

## An Intellectual Journey to Many Worlds: Ahmad Fardid and Modern Iran in the Age of Social Transformation

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### Abstract:

During the second half of the twentieth century, public intellectuals in Iran were highly influential. Arguably, the Islamist segment of these intellectuals substantially contributed to the making of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 with both their activism and dissemination of ideas. One of these intellectuals was Ahmad Fardid (1912-1994), an oral philosopher of Iran who had appropriated anti-modernist European philosophies to formulate a totalizing form of Islamism. In *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid*, Ali Mirsepassi presents comprehensive research on Fardid's personal life, worldview, and legacy. This effort is undertaken with well-rounded analysis of the ideas of Fardid and other intellectuals whom he was influenced. Essentially, this study elucidates a transnational moment in twentieth-century Iranian intellectual history which helped the creation of a peculiar "nativist" discourse. Mirsepassi highlights the salience of this moment and its persisting relevance.

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Mirsepassi, Ali: *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 396 pages, 19.99 GBP. ISBN 978-1-316-63647-3.

### Abstract:

During the second half of the twentieth century, public intellectuals in Iran were highly influential. Arguably, the Islamist segment of these intellectuals substantially contributed to the making of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 with both their activism and dissemination of ideas. One of these intellectuals was Ahmad Fardid (1912-1994), an oral philosopher of Iran who had appropriated anti-modernist European philosophies to formulate a totalizing form of Islamism. In *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid*, Ali Mirsepassi presents comprehensive research on Fardid's personal life, worldview, and legacy. This effort is undertaken with well-rounded analysis of the ideas of Fardid and other intellectuals whom he was influenced. Essentially, this study elucidates a transnational moment in twentieth-century Iranian intellectual history which helped the creation of a peculiar "nativist" discourse. Mirsepassi highlights the salience of this moment and its persisting relevance.

With its gradual formation and material realization, the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 continues to pose uneasy questions for scholars and policy-makers all around the world. While the overwhelming majority of the scholarly engagements with the revolution analyze its peculiar sociopolitical and economic conditions, only a handful of studies venture into its cultural-intellectual foundations. Remarkable among these are Hamid Dabashi's *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York, 2017) and Mehrzad Boroujerdi's *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (New York, 1996). Hence, Ali Mirsepassi's *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* is yet another well-conceived study that maintains this line of inquiry. As its title suggests, the book is primarily centered on Ahmad Fardid, an emblematic Iranian public intellectual. It simultaneously engages with his lifetime experiences, philosophy, and legacy. However, the transnational aspects of Fardid's political thought consistently

remain at the book's focal stage. Mirsepassi's *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought* consists of five parts, nine chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. Naturally, its content is voluminous but structured and conveyed articulately.

In the first part of the book, entitled *Introduction*, Mirsepassi briefly surveys Ahmad Fardid's ideas regarding Iran's complex encounter with modernity as well as some of the significant historical events and intellectual currents that formed the backdrop of these ideas. In this part, Mirsepassi argues that the thought and life of Fardid still remain deeply relevant as they speak volumes for the rise of the anti-modern, Islamist political discourse in Iran during the twentieth century. To do so, he appeals to Steven Wasserstrom's account of 'religion after religion' in order to elucidate how Fardid had tried to define Islam as a socio-political ideology, situated in stark opposition to Western modernity.

The second part of the book, *The World of Young Fardid*, traces the life of Fardid and the development of his thought during the formative years of his early career, namely between 1935 and 1946. A thorough examination of this time period reveals that Fardid shared common intellectual affinities with two European thinkers: Henri Bergson and Henry Corbin. The writings that Fardid produced during the 1930s display that he picked up on Bergson's rendering of 'intuition' and tried to associate it with the mystical Islamic notion of *elm-e hozuri* (non-rational knowledge). In the case of Corbin, however, Mirsepassi bases his claims mostly on his own analysis. He suggests that Corbin and Fardid were similarly discontented with secular modernity and appealed to religious revival based on tradition as an alternative construction.

The third part of the book, *Orientalism and "Spiritual Islam": Fardid, Corbin, Foucault* focuses mostly on Fardid's activities after his return to Iran from his unfinished studies in France and Germany. In this part, Mirsepassi illuminates the history of Fardid's coinage of *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication) and his critique of Orientalism. He implies that there are, in fact, similarities between Fardid's critique of the Western conception of the East and those of contemporary post-colonial scholars such as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood. Mirsepassi warns against a potential discursive pitfall, namely that critical attitudes toward secular modernity or colonialism should not lend credence to the peculiar convictions of absolutist movements such as Islamism. In this particular vein, for instance, Mirsepassi also criticizes Foucault's initial sympathy with the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The fourth part of the book, *Ahmad Fardid's Philosophy after the Revolution, 1978-1981*, traces the efforts of Fardid after the Islamic revolution. It particularly stresses how he tried to self-fashion himself as one of the ideologues of the revolution and the worldview it came to represent. In further developing his philosophy during the post-revolutionary era, Fardid appropriated Heidegger's concept of authenticity

and appealed to his understanding of history. These efforts procured a violent rejection of modern Western thought on the grounds of being inauthentic and alienating. On the level of activism, on the other hand, Fardid had tried to guide the leadership of the Islamic Republic on how to model politics and social organization.

The last part of the book, *Fardid Remembered* includes selected interviews with Fardid's acquaintances. Thus, the mindset of Fardid, this time, is narrated by his contemporaries, including but not limited to Ehsan Shariati, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Abdolkarim Soroush. In this part, Mirsepassi takes a relatively nuanced approach, giving voice both to Fardid's critics and proponents. In the book's conclusion, *Fardid after Fardid* Mirsepassi reiterates his overall argument: Fardid represents an anti-Western and anti-modernist intellectual zeal in Iran which is paradoxically built on ideas of European origin.

Having said this, lastly, a few caveats should be put in order. Throughout the entirety of the book, Mirsepassi is very critical of both Fardid's worldview in particular and of twentieth-century Iranian Islamism in general. He contends that both embodied absolutist and radical leanings which, as a matter of fact, encouraged political violence in the post-revolutionary era. In this respect, occasionally his engagement with Fardid appears partial and personal, blurring the overall tone of the book. Furthermore, Mirsepassi tries to structure an extensive narrative by drawing analogies of various kinds between Fardid and European thinkers who have been critical of secular modernity. At times, one might question the coherence of some of these analogies, especially those that are not established upon biographical/historical facts but rather upon Mirsepassi's own analysis. For instance, Fardid's own testimonies and writings acknowledge his interactions with Bergson, Heidegger, and Corbin. However, the association of Fardid's stance with that of Foucault in the book is based entirely on Mirsepassi's own proclivities and can be perceived as a far-fetched conviction. Nevertheless, despite its minor flaws, Mirsepassi's *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought* is an informative and insightful reading for anyone who wants to understand the complex mindset of Fardid and the network of ideas that orchestrated the course of the twentieth-century intellectual history of Iran.

**German Abstract:**

**Eine intellektuelle Reise in viele Welten: Ahmad Fardid und der moderne Iran im Zeitalter sozialen Wandels**

Öffentliche iranische Intellektuelle waren in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts sehr einflussreich. Es ist anzunehmen, dass die Islamisten unter diesen Intellektuellen maßgeblich zur Entstehung der Islamischen Revolution von 1979 beigetragen haben – sowohl mit ihrem Aktivismus als auch mit der Verbreitung ihrer Ideen. Einer dieser Intellektuellen war Ahmad Fardid (1912-1994), ein iranischer Philosoph, der sich anti-moderne europäische Philosophien angeeignet hatte, um eine radikale Form des Islamismus zu propagieren. In *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* präsentiert Ali Mirsepassi einen Gesamtüberblick über Fardids Leben, seine Weltanschauung und sein Vermächtnis. Dafür führt Mirsepassi eine fundierte Analyse der Ideen von Fardid und anderen Intellektuellen durch, die von ihm beeinflusst wurden. Kern seiner Studie ist das transnationale Moment in der iranischen Geistesgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts, das zur Entstehung eines eigentümlichen ‚nativistischen‘ Diskurses beigetragen habe. Mirsepassi betont dabei die Auffälligkeit dieses Moments und seine anhaltenden Relevanz.

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