerging post-Islamist trends in the Muslim world may contribute to the alternative path (Mahdavi 2013, p. 67). Accordingly, post-Islamism entails that “Islam is neither *the* solution nor *the* problem”. Post-Islamism’s main conflict with Islamism (including the moderate) is related to the idea of an Islamic state. Post-Islamist doctrine views this term as an “oxymoron”, a state that is merely “a clerical oligarchy, a Leviathan, [protecting] the interests of the ruling class” (Mahdavi 2011, p. 95). Post-Islamism favors a secular democracy but does not entail “the separation of religious affairs from the affairs of the state” and as such is not post-Islamic (Bayat 2013, p. 25). An Islamic state, the kernel of Islamist doctrines, is rejected in post-Islamism. This rejection, as Asef Bayat rightly observes, is “neither anti-Islamic, nor even strictly secular”. Post-Islamism strives to consolidate democracy with Islamic ethics (Bayat 1996, p. 9). As Mojtaba Mahdavi argues, post-Islamism is a discourse that takes place from the bottom-up, and mirrors a movement that “has synthesized the global and local paradigms of social justice, freedom, human rights, and Islamic values.” (Mahdavi 2019, p. 25) Based on this reading of post-Islamism, it can be said that if there are aspects of the modern condition that we oppose, if we see the existing practice of democracy as the rule of the wealthy and powerful, or if we see the narrow and calculating vision of economic neoliberalism as a cause of injustice, then we must offer new and alternative understandings in these realms. As difficult or impossible as this task may appear, it is the only way out of the present condition.

But the individual and the nation both exist in a broader world. Recognition at a global level allows individuals and nations to impact the world and engage in self-examination and reinvention. This interaction and mutual influence makes possible the gradual emergence of a common human identity. In sum, to appeal to cultural-national identity without acknowledging the common human identity is a dangerous endeavor which leads to dogmatism, absolutist truth claims, and a self-imposed exclusion from the modern world.

Those who appeal to identity from a universal vantage point see globalization as a natural process, an ideal with roots in religion and philosophy, and one with continued global appeal. Those who are suspicious of identity have in effect negated the question of “difference” and surrendered to a particular cultural policy which is presented as universal and global. This group has given up the quest for recognition.

In the present discussion, the idea of a human identity assumes, firstly, individuals whose sovereignty and autonomy are respected and protected, and secondly, nations who have engaged in self-examination, have made distinct contributions, and have been given recognition. In the absence of these two conditions, any claim about a common human identity, human civilization, or globalization is a disguise for reviving the grandeur and splendor of old empires. Such a vision is only the dream of a wealthy and powerful few who seek to change the world to better serve their narrow and oppressive world view. How can this be a sustainable project of globalization when a majority of the world population is excluded? To talk about identity and recognition is to talk about all of humanity. It means talking about those who have been excluded from participating in building a common future for humanity. And it means recognition, respect, and protection for human dignity and its essence of freedom, innovation, and creativity.

The challenge of post-Islamism and its claim to a new approach that rejects both dogmatic Islamism—which embodies “the illusion of a nativist particularism” and an imperial modernism which embodies a “West-centric hegemonic universalism” is precisely an exemplification of this struggle for recognition. This necessitates a distinction between a constructive “alternative modernity” in a globalized world on the one hand, and a destructive, self-referential, “suicidal” approach of an “alternative to modernity” that has self-marginalization as the inevitable result on the other hand (Mahdavi 2019, p. 34).

The peculiar challenge for Iranian identity lies in the duality of its reinventive, deconstructive efforts—internally on the national level, but also culturally on the global level. It is not difficult to imagine how these two interconnected levels of identity-building are riddled with tension and distress. Accordingly, to employ Honneth’s framework, such claims to identity can only be articulated through a struggle that has as its ultimate goal, the recognition of its unique contributions to an intersubjective, interwoven objective world. (Mesbahian 2019, p. 267).

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