Fariba Adelkhah, Being Modern in Iran, translated from the French by Jonathan Derrick, (New York: Columbia University Press in association with the Centre D'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, 2000). Pp. xiv, 190.

In this provocative work of social anthropology, Fariba Adelkhah -- a Paris-based scholar who first appeared on the academic radar screen with a book entitled *La revolution sous le voile-Femmes islamiques d'Iran* (Revolution with Veil: The Islamic Women of Iran) -- manages to unveil modernity in post-revolutionary Iran. She not only removes Iranian society's *chador* of foreignness but also tantalizingly informs us that it is well pregnant with modernity in all aspects of life.

Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork throughout the 1990s, *Being Modern in Iran* presents a glimpse of the agonizing and contrived as well as the convenient and innovative features of modernity's absorption in post-revolutionary Iran. The collage of arguments presented in the book reminds the reader that while Iranian society is an amorphous entity it is not entirely malleable to the whimsical demands of modernity. Speaking of the encounter of modernity with local ethos, nuances, and repertoires, Adelkhah writes: "The country does not receive cultural and social expressions imported from abroad in a passive way. It takes them over and builds them up in accordance with many individual initiatives and sometimes real collective mobilization" (p. 155). Nor is she convinced that the facile dichotomies between a malignant state and a benign civil society often used to analyze post-revolutionary Iranian politics are justified or useful. She remarks: "the regime's public policies cannot be seen simply as a coherent totalitarian program. Their implementation has to take account of the complex interplay of a combination of social forces" (p. 166).

So what accounts for the fluid and permeable nature of post-revolutionary Islamism in Iran? In the preface of the book Adelkhah claims to identify four factors but manages to point out only three major culprits: the bureaucratizing and rationalizing of social life, the differentiation of the political field from the religious field, and the centralization of Iran (pp. xi-xiii).

Adelkhah devotes a large part of her book to demonstrate how daily life in contemporary Iran is becoming increasingly bureaucratized and rationalized. Following the theoretical lead of Jurgen Habermas, she maintains that this process results in the emergence of a public space that involves "public use of reason" and a new definition of subjectivity in the private sphere. Borrowing further from Anthony Giddens, Adelkhah claims that a differentiated public space -- both geographically and sociologically speaking – reveals the emergence of "life politics" where individualization occurs according to subjectivity and the principle of "self-reflexivity." Hence, she declares in the closing page of her book that "to be modern in Iran is to set oneself up as a moral being in a relatively precise context, according to ideas of self-reflexivity and in relation to a public space of a rational-legal type" (p. 178). Allow me to gradually deconstruct this turgid translation of French prose.

Adelkhah provides an impressively long list of examples to support her contention about the rationalization and bureaucratization of social life in Iran. Beginning with the changes taking place in the economic domain, she demonstrates the growing commercialization and money orientation of the Iranian society. The discussion about the commercialization of the electoral space and the financing of political life by businesses helps remind the reader about the eternal wisdom of the maxim that "money is the

mother's milk of politics." Evidence of further change includes the increasing modernization and professionalization of corporate management and tax collection, the economic hegemony of the middle class, the increase in mass literacy and higher education, the rationalization of consumers' and producers' behavior, the inauguration of an assortment of urban renewal projects, and the expansion of rail and road links that connect Iran's remote regions to each other and to the center.

Similar trends are discernable in the religious domain. According to Adelkhah, clerical organization, theological instruction, and collection of religious taxes have also become increasingly institutionalized. The same clerical class who before the revolution would not recognize either the necessity or the legitimacy of collecting state taxes -- over and above religious taxes -- has now reconciled itself to this predicament. In terms of pedagogical edification, religious education is increasingly organized along the lines of university curriculums as Islamic subjects and disciplines become more specialized. The growing utilization of logical arguments has meant that Islam is becoming a matter of reason as well as faith (p. 120). Moreover, religious feasts and the Qur'an have now entered the era of mass media (Radio and TV) and new information technologies (CDs, Internet sites, dial up telephones reciting Qur'anic verses, etc). Subsequently, as faith is increasingly transmitted through modern means of communication, people's relations with the word of God have undergone a metamorphosis (p. 108). The omnipresence of Qur'anic verses and religious iconography in books, newspapers, stationeries, banners, wall paintings and the like has meant that the average believer cannot possibly exercise the same care and deference he or she used to show toward such objects.

Adelkhah also points out that more goes on in supposedly religious gatherings than simple talk of God. For example, women use such ceremonies know as *sofreh* (or "gift of a dish") to discuss such mundane issues as housing and marriage matters, gossip, or to display their social distinction through their appearance. Moreover, nowadays religious sermons taking place in mosques or lecture halls are often followed by question and answer periods that enable the interlocutors to be more than passive listeners. Hence, even religious sermons are being colonized by the advancing march of individuality. Adelkhah also argues that as Iranian faithful proceed to "confer sacredness from below" by institutionalizing shrines and mausoleums in their localities, they frustrate and undermine the imposition of a top-down religious order.

Analogous emblematical transformations have occurred in the political arena as well. Thanks to its radically changed economic and human geography as well as its political-cultural metamorphosis, Iran is perhaps a more differentiated society than ever. In addition to continuing many of the centralizing and bureaucratically rational policies of its predecessor, the new regime has had to create new institutions, rules of political engagement, and legal procedures to deal with the multiple new constituencies that have entered the political fray. The author mentions the families of the martyrs, Hezbollah activists, and war veterans as new clientele networks contributing to the corporatist character of post-revolutionary politics.

In Adelkhah's view, after two decades of experimentation, the leading political indices of the country point to the following set of conclusions: Politics has become less sacred; policies and judicial rulings are now openly debated; politicians have become more professional and utilitarian; political mediation is finding appropriate channels; and

recourse to elections has emerged as the "legitimate procedure for evaluation and choice." These indices lead Adelkhah to conclude that (a) the political and religious spheres are parting their ways; (b) Iran is a society engaged in a full-scale internal debate about elections and the electoral process (p. 95); and (c) as Iran becomes a more differentiated and complex society, no single actor can hope to exercise monopolistic control over the political domain.

In my view, the most fascinating parts of this book are the sections that discuss the changing landscape of popular culture. Adelkhah highlights the features and imprints of the newfound emphasis on individualization and individual autonomy in Islamic Iran. We learn of how the culture of "care for oneself" and attention to one's appearance is leading an increasing number of women toward beauty salons, body building centers, swimming pools, saunas, an unquenchable urge for cosmetics, and the purchase of *Reader's Digest*-type self-help manuals covering such subjects as child rearing, healthy eating, physical education, and marital advise. Upon reflection, the relation between these and such other trends as increased number of women in the labor force, falling fertility rates, rise in the median age of marriage, and the upsurge in the use of contraception becomes obvious.

As the family becomes more nuclear, it fits more easily into apartment dwellings and comes to term with the necessary nomenclature of an urban culture and lifestyle, which emphasize privacy and perhaps inadvertently less filial piety. While Adelkhah does not invoke the statement "we are our choices" by Jean-Paul Sartre, she does go on to say that choosing one's life style is a major characteristic of modernity (p. 162). Modernity, as we all know, does not just change the configuration of houses and our

familial space but also that of cities and public spaces. In his book, *Social Contract*, Rousseau maintained, "houses make a town, but citizens a city." Turning Rousseau on his head, Adelkhah asserts that cities also make their residents -- especially newly arrived folks from the countryside – by turning them into "social" inhabitants. She offers the example of parks and gardens that flourished during the mayership of Gholamhossein Karbaschi as public spaces that enabled Tehran citizens to entertain, exercise, and relax as they wish. In other words, parks are supporting the individualizing process of Iranian society (p. 21). The author also informs the reader of how with the help of a popular radio program, Mayor Karbaschi was able to appeal to Iranian's cult of gardening and asked them to extend their exclusive courtyards into the streets by planting flowers in front of their houses. Hence a formerly private practice acquired a public dimension.

According to Adelkhah, not just the individualization of the living contributes to the creation of a public space, but the individualization of the deceased as well (p. 123). How so? She cunningly observes that graves as well as obituary notices appearing in the Iranian print media have become more personalized as they are increasingly adorned with the portraits of the deceased, women included. Nowadays, more and more people sign their individual names rather than just listing the collective family name in condolence messages and obituary notes. To top it all, funeral rites have become ever more bureaucratized, commercialized, and professionalized in Iran. In an ultimate act of irony, memorial services now provide the family of the deceased person with abundant "choices" befitting their pocketbook, prestige, and visibility concerns.

Another highly original section of the book is where Adelkhah treats the subject of *javanmard* or "man of integrity." *Javanmard* is one who exhibits such qualities as

altruism, courage, generosity, honor, humility, justice, modesty, rectitude, and self-denial. Looking into the annals of Iranian history, the author identifies such figures as Puriyaye-Vali, Yaqub-e Leys, Sattar Khan, Teyyeb Haji Rezai, Gholamreza Takhti, Ayatollah Khomeyni, Mehdi Bazargan, and Gholamhossein Karbaschi as prototypical men of integrity. Adelkhah maintains that in post-revolutionary Iran, *javanmardi* as a life style has become increasingly bureaucratized and even democratized (p. 53). Public generosity, or open-handedness has managed to adapt itself to modern conditions and nowadays occurs more within the confines of an institutional setting -- be it political, religious, or associative. Henceforth, the man of integrity becomes more of a "social being" and increasingly acquires a civic persona. Furthermore, as public generosity has become "routinized," it has helped to "redefine the social base of the regime" (p. 74). Adelkhah's examples of *javanmardi* include: building clinics, schools and sport complexes, providing the dowry of a disadvantaged young girl, paying the tab for funeral services, financing scholarships, donating body organs, and marrying the widows of "martyrs." The social ethic of selflessness is not the monopoly of the men alone. The author contends that when a woman marries a disabled war veteran or welcomes the arrival of a co-wife whose previous husband had been martyred, she too should be designated as a woman of integrity or *javanzan*. In short, *javanmardi* allows individuals – not only men but also women – to become part of an emerging public space (p. 175). Adelkhah's examples of *javanmardi* illustrate how the transition to modernity can be accomplished not by abandoning traditional ethos and practices but by breathing new life and meanings into them.

The idea of competition is yet another important feature of the public space. Adelkhah somewhat mockingly mentions the fact that in today's Iran competitions are held not just to identify the best office workers, painters, and university professors, but also the best bank note counters, Qur'an recitalists, shepherds, and wives of disabled war veterans. She maintains that this real fever of competition should also be understood as part of society's general movement towards individualization (p. 147). Iranian's craze for sports is just an extension of this spirit of regulated competition. As sporting events acquire a focal position in Iranian social life, players and teams become objects of greater public concern and adoration. The fact that sports are now more obviously linked with science and technology further contributes to the professionalization and rationalization of this sphere of public space.

In short, according to Adelkhah, what is per force in Iran is the emergence of a real public space, which promotes self-oriented practices, and public use of reason or what Michel Foucault has called "bio-politics." She cautions us, however, that the formation of a public space "should not be seen as a linear process," nor should we assume that it will "lead to democratization of the regime in due form" (p. 28).

Despite its numerous contributions to the literature on Iranian popular culture, *Being Modern in Iran* is not without its shortcomings. While the transition to "modernity" is a mainstay of the book, no solid definition of modernity is given. Adelkhah, alas, characterizes modernity by resorting to such bland and harmless generalities as "some relation to real life in all its complexity and diversity" (p. 2) or "some sort of critical relationships between the private and public spheres [which also involves] self-reflexivity" (p. 7). As for concrete "signs of modernity," she mentions such

amenities as big tree-lined and lighted avenues, parks, public benches, and telephones or wearing jackets and ties in the workplace while enjoying the services of secretaries or a private work space.

In my view, modernity denotes more than just rationalization, self-reflexivity, and technological amenities or gadgetry. Such thinkers as Marshall Berman and Anthony Giddens have pointed out that among other things, modernity also represents a heroic and holistic view of the world, one that emphasized belief in progress, linear secular history, pluralism, human volition, and the belief that human beings are the sole source of values. Perhaps had Adelkhah differentiated between modernization, modernism, and modernity, she could have better fleshed out the complexities, hazards, and improvisations that are necessarily entailed in the appropriation of modernity in Iran.

Another point on the debit side is the fact that Adelkhah makes a number of unsubstantiated generalizations about everyday life and politics in Iran based on highly selective use of examples and convenient oversight of counterfactual evidence. For example, one could have asked her whether the concept of "self" is as ethically vital, legally sacrosanct, and politically cherished in Iran as it is in the West? Does "subjectivity" in Iran have the same aura of unmediated agency as its Occidental counterpart? Is the process of conferring sacredness from below as widespread as the author claims? Moreover, as a political scientist, I would have liked to find out how Adelkhah interprets the nepotism of the political elite, the dominance of powerful families over political and economic apparatuses, the importance of personal connections, and the inability of "trust" as a social capital to often transcend primordial ties in Iran.

While I respect Adelkhah's decision not to deal with the rampant debates among the intellectual elites on the subject of modernity, I was somewhat troubled by the absence or paucity of discussions in the book revolving around such important benchmarks of modern popular culture as notions of citizenship, leisure, social etiquette, time, and naming practices. Finally, had the author analyzed the inducements of advertising strategies, the candor of political satire and graffiti, or the metaphorical language of novels and poetry with her penetrating anthropological observations we would have had an even more fulfilling book on what it actually means to be modern in Iran.

Finally, it must be said that this is not necessarily a book that can be read with equal ease by Western or Iranian audiences. The ten-page glossary testifies to the wide-ranging employment of Persian terms throughout the book. The use of unfamiliar and sometimes incorrect translations from Persian into English via French, and the liberal application of various Western theoretical concepts whose meaning and context are not adequately explored augment the challenges faced by the reader.

These criticisms, however, should not in any way diminish our assessment of *Being Modern in Iran* as a fascinating and trailblazing book on modern popular culture in Iran. Adelkhah has provided a road map and much food for thought for those willing to embark on a similar intellectual journey.

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