

Modernisation in Russia and Iran: Toward an Autonomous and Adaptive Developmental Trajectory

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Abstract

Iran and Russia are experiencing their own modernity at a time when the very paradigm of modernity is being radically questioned in the west, its place of origin. Having passed through the labyrinth of social contradictions, both Russia and Iran have reached a point where they are transcending the logic of development of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Today, Russian and Iranian modernisation represents a unique interaction of universal value patterns and specific cultural codes – a trajectory that can be qualified as an autonomous and adaptive modernity. As such we need a broader cognitive space to allow the emergence of ‘multiple modernities’. The era of fixed, Euro-centred, and non-reflexive modernity is reaching its end – modernity, as an epistemological category, is transcending the totalising narrative in whose grip it has been enchained. The ethnocentric west needs to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the modernisation experience, and accordingly subdue its impulse to ‘homogenise’ and ‘orientalise’ the ‘other’. It needs to move away from a unilateral logic toward a genuine cross-cultural encounter that takes a much broader view of the modernisation process by placing it in the long-term context of cultural adaptation of civilisational complexes to the challenge of modernity.

Keywords: Russia, Iran, modernisation, inter-civilisational diversity, cross-cultural encounter, hegemony, unilateralism

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Introduction

The history of development in Russia and Iran has been beset by a common, recurring dilemma: the question of orientation in political, socio-economic and cultural development. In both countries, the source of this dilemma is rooted in a civilizational and cultural tradition that has rendered the modernisation process such a challenge, suffusing the experience, hitherto, with ambivalence. Since Peter the Great, Russian society has faced the problem of finding its own place in Europe. On the one hand, Russia was driven by the goal of 'catching up with the west' (or even surpassing the west) by adopting its material and technological standards; and on the other hand, 'Holy Russia' or 'Mother Russia' consistently defended its unique and autonomous path of development owing to its unique traditions and institutions. Likewise, Iranian history reflects the struggles of an ancient state seeking to chart a distinctive developmental path based on its historical and religious experience, and its civic and national identity. What is common in both cases is the conflict between aspiring for western-style benefits on the one hand and the desire to maintain the countries' distinctive historical character on the other. Both countries demonstrated a deep-rooted incapacity, or even reluctance to modernise strictly along western lines. Thus, the first strand of this analysis is guided by aetiological considerations - the *pathology* of failed adaptation to Western standards. What accounts for the failure of the Russian and Iranian modernising movements to model their societies along Western lines? The source of this failure, we argue, is located in a cultural or



civilizational disjuncture, namely, the Russian and Iranian leadership's desire to delineate an indigenous path toward modernity. That is, a trajectory that not only would preserve traditional structures, but also would deliver the achievements of 'modern' states.

We argue, however, that both countries reached a point on their respective historical timelines where they moved closer to resolving the developmental dilemma. Here we come to the second strand of this analysis. We argue that both Russia and Iran have found themselves in the throes of an historical 'moment' where the developmental experiences and conflicts of the past pushed them to explore a more *integrative* strategy of action. Russia and Iran have preserved their autonomy by upholding their distinctive historical characters and particularities – be it Islamic, Orthodox Christian, revolutionary or messianic. However, as both countries find themselves in the context of the emerging global village, or nascent 'cosmopolis', fuelled by the forces of economic and technological globalisation, drawing on western experience has proven to be important. (Dallmayr, 2003: 17-18,85) Both Russia and Iran are edging closer to developing a variety of modernity that is both 'homegrown', indigenous and 'nativistic', but also integrative in that it also embraces (in some aspects) western standards, institutions and practices. Thus the respective Russian and Iranian brands of modernity are not only autonomous but also adaptive, by taking stock of the realities of the globalising world we live in.

The mammoth paradox of modernisation seems to have been resolved – nevertheless, this developmental trajectory is perpetually under the threat of being blocked owing to the overwhelmingly ethnocentric and unilateral character of world politics. Given the west's pervasive hegemony in military, economic, and technological domains, the term 'globalisation' tends to be basically synonymous today with 'modernisation', signifying the diffusion of western cultural preferences around the globe. Herein lies the heart of the issue: the fact that the predominant narratives of modernity are



grounded in European historical experience. Modernity is situated in a western frame of reference, with a western governing centre. Thus much of the western world sees the 'rest' or the 'others' through a Eurocentric lens. This lends itself to an overwhelming tendency to orientalise and to homogenise the world, which some argue is a smokescreen for subtle neo-colonial forms of domination (Dallmayr, 1996). The west needs to free its impulse to dominate, impose, and to coerce, and to foster a true global village by accepting the fact that modernity has multiple trajectories.

The contemporary political climate bears emblems of a homogenising globalism or universalism that does not reflect the transformations that are taking shape across the board. Nor does the predominant political praxis support the diverse cultural traditions of the non-western world. For the sake of this analysis we are focussing on Russia and Iran, however, there is a panoply of cultural traditions in the *modernised* non-western world ranging from Confucianism to Hinduism to Jainism and Buddhism. We need to move beyond the unsophisticated and dated views of the 'west versus the rest'. In Russia and Iran, the paradoxes that have arisen defy monolithic and narrow-minded classifications. As such, we need to create the intellectual and conceptual space for a convergence and coexistence of cultures within the melting pot that is world civilisation. Thus we need to venture beyond the type of Eurocentric arrogance that breeds the kind of hostile world in which Samuel Huntington grounded his vision of a looming 'clash of civilisations' (Huntington, 1993: 22). The notion of a global monoculture (à la Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history'), and the writing of a universal history does not correspond with the reality on the ground (Fukuyama, 1995: 16). Although geopolitical and strategic interests are clashing, civilisations are not clashing, history is not ending and there is no end point of universalism or homogenisation in sight.

The danger of unilateral ethnocentrism is seen in conflict areas in a world in which an 'Atlantic-type polity' has been erected at the



zenith of politics, to use Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's words (Taylor, 2004). Such a policy has created conditions for what contemporary western thinkers, like Taylor distinguish as the 'boosters' and the 'knockers' of western modernity – the 'boosters' being the wholesale promoters of modernity, and the 'knockers' being radical opponents of modernity. Many of these 'knockers' have developed an aversion to western modernity owing to memories of colonialism, imperialism, and the traumas of conquest and violence (Taylor, 1992). Thus, many observers have a tendency to depreciate or debunk European/western culture as a synonym for cultural arrogance. In the Arab world, in China, in Russia and in Iran, there are many such 'knockers', owing to the not-so-distant memory of western cultural arrogance. The danger is that this fresh memory has created polarisation in conflict resolution. In political impasses such the Syrian uprising it is becoming an enormous challenge achieving consensus on how to deal with the conflict. The situation is getting worse, with the death of thousands of innocent lives. At this stage, the American government has very little credibility as a self-appointed champion of the innocent, as a result Russia and China will not agree on a collective political strategy, particularly as they perceive intervention as trespassing on the country's sovereignty. This is a case where the history and record of American hegemonic unilateralism, egocentrism and ethnocentrism has created polarisation and deadlock at the expense of human lives.

Increasingly the Eurocentric manifestation of the past is being challenged or even replaced by the rise of a global arena in which non-western cultures and societies are increasingly active participants in shaping the future of the world. Never before has the world needed (with such mounting urgency) a new logic of engagement in dealing with the emergence of non-western expressions of modernity in non-western countries like Russia and Iran. We need to move away from a unilateral logic toward a genuine cross-cultural encounter in view of the materialization of a new intercivilisational world order. As



Taylor contends, these days we speak of ‘multiple modernities’, the plural reflecting the fact that other non-western cultures have modernised in their own way, and cannot properly be understood if we try to grasp them in a general theory which was originally designed with the western case in mind (Taylor, 2012). Thus the third strand of this study highlights the need for a serious reflection on the meaning of modernity and its future directions. Hence, we need fresh cognitive tools and a new imaginative vocabulary to understand the nature of modernisation in Russia and Iran today. Re-theorisation of these concepts is crucial, particularly in view of the fact that existing theories of modernity and modernisation cannot account for the methodological breakthroughs we are discovering in modern day Russia and Iran. The very paradigm of modernity as an absolute epistemological category needs to be radically questioned.

An important consideration to take note is that while it is essential to steer clear of the kind of abstract universalism we have discussed above, it is just as important to avoid narrow particularism – a middle ground must be maintained. In other words, not only must we steer clear of both Orientalism, we must avoid its reverse mirror image, Occidentalism, or Orientalism in reverse. Both ossified ideological formulas are futile in the emerging global village. As philosopher Fred Dallmayr explains, the challenge is to steer a course between ‘Eurocentrism’ and ‘Euro-denial’ (Dallmayr, 2003: 5). While it is essential to focus upon particular experiences of modernisation, in this global village, it is important to also embrace the institutional benefits of the western world. Often the reaction to western globalism or universalism can lead to radical exclusion or self-encapsulation or a harsh nativist backlash, which is equally futile (Dallmayr, 2001: 28-9). We need to foster what Hans-Georg Gadamer referred in his teachings as ‘unity in diversity’ as opposed to global uniformity.

In Russia and Iran, the challenge or target has been not to go beyond modernity but rather to foster modernity as a global condition



manifested through particular and national experiences. Both countries have transcended the exhausted trajectories of the past that are characteristically essentialist or absolutist, and that have little to contribute to a new logic that embraces pluralism, evolution and forms of hybridism. What history has taught us is that modernity cannot be borrowed, imposed or copied and pasted. As Ali Mirsepassi asserts, 'Modernity is not an object or blueprint which is already completed and needs merely to be purchased or sold. It is an end that one moves toward only on the basis of dialogue and collective agreement, an end which necessarily involves both 'indigenous' and 'world' elements if it is to be truly living and relevant (Mirsepassi, 2010:189).'

In Russia's case, under Putin, Russia has had to adopt western-inspired liberal initiatives in order to attract foreign investment and technology. This translates into greater pluralism and deeper institutionalisation of constitutional processes. At the same time, Putin subscribes to more 'traditional' objectives, including restoration of a strong centralised state, a more significant relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church, a more controlled media, and revival of past symbols and imagery. Putin's method is integrative in that it retains some of the old structures and practices that are authoritarian and arbitrary, but also adaptive in the sense that the leadership is not ideologically opposed to modifying certain practices for the sake of the country's political survival. In a sense, Russia is following a 'non-model', or a model of experimentation rather than a preconceived blueprint (typically borrowed from the west) of social engineering. There is no fixed goal on the horizon, only an adaptive flexibility in how the leadership approaches western-inspired norms and institutions. Hence in this non-model we find a balance between autonomy and adaptation.

In fact we go so far as to argue that Russia's approach (provided it is pursued in a tolerant and non-oppressive way) could serve as a 'non-model' for other countries that have historically experienced an



ambivalence or disjuncture toward western modernity. That is, countries that have been caught in the tension between modernity and anti-modernity, between Eurocentrism and Euro-denial, and between Orientalism and Occidentalism. This applies both to the economic context and the cultural-religious context. In an acute manner, the tension between alternatives applies today also to mainland China where we find a fierce struggle between defenders of a liberal capitalist market and defenders of state control, between defenders of traditional culture (especially Confucianism) and devotees of modern liberal practices (Dallmayr and Tingyang, 2012).

I- Modernisation without modernity

The methodology of the discussion at hand entails a substantive analysis of the historical dilemma of modernisation in Russia and Iran. We will briefly marshal the various episodes of transformation to substantiate the assertion that both countries have demonstrated a deeply ambivalent relationship to the western project of modernisation. There are few studies that stand back and treat Russian or Iranian modernisation as facets of an historical totality, a unified organism as it were. This analysis contextualises successive modernisation movements within a much broader historical framework in order to map out recurrent patterns, which in turn, lend themselves to wider sociological inferences such as the ones we have touched on above.

Going as far back as Peter the Great and Reza Shah Pahlavi, we can identify the beginnings of ‘catch-up’ modernisation, where both autocrats struggled to achieve military and industrial parity with advanced western nations. Inspired by European cultural, social, administrative and military progress, Peter transformed Russia from an almost medieval backwater into one of the world’s great military and naval powers by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Politically, however, Peter’s orientation represented a departure from western standards. Popular participation was actively discouraged and



repression remained a permanent fixture of the regime. Like Peter, Reza Shah's modernisation project in the early twentieth century engendered two binary opposites: heavy state-guided European-style development of industry, infrastructure, administration and the military on the one hand and the omnipotence of the shah, the lack of civil liberties and repression, on the other hand. The features of Peter the Great and Reza Shah's modernising movements persisted under Nicholas II and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The impetus for modernisation in both countries derived from great power aspirations, and for this task, the advanced west represented a source of emulation. Modernisation was fast-paced, state-sponsored and limited to producing the 'outward' manifestations of modernity; political repression persisted and both autocracies remained undiluted.

During imperial Finance Minister, Sergei Witte's state-sponsored industrialisation drive, Tsar Nicholas II continued to claim absolute power and to support the preservation of the autocracy. In the 1960s and 1970s, Mohammad Reza Shah embarked on a similar programme of state-sponsored westernisation, based on the conviction that industrial and cultural proximity with the west would clear the way for Iran's passage to modernity. However, Mohammad Reza Shah was reluctant to advance civil society or to promote pluralism. His leadership was characterised by authoritarianism and intolerance of dissent. Both the Romanov tsars and the Pahlavi shahs adopted a brand of westernisation that led to the pattern of 'modernisation without modernity'. While both countries aspired to converge with the west by meeting its material and technological achievements, they ended up diverging from the west by retaining the autocratic foundations of the *ancien régime*. The contradictions of this mode of development resulted in socio-political discontent and political unrest, which in the presence of ideological channels and fateful 'sparks' culminated in revolution. The dilemma over orientation significantly contributed to the collapse of the Romanov and Pahlavi dynasties.



The Romanov tsars believed that they were able to construe their own variety of modernity by virtue of their ‘unique’ institutions; likewise, the Iranian elite were convinced that Persia’s rich heritage had bequeathed to them the tools they needed to make the exit from tradition to modernity. At the same time, the prospect of a shortcut to modernity through appropriation and assimilation of western successes proved to be a tempting alternative for the successive tsars and shahs. Russia and Iran’s experiments with modernisation represent the leadership’s failure to adapt diverse traditional values and institutions to the developmental paradigm adopted from the west. On the one hand, autocratic modernisation represented a reaction to, and repudiation of, backwardness and an effort to remedy the condition through westernisation; on the other hand, it offered a tribute to backwardness through the retention of traditional structures. Paradoxically, the objective was to adopt those ‘modern’ traits that would fortify the state and thereby reinforce certain ‘non-modern’ institutions.

II- alternative modernities

In spite of this contradictory adaptation to modernity, pre-revolutionary development can be considered a tentative westernisation effort because the leadership pursued a developmental path fashioned in the west. ‘Catching up with the west by becoming like west’ was the idea behind modernisation. While in imperial Russia and Iran, modernisation was premised on *convergence* with the west (in the sense that the vision adopted was in principle, though perhaps not in practice, borrowed from the west), socio-economic development under Vladimir Lenin/Joseph Stalin and Ayatollah Khomeini was modelled on distinctly non-western theoretical constructs: state socialism in the case of Soviet Russia, and Islamic theocracy in Iran. Both models represented *divergence* from western norms and standards: ‘catching up with the west by becoming unlike the west’.

This is not to suggest that the post-revolutionary development



paths were entirely anti-western. In fact, the pursuit of certain 'modern' ideals such as economic independence continued steadfast, albeit within an alternative theoretical framework. However, this brand of modernity, unlike its predecessor, did not correspond to the specifically western representation of modernity (the absence of liberal capitalism in Russia and of secularism in Iran). Instead, the result was a non-western or anti-western variety of modernity.

Post-revolutionary Russian and Iranian leaderships constructed 'alternative modernities' that were ideologically opposed to western socio-political and economic constructs. The Bolsheviks patently rejected the western capitalist model and instead introduced what appeared to be its antithesis: state socialism. Similarly, in post-revolutionary Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini inaugurated a political system that represented a blend of divine rule, theocracy and democracy, modelled on a theoretical paradigm that the west had never seen before.

Nevertheless, even when modernisation was purposively modelled on a liberal capitalist blueprint, as it was during Mikhail Gorbachev's programme of perestroika and glasnost in the 1980s, a profound sense of ambivalence prevailed. Like imperial modernisation, Gorbachev's transformation represented a paradox because the reformist General Secretary expected to exploit the dynamism of the market economy within a socialist template, which in turn resulted in a hybrid polity. Many analysts have argued that the Soviet Union collapsed because of the inherent contradictions of such a project. At heart of this was the conflict between the attempt to create a modern society (characterised by industrialisation, secularisation, urbanisation and rationalisation) and the simultaneous effort to create an alternative modernity. The central features of this alternative modernity included the abolition of the free market, the attempt to achieve the direct expression of popular sovereignty as represented by the party-state, the inversion of typically modern forms of class hierarchy (which allowed bureaucracy to dominate) and



a permanently revisionist stance in international affairs (as defined by the aspirations to revise the existing international order). Like the tsars, Gorbachev was mistaken to believe that such an inconsistency would not generate serious social conflict. The case we are making here is that whether through convergence, divergence, or a bit of both, Romanov, Pahlavi, Soviet and Islamic societies invariably culminated in models that differed from those existing in the west.

There are a number of cultural and civilisational explanations for Russia and Iran's failure or reluctance to adopt western institutions. The inability of the Russian leaders to engage in wholesale westernisation can be traced to a 'cultural trap' endemic to Russian society. Russia's outlook toward the west can be explained as a cultural phenomenon based on traditional archetypes of national consciousness stemming from the past. Russia has always viewed the west 'with hate and love' (an expression from Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Blok's poem 'The Scythians'). 'Hate' is perhaps too strong a word; a better description would be a sense of spiritual superiority stemming from Russia's supernatural mission as put forward by the Slavophiles. With love: because the impetus for modernisation derived from admiration of the marvels of western technology and industry.

The Slavophiles held the belief that Russia had to maintain its state apparatus (no matter how conservative or authoritarian) in order to fulfill its messianic mission. They believed that Russia was a true Christian country destined to maintain the purity of Christianity, to bring the Christian Churches together and finally to usher into the world the thousand-year kingdom of God (Suslov, 2011: 36). This unique sense of destiny was premised on the 'Russian idea' – the notion that Russia could forge a superior path to the modern world through emphasis on traditional institutions and spiritual values: the peasant commune, serfdom, the Orthodox church, a sense of 'community' as a result of the extreme isolation of the Russian peasantry, religiosity, equality and the notion of a 'people', or *narod*.¹



The Russian idea, the empire's distinctive geographic position (spanning both the Asian and European continents), its 'Asiatic heritage' resulting from the Mongol yoke and its consequent isolation from Europe, the xenophobia of the tsars, the adoption of Eastern Christian Orthodoxy from Byzantium (as opposed to the Western Roman Empire) and the Communist adventure of the twentieth century raise the question: are these experiences simply historical anomalies or are they features of a uniquely Russian genotype? This question has permeated Russian political culture for centuries and it has perpetuated the fundamental contradictions of Russian modernisation. Successive Russian modernisers and reformers have been plagued by the dilemma of, first, shaping a polity felt to be more in tune with the country's own character by *differentiating* from dominant western models; and, second, reaping those immediate benefits enjoyed by more developed European societies by *dedifferentiating* from European models. Russia's past can be characterised as a combination of these orientations.

Similar to Russia, Iran's response to western socio-political developmental models has been one of 'hate and love'. This ambivalence has cultural/religious roots. Iran shares with Russia the tradition of an apocalyptic religion and a messianic consciousness. Twelver Shi'a Islam, the branch of Islam that has been Iran's official religion since 1501, holds that the twelfth Imam, the *Mabdi*, who disappeared in 873 AD and is thought to be not really deceased but in hiding, will one day return to bring justice to the world (Barnes and Bigam, 2006: 2-3). Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran is believed to be a springboard to a Shi'a utopia by virtue of its theological structures, institutions, laws and practices aimed at creating the conditions for the return of the *Mabdi*. The coming of a messiah and the advent of the Last Days, in which a sudden transformation of society would occur, have been an important set of themes in early modern and modern Shi'a Islam, and these have been remarkably intertwined with Iranian rebellions, revolutions and state formation.



The history of Shi'ism has been rife with millennialist movements, many of which have had a major impact on society and state (Cole, 2002: 282-311). The Iranian national consciousness contains elements of spiritual superiority. This has compelled Iranians to maintain a socio-cultural 'distance' from the west for the sake of preserving indigenous culture. However while Iranians feel spiritually more advanced, they feel competitive in terms of material power, namely, security, comfort, welfare, education, industry and technology. Thus the west represents both an anti-model and a model.

Iran's modernisation dilemma can also be attributed to the country's nationalist tendencies. Challenges to Iran's cultural fabric and its territorial integrity, combined with an appreciation of the country's past and the unifying features of the Iranian nation, made nationalism a powerful aspect of its political culture. It was the belief of many nineteenth century Iranian nationalists, including the prominent Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Agha Khan Kermani, that Persia's decline from an earlier period of 'greatness' began with the invasion of the 'barbarous' Arabs in 740 AD (Kashani-Sabet, 2002: 163-4). Proponents of European culture believed that westernisation was a shorthand method by which Persia/Iran could dissociate from its Arab past and jump-start its cultural evolution. Thus, westernisation had less to do with structural or cultural convergence with the west and more to do with recovery of Persian culture, identity, history and sense of nationhood. To use nineteenth century intellectual Kermani's terminology, westernisation had to do with 'uprooting the malicious tree of oppression and the revitalisation of the power of the *milliyat* [nation] in the character of the Iranian people' (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001:102).

A century later, secular nationalists, who had characteristically attributed Iran's backwardness to the Arab legacy, now shifted blame onto the machinations of the west – an approach that gained wider currency in the 1960s with the emergence of Third World developmental discourses. At the forefront of Iranian intellectual life



were such thinkers as Jalal Al-Ahmad, Ahmad Fardid and Fakhroddin Shadman, who articulated the popular *gharbzadegi* or ‘west-toxication’ position. They believed that westernisation had contaminated Iran’s intellectual and social climate. They called for a national ‘awakening’ and active resistance against the hegemony of what they perceived to be an ‘alien’ culture. This culture, they believed, was slowly eroding Iran’s cultural authenticity, political sovereignty and economic stability (Boroujerdi, 1996: 68-9).

It was in this political and cultural milieu that Ayatollah Khomeini’s anti-western, anti-shah platform gained popularity. The Iranian-Islamic revolution and the system that followed can be interpreted as a revolt in defence of culture and tradition. Reza Davari-Ardakani describes the Iranian revolution as a reaction to ‘west-toxication’, portending the end of western domination and the beginning of a new era in which religion would dampen the ‘holocaust of west-toxication (Davari-Ardakani, 1980)’. Through the practices and rhetoric of Shi’a revolutionary activism, Khomeini succeeded in creating a non-western, local variety of modernity. Thus, the Iranian-Islamic revolution was an effort to embrace modernity, by placing emphasis on the Islamic inheritance, and by relegating the ‘western’ narrative to the margins.

III- Putin’s Russia

We have argued that in post-revolutionary Russia and Iran, the leadership constructed ‘alternative modernities’ that were ideologically opposed to western socio-political and economic constructs. During Vladimir Putin’s leadership and Seyyed Mohammad Khatami’s presidency in Iran, many interesting paradoxes took shape, defying monolithic classifications inherited from sociology. Neither Putin nor Khatami tried to ‘import’ modernity from the west or to ‘catch-up’ with the west. Nor did they attempt to ‘westernise’, ‘modernise from above’, or to create ‘alternative modernities’. Instead, they shifted away from the stark antinomies of the past by employing a more



integrative approach to modernity.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Russia entered into social, political and economic free fall, into a somewhat chaotic situation with many factions competing for advantage. In order to attract foreign investment and technology, Russia had to adopt neo-liberal policies of absolute market freedom, that is, a completely unregulated type of predatory capitalism (which was preferred by leading western economists and foisted by them on the rest of the world). This led in Russia to wild economic activities and speculations. In the west, this variety of rapacious capitalism led to a financial fiasco in 2007-8. Putin realised early on that following the unregulated market model would drive Russia into bankruptcy and financial meltdown. Hence, he instituted greater state control of the market. Some observers question whether Putin went overboard and conjured up the old ghosts of Soviet collectivism. While this is open to debate, what concerns us here is that Putin's approach reflected a compromise between western-style practices (full-blown capitalism) and traditional Russian methods (greater market control and regulation). A neo-Slavophile, albeit a cautious one, Putin was not afraid to revive past practices. In fact, under Putin, it does seem to matter whether Russia is part of the western world or not – what matters is Russia has to cultivate internal stability and prosperity using both indigenous resources and western practices. In other words, Putin had to draw on both Slavophile and westerniser principles. This he did by combining adaptation to international norms with a reserved area of autonomy and scope for indigenous development.

In the past decade or so, Russian development has been guided by two different considerations. On the one hand, the country needed to appear more 'liberal' in the west's eyes in order to attract foreign investment and technology for the development of infrastructure, technology, industrial standards. Thus, Russia needed to encourage greater pluralism and deeper institutionalisation of constitutional processes. On the other hand, Putin subscribed to more 'traditional'



objectives, including social market economics, restoration of a strong centralised state, a more controlled media, revival of past symbols and imagery, and appreciation of historical (even Soviet) achievements. These two different orientations were bound to create some tension.

Today Russia is a dual state, subsuming two distinctive political orders: the normative/legal system based on constitutional order and an administrative regime. The administrative state is embedded in para-constitutional and para-political bodies, which subvert constitutional mechanisms.² Russia is far from achieving the modernisation goals that Putin set upon in his first election in 2000 – the country is still not well integrated into the international system and the international economy, its institutions are not entirely participatory and the economy is neither competitive nor diversified (Sakwa, 2011:7). In an interview in *The New York Times*, Russia's Minister of Finance, Aleksei Kudrin stated that in order to diversify the economy and move away from oil dependence, Russia needed a good judicial system, so that 'everyone will be sure in his investments, in fair arbitration and courts, in the authority and very efficient work of the government and its administration of all federal bodies' (Barry, 2011).

For Russia, the priority today is the need to maintain internal stability and to implement formal democracy necessary to attract foreign technology, and thus advance the modernisation initiative, and to guarantee elite continuity through an internal balance between factions (the security services, the *siloviki*, and the liberals). The gulf between the administrative regime and the constitutional state will have to be closed, corruption tackled, and the aspirations of the newly-emboldened middle class will have to be fulfilled. Whether Russia ever becomes a consolidated democracy is unlikely, however, democratic progress is a possibility for the reason that Russia is no longer limited as it was in the past. If the leadership genuinely commits to gradually reforming the highly controlled and non-transparent economic and industrial base of the country together with



the development of a ‘functional selection of democratic’ values as declared by Dmitiri Medvedev – this is already a step in the right direction.

This could very well happen as Russia has been following a ‘non-model’: it is not limited to a preconceived model as it did in the past. It does not follow a totalising blueprint that does not aspire to be this nor that; instead it is integrative and adaptive. Integrative in that retains some of the old structure and practices, that are authoritarian, arbitrary, Soviet or non-democratic in nature; but also adaptive in the sense that the leadership is not ideologically or fundamentally opposed to modifying these practices for the sake of the country’s political survival. As Richard Sakwa asserts concerning Putin’s third term: that there is significant political change on the horizon (Sakwa, 2012). Russia will have to reform for its own political survival and the fact that there is no model suggests that there are no conceptual constraints or ideological barriers.

Russia does not have a stated mission to converge with, or diverge from, the west. It does not aspire to be or not to be like the west, whereas, during the Romanov, Soviet, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin years, the objective was to look at the west as either as a model to be emulated or as an anti-model to be rejected. In this manner, Putin’s political project represents a departure from earlier trends in Russia. What was unique about Putin was that he transcended Russia’s modernisation blockage by repudiating ideas of an ‘alternative modernity’. We saw this trend in international relations: Russia no longer tried to set itself up as an alternative to the west but to act as the champion of the autonomy of sovereign states, above all its own. Gone are Soviet aspirations to world leadership or efforts to revise the international order. Putin’s approach to foreign policy combined Russia’s traditional orientation toward *realpolitik* with recognition of the importance of interdependence and international economic integration.



IV- Iranian Case

Iran also reached a similar historical juncture under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, a time when global transformations necessitated re-evaluation of the status quo. In the mid-1990s, the Islamic Republic of Iran was in a state of flux. During the process of assuming its final shape, it went through a period when it needed meaningful public input to guide its course. The country's population, across the board, was rapidly undergoing change, largely in response to the pressures of urbanisation, migration, economic integration, the emerging global village, cultural exchange and diffusion, and the technological revolution that was sweeping the world. When Khatami suddenly appeared on a reformist platform in 1997 and secured a surprise landslide victory of over 70 per cent of the vote, it symbolised the desire for change.

A cautious reformer, Khatami advocated gradual change, and piecemeal, evolutionary development of the existing system rather than a radical shake-up. His blueprint for change was grounded in local cultural traditions. However, at the same time Khatami was keenly aware of global realities. Nevertheless, the reformer-president was not a westerniser and he rejected the idea of a homogenous global culture. He explicitly claimed that modernity had a different starting point in Iran, thus suggesting it would have also a different outcome from that of the west. He questioned the genealogy of modernity and argued against the assumption that it was necessary to pinpoint the origins of this social process. Modernity's trajectories are multiple, he held, with different social and moral effects. He emphasised that modernity was a social construct that produced its own reality.³

The distinctiveness of Khatami's path to reform lay in his advocacy of gradual institutional reform within the existing template of Iran. As we saw under Putin's leadership, change under Khatami was characterised by simultaneous engagement with the future as well



as the past, and by concentration on the indigenous rather than the imported. Conceptually and methodologically, Khatami decentred the unilinear path of modernity by proposing a more historically sophisticated trajectory of social development. A nativist and a staunch supporter of the principles of the Islamic Revolution, Khatami believed that Iran had to fashion its own brand of modernity, based on its national identity and its historical, revolutionary experience. Yet, drawing on western experience was also important in order to respond to the calls for democratic reform. Thus, Khatami constantly referred to the need to develop civil society, to foster pluralism and to institutionalise the rule of law. The task Khatami had set for himself was not an easy one. Indeed, before Khatami, no one in the Islamic Republic of Iran had attempted to introduce sweeping reform. Although the reform programme never bore full fruit, it energised Iran's debates, its administration, economy and international relations. What is important is to place emphasis on Khatami's *vision* rather than the outcome of his policies.

What is interesting to note is that the 'Khatami way' was to transcend the sharp turns and revolutionary breaks that have characterised so much of Iranian history. Like the Romanov tsars, under the *ancien régime*, the Pahlavi shahs implemented a peculiar brand of 'modernisation without modernity'. Following the Iranian revolution, the first Islamic republic was established, modelled on a distinctly non-western social construct – again comparable to the Soviet Union in that it represented a non-western political project. In retrospect, these modernisation projects were extraordinary experiments, without historical precedent. Khatami tried to move Iranian politics beyond these tumultuous times toward a regular politics. His reform movement represented the explicit project of a 'return to normalcy', an expression Richard Sakwa uses with reference to Putin's presidency (Sakwa, 2004). Thus, Khatami's vision represents a conceptual and methodological shift in the history of development in Iran.



We have argued that Putin and Khatami rejected the unilinear, homogenising model of modernity, however, at the same time they did not subscribe to a rigid and dogmatic interpretation of their indigenous/authentic identity or traditions. Both leaders moved away from the developmental imagery and convictions of the past in favour of a more autonomous and adaptive path to modernity. The current administration in Iran is also cognizant of the need to shift away from the stark antinomies of the past. At the same time, it is also well aware of the global village that we live in. Contrary to popular belief, the principles and considerations that guided Khatami are not anathema to the current administration. Like any other state, Iran is aware of the need to evolve and to adapt to societal, socio-economic, civic, and global forces. A unique and distinct political system, the Islamic Republic is a democratic theocracy with no precedent in modern history. As such it is perpetually evolving, adjusting and adapting to the needs of the day.

The west should be reminded that their developmental trajectory was a 'work in progress' for many years. The reflections of Simon Murden and Fred Halliday come to mind. Murden explains, the development of a political model is an incremental process and cannot be achieved overnight. He makes this argument with reference to the evolution of liberalism in the west: 'Liberalism was never applied in an ideal form. Liberal ideas established influential tendencies in the politics and economic systems of Europe and North America, but they always ran alongside other forms of belief and practice. Liberalism was varyingly meshed with Christianity, kingship, class, status, nation, and the state ... People could aspire to liberal ideals while retaining elements of their pre-existing beliefs. Meshing liberalism with ideologies sometimes caused tensions within and between societies, but westerners lived with those contradictions over long periods (Murden, 2002: 1-2).

Halliday advances a similar argument, '[Francis] Fukuyama, like many in the west, overestimated how many states had attained



democracy ... First, the economic history of few, if any societies in the world had even approximated to the free market model of liberal theory – the development of Japan, Singapore, Korea, and before that of Germany and Britain relied centrally on state intervention ... Secondly, democracy was not a sudden, all or nothing event ... but a gradual process, over decades and centuries: it took Britain and the USA three hundred years and three internal wars between them to move from tyranny to the kind of qualified democracy they have now. Thirdly, liberal politics is not a single act, bestowing finality on a political system. No one can be certain that a democracy is even reasonably stable unless it has been installed for at least a generation – many have appeared only to disappear (Halliday, 2005: 159).

Clearly institutional development is not something to be achieved overnight. However, this task becomes quite the challenge when the United States Congress allocates millions of dollars to toppling the Iranian regime. No state can contemplate institutional development when it is perpetually under threat. The problem is that the Islamic Republic – as political and social construct – represents a conceptual challenge to the prevailing Eurocentric representations of modernity. The Iranian political system rejects the secular, hyper-rationalistic view of modernity. Likewise it rejects unmeasured and unrestrained liberalism. This is not to suggest that the Islamic Republic does not subscribe to standards and norms ascribed to the west. Iran, like contemporary Russia, follows a non-model. It is not *fundamentally* antagonistic toward western modernity. However, it does chose to pave its own developmental trajectory – one that accommodates historical, national, revolutionary and local experience while benefiting from the accomplishments of western civilisation.

However the dominant North Atlantic and Western European states have stunted Iran's institutional development. Noam Chomsky puts this bluntly: 'Iran has to be punished because it broke free from of US control in 1979 (Chomsky and Gilbert, 2007: 136).' It is being punished for representing a non-western variety of modernity and for



refusing to be a pawn in the dominant powers' chess game. As such, the west has engaged in a vicious campaign to isolate and to vilify Iran as a 'nuclear boogeyman' – a dangerous campaign that can provoke an arms race by prompting regional states to develop strategic deterrence capabilities.⁴ In order to justify the hegemonic and egocentric stance toward Iran, the west has simplified the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as an era of revolutionary revivalism with apocalyptic scenarios. The fact is that the west's behaviour was no different during Khatami's presidency – a time when Iran extended an olive branch only to be brandished as a pariah on the axis of evil. At the heart of this is hegemonic arrogance and the west's impulse to homogenise 'others'. If alternative societies emerge then they can fall victim to crippling sanctions, threats of military intervention, cyber-warfare, regime change efforts, and covert actions to destabilise the government under the guise of democracy. The only effect of this behaviour is to radicalise even the most moderate elements of society and create a sense of insecurity, which can actually stunt any form of democratic development.

The issue is that the west operates under the assumption that there is some sort of historical inevitability to liberal society. We have yet to see whether the Western European model of a liberal, secular democracy is a feasible ideal in the Arab world. Conservative British commentator David-Pryce Jones asserts that the idea that Arabs want freedom and democracy, à la the storming of the Berlin Wall is: a 'Eurocentric fantasy resting on the inability to grasp how other societies actually operate (Pryce-Jones, 2012).'⁵ Democratic revolutions do not automatically beget democratic institutions. The fact is that there is no global uniformity when it comes to modernity and what we need on a global level is to foster universal recognition of the heterogeneity of the experiences of modernity. As we underscored above, hitherto, modernity has been depicted as an exclusionary ideology grounded in European cultural experience. The fact is that the non-western world did not experience the Renaissance, the



Reformation or the Enlightenment (and its democratic offshoots), thus development and modernity cannot possibly mean the same thing in non-western societies and cultures.

Until the dominant North Atlantic and Western European states accept the fact that modernity has multiple trajectories, the world will remain polarised. If the west had embraced Iran in its new form as an Islamic republic, as a particular blend of a democratic theocracy all the way back in 1979, there is no doubt that Iran and the international community would have had better relations. In fact we go so far as to argue that if Iran had been left to follow its own developmental path based on its historical, revolutionary, cultural and religious experience, and its own civic and national identity (free from outside interference or pressure or sabotage), and to craft its own brand of modernity, there would have been a natural convergence or assimilation with the west rather than the stark polarisation we see today.

Thus, the current domestic and international Iranian situation is very much a function of political pressure from abroad. The question is how can Iran pave its developmental path in the context of a global campaign to 'tame' Tehran or rather to pressure it into succumbing to western demands? How can Iran follow the developmental path it arrived at under Khatami if it is persistently facing an existential threat from abroad? If Iran (and other non-western representations of modernity for that matter), are to sustain a viable alternative path to modernity, the dominant North Atlantic and Western European states need to acknowledge heterogeneity of the modernisation experience. We need to move away from a unilateral logic toward a genuine cross-cultural encounter. Only then can we fantasise about a true global village.

However, what is glaringly clear is the fact is that the era of fixed, Euro-centred, and non-reflexive modernity is on the verge of reaching its end. Modernity, as a sociological phenomenon, is transcending the totalising narrative in whose grip it has been enchained, in theory if not in practice. As Mirsepassi argues, 'Theories



of modernity desperately need to re-examine a historical record revealing a far more open-ended structure of modernity than its theoretical representations have ever before had the courage to concede (Mirsepassi, 2000: 185).’ New modernities are required so that the very concept of modernity itself may grow with the contribution of new voices and experiences. Not only does the west need to critically rethink the sociology of modernity, it needs to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue and overcome its unilateral and domineering tendencies. The monological system we live in where a dominant power dominates discourse must be overcome through dialogue – the very dialogue Khatami spoke about during his presidency. The impulse to dominate has only led to unnecessary and unjust wars, humanitarian disasters and greater polarisation.

Conclusion

Russian and Iranian modernisation has matured and evolved as a result of the pushes and pulls of historical forces. From the inadequacies associated with westernisation, to the ideological rejection of Eurocentric norms, to the continuous vacillation between the retention of traditional institutions and the adoption of ‘modern’ alternatives, Russia and Iran’s road to modernity has been agonising. However, by standing back and looking at successive Russian and Iranian movements as part of a historical totality, it appears that the mammoth paradox of modernisation has come closer to being resolved in the form of autonomous and adaptive modernisation. Both countries are experiencing their own modernity at a time when the very paradigm of modernity is being radically questioned in the west, its place of origin. Russian and Iranian modernisation will remain an ongoing process of interaction between universal value patterns and specific cultural codes. As such we need fresh cognitive tools and a new imaginative vocabulary to understand the nature of modernisation in Russia and Iran today. We need a more broadly nuanced and pluralistic understanding of modernity that takes a



much broader view of the modernisation process by placing it in the long-term context of cultural adaptation of civilisational complexes to the challenge of modernity.

At the same time, the world needs to take stock of the fact that we are living in a global village with greater interconnectedness – a global village in which there is greater diversity and less uniformity. Thus we need to foster a global and pluralistic modernity that encourages states to develop multiple modernities based on their distinctive historical, national and particularistic traditions. Having passed through the labyrinth of social contradictions, it appears that both Russia and Iran have reached a point where they began to transcend the logic of development of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. However, until the North Atlantic and Western European states subdue their impulse to dominate, to impose and to homogenise, Russian and Iranian development will continue to be an uphill struggle. However, while the ethnocentric west digs itself deeper in intractable conflicts and imbroglios around the world, Russia and Iran slowly chart their paths toward a genuinely autonomous modernity.

Notes

1. This is premised on Sergei Uvarov's Triad, also known as the "Official Nationality": orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality. This was the dominant ideological doctrine of Emperor Nicholas I.
2. One of such bodies is the Russian Popular Front formed recently and designed to stifle creativity within the ranks of United Russia. Others are the State Council (undermining the work of the Federal Council) and the Public Chamber (undermining the Duma).
3. For a detailed analysis of Mohammad Khatami's eight-year presidency, see Ghoncheh Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran: the Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).
4. Ironically, at the same time, the international community speaks about disarmament and non-proliferation.

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