

book, are located. For example, how can we understand heritage work that is simultaneously about state-building and institutionalization *and* about resistance, about establishing authority *and* challenging authority? How can creativity open up a space for creating and negotiating statehood and political subjectivity in colonial spaces, when the state itself does not exist? And finally, how can museums, as an epitome of colonial knowledge, be reworked to counter colonialism—to use De Cesari’s own words, “What does it mean to museumify something that is not past, not dead, even, at times, not yet existing?” (p.194)

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Iran’s Troubled Modernity: Debating Ahmad Fardid’s Legacy.
Ali Mirsepassi, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Pp. 371.
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“My conclusions have cost me some labour from the want of coincidence between accounts of the same occurrences by different eyewitnesses, arising sometimes from imperfect memory, sometimes from undue partiality for one side or the other.” With these introductory words to the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides captures the challenges of oral history, i.e., the unreliability of reconstructed memory and the partiality of the narrators’ accounts. For Ali Mirsepassi’s oral history manuscript, *Iran’s Troubled Modernity*, both challenges loom large. There is no obvious redress for the first, but the diversity of the multiple narrators of the book could potentially reduce the severity of the second.

Known to many as the Iranian Heidegger, Ahmad Fardid was a controversial figure; a philosopher revered by some and loathed by others. His detractors consider him an enabler of fascism while his supporters deny this charge, and refer to him as one of the most sophisticated but misunderstood thinkers of Iran. Is Fardid worthy of such on-going attention? Mirsepassi seems to think so, and that might be his reason for launching this, his second book on Fardid.

Iran’s Troubled Modernity is an expanded version of the thirteen interviews that appear in the penultimate chapter of his 2017 monograph, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid*. Almost all of these voices, are also present in the current book. Philosophy professor Ehsan Shari’ati, journalists Seyyed Ali Mirfatah and Seyyed Javad Musavi, and scholars Mohammad Reza Jozi, Mansur Hashemi, and Behruz Farnu, reside in Iran. Professors and other scholars, Abbas Amanat, Seyyed Hossein Sadr, Ramin Jahanbegloo, Abdokarim Soroush, Dariush Ashuri, and Ata’ollah Mohajerani, live abroad. The majority of the book’s narrators knew Fardid personally. Three of them, Amanat, Jozi, and Farnu, were his students. As revealed in their narratives Amanat became disillusioned with Fardid and found his thoughts dangerous, while the other two remained his advocates. Nasr and Ashuri were Fardid’s colleagues. As the Dean of Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Nasr was the one who, despite the pushback from his other colleagues who had questions about whether Fardid had a Ph.D., hired Fardid to teach at Tehran University. Ashuri, who was at first an admirer of Fardid, turned into his bitter critic, reportedly after Fardid attacked and ridiculed one of his writings. Ramin Jahanbegloo was a young teenager when he first came to know Fardid in weekly discussion sessions organized by his father. Meybodi interviewed him several times on the pre-revolution national television and also the pre-revolutionary daily *Rastakhiz*. Soroush, Shari’ati, and Mohajerani, each had a one-on-one conversation with him. Whether the rest ever met Fardid is not revealed in the book. To his credit, Mirsepassi has assembled a group with diverse intellectual and political backgrounds and contrasting judgments about Fardid’s character and thought.

Ashuri and Soroush reveal intense dislike for the person of Fardid and have severe contempt for his ideas. Also critical, but more measured in tone and detailed in analysis, is Amanat. Another critic, Nasr is

not only careful in tone, but is kinder in judgment. On the supporter side, Farnu and Jozi speak highly of Fardid. Not as admiring as these two, but still sympathetic, are Mirfattah and Musavi. Somewhere in between these contrasting groups and with a less partisan approach we find the voices of Jahanbegloo, Shari'ati, and Meybodi. What do these diverse voices say about Fardid? Despite the conversational and informal format of the interviews, a few themes appear in all: Fardid's personality; his status as a philosopher; and most significantly, the political import of his ideas.

The picture that emerges from these accounts is that of a man with an odd and/or difficult personality. Obscene, defamatory, insulting, belligerent, insane, passionate, reclusive, and mysterious are only a few referent adjectives. Fardid's personality, however, is not at the center of the controversy, the way his intellectual status is. Except for Soroush, almost all consider Fardid a man with a sharp mind and flashes of brilliance. But whether he was a significant philosopher, an "Iranian Heidegger," is where major disagreements emerge. Soroush judges his ideas as hollow, Amanat finds them deceptive and false, and Ashuri sees the paucity and "poor quality" of his writings as signs of his intellectual insignificance. Such judgments are not shared by all. Shari'ati describes Fardid as "philosophically and intellectually original," and Musavi compares him to "crazy" but "genius" world philosophers.

His critics point to Fardid's incomprehensible language as another factor that proves the poverty of his thought. But his supporters, Farnu and Jozi among them, invert the relationship between language and thought, and argue that Fardid's lack of lucidity was due to his brilliant but lonely understanding of the dark and nihilistic human condition, an understanding that cannot be relayed to those who are trapped in the hegemonic influence of Western enlightenment/modernity.

Does Fardid's exasperation with the "westoxicated" have political implications? In *The Republic*, Plato presents the unforgettable allegory of a cave inhabited by dwellers who, chained by their neck, are incapable of seeing anything but dim shadows on the wall, mistaking them for real objects. Only a rare person, one with philosophic tendencies, would be able to break the chain of ignorance, climb out of the cave, and through the sun's illumination, see objects as they truly are. It would be the duty of this philosopher to go back into the cave and rule over the ignorant mass, while enduring their incomprehension of the truth. If through this allegory, Plato advocates a political system that, according to Karl Popper, would lead to totalitarianism, can one read the same in Fardid's philosophy of westoxication? The answer by Soroush, the most outspoken Popperian among the voices of this book, would be an emphatic yes. Others don't look at Plato but at Heidegger, to make their case for how Fardid's seductive ideas have deceived some disillusioned intellectuals and millions of masses, making them the enabler of authoritarian populism in Iran (see for example Mirsepassi and Amanat). There are also voices who are either a bit more tentative (Shari'ati), or insist that Fardid's philosophy promotes neither violence nor fascism. Even though such denials come mainly from Fardid's supporters, in that judgment they are not alone. Jahanbegloo, for example rejects the charge that Fardid, as a Heideggerian philosopher, is "a missing link to events after the revolution." In his view even if some of Fardid's students were involved in such events, their participation should be understood as a corollary of revolutionary fervor, and not the result of "Heideggerian or philosophical influence" (p. 105).

What should one take from an oral history book with such contradictory accounts? A well-developed and judicious introduction would be helpful, especially for readers who are not familiar with Mirsepassi's earlier book on Fardid. In the beginning of the penultimate chapter of his earlier book, Mirsepassi addresses the challenges of memory reconstruction and partiality. It is, therefore, curious that he says nothing about such problems in this study. A thoughtful introduction would also elaborate on how these disparate accounts fit together in creating a larger picture. Instead, the introduction is primarily a polemic against Fardid's personality, his thought, and most importantly, the political import of his thought. Mirsepassi writes: "Fardid marked Iran's historical trajectory, articulating an ideology that ... at once inflamed Iran's civil society, electrifying intellectuals disillusioned with the left and seeking 'themselves' and inciting the uprooted masses upon an existentially orienting populist platform" (p. 4). With this, the author gives too much credit to Fardid, as an articulator and as an ideologue, for the "disaster" that has befallen Iran since the revolution. Populist platforms must be expressed in a clear manner to successfully galvanize the masses for action. Fardid's admirers and foes alike (and that includes Mirsepassi, himself), agree that elocution eluded Fardid. So, the claim that an "incomprehensible" (sometimes even to his intellectual colleagues) philosopher is the "articulator" of a populist ideology needs

better evidence than that which Mirsepassi provides. Related to the problem of lucidity, is the matter of substance. Some of the accounts in this book, including those from a few non-supporters, challenge Mirsepassi's assertions. Shari'ati, for example, argues that despite the existence of some "Fardidian literature or terms" in the Islamic Republic regime, the fundamentalist trend in Iran is not Fardidian. Exaggerating Fardid's role also means ignoring the voices of other antimodern intellectuals, many of whom preceded Fardid, in forging the worldview that affected Iran's historical trajectory (see Afshin Matin-Asgari's, *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Mirsepassi also claims a direct connection between Fardid's philosophy and the social developments in revolutionary Iran, a connection that remains unsupported. As if anticipating this claim, some of the voices from within *Iran's Troubled Modernity* warn against it. To his credit, Mirsepassi allows multiple viewpoints, some diametrically opposed to his, to be aired.

Whether we learn significantly more about Fardid himself, beyond what we got from *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, is not obvious. But, as the narrators in this book reflect on Fardid, they provide the reader with glimpses into their own characters, thoughts, and their places in Iran's intellectual history. Their vastly divergent judgments of Fardid's thoughts, if not his personality, testify to how divided the philosophical and political landscape of this post-revolution country is.

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The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World. **Cyrus Schayegh, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).** **Pp. 496. \$51.50 cloth. ISBN: 9780674088337**

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In *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, Cyrus Schayegh has written an ambitious and sweeping history of the Middle East in the modern era, which he defines loosely as Greater Syria between about 1850 and 1950. The book concerns itself with what Schayegh calls "a history of transpatialization," or "socio-spatialization," by which he means a linked history of regions, towns, classes, social groups, sects, religions, and nascent national movements (p. 2). The book aims to offer a non-nationalist history of Greater Syria between the final Ottoman decades and the hardening of post-colonial borders and nations. The historiographical concept of *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* is original and stimulating and, with a few minor lapses, succeeds in offering a new and praiseworthy interpretation of an epoch of great change.

Schayegh proceeds through five chapters, each preceded by a vivid biographical or narrative vignette highlighting important individuals or pivotal events in the history of the region. He begins by tracing links between the cities, towns, villages, families, and social movements that made up Greater Syria around 1900. Subverting the tendency among historians to treat topics, ideas, and narratives separately, Schayegh includes the nascent Zionist movement in the story of the region, but he pays rather less attention to the still-dominant structures of the Ottoman State during the same period.

Chapter 2, "Crucible of War," outlines the civilian experience of the Great War on Greater Syria, drawing on the experiences of exemplary individuals, like Khalil Sakakini. Schayegh successfully brings the traumatic and unsettled period to life, and maintains his focus on the waxing and waning of the fortunes of the region's great cities, hinterlands, and their citizens. He also discusses the marginal, and uncertain position of the Zionist community in Palestine, as it maneuvered, like other Ottoman communities, between hope and fear, cooperation and opposition. Some joined the Ottoman army, while some forged communications with the British forces slowly moving north from Sinai.