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Tradition, Modernity and Development

Thinking about the meaning of the above three concepts and discerning the relationship among them is one of the most pressing preoccupations of thinkers in our age, especially in non-Western countries. A superficial glance at the above terms may lead us to conclude prematurely that modernity is a Western phenomenon, built through the dismantling and breaking of tradition.

Then there is development, viewed as the upshot of modernity, which has become a paramount strategic goal of those outside the stem sphere of thought and values. From such assumptions we can reach the simplistic conclusion that to reach development, it is necessary to embark on modernization, and modernization can only come about through dismantling tradition.

But these arbitrary assumptions can only satisfy the feebleminded or those who feel no responsibility for human destiny. The problem is much too complex to be solved with simplistic solutions. Tradition cannot be transformed through mere prescriptions, nor does modernization come about easily, for, until people themselves change, no fateful transformation will happen in their lives, and the transformation of people is a highly complex affair for which individuals often lack the tools.

Terms such as tradition, modernization, and development are replete with ambiguity, and thus far there is no consensus on how to define them. Indeed, consensus may never emerge. In order to minimize misunderstanding, all those engaged in this debate must specify clearly what they mean by these terms before they leap to offer their theories and prescriptions.

What do I understand modernization and tradition to mean?

When we talk about modernity, we are certainly talking about innovative and evolving phenomena and institutions. But are all new phenomena modern? Or does modernity mark a specific era in history? Human society, even its most primitive kinds in antiquity, has always been in flux.

The essential difference between the Old World and the modern era is not in the static nature of the old versus the dynamism of the modern, but in the slow pace of change in the Old World and the

breathtaking pace of change in modernity.

Putting the intricate debate about the relationship between civilization and culture aside for the moment, it is fair to assume that each culture is attuned and adapted to a specific civilization. Modern civilization came about through the dismantling of the previous civilization and through overturning the culture corresponding to the old civilization. Then modern civilization ushered in a culture to fit and meet its demands.

Tradition, by definition, deals with the past, but we cannot think of all old things as denoting tradition. We talk about divine traditions or natural traditions, which are considered constant and immutable by their proponents.

The laws governing existence are divine or natural traditions. It is possible that humans commit errors in the discovery of these laws, and later come to recognize their errors, but what changes here is the understanding of the laws, not the laws themselves. We may accept the principle of change and instability in the essence of the world, just as Sadral Mote'allehin among the great Muslim philosophers– believes in 'dynamic essences', or just as Marxists see the world as being propelled by internal contradictions, and thus immersed in a constant state of transformation. Thus, the principle of change is permanent for everything.

In my view, tradition is a human affair pertaining to the mental and emotional predispositions of a people; in other words, tradition comprises the habituated thoughts, beliefs, and deeds of a people, that have been institutionalized in society on the basis of past practices.

In this definition, tradition is similar to culture, and in many instances tradition is itself a symbol of culture, but we cannot think of all culture as being traditional. Tradition is the existing culture in a society that has once possessed a compatible civilization. But now, even though the old civilization has withered, aspects of the corresponding culture have remained deeply entrenched. By civilization I do not refer only to advanced and complex civilizations, but to a specific way of life broadly defined. Thus hunter–gatherers, too, had a civilization; indeed, for as long as human society has existed, there has been civilization.

The existence of a past culture in the present while the base civilization has withered is possible because culture has roots in the depths of human beings and may be more long lasting than the underlying civilization. Many cultural legacies may outlast civilizations by centuries.– In other words, tradition is the reflection of past culture in today's life if the civilization has changed.

When. a new civilization is created and the culture appropriate for it is entrenched, people who still carry around vestiges of the previous culture experience a contradiction when encountering a new civilization. On the one hand, the realities of life are affected by modern civilization, but much that contradicts modern civilization is still in place, too. People and nations like us are deeply affected by this

contradiction. Most of the cultural uncertainties in our society, which has vast differences with the West, are attributable to this contradiction, which until solved at the root, will continue to spawn crisis.

Western society's embracing modern civilization came about through breaking with tradition. The beginning of modern civilization should be seen as the point when the thoughts and values of the Catholic Church and the social and economic traditions of feudalism were questioned and then rejected. The victor in this challenge was modern civilization and the leaders of this value system. The fundamentals of this system were exported to America from Europe and from these two places to distant comers of the world and became dominant, even affecting life in our country.

At the same time, our past culture *continues* to live within us; this culture has serious differences and disagreements with Western culture. In other words, our tradition is more suitable for another civilization. That civilization no longer exists and the present civilization's border has expanded and affected us fundamentally.

As we all know, this civilization established itself by dismantling the civilization of the Middle Ages in the West. But we had a different civilization from the West in the Middle Ages. Thus, even though modern civilization was at odds with the Western civilization of the Middle Ages, does this mean that the same schism exists between modernity and our previous civilization? This may have something to do with the difference between Islamic and Christian civilizations and cultures.

The most important similarity of our thought today to what was dominant in the West in the Middle Ages is the central place accorded to God in the lives of humans. By contrast, in modern civilization secular humans are viewed as being the center. Even the chief architects of modern thinking–such as Descartes who emerged at the dawn of the modern era–who have defended God and the supernatural in principle, have a markedly different view than Christians and Muslims of the Middle Ages. The centrality of the role of humans constitutes the chief difference among them.

Of course, there has always been divine, mystical, and religious thinking in the West. But there is no doubt that as God and religion were central to the Middle Ages, nature and humans are central to the modern world. In the Middle Ages, otherworldly issues carried more weight and prestige, and here Muslims and Christians were similar. But in today's world, focus on the afterlife has been replaced by secular concerns.

In the modern world, even though the boundless optimism of eighteenth–century Westerners has faded, science and its offspring technology are still the most important factors guiding human life. People–at least in social spheres–do not see any reason to rely on anything other than empirical science and human perceptions.

In the past, the view of humans from the perspectives of being and science was different from today's. The value of knowledge was not measured by its utility in the practical affairs of this world, but by the nobility and exalted place of its subject matter. Thus, inquiry into metaphysics, and especially theology, were viewed as being the most important branches of knowledge.

In social life, it was claimed that religious law, or the apparent meaning discerned from religious texts, should rule supreme. Besides divine 'revelation', humanity did not need another source for knowledge and practice. It is worth mentioning that in the Muslim world, philosophy under the influence of Aristotelian and neo-Platonic views-which was essentially different from modern philosophy and rationality-was faced with statutory and canonical views of religion among the rulers and the population, and the effect of Sufism among much of the elite and some parts of society, and thus remained isolated and confined to the sidelines.

The beginning of the modern age can be seen as a time when the main measure of the significance of knowledge and science became their practical utility in this world, whereas before then, the dominant thinking had rested on the folly of the physical world. And even though Muslims of that time were ahead of their Christian contemporaries in recognizing the validity-and indeed the significance-of the natural and physical world, in both civilizations, focusing on the natural world was viewed as being a largely futile occupation.

The crux of my argument is that today's civilization dominates us non-Westerners as well, and that this civilization requires a culture that is attuned to it. Yet portions of our culture remain attuned to a bygone civilization. Modern civilization was built through the dismantling of the previous civilization and the accompanying culture.

Thus we must concede that the incompatibility of modern civilization with our tradition-bound civilization is one of the most important causes of the crisis in our society. What is to be done? Should we insist on remaining immersed in our tradition, or should we melt fully into Western civilization? Or is there another way of removing this contradiction, or at least taming and channeling it such that it does not lead to our destruction and the unraveling of our social fabric and historical identity?

Many traditionalists continue to defend their heritage against modernity, often thinking of this heritage as being divine, assuming that they can bring order to their lives by shutting the doors to Western values and civilization, and by relying on tradition.

But this ill-fated rigidity has not achieved their aims, a fact evident in Western civilization's success in exporting much of its values to unprepared tradition-bound societies that have lacked the capability to understand the West. Thus, traditionalists have been left with no choice but to retreat progressively, without providing society with the tools to appraise Western civilization properly.

Then there are those who believe that this crisis can be solved by a complete and uncritical adopting of modern values. Modernity, to them, counts as the highest achievement of humankind to date, as they prescribe that all obstacles for its embrace be removed, tradition being viewed as the biggest obstacle in the process of modernization.

They advise that we prepare the way for the new civilization by stepping on our past heritage. But sadly, many who have been entranced by the admittedly awesome accomplishments of the West, those who have represented the essence of what became known in our society as intellectualism, have not only not solved the problem, but made it worse.

First, the shallowness of their view, the debate being merely glossed over, has postponed the emergence of a real debate about the relationship between modernity and tradition. Second, dispensing with deeply rooted traditions, they have proved incapable of achieving anything of significance.

They have never found a place in the hearts of a people who have become habituated to tradition; they have not spoken a language comprehensible to the people, and thus have died in isolation, their words never gaining common currency. Or even worse, in order to survive they wrapped themselves around autocratic rulers, often becoming the tools of Western colonialism in their own countries.

In real life, neither religious decrees and mere wishful thinking can prevent the advance of Western culture, nor can memoranda and doctrines uproot tradition. Human life is always changing, sometimes unconsciously and uncontrollably. The important thing is to see through which perspective we can maintain an instrumental presence in the process of change, so that instead of being at their mercy, we can confront circumstances with awareness and intelligence.

Alongside these two imagined solutions, there are reform-minded thinkers, in the developing world. While there is hope that this movement may be more successful, thus far it, too, has been beleaguered by the crisis that we face. This is because reformists rest on two fundamentals: one, a return to the self and reviving our historical-cultural identity, and two, a positive encounter with the achievements of human civilization, while being aware of the hegemonic and colonial legacy of the West.

Not only is there no unity of vision about the 'self' that they want to return to, but also they cannot agree on precisely those aspects of the West that we must absorb and internalize. Thus reformists must be viewed as keen and aware pioneers who have tried to confront their society's woes courageously to rid it of degrading conditions.

Our past has been eventful, but our future remains uncertain. We are adrift in a world dominated by Western culture, politics, economics, and military might, and confront the idea of development which is a tested form of progress in the West. We must decide once and for all where we stand in relation to the West and how Western values are related to development, so that we can attain development without

losing our national identity or becoming dissolved in the West.

Development, like many other contemporary concepts, has its roots in the West. Here is how I define it: to establish widespread welfare on the basis of the values and criteria of Western civilization. Do we not divide the world into the two camps of 'developed'–meaning built on Western values–and 'undeveloped'? Do we not think of those countries as 'developing' that are trying to modernize their way of life by emulating the West? It is here that the relationship between tradition and modernity comes into focus.

Development is a Western concept, based on Western civilization. Without knowing it we cannot know development, let alone make decisions about it or reject it. So, I believe that debating about development is premature before focusing on its underpinnings.

There are those who claim that nations are doomed to remain backward, even to perish, unless they meet all of development's demands. Modernization, they say, is necessary to achieve development.

The above judgment is true if we see the West as the ultimate human civilization that is impossible to supersede in the future, but there are those who see the West as the latest but not the ultimate human civilization, which like all other human artifacts, is tentative and susceptible to decay.

Of course, this does not mean denying development or surrendering to the views of regressive traditionalists; it means rejecting the prescriptions of those who prescribe complete and rapid Westernization. While the prescriptions of thinkers usually differ from those of the power elite, development will be achieved more fully if policy making is attuned, to the prescriptions of rational thought, not itself a constraint on thinking.

Our role as thinkers is to realize that even if development means repeating the Western experience, we still have to fathom its basic tenets and their implications. This represents the most important calling for real intellectualism and thinking. The truth of the matter is that without rationality, real development will be impossible to attain.

First, development is not a mechanical process that can be achieved in the absence of rational human beings. And second, a society that is devoid of rational thinking will lose its balance as soon as it encounters problems, and it is amply clear that human difficulties cannot be solved through reliance on force, strict laws, and the decrees of politicians, even though difficulties might be submerged by these means for a while. The sad experience of the 'Westoxicated' and the tradition–bound is before us, and we must learn from their mistakes so we do not repeat them.

Modern civilization is the important reality of our age and has brought many monumental benefits to humanity. But its faults are many as well, and these faults are not limited to Westerners' political and economic atrocities outside their geographic borders. The West faces serious internal crises in its

economy, society, and in its thinking. For those of us living outside the West, if we do not feel overwhelmed and taken in by the West, we will at least be better judges of the disasters brought about by Western colonialism for non-Westerners.

Western civilization is a human construct, and thus tentative and prone to decay, unless someone claims unrealistically that with the dawn of modern civilization, the fountain of human curiosity and creativity has dried up. Civilization is an answer to the curiosity of humans who never stop questioning their world.

The ever-changing needs of humans compel them to fulfill these needs, and civilization is the answer to the questions one faces. Of course, there are important questions and needs history that spur the emergence of civilizations, and these questions are themselves affected by the time and place in which they arise. That is why civilizations change and there is no such thing as an ultimate and eternal civilization. For as long as there are humans, so will be their curiosity and needs. With each question that is answered and each need that is fulfilled, humans are confronted with new questions and needs.

Each civilization remains standing until it can harness its inner power to offer answers to human questions and to fulfill human needs, but civilization, similar to all secular things, is limited. When it depletes its natural strength and cannot find answers to new questions, slowly the exuberance of followers of this civilization will vanish, and that is how civilizations decay and perish.

Western civilization has encountered great crises, and by relying on its natural strengths, it has been able to pass through them, beginning in the nineteenth century and culminating in the two world wars of the twentieth century. But the liberal and capitalist West managed to confront and outlive its socialist opponent through adjusting its institutions.

Precipitated by its own internal weaknesses, socialism's demise dazzled the world. It is nonetheless clear that the West is faced with other deep crises, crises that have arisen out of questioning the core values of the West, evident in a decrease in confidence in its capabilities and permanence. These questions are now more pressing and pertinent than ever. Thus, objections to the moral and philosophical bases of the West are more common today.

It is true that the inability of the culture of the Middle Ages to offer answers to human curiosity and needs, and resorting to physical and psychological force to suppress those questions and needs, led to an intellectual and social explosion which caused the rule of the Church and feudal overlords to crumble. But it would be naive to think of these conscious questions and needs as the sole cause of the emergence of modern civilization. These questions and needs emerged amid motivations, which were outside the realm of logic and rationality.

First, the harsh restrictions imposed by the Church and feudalism were instrumental in bringing about a reaction in the opposite direction. The Church had given its practices a sacred facade such that its

excesses led Westerners not only to overturn the extant social order, but to doubt the whole validity of religion and spirituality.

At the same time, hedonism and greed played a great role in the birth and rise of modern civilization, which has trampled on higher truths and spirituality.

Was the role of the bourgeoisie any less significant to the development of modernity than that of the intellectual founders of the movement? What drove the bourgeois class was certainly not a restless search for truth and justice, and the rescue of these two ends from the excesses of the Church and feudalism, but the will to acquire wealth.

Liberty, brotherhood, and egalitarianism were the key promises of the French revolution, but these promises were themselves tools in the hands of the new bourgeois class as it competed with the aristocracy for power, driven by the boundless ambition that characterized the new-rich. It is even possible to claim that the scientists and intellectuals of modernity were actually providing rational and intellectual justification for the wants and ambitions of the new class.

As we praise the many achievements of Western civilization such as modern science, technology, freedom of thought, and democracy, we cannot overlook the colonialism, the use of deadly force against non-Westerners, the plunder of other peoples' material and cultural riches, polluting the earth's environment, perpetuating half-truths and lies, and the opportunism that also characterize the West.

Thus we cannot surrender to all that is Western. At the same time we cannot deal with tradition superficially; tradition is the essence of the socio-historical achievements of a people, especially important to us since we have had a rich culture and history. As Aristotle says in his Politics, habit and tradition play an important role in keeping a good society together.

Breaking with tradition means destroying the cultural and historical heritage of a people, but if a people are to evolve, they must understand their past to see where they are in their process of historical evolution. Thus, dismantling aspects of tradition must be based on indigenous models, not imported and artificial.

Indeed, delving deeply into their tradition awakened Westerners at the dawn of modernity. Thinkers revisited the artistic tradition of the Greeks and the social traditions of Rome. Religious believers returned to what they considered to be the most authentic aspects of Christianity, and hence the Reformation. These returns to tradition and reappraisals ushered in the new epoch:

In such a world, the bourgeoisie, aided by secular thinkers, achieved victory on the basis of the new thinking which rested on a return to previous ways of rational thinking. Thus, even in the itself a constraint on thinking. Thus, even in the effort to dismantle tradition, there is no escaping tradition.

We who have the will to evolve, and who want to take the reins of destiny into our hands to be able to transform it, must ensure that our seeking of Western models of development does not lead to destroying our heritage. We can only critique tradition if we have a firm sense of our own identity; a tradition less people are invariably devoid of serious thought. Weak-willed and brittle, they are at the mercy of events.

This aside, there is the practical problem that tradition is too deeply rooted in human life to be dismantled by the mere decree of politicians or prescriptions of intellectuals. Even worse, forcing this process may actually exacerbate problems and rob society of identity. But this is not the same as surrendering to tradition unconditionally.

Tradition, much like civilization, is a human construct and susceptible to change. The continuous transformation of traditions at varying speeds all through history is ultimate proof that further change is inevitable. The important issue is to what extent the process of change is initiated consciously with maximum participation of the people themselves, instead of being handed down from above or being forced upon people by circumstance.

Traditions are bound to evolve. The question remains whether or not people should ever be forced to maintain traditions in spite of needs, desires, and requirements of the human way of life.

Tradition is dependent on the understanding and intuition of people, who are they prone to change. This change does not negate the existence of all absolutes, but merely necessitates the recognition that our interpretations of the absolute change over time. Has human understanding of the divine been constant over history?

The important point is that as interpretations get entrenched, as they sink into the historical memory of a people and a society, turning away from them becomes difficult, and this difficulty is exacerbated when traditions adopt the veneer of sanctity such that any criticism or objection directed at these habits and interpretations is viewed as sacrilege. Combating sacrilege is a divine duty, making this problem more acute in religious societies.

It is certain that our thinking and lifestyles need transformation. Much of the time, tradition is the greatest obstacle to development, unless we actively participate in transforming and reconstructing it.

Our society needs to evolve and transform itself, but we must know that development in its Western sense is merely one form of transformation, not the only form. Development in the West is the upshot of reliance on tradition and deep historical understanding which paved the way for a new understanding of humans and being among Westerners.

Westerners have been through a long and difficult process. Only after passing through many vicissitudes have they achieved rational wisdom and will. The search for truth, as well as competition, vindictiveness, and ambition have all combined to make modernity and development appear.

We live in a time when the inner weaknesses of the West are becoming evident not only to those outside the West, but to Westerners themselves, who now doubt their noble manifest destiny. Awareness of this issue compels us to refrain from buying fully into Western notions of development. At the same time, we cannot view tradition as being immutable and divine either.

Therefore, we face two human challenges, one deeply rooted in our society, the other imported and in some instances dominant over us, namely modern civilization. The important thing is to not defy either of these, as some have done.

To understand today, we must know the demands of tomorrow, and to properly understand the future, we have no choice but to acquaint ourselves with our history. Tomorrow is a time when humanity transcends today's civilization, and those who get there sooner will be those who are familiar with the past and focus on the future, not the rigidly tradition-bound, nor the superficially-modern who understand only the facade of today's civilization.

Why not focus on the coming civilization, and adjust all transformations to fit that ideal. Such an ambitious plan requires that we critique both modernity and tradition.

Of course, entering the future does not imply dismantling today. Only those who reach a level of growth, awareness and courage to be able to incorporate all the achievements of human kind can be build a new epoch and become masters of tomorrow.

We are by no means doomed to dissolve into modern civilization, but we cannot ignore its many great scientific, social, and political achievements. Can we not transcend the present day to establish a new relationship to existence and achieve a new vision, and in its shadow become the source of a new civilization, which, while resting on our historical identity, and benefiting from the accomplishments of modern civilization, could inaugurate a new chapter in human life?

This is especially promising for us Iranians and Muslims who have a record of creating civilizations that have played a central role in human history. Can we not be the originator of civilization again? Of course this does not mean that we should return to the past to stay there-which would be regressive-but that we must find a secure launching ground to move beyond the present and toward a future that is dependent on our present and our past.

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