The Unbearable Lightness of Empty Time:
The Responses of Iranian Intellectuals to the Time Experiences of Modernity

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	By an approach to the sociology of time, this article seeks to examine the consequences of transformations in the space-time order of society ensuing rapid modernization processes for Iranian intellectuals in the decades succeeding the 1979 Islamic Revolution. First, it explores how certain Western thinkers and philosophers confronted the spread of "empty time," and then turned to the works of three influential Iranian intellectuals of that period -Dariush Shayegan, Ali Shari'ati, and Jalal Al-e Ahmad, aiming to compare their positions. It also asks: How did they, during that period, engage with the category of modern time? How did it touch their assessment and understanding of the West? And can a kind of relationship be discerned between their time-based assessments and their demand for political changes? This paper takes on a document-based approach, applying the theoretical sampling to analyse the primary texts of three intellectuals under study The findings suggest that the dominance of modern empty time constituted these intellectuals' discontent with the West, and that their concerns were closely tied to their dissatisfaction with modernity and autocratic modernization processes. Their dissatisfaction, in turn, promoted their estrangement from the Shah's regime and its western-oriented social reform projects and their receptivity to a fundamental transformation of society grounded in religion and tradition as well. It concludes that while Western philosophers grappled with the hollowing out of time in modernity, seeking to reclaim meaningful moments in Diogenic temporalities or expressive dimensions of modern life. Iranian intellectuals also attempted to offset and fill the unbearable lightness of modern time with the weight of tradition. Despite the post-revolutionary slowdown of processes of modernization and a return to tradition, additionally, the problem of the emptiness of modern time has yet remained an unavoidable and open-ended challenge for Iranian thinkers and intellectuals.

1. Introduction

Asserting a radical rupture from the tradition and order of the pre-modern society, modernity has continually perceived itself as bearing the immense responsibility of constructing its own normative framework (Habermas, 1998). The disintegration of Europe's theological–political system indeed, the demand rose for the invention of new foundations for meaning and social order. The burden of this rupture seemingly has persisted even in contemporary Western societies, which is seen in the ongoing arduous task of legitimizing their moral and institutional structures.

From a historical perspective, medieval Europe is known by hierarchical order of people and things organized the (social) world and bound the profane to the sacred. This configuration ensured the believers' fullness of their moments by the omnipresence of the divine in both thought and action (Taylor, 2021, Ch. 1). Consequently, the directions of individual and collective existence were largely predetermined across all domains of life. Within this framework, time itself was experienced as inherently meaningful and integrative –linking worldly activity to spiritual destiny, and uniting temporal and eternal dimensions through the moral economy of divine promise and retribution. Even in the absence of an absolute assurance of salvation, subjects could nonetheless find ontological security within this theological–political cosmos.[1]

Yet, the collapse of the ancient spatial-temporal order -set in motion by the profound transformations during the Renaissance- made redefinition of time-space-relations of society and general orienting principles necessary (Harvey, 2014, Ch. 15). In this newly secularized horizon, sacred frameworks gave way to mundane time and space, whereby making individual and collective life projects both possible and necessary. The constitution and stabilization of modern space–time thus reflect deep transformations in the human perception of world, existing social formations, and the emergence of novel modes of social practice.

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[1] For instance, one may refer to the role of religious practices—particularly the ritual of confession in the Catholic Church—which granted psychological relief to anxious subjects fearful of eternal damnation by promising the absolution through the mediating authority of the Church (cf. Weber, 2022).

The transformation of time–space relations has long preoccupied scholars across the social sciences correspondingly. They have paid attention to articulating more productive frameworks for understanding the conditions and consequences of modernity, to interpret ongoing social changes, and to critically interrogate the temporal structures of society. So in the formative period of industrial capitalism, Karl Marx began to study the temporal and spatial reorganization of labor within the emerging factory system, the standardization of time as a measure of wage or capitalist exploitation. He also revealed how capitalist development operates through mechanisms of exploitation and the ceaseless circulation of capital (Marx, 2009). More recently, Marshall Berman (2000) explored *the experience of modernity* -"a particular mode of vital experience: experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils" (p. 14) - as those that marked by rupture, fluidity, and transformation. His engagement with modern writers and thinkers from Goethe to Marx, illuminated the contradictions, tensions, and of course creative energies inherent in the modern age.

By the same token, an inquiry into how intellectuals and social thinkers -as a distinct yet profoundly perceptive and influential group (Said, 1999)- may elucidate the processes of modernity and modernization, particularly in light of shifting temporal–spatial configurations, offering novel and fertile ground for understanding the broader cultural and intellectual transformations of society.

If the enfolding of modern societies corresponds with changes in temporal structures, then this analytical framework offers a strong lens for interpreting the transformations of Iranian society as well. It would be a very interesting investigation if the focus particularly were placed on the period characterized by state-led, rapid modernization accompanied by extensive economic, social, and cultural changes. Particular significance is the encounter of Iranian intellectuals with modernity and the accelerated processes of modernization. Approaching this encounter through a temporal perspective provides critical insights and opens new pathways for research within the sociology of time.

Accordingly, this study investigates how Iranian intellectuals during the decades preceding the Islamic Revolution -namely the 1960s and 1970s- perceived and articulated the temporal–spatial transformations taking place within their society. Drawing on a framework of the sociology of time, it positions its core inquiry at the intersection of the expansion of modern, "empty" or homogeneous time, and the intellectual reactions. Three interrelated questions raise here as follows: "How did Iranian intellectuals of this period engage with the conceptions of modern time?" "In what ways did their understandings of time inform their evaluations of the West?" And "can a connection be drawn between their temporal critiques and their aspirations for social and political change?"

This article advances three central hypotheses. First, it seems that conceptions of time substantially influenced Iranian intellectuals' interpretations of the West during the period under discussion. Second, it suggests that their discontent with the pervasive secularization of time within both individual and collective life was closely linked to broader discontent with modernity and the authoritarian state-run modernization projects at that time. Finally, it seems that this dissatisfaction contributed to their intellectual and political turn away from the Shah's regime toward the alternative visions of radical transformation grounded in religion and tradition. A temporally oriented interpretation of their positions is significant not only in light of the subsequent Islamic Revolution but also because it represents a distinctively non-Western encounter with modernity.

The material used in this article consists of the primary texts of three influential intellectuals whose ideas gained traction among intellectuals, students, and other groups of the modern middle class in the decades preceding the Revolution—namely, Daryush Shayegan, Ali Shari'ati, and Jalal Al-e Ahmad—and their respective works *Asia in Contrast with the West*, *Westoxication*, and *Collected Lectures of Dr. Ali Shari'ati.* The selection of these figures rests on several considerations.

Broadly speaking, all three can be situated among the critics of Western modernity but from different respect. Following Bahrami-Kamil (2014), Shayegan (in his early phase) and Ahmad

Fardid may be classified as "essentialist" critics of modernity, attributing to Western modernity a series of intrinsic and irresolvable crises that renders any reconciliation with religion or non-Western cultures futile (p. 170). In contrast, Shari'ati and Al-e Ahmad -together with a broader spectrum of reformist and nativist intellectuals- may be described as "non-essentialist" critics, seeking to articulate alternative forms of modernity grounded in their own historical and cultural contexts (p. 237). More specifically, Shari'ati rejected the notion of a fixed or universal essence of modernity, pursuing instead a critical third path between tradition (religion) and modernity (p. 273). Al-e Ahmad, within what might be termed a "nativist paradigm" (Boroujerdi, 1996) endeavored to adapt the constituent elements of modernity to Iran's specific historical and cultural circumstances (Bahrami-Kamil, 2014 p. 303). A reading of thoughts of these thinkers about modern Western society from a temporal perspective thus provides an integrative and interpretive framework for understanding their discontent with the West and modernity and the processes of modernization at that time.

This argument draws upon two interlocked notions: first, the transformations in temporal structures under modernity operate beneath the surface of explicit political conflicts, becoming interwoven with the fabric of everyday individual and social life in modern societies (Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009), profoundly shaping individuals' perceptions of themselves, others, and the world. Second notion lies in the observation that their critical engagement with the West and modernity is informed by a distinctive temporal–spatial sensibility that has yet to be systematically analysed, while their ideas -particularly those of Shari'ati and Al-e Ahmad- have considerably determined the revolutionary and post-revolutionary orientations of Iranian society. At their time, each of these thinkers sought to conceptualize the crises confronting Iranian society, developing key notions and terminologies in which specific conceptions of time occupy a central position that merit being unpacked and highlighted on their own terms.

2. Literature Review

A survey of the social science literature reveals that from the early stages of the expansion of "homogeneous" or standardized time in modern societies, the founding fathers were attentive to the emerging temporal–spatial relations and their implications for the individual and social lives of modern subjects as well as newly emerging social groups. In this way, Karl Marx situates the capitalist mode of production within transformations of societal temporal–spatial structures, emphasizing the concomitant emergence and exploitation of the working class (Marx, 2009, Ch. 1). Along these lines, building on Marx insights, E. P. Thompson's landmark historical study, *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*, examines the contested regulation of time between workers and employers, highlighting the imposition of rigid labor schedules on English workers during the early stages of industrial capitalist expansion. Drawing on Max Weber, Thompson underscores the role of Protestant sect preachers in cultivating a disciplined relationship to time, framing punctuality and labor as moral obligations that mediate guilt and secure spiritual salvation (Thompson, 2023, Ch. 3 & 6).

Weber himself interprets the Protestant ethic as generating a novel conception of time among early Protestants and furthermore as a foundational precondition for capital accumulation and the rise of capitalism. He argues that Benjamin Franklin's aphorism, "Time is money," epitomizes the "spirit of capitalism," reflecting both Protestant asceticism and the moralization of labor (Weber, 1998, pp. 52ff.). By the early twentieth century, Georg Simmel observed that the metropolis functioned not merely as a center of monetary economy but also as a site of heightened temporal awareness, punctuality, and scheduling. Urban subjects, he argued, have begun to develop the distinctive forms of emotional and social interaction, as well as specific psychological and neurocognitive adaptations, in order to adapt and navigate the high tempos of city life (Simmel, 1993). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's study of the temporal horizons of Algerian peasants (1963) demonstrates how the introduction of market-driven temporal regimes disrupted longstanding temporal routines, destabilizing pre-existing social and economic rhythms within Kabylia communities.

Regarding modern Iranian society, scholars have also explored temporal–spatial transformations and their social consequences. Atabaki (2013) studies the habitual transformations of the first generation of oil industry workers in southern Iran, emphasizing the role of modern work-time regime in producing disciplined and industrially oriented workers. He concludes that these temporal–spatial rearrangements were as integral to the broader project of Iranian modernization. Shari'ati and Soroushfar (2017) examine the calendric structuring of post-revolutionary cultural and social policy, framing it as a mechanism for reconstructing collective memory. Poornik (2023c) contextualizes the theory of social acceleration to interpret the Islamic Revolution from a temporally informed perspective, analyzing the role of different social groups in accelerating societal transformations. Similarly, Siamian and Mohseni (2024) investigate the establishment of modern temporal order within the framework of the modern state, arguing that state regulation of time functioned both as a tool of centralized power and as a pivotal mechanism in the broader processes of societal modernization during this period.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

3. 1. A Secular Time-Space

The disintegration of the pre-modern order and the concomitant ascendancy of secular, worldly time fundamentally reshaped individual and collective self-understanding in Western societies. Spatially, the Renaissance replaced the hierarchical, theologically anchored spatial order with a socially organized, calculable, and mobile system of spatial relations, in which preordained divine distances gave way to socially constructed and manageable coordinates. The development of linear perspective, positioned the observer/subject as the epistemic center of vision, enabling a rationalized and objectified representation of the (mundane) world. As Harvey argues (2014, p. 319), "perspectivism allowed the world being presented from the point of view of the individual 'observer,' emphasizing the physics of light and the capacity of the individual to depict what they saw in a manner considered 'realistic,' rather than according to truths prescribed by mythology or religion." Perspectivism thus not only reorganized space in a secular way but also fostered

nascent individualism, situating the subject as an active agent in the production of spatial knowledge. Concurrently, the world came to be conceived as effectively infinite, navigable, and representable through cartographic and measurement technologies. This spatial reconceptualization underpinned the expansion of long-distance trade and intensified imperial competition, driving territorial conquest and colonial enterprise (Harvey, 2014, p. 298).

The spatial transformations were inseparable from profound temporal shifts as well. Time became increasingly secularized, rationalized, and commensurable so as to pave the way for its commodification and the establishment of standardized temporal regimes. Together, these reconfigurations of time and space undergirded the social, economic, and epistemic frameworks of early modernity, structuring both collective institutions and individual subjectivities.

First, the secularization of time involved the widespread internalization of linear temporal frameworks, fundamentally transforming both individual and collective perceptions of past and future, which in pre-modern societies had been regulated by a hierarchically structured sacred temporality (Taylor, 2021, pp. 146–147). Within this context, the temporal reconceptualization of the arrow of time conferred a secular function on the notion of "progress," effectively replacing the eternal presence of the sacred with a future-oriented horizon of expectations. The present came to be understood as a moment in which anticipatory projections were formed, directed toward a future in which they could potentially be realized. As Koselleck notes, "The emerging horizon of expectations has dynamized history. The concepts 'modern age' and progress could be used synonymously." (1975, p. 391, cited in Nasehi, 1995, p. 49). Second, the processes of urbanization, economic growth, and industrial expansion interlocked the measurement of time directly to the imperatives of capitalist production—particularly the circulation of commodities and capital (Thompson, 2023). Capitalist regimes imposed a "new temporal discipline" through multiple mechanisms, including the division of labor, workplace supervision, bells and clocks, financial incentives, moral sermons, and formal education, aligning the temporal rhythms of social life with the demands of industrialized production.

3. 2. The Time Crisis of Western Modernity

The disintegration of the pre-modern theological–spatial order required a reconfiguration of meaning around secular, linear conceptions of time. Temporality that was oriented around a short-term present in community of believers, indeed was immediately connected to a transcendent, eternal horizon, mediated through the advent of Christ and imminent promised salvation.

Modernity, by contrast, necessitated a self-contained, secular temporality capable of replacing the former divine temporal order. It was also manifested in the emergence of a distinct secular present, in which novelty was no longer intrinsic to the flow of time itself; instead, individuals were confronted with a spectrum of possibilities that they could realize through their own agency (Löwith, 2021). In this context, the notion of "progress" –a secular and modern notion- projected the present toward a differentiated, potentially improved future, while the past was reinterpreted as a "field of experience," instrumental for historiography and the planning of future action (Koselleck, 1979).

Therefore, the notion of passing time was supplanted by plans and individual life projects, which were intertwined with collective endeavors. Where old theological idea based on the movement of history unfolding above individuals toward the eternal, the conception of progress became the principal driver and motivational force lied behind modern self-realization (Wetz, 2016, p. 23; Torres, 2017). So history itself was undergone a redefinition as a human construct and opened onto human conditions, as both individual and collective agency began to make sense –compared to the former divine order. To put in in Koselleck's terminology, history coloured to "collective singular" (Kollektivsingular) (Koselleck, 1979, p. 50) made it possible thenceforth collective movements for social change, contrasting with pre-modern revolts that their success primarily meant a kind of dismantling existing structures. In conjunction with the emerging notion of progress, thus, concepts such as improvement, reform, accumulation, and futurity acquired normative and aspirational force, rendering utopian, worldly visions both imaginable and actionable within the secular temporal framework of modernity.

Nevertheless, this secular reconfiguration of time was neither seamless nor tensionless. Early Enlightenment optimism regarding the progressive trajectory of history soon gave way to disillusionment and even escalating anxieties. Two interrelated crises can be identified in this context. The first crisis reflects in the fact that the expansion of the present into a multiplicity of possibilities and opportunities which could be taken up and fulfilled, failed to provide a compelling substitute for a coherent historical direction that had historically prevailed. The frustration and sense of temporal disorientation generated by this condition are evident across Western thought -from Bergson with his distinction between linear, quantitative Newtonian time and the inner, qualitative duration of lived experience (Bergson, 1910), to Nietzsche with his proposed concept of eternal recurrence as a counter to linear time (Nietzsche, 1990), to Heidegger with his contrasted existential, lived temporality with objective, measurable time (Heidegger, 2024). The attempts that thus far have made to anchor history within purely worldly frameworks, while initially promising, ultimately proved inadequate or unconvincing.[1] The second crisis emerged in the twentieth century with the erosion of the idea of "progress" regarding the catastrophic consequences of technological and scientific advancement. The barbaric events und atrocities during the two World Wars made it increasingly difficult to frame progress as a means of opening the present toward future improvement or transformation. The Frankfurt School thinkers repeatedly have warned throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of the dangers inherent in the collapse of progress as a foundational pillar of the project of modernity (e.g., Adorno & Horkheimer, 2024, Ch. 1, cf. Allen, 2017). Otherwise, attempts to close off historical horizons or declare the "end of history"- initially conceived as a response to the exhaustion of alternative futures from a liberal tradition- failed to address the deeper crisis resulting from the collapse of progress as well (Fukuyama, 2014).

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[1] In this context, Hegel famously interpreted the Prussian state as the embodiment of the *Geist* and as the culmination of historical alienation that signed "end of history." In recent years the failed attempt of declaring "the end of history" have often been exemplified by liberal democracy (cf. Rosa, 2017).

Together, phenomena what might be termed the deprivation of late modern society signifies a profound loss of meaning in time, the absence of a coherent historical trajectory –or better to say disorientation, and the disintegration of collective and individual projects of temporal and historical progress.

3. 3. Western Thinkers' Responses to the Empty Time in Modern Society

Modern thinkers in various ways have expressed profound dissatisfaction with the loss of meaning in time, particularly the lack of kairos (καιρός) -moments of rich, qualitative, and intuitive experience- in the face of the dominance of chromos (Χρόνος), or linear, sequential, and quantitative time (Nasehi, 1996). Henri Bergson was among the first to address the increasing dominance of "empty time" by distinguishing between "homogeneous time" -linear, mechanized, spatialized, and quantitative prevailed time of modern society- and durée, or lived time. He discussed about the latter that "abstract time is immobile for me as the state I localize in it, that it could flow only by a continual changing of quality and that, if it is without quality, a simple theatre of change, it thus becomes an immobile milieu. I should see that the hypothesis of this homogeneous time is simply meant to facilitate the comparison between the various concrete durations, to permit us to count simultaneities and to measure one flowing of duration in relation to another (Bergson, 1964, Ch. VI, cf. 1910: 100ff.). In response, Bergson proposed a return to durée, a form of time abundant with lived, experiential moments as he called in intuition: "The intuition we refer to then bears above all upon internal duration. It grasps a succession which is not juxtaposition, a growth from within, the uninterrupted prolongation of the past into a present which is already blending into the future. It is the direct vision of the mind by the mind,—nothing intervening, no refraction through the prism, one of whose facets is space and another, and language. Instead of states contiguous to states, which become words in juxtaposition to words, we have here the indivisible and therefore substantial continuity of the flow of the inner life. Intuition, then, signifies first of all consciousness, but immediate consciousness, a vision which is

scarcely distinguishable from the object seen, a knowledge which is contact and even coincidence (Bergson, 1964, Introduction).

Following Bergson, Nietzsche also critiqued the empty and unqualified character of modern time. He proposed a Dionysian ethic and claimed an embrace of life (Yes-saying) as remedy to the emptying of the moments. The concept of amor fati -love of one's fate- exemplifies Nietzsche's call for "yes-saying" to life in the present moment: "For the new year. — I still live, I still think: I still have to live, for I still have to think. Sum, ergo cogito; cogito, ergo sum. Today everybody permits himself the expression of his wish and his dearest thought; hence I, too, shall say what it is that I wish from myself today, and what was the first thought to run across my heart this year — what thought shall be for me the reason, warranty, and sweetness of my life henceforth. I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Let looking away be my only negation! And all in all and on the whole: someday I want only to be a Yes-sayer." (Nietzsche, 1990 [1377], p. 246 *Twilight of the Idols*, "Maxims and Arrows," §1). It would be false if one counts Nietzsche's Dionysian ethic merely as an attempt to restore the richness of the present moment; but it also articulates the notion of "eternal recurrence [die ewige Wiederkunft]" in the face of the creeping linear, empty time of modernity: "Was THAT—life?" will I say unto death. "Well! Once more!" My friends, what think you? Will you not, like me, say unto death: "Was THAT—life? For the sake of Zarathustra, well! Once more!" (Nietzsche, 2008, p. 341 /(1911). In this interpretation, the "eternal recurrence" constitutes a call to rupture the sequential flow of time in favor of deliberate decision and event as well. In *The Gay Science*, he explicitly links the notion of "eternal recurrence" to decision and will to change: "Perhaps this moment [Eternal Recurrence of the same] is an excellent opportunity for you… If such a thought seizes you, it will transform you, turning what you are into something else, perhaps even radically altering you. You will question everything you do, asking: 'Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the heaviest weight. Or how

well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal seal and confirmation?" (Nietzsche, 1978, sec. 341). Therefore, Nietzsche by means of *eternal recurrence* and *will to change* renders what might be called *the unbearable modern experience of time* bearable.

In this context, absolutism and universal claims inherent in the notion of progress prompted Walter Benjamin to connect his critique of social democracy with a broader critique of progress as the central principle of the modern understanding of history. For him, historical progress is inseparable from the notion of human progression through a homogenized and empty time. The notion of progress itself must be put into critique, since it is enough dogmatic that precludes any resistance and alternative, or non-linear, spiral historical trajectories (Benjamin, 1996, §13). Benjamin's solution to this exhausting condition is the recourse of the present within history through the notion of "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*): "History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogeneous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now [Jetztzeit]." (Benjamin, 1940)1996, §14). Through this lens, revolutionary events are understood as temporal ruptures within the course of history, representing openings for transformative action and ripe with possibilities for both individual and collective emancipation (Rancière, 2023, p. 30).

In late modernity, of course the increasing acceleration of the pace of individual and collective life has caused to open a scissor between world time (Weltzeit) and life time (Lenbeszeit) (Blumenberg, 1986), which led to a condition of the frustration of modern subject. It arises from the fact that they cannot—or, put differently, do not have the time to—respond to or fulfil all the life-plans, possibilities, and options that a single lifetime places before them. Although subjects attempt to bring these two horizons -biographical time and historical time- as close together as possible by accelerating their individual and social lives, the very processes of acceleration leave them ever more unable to do so." (Rosa, 2017). Rosa contends that the appropriate response to this analytically disruptive condition -a novel form of temporal-spatial alienation—is not mere deceleration or withdrawal into slow movements, but *resonance*. As he defines it as "a mode of relation to the world that emerges through af   fection and E   motion, intrinsic interests, and

the expectation of self-actualization, in which the subject and the world mutually touch and transform one another" (Rosa, 2016, p. 298, Trans. HP). He also emphasizes a "good life" can be retrieved through the activation of axes of resonance. So it is claimed that the rates of increasing social acceleration that might lead to alienating social condition can be responded by resonating with the world along the axes of resonance: namely horizontal axe of social interactions; vertical axe of connecting to a totality, such as history and religion; and diagonal axe through engagement with the material world (*Dingwelt*).

At least in the West, the unfulfilled promise of progress and the disorientation of history have long been sources of discontent with the present (Poornik, 2023a). Western thinkers have, accordingly, sought to address the challenges posed by empty time and the exhaustion of utopian energies in modernity (Nasehi, 1996). Among the most notable theoretical efforts in this regard are attempts to recourse the meaningful present or "*moments*" from the homogenized, secularized, and quantitatively measured time characteristic of modern societies, many of which are closely intertwined with sociological though.

Otherwise, parallel to aforementioned theoretical enterprises, scholars have sought to reorient the horizon of the present toward utopian projects (Cf. e.g. Chrostowska & Ingram, 2016; Abensour, 2025). As Zygmunt Bauman (1976, p. 17) observed, utopia is "an image a future and better world, which is not at all inevitable so much as it is desirable; which is critical of that which exists, an in this sense is practical realization; and which relies politically on the possibility of collective action." Yet, despite these theoretical contributions, such approaches have remained marginal, and under the temporal–spatial conditions of late modernity, they appear further difficult to realize.

The ways in which non-Western intellectuals meanwhile engage with fundamental transformations in the time-space of their societies deserve a careful study and can provide critical insights into social phenomena they engaged them. In the contexts of non-western societies, including Iran, where modernity and modernization processes have been in autocratic and up-down ways imposed rather than immanently cultivated. Moreover, the mechanisms

through which these societies encountered modernization -whether via colonialism or other dependent and coercive ways-produced distinct responses and adaptations. They unfold within pre-existing social structures, cultural repertoires, and intellectual traditions, which were often disrupted or reshaped by the forces of modernization.

Against this background, the following section explores how three key intellectuals conceptualized the experience of empty time and the solutions they proposed.

4. Methodology

The paper at hand adopts a document-based approach. It takes on the theoretical sampling as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (2016) to analyse the primary texts of the three selected intellectuals: *Asia in the Face of the West* by Daryush Shayegan, the selected works of Ali Shari'ati (the same theoretical sampling procedure led to three following Shari'ati speeches, *Characteristics of the Modern Age*, *Return to the Self*, *Man without Self*, and *Civilization and Modernity*), and *Gharbzadegi* (*Westoxification*) by Jalal Al-e Ahmad. The analyses are guided by the conceptualization of empty time and by a comparative analysis of Western thinkers' engagement with time in modern society. The theory-driven text analyses are applied: the selected texts are re-examined and abstracted according to a set of pre-determined "reflexive indicators." Analyses proceeded through both maximal and minimal comparability principles until theoretical saturation was achieved (Keller, 2023, pp. 123ff). To enhance validity, the study drew on scholarly literature examining these three thinkers, and to ensure reliability, the interpretations were contextualized through rich, thick description (Flick, 2013).

5. Research Findings

Largely speaking, the findings indicate that the intellectuals under study were acutely aware of the profound transformations in the time–space configuration of their era and of the implications these changes held for their society. They sought to respond to the emptying of historical time

regarding undergoing rapid and state-imposed modernization. To this end, each, in their own way, turned to the resources of tradition and religion and elaborated their respective solutions.

5. 1. Iranian Intellectuals and Temporal–Spatial Transformations

The emergence and diversification of social classes, including the intellectuals have had hand in hand with the enfolding modernization processes and urbanization (Gramsci, 1968). They were however inherently contradictory that reflected in thoughts and attitudes of intellectuals. It can be summarized as follows: on the one hand, modernization and urbanization paved the way for the rise of intellectual groups, while on the other hand, they generated social anxieties and pathologies that frequently became objects of various critiques (Van der Loo & Van Rijen, 1997). In the context of Iranian society, the same is true for the rise of modern intellectuals. During the final two decades of the Pahlavi era, top-down modernization gained momentum thanks to the rise in oil prices and production, which in turn led to drastic temporal-spatial transformations across society. Using Harvey's terminology (2014), the spatialization of capital disrupted traditional agricultural structures and concentrated labour and capital in urban centers, a process amplified by the land reforms of 1963. The ensuing rapid urban growth, driven by massive rural-to-urban migration, speculative capital produced unprecedented increases in land and housing prices. The movement of capital into urban areas fuelled gentrification as a form of exercising power over space. The pressure on urban infrastructures and uncurbed urbanization led to the emergence of peripheral settlements and shanties, as well as a series of conflicts between new migrants and state authorities during the period under discussion (Katouzian, 1995, pp. 307ff; Bayat, 2012, Ch. 2; Jajarmi, 2016).

From a temporal perspective, modern nation-states imposed homogenized, standardized time to consolidate administrative power and coercion (Anderson, 1997), while at the same time it became a resource for the synchronization and coordination of complex conditions in modern societies. In big cities, as Simmel observed, accelerated urban tempos became embedded in the private and collective lives of urbanites (Simmel, 1993). Return to the conditions of Iranian

migrants at that time, they had to confront alienating temporal–spatial conditions shaped by the rapid circulation of capital and urban reconstruction. The processes of the "creative destruction" of modernity were in full force, placing newcomers in alienating conditions marked by experiences of uprooting, estrangement, and vulnerability (Poornik, 2022; 2023a). For marginalized populations, nonetheless, kinship, ethnic, and neighbourhood networks created alternative forms of co-presence, enabling social resilience and sometimes collective resistance to municipal authorities while demolishing their informal housing (Bayat, 2020, pp. 57ff). Religious spaces and rituals also provided familiar communal anchors, offering stability amid urban dislocation and distress (Mirsepasi, 2010, pp. 314ff). Of course, such sociocultural dynamics and miserable conditions surrounding increasing populations deeply touched the majority of intellectuals provoked them to respond.

On the other side, expanding authoritarianism and political repression reconfigured the social spaces available for engagement, displacing or suppressing modern institutional arenas such as independent labour unions, political parties, and media outlets, which came under strict state control or surveillance (Mirsepasi, 2010, p. 134). In response, for many intellectuals and educated middle class cultural and political activity shifted to underground networks, student organizations abroad, and, crucially, long-standing traditional and religious institutions, including mosques, *husseiniyahs*, religious schools, and bazaars. It also reflected an implicit compromise between the state and intellectuals: educated elites and urban intellectuals were able to operate within emergent institutional and social spaces generated by rapid modernization, but on the tacit condition that they refrain from directly criticizing the repressive and corrupt nature of the political apparatus. Accordingly, opportunities for limited intellectual and social engagement were available in expanding modern bureaucratic institutions, state cultural centers (e.g., Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults), universities, and literary journals (Boroujerdi, 1996, pp. 57–81). This paradoxical and alienating situation experienced by many intellectuals and other modern groups, shaped by autocratic and exclusionary modernization processes, also mirrored a growing dissatisfaction with modern temporality, which

was increasingly reconfigured toward secularization, emptiness of time, and the erosion of utopian horizons, and therefore rendered intolerable.

5. 2. Iranian Intellectuals and Time: Shayegan, Shari'ati, and Al-Ahmad

A. Dariush Shayegan: The Exhaustion of Utopian Energies in the West versus the "Eternal Ethnic Memory" in the East

Shayegan conceptualizes a form of "mythical and divine time" extending to the world of afterlife, which he associates with the East. He contrasts this "eternal time" with the empty, secularized, and sterile temporality of the West. In this regard, he offers one of the most conscious temporal perceptions of the cultural evolution of the West vis-à-vis the East, using it as a framework to step out from what he calls "our historical destination."

He also interprets Western nihilism as a "declining trajectory," characterized by "a systematic descent from intuitive thinking to technical objective worldviews, from eschatology to historicism (Shayegan, 1999, p. 3). Along these lines, he identifies four interrelated descent movements that constitute "the destructive force of Western nihilism" as follows: (1) "the decent from eschatology to historicism, (2) "the decent from intuitive insight to technical thinking", (3) "the decent from essential forms to mechanical concept", and (4) "the decent from spiritual essence to sensual drives". Particularly, "the movement from eschatology to historicism" entails "the negation of the symbolic and eschatological content of time, transforming it into a linear, quantitative trajectory propelled by one-dimensional progress rather than divine providence". He understands this trajectory as "the *demythologization* of mythical and divine time" (ibid., p. 48, italics in original). In this account, time is vividly used as part of the explanation of the West, Western civilization, and its nihilistic forces, better to say, to claim that time has become void and meaningless. From a time-based perspective, it is to say that, for him, Western civilization is marked by several characteristics, namely "the monstrous force of negation" reflected in "the demythologization of time", or more precisely, the stripping of divine properties from time (Ibid., p. 96); persistent rupture, driven by "ambition, and evolution, and progress", as well as by "will

to power" (pp. 234ff); and the extension of secular life through technology and expelling otherworldly life from worldly life. Regarding the latter, a transformation in the human perception of time takes place, by which the realm of chance and contingency is ascribed to death and the realm of worldly life to the domination of technology and technics. So, according to Shayegan: "In a world where time loses its ideal dimension and becomes devoid of any divine meaning; in a world where, if the Wait ends, death no longer serves as the connecting link between worldly and otherworldly states of affairs; in a world where salvation is considered progress and progress is entirely a mundane end, everything becomes problematic, and above all the inescapable reality of death" (Ibid., p. 249). Here, the empty content of time is tied to one of the central ideas of modernity and the processes of modernization, namely progress, which cuts its connection with death. It also contrasts to the will of extend the present toward an otherworldly future. In response, Shayegan emphasizes that "the religious dimension of Iranian civilization bears no affinity with Western nihilism" (Ibid., p. 9). And then, against the processes of secularization, rupture, and the loss of direction in Western history -that once oriented toward otherworldly spirituality and heaven-, he posits the Iranian "ethnic memory," which he accounts as rooted in continuity and immutability (a mystical vision). He also warns that these features are declining or eroding (pp. 162ff). In this context, he distinguishes between "Western culture" and "our thought", considering that former dynamic and *time-based*, and the latter consistent, static, and place-based: "If the cultural text of Western thought derives from the evolution of the same thought and their successive transformations, in our thought, this web of relations emerges from the integrated whole of our culture. Since transformation and evolution, which requires temporal trend and qualitative transformation of principles, has not been decisive in our cultural text. So our principles have consistently maintained their connections to their origins. Therefore, our 'cultural text' is interpreted from a horizontal and spatial perspective, not from a vertical and temporal one" (Ibid., p. 297). Thus, Shayegan's contours of a temporal critique of the West reveal that dissatisfaction with the processes of modernization and Western modernity translates into a certain spatiotemporal reading of the Eastern and Western civilizations. It echoes and

extends into various forms of discontent with political, social, cultural, and intellectual conditions. As the following discussion shows, such ideas find a parallel yet distinct formulation in Ali Shari'ati's thought.

B. Ali Shari'ati: The lack of Event in Time

The lack of meaningful events within the succession of modern time is also traced in Shayegan's accounts, for example, where he invokes the myth of Sisyphus to depict the Western individual's search for meaning while he doomed to Sisyphusian monotonous repetition (Shayegan, 1999, pp. 258–259). But this critique is even more sharply highlighted in Ali Shari'ati's work. His time understanding is akin to "explosive time" [1] or a moment of rupture, theorized in a manner similar to Benjamin's concept of "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*). This demand for transformation in time repeated again in the well-known concept of "returning to the self", which in this context hints at a kind of inner vitality compared to compressed and emptied time of modern society.

For Shari'ati, contemporary Western civilization is a "consumer civilization," emerging from instrumental rationality, capitalism, and mechanism from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. The bourgeoisie, however, "through the mastery of science and machinery, has advanced machinism, scientism, and the primacy of consumption, resulting in the alienation of human beings" (Shari'ati, 1988, p. 86). The temporal logics embedded in these processes are inherently alienating. Accordingly, this civilization is characterized by the accelerated advancement of instrumental sciences, machinism, and industrialization, and is therefore accompanied by the negative consequences of an accelerated society, driven by the forces of consumption and competition. In his diagnosis of non-Western societies, he refers to them as "mosaic civilizations" that have suffered from a crisis of historical disorientation and purposelessness. In such societies or civilizations, certain elements from their past remain, while context-free elements are imported limitlessly from the West, resulting in the development of consumerism. Disorientation and purposelessness, he argues, are the consequences of this

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[1] This type of time is borrowed from Georges Gurvitch. For details cf. Harvey, Ch. 8, p. 191.

combination: "This mosaic civilization in non-European countries, or, in my words, 'hotchpot societies,' has no specific form or purpose, and it is unclear what kind of society it is. In such societies, the people and their thinkers are unable to understand why they are living, what their goals and future are, or what their beliefs mean. Why did such a society come into being?" (Shari'ati, 2011). On the other hand, he also links the temporal logic of machinism in capitalism to labor, leisure, and increasing consumption, which in turn intensify the nihilism and purposelessness of modern Western civilization.

At first glance, machinism seemingly makes the modern human free from long work hours, he argues, which supposedly provides her with leisure time for "spiritual self-cultivation and the free development of herself." But he continues that under capitalist conditions, instead of being a savior, the machine has become her oppressor and dehumanizing force: "The machine grants me control over every hour freed from the burden of additional labor, and this, above all, is humanity's greatest savior… However, 'machinism', that is, the law imposed by 'capitalism,' the primacy of 'consumption,' the philosophy of 'consumerism,' and the incremental system of 'false needs', has bound humans to the chains of 'consumption,' reducing the meaning of human existence solely to the framework of an 'consuming animal.' As we see, the machine has now reached the electronic stage, its highest evolutionary potential. Yet, instead of reducing my eight hours of labor to one hour, it increases it to eighteen hours. In the end, I still fall short in consumption and am forced to pre-sell my future hours, and even years of my life, instead of living in the present." (Shari'ati, 2010). As a result, in his criticism of the West, he contends that this compression of the present obstructs meaningful individual practice and, along these lines, renders individual life aimless. This temporal compression, which is interwoven into the main processes of production and consumption, forms a circular and exhausting movement that leaves no space for autonomous, purposeful engagement. Its scope extends merely from labor to leisure, from production to consumption, and remains closed. "Such a human being, who endowed with divine values and a divine essence, falls into the trap of "everyday life"… a mire in which the most precious divine values of the human being sink deeper each day. A person becomes caught

in that same foolish cycle of life: everyday life, repetitive life, circular life… a circle in which one works for leisure, and has leisure for work; produces for consumption, and consumes for production." (Shari'ati, 1988; cited in Kazemi, 2017, p. 142).

This temporal condition is inseparable from a specific kind of anthropology in which humanity's descent from its divine values and essence is completed through the circular and repetitive rhythms of consumerized everyday life. According to Shari'ati, however, the situation is not entirely hopeless. He proposes a two-pronged approach to scape this dual temporal accelerating pathology, namely, purposefulness (at a collective level) and compressed, cyclical exhaustion (at an individual level). On the one side, he advocates a form of divine anthropology that posits a kind of inner dynamism against compressed and circular time. It ensures a sustained process of progressive self-becoming (Shari'ati, 2010). On the other side, he calls for a collective movement beyond the Western temporal order, or better to say, a "return to the self," which would close the gap between lifetime and historical time (as a source of the discontent of Western civilization). He explains it as follows: "Islamic civilization has acted like a pair of scissors that has completely cut us off from our pre-Islamic past. As a result, for us, returning to our roots does not mean rediscovering pre-Islamic Iran, but rather returning to our Islamic roots" (Shari'ati, 2000). This counter-movement to the course of history, nonetheless, is accompanied by a fundamental will to change, which in turn is posed against the lack of eventfulness in the secularized, and therefore decaying the present of Western modernity. In his lecture *Return to the Self,* he illustrates social conditions in which "over several centuries, certain forces brought about the degeneration of the people and became deeply intertwined with their thought, customs, and temperament," and, as a result, "centuries must pass before that which has taken root in the depths of their thought and produced stagnation and decline can be transformed into awareness, movement, and right-mindedness." Yet he keeps hope for an event and continues that in such societies, miracles sometimes occur and individuals "suddenly rose up, and the warm blood of life, movement, and dynamism began to flow within them…." Thus, he regards the occurrence of such a rupture in eventless moments as a kind of miracle, one that indeed once occurred in the

form of the social revolutions of the 1960s in Europe and the movements of anti-colonialism. But it is possible only through "faith" and "consciousness": a "return to the self," which is associated with the very possibility of an event in the present moment, and ultimately "a conscious faith… a miracle born of consciousness and faith. With this must emerge a force, and then stagnation is suddenly transformed into movement, ignorance into consciousness, and this centuries-long degeneration is suddenly transfigured into a resurrection and an apocalyptic uprising…."

C. Jalal Al-Ahmad: The Loss of time orientation

Compared with Shayegan and Shari'ati, Jalal Al-Ahmad contrasts a kind of continuous and well-oriented time—better to say, a historical trajectory toward a certain future—with rupture in the course of history and its disorientation. In his seminal essay *Westoxification (Gharbzadegi)*, he identifies a rupture "without any continuity in history and any veritable process of transformation" as characteristic of *Westoxification* (Al-Ahmad, 1977, p. 17). For him, Western nihilism arises from the predominance of technique, technology, and machinery, which attain "autonomy" and give rise to the soaring complaint in western societies Diagnosing Iran's situation, the loss of orientation in the historical time of collective life becomes prominent. Under *Westoxification*, he argues that social transformation is replaced by a disoriented movement that, accordingly, provides no "tradition," as was the case in the past when it offered foundation and stability. By the same token, unlike the West, under this condition there is no coherent drive toward secular progress. This suspended condition which has become unbearable permeates all the micro- and macro-dimensions of social life. (Al-Ahmad, 1977, pp. 49, 101). "Central to this diagnosis is the notion of a rupture in collective time. Unlike the alienation associated with modern or late-modern temporality, this rupture is not rooted in the emptying of the present and the frustration caused by the compression of time or the failure to appropriate the material world, but rather in a radical break in the succession of collective time-history." "Not bound to tomorrow, yet all bound to today. And all this aided by through radio, press, textbooks, specialized laboratories, and the Westoxification of leaders and misguided thinkers [who after educating] returning from the West…" (Al-Ahmad, 1977, p. 125).

This condition also is characterized by close off the future horizons, which in turn cause to deplete the utopian energies of modernity. Al-Ahmad proposes as a solution a collective project of extending the present backward toward the past, counteracting the rupture caused by *Westoxification*. He accounts this kind of extended present would involves a certain temporal orientation in terms of a divine utopian time: "Ninety percent of the people of this country are waiting for the Imam Mahdi. We are all waiting, and rightly so. Yet each does so in his own way… All those Ninety percent of the devoted citizens see the state as the agent of oppression, the usurper of the Imam Mahdi's rightful authority" (Al-Ahmad, 1977, p. 104). In this regard, the notion of 'Return to the Self' in Al-Ahmad's thought differs from that in Shari'ati's. While the former is linked to a theological utopian project, the latter is associated with empty time and the will for an event to occur in the moment.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Modernity and the processes of modernization are accompanied by forms of discontent that manifest at both individual and collective levels. In light of a sociology of time, this article has sought to reinterpret these discontents and, through a sociological reconstruction of empty time, to offer a temporal reading of the discontent expressed by prominent Iranian intellectuals toward the deep social transformations of their era. To do so, rather than relying on interpretations in terms of repressive socio-political conditions and/or social and economic inequalities at that time, the article has proposed a spatiotemporal framework.

Western thinkers -sometimes with a sense of despair- accepted the fact that empty time is prevailed in modernity and attempted in various ways to recover meaningful and substantive moments in the present, whether in the form of individually liberating moments (e.g., Bergson, Nietzsche) or collective ones (e.g., Benjamin). The Iranian intellectuals examined here also adopted a critical and diagnostic stance toward the dominance of empty time across the different dimensions of life. Yet, due to the distinctive characteristics of modernity and the authoritarian, imported processes of modernization in Iran, they did not simply accept these temporal

conditions. Instead, they sought to articulate alternative temporal forms compatible with their own society. Shayegan identified a fundamental distinction between the "mythical and eschatological time" of the East and the descending, worldly, and nihilistic time of the West. He proposed a return to "ethnic memory" as a solution. Shari'ati countered the alienating and mechanical time of the West with a conception of "Return to the Self," linking the will to social transformation to moments of rupture. While Jalal Al-e Ahmad attempted to oppose the static, graded, and directionless temporality of the West with a theological utopian time drawn from Shia tradition.

Regarding its first and second hypotheses, this article demonstrated that the interpretation of modern time played a significant role in shaping these intellectuals' perceptions of the West, and that their concerns regarding the expansion of empty time were closely tied to their dissatisfaction with modernity and the modernization projects of their time.

This conclusion also makes the third hypothesis of this study defensible: namely, that discontent with the spread of modern time contributed to the intellectual turn away from the Pahlavi regime and toward support for a fundamental social transformation grounded in religion and tradition. In confronting the exhaustive dynamic of the emptying of modern time, Western philosophers and thinkers sought to escape the nihilistic conditions inherent in modern life by cultivating the Diogenic or expressive dimensions of modernity. In this regard, Bergson proposed '(long) durée' through intuition; Nietzsche turned to Diogenic ethics and a 'yes-saying' stance toward life; Benjamin associated 'the moment' with a form of radical rupture (revolution) in opposition to the repressive concept of progress; and Heidegger linked existential temporality to the understanding of Dasein. The Iranian intellectuals under discussion similarly attempted, each in their own way, to overcome the unbearable lightness of modern time by drawing upon the weight of tradition.

However, it seems that the Islamic Revolution slowed down the accelerated pace of modernization, which also had consequences for Iranian intellectuals' understanding of modern individual and social life. Yet their encounter with modernity, modernization, and their temporal implications has remained an open-ended challenge. In this respect, the temporal modalities of

the extended present, the return of the occulted Imam, and the will to an event within the moment were reflected in the valorization of tradition, the spread of Manichaeism, and the will to revolution among the intellectuals under discussion at that time. In recent years, however, the collapse of the spatiotemporal coordinates of modernity and its consequences for Iranian society have been supplanted, among sociologists and theorists, by increasingly frequent accounts of 'projects of catastrophe' (Cf. Poornik, 2023b). This shift is evident in the recurrence of terms such as 'short-term society' and 'self-beating society' in their assessments of contemporary Iranian society. This development warrants a separate and more extensive investigation.

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I declare that I have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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