This book offers a sociological perspective on the history of the struggle to achieve modernity and democracy in contemporary Iran. It argues that Islam, as a religion and cultural practice, and democracy, as a nonviolent way to organize political order, are both socially rooted and can be best understood and reconciled within a sociological and institutionally grounded perspective. This contrasts with the dominant current of thought among many prominent Iranian intellectuals, a discourse which argues that “Islamic culture” rests on an archaic set of fixed ideas and beliefs inherently hostile to democratization in Iran. The thinkers of this school argue that a radical philosophical critique of the history of ideas is called for as a fundamental prerequisite both to resolve the present political crisis and ensure the future well-being of the country.

The paradigm of epistemic revolution, or science pursuing absolute detachment by representing the world in terms of exactly determined particulars, was historically formulated by Enlightenment philosopher Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827), who aimed to “embrace in the same formula the movements of the largest bodies in the universe and . . . the lightest atoms: nothing would be uncertain for it, and the future, like the past, would be present to the eyes.” This is an earlier variation on the Hegelian vision of Absolute Mind, or a complete scientific knowledge of the universe captured in a single perception contained in the present moment. In its political extension, the reductive program of the Laplacean fallacy based itself on comprehensive claims about the world that left no place—or need—for public liberties. Regarding political means, it entailed the violent idea that “political action is necessarily shaped by force.” This Laplacean tendency has led through a “complex historical movement . . . along a number of mutually related lines” to the “establishment in our time of the scientific method as the supreme interpreter of human affairs.” The resulting “objectivist ideal”—
based on “absolutely impersonal knowledge” or a “picture of the universe in which we ourselves are absent”—is, according to Michael Polanyi, a “menace to all cultural values, including those of science.”

Indeed, from the Soviet experiment to the secular modernizing regime of Kemal Ataturk, the underlying Laplacean paradigm tended throughout the twentieth century to produce unlimited state powers in order to permit the total reshaping of society, including its commonly held notions of truth. A program of such totalizing dimensions rejects democracy as a means—however much it envisions its actions in terms of an emancipating democratic end. This book will argue against such visions of “epistemological revolution,” instead presenting the case for a more modest sociological perspective on the politics of democratization grounded in everydayness rather than flamboyantly imagined philosophical visions of total change seeking to attack the whole design along either Heideggerian “culturalist” or “scientific” utopian lines. The first raises “culture” to an absolute political principle, while the second reduces it to a marginal “subjectivity.”

By contrast, a sociological or institutional perspective would prioritize fixed and mutually reinforcing institutional arrangements guaranteeing instrumental freedoms such as: political freedom/civil rights, which provide opportunities to determine who should govern (voting rights) and the possibility of criticizing authorities (via the press, political parties, and so on); economic facilities, which provide opportunities to utilize economic resources for the purpose of consumption, production, and exchange (including distributional considerations); social opportunities, referring to arrangements for education, health care, and other factors that influence the individual’s freedom to live better; transparency guarantees, or the freedom to interact under guarantees of disclosure and lucidity to prevent corruption or financial irresponsibility; and protective security to provide a social safety net in the face of possible deprivation caused by material changes. Such an institutional matrix is the basis for popular political participation in government and shared power in civil society, or a democratic politics of the temporal and the everyday. Although concerned in principle with the free agency of people, such an institutional matrix is not aligned per se with a particular cultural or philosophical outlook as deciding the meaning of public life. Nor does it need to “transcend” culture.

This work analyzes in detail the developments in modern Iranian thought which have created the tendency to imagine democracy and modernity philosophically in terms of total cultural transformation or epistemic rupture, and argues against this tendency. The argument presented for the role
of sociology is linked to a broader set of debates concerning the nature of modernity. These include becoming other from the self as an aspect of the Enlightenment and cosmopolitanism, the proper nature of the relation between the private and public spheres within democratic modernity, the various historical patterns of belief and reason between the secular and secularism, and ultimately the very character of the democratic undertaking for contemporary developing societies. All these options stand between dreams of total epistemological revolution and the everyday nuts and bolts of democratic institutions and the reform of traditional cultural inheritance.

The Philosophical Debates

This work operates in part on the level of certain philosophical debates, including the relation of alternative conceptions of scientific truth to the problems of ethics, the nature of the historical dialectic between modernity and tradition, and the proper place of religious belief and experience. These debates are part of the so-called “linguistic turn,” in which the Enlightenment’s universal critique finally extended its corrosive powers of skeptical doubt to language itself. We may identify three such fronts where varying threads within the Enlightenment battled with one another and Counter-Enlightenment undercurrents also made significant interventions. These moments of conflict mixed specifically modern epistemic, existential, and political problems, concerned with modern science and technology, the nation-state and power sharing, with crucial issues of a more personal nature such as community, tradition, and belonging.

First, on the phenomenological front, Husserl attempted to counter Platonic theories of rationalism and representation, as well as positivism, by identifying the “life world” through reflective attentiveness to “lived experience.” He aimed, in characteristic Enlightenment fashion, to reveal the universal “structures of consciousness” independently from received and unexamined presuppositions and beliefs. The intended result from Husserl’s point of view was the basis for a new philosophy equal to modern science in its objective rigor. The effort, though fascinating, failed. The actual and unintended result over the long term was to split Continental from Anglo-American philosophy, and usher in a diverse intellectual and political movement committed to language or culture as the limit of politics and reality. In constructing the “life world” Husserl deemed language an all-important dimension of meaningful experience and examined it as something “lived
through” rather than studied from the third person. He believed, falsely as it
turned out, that he would lay bare a universal a priori grammar.

Heidegger subsequently shifted the focus of the phenomenological “life
world” from consciousness to being, declaring scientific consciousness an
impotent and peripheral moment in a larger existential or personal reality
of unconscious habitus and unfathomable mystery. Within this context, for
Heidegger language became a potent force of spiritual revelation, political
transformation, and community reintegration, or roots. In this paradoxical
story the modern yearning for an a priori epistemic basis for scientific cer-
tainty ironically was transformed into a philosophically sophisticated form
of ethnic, nationalist, political revivalism. If the debate at the philosophical
level seems remote, its implications in the political realm are significant and
grave for secular and democratic modes of organization.

The second and somewhat related thread in the “linguistic turn” concerns
the influence of Ferdinand Saussure and his insistence that “difference,” as
the basis for all meaning, destroys any possibility of unitary or finished iden-
tity. This point of view was very damaging for inherited Platonic modes of
conceiving of hierarchic meaning not only for the “givenness” of nature but
also for modern political reality from the French Revolution to European
colonialism to gender and race relations. Rejecting the traditional corre-
spondence theory of meaning, or representation, in which language refers
to fixed objects in the world, Saussure argued that meanings are differential.
Language does not correspond to units given in nature, but to the arbitrary
relation between signifier and signified that is specific in nuanced form to
each and every language. As no language is privileged above the rest in hav-
ing true access to reality, the meanings stored in language exist in a fluid
network that is largely cultural and historical. Meaning is therefore by impli-
cation essentially open. Saussure hoped in Enlightenment fashion to identify
the synchronic or structural base of all human language beneath the shift-
ing surfaces, rejecting the traditional diachronic or historical approach to
linguistics. He argued, extending the Enlightenment critique to the limits of
language itself, that every word is a prejudice.

When France experienced military defeat and occupation with World
War II and the Vichy regime, followed by decolonization, Saussure’s ideas
were quickly seized upon by disillusioned radicals for conceiving of a new
theory of culture that rejected the entire essentialist heritage of the West-
ern Enlightenment. This post-structuralist intellectual revolt dismantled the
received modern Enlightenment ideals of “the human” as myth (Roland Bar-
thes), ideology (Louis Althusser), and power (Michel Foucault), undermin-
ing in the process the credibility of liberal democratic institutions and values as mere “masks” or “symbolizing systems” for modern European bourgeois man. Post-structuralism, at the same time, could present itself tacitly within the intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment as an extreme anarchist form of modern challenge to unexamined habits or traditional beliefs, seeking a new world of freedom or agency beyond the limits of the old social order. As the heirs not only to Saussure but also Heideggerian authenticity, the post-structuralist intellectual movement had considerable political significance in reducing all traditional liberal claims about justice to struggle over naked power—a view with particular appeal in developing societies resisting neo-colonial political, economic, and cultural domination, such as Iran. This, combined with the inordinate priority given to culture, undermined the perceived credibility and value of democratic institutions in the eyes of many. For the second time, then, the modern yearning for an a priori epistemic basis for scientific certainty ironically acquired the potential for philosophically sophisticated ethnic, nationalist, political revivalism.

The third expression of the Enlightenment critique of language as “given” is the claim that language does not concern an isolated rational subject or mind but a group or community. This view amounts to a critique of the Enlightenment individualist ideal of the radically autonomous self, or agency. Although to critique the autonomy of the individual is to sometimes risk undermining the political arrangements of personal liberty, it is not always so. Defending the concept of a social self, John Dewey argued that activities acquire meaning through “interaction with a matured social medium.” Language is the “principal vehicle of this social medium,” linked to traditions, institutions, thoughts, beliefs, and desires. Yet Dewey, for all his critiques of received Enlightenment notions, was deeply committed to the political heritage of liberty as embodied in institutional arrangements.

Along similar lines to Dewey, we find Ludwig Wittgenstein’s critique of representation and the rational subject in his later works. Often Wittgenstein is presented as a man whose sphere of interest is limited to philosophers of mind and language, and is isolated from the entire train of empiricism, criticism, and phenomenology with their significant political implications. Wittgenstein’s later work represents a total rejection of metaphysical dogmatism and a shift in philosophy from the realm of pure logic to that of everyday life or temporality. He aimed to “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use,” and argued that “we must stick to the subjects of our everyday thinking.” He rejects the unconsciously guiding Platonic “grammar” which teaches that a single true definition or essence exists behind
each “object,” arguing instead for an analytic framework of fluid and diversified “family resemblances” and “language games” grounded in everyday practicality. Wittgenstein rejects the craving for generality underlying such “mental pictures” in favor of more complex and variable context-specific ones, where a variety of different meanings are possible “so long as we avoid misunderstandings in any particular case.”6 This resembles Dewey’s notion of “conceptual pluralism.” Wittgenstein’s analytic framework is also similarly grounded in “forms of life,” a concept comparable to the phenomenological life world, emphasizing the unfixedness and openness of possibilities in an existing world where fact and value frequently merge. This view allows for the accommodation of traditional beliefs with scientific advances, grounded in the conviction that there are no fixed “definitions [of truth] corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics and ethics.”7 Meaning in this context is woven into the complex fabric of lived experience.

Wittgenstein’s critique of the Enlightenment, like Dewey’s, has democratic implications and extends the Enlightenment heritage by illuminating its strengths and shortcomings. Rejecting a priori foundationalism, he argued that philosophy “cannot give . . . any foundation” and “what is hidden . . . is of no interest.”8 It follows that, in contrast to totalizing projects, “problems are solved . . ., not a single problem.” Critical reason “should be capable of stopping” and knowing “peace,” or respecting limits.9 Rejecting the principle of epistemic rupture, Wittgenstein compared knowing as a “flash” to knowing as “extended in time” and observed that “‘knowledge’ is a state of consciousness or process.”10 These processes, or word games, are grounded in “particular circumstances.”11 They have no essence or “one thing in common . . . but are related to one another in many different ways,” and are “not closed by a frontier.”12 There is no “totality of conditions corresponding to the nature of each case.”13 It follows that explanation of concepts “is never completed,” or “given once for all . . . independently of any future experience,” leaving no place for the “illusion” of the “super-order.”14 This broader concept of temporality pervading Wittgenstein is linked to “customs,” “uses,” and “institutions,” involving the critical component of a “new decision” at “every stage.”15

These philosophical debates share certain commonalities: the attempt to conceive of meaning in a more open way and a critique of totalizing notions of reason. That is, they challenge the boundaries of the Enlightenment in terms of its Eurocentric conceptual limits and its tacit political entanglement in historically oppressive forms of power. There is no inside/outside dynamic characterizing modernity and its traditional other in these complex articulations of the meaning of modernity. Thinkers such as Husserl and Saussure
unwittingly undermined the old certainties of the Enlightenment, seeking fresh foundations in epistemic certainty. The critical perspectives that followed in their wake are split between a discourse of authenticity that entirely rejects the heritage of the Enlightenment, secularism, and even democracy (as in Heidegger), and a second stream that embraces the heritage of the Enlightenment while being aware of its dangerous epistemic and political failings. The critical points of view we find in Dewey and Wittgenstein, among others, suggest that a democratic society is grounded in institutional realities established collectively through a period of widespread public participation, on a pragmatic rather than fixed epistemic basis, and drawing on the selective continuity of existing cultural meanings rather than seeking to destroy them in the name of an epistemic “rupture.” Taken together, these debates indicate the complexity of the issue of the secular and secularism, and its relation to the project of building democracy in a given context.

**Culture and Democracy**

It follows that all these philosophical debates concern very contemporary and relevant issues pertaining specifically to Iranian, and more generally global, political problems of nation making on the ground. By intervening in these debates from a fresh and alternative perspective—debates which have directly and indirectly marked Iranian public discourse over several decades—it is hoped that a more realistic picture of the dilemmas and competing horizons inside contemporary Iran may be offered to the non-Iranian reader, and prevail over the often numbingly simplistic and clichéd images of Iranian political reality that circulate in academia and the popular media in the United States and elsewhere. The arguments in the book are a bid for clarity and understanding, aimed at promoting multisided dialogue at a time when storm clouds of hysteria and fear increasingly loom and threaten to incite otherwise ordinary people to participate in deadly, irreversible, and misguided lines of violent action.

On the broader intellectual level, this work will hopefully contribute to discussions which aim to create a more complex and nuanced conception of modernity than the largely closed and Eurocentric one which has long prevailed in the wake of empire. It aims to open new spaces for the multiple forms of rationality and cultural expression that modernity can and should offer within the framework of a more democratic politics of global or cosmopolitan justice. As far as this opening of new horizons is concerned, the old wall seems to be already significantly cracking in places. We see this in,
for instance, the U.S. election of President Barack Obama and his declaration that the idea that “corruption” in Kenya, his father’s country, was “a product of Kenyan culture,” was an “insult” and his praise for Kenyan political activists in their struggle for independent and democratic institutions as “proof to the contrary.” We see a big opening up beyond the fixed inside/outside paradigm of “cultural” modernity in a half-Kenyan of mixed Muslim-Christian parentage, educated in Indonesia, taking the lead in American national politics and proclaiming the value of the American heritage in terms of the shared democratic and humanist values of the Enlightenment: political transparency, ethnic coexistence, civil society, representative government, and freedom from economic hardship. Obama certainly does not argue that “Western culture” holds a particular monopoly on these qualities, citing the struggles of men and women worldwide.

Recent intellectual debates in Iran also suggest the growth of a similar conception of democracy as an open project, confined to neither the West nor any other specific culture or geographic region. Iranian religious political activist Reza Tehrani, who participated in the embassy takeover in 1979, publicly undertook a campaign in Iran from 1999 to 2002 for the implementation of democratic institutional principles within the tradition of the Constitutional Revolution and the National Front period. Tehrani promoted closer links with the United States and other foreign countries, rejecting the very premise of an authoritarian Islamic state as the salvation of the Iranian nation in the modern world.

These recent examples strike a pronounced contrast with the dominant political discourses on democracy and modernity that have driven much interstate political activity in the first decade of the new millennium. Mainstream intellectual debates within Iran often gave political expression to prevailing philosophical abstractions which circulate globally, and which need to be dismantled to permit a more complex and relevant point of view on paths of contemporary social evolution.

Even today, “culturalist” explanations for contemporary political dangers and conflicts seem to persist by force of habit, confusing the concepts of culture, democracy, and the right of military intervention. The post-millennium decade was a time in which democratic visions of change were curiously undemocratic. They were seemingly modeled on a universalist Christian monotheist tradition in which violent conquest is morally justified, rather than the tradition of a right to popular representative government introduced by the French Revolution. The concept of means echoed Machiavelli’s maxim that “one should reproach a man who is violent in order to destroy, not one
who is violent in order to mend things.” The essentialism of the “culturalist” argument, inspired by outdated political and epistemic notions of modernity, threatens the very growth of democratic institutions in societies undergoing the difficulties of transition. It also fuels the fires of a hardened and hostile cultural identity, effectively providing an intellectual resource for a backlash to Enlightenment democratic values. From U.S. neoconservatives to their liberal critics, from hard-line Islamists to secular liberals in the Middle East, we hear a chorus which underlies their disparate and conflicting political aims and ideological claims. They assert an unbreakable link between culture and democracy as a problematic, particularly with respect to the reified “culture” of “Islam.” Among neoconservatives this faith has revealed a third component in a discourse proclaiming the necessity and the right to military intervention by Western forces.

Across the spectrum, these arguments rest upon similar premises. The prevalent view in the West—one that is shared by the media, political leaders, and many “experts”—is that Islamic societies lack a democratic “culture” and that they are therefore incapable of achieving democracy. Neoconservatives have interpreted this as a call for outside intervention, while for Western critics of neoconservatism it signifies the inevitability of failure in attempts to forcibly democratize Middle Eastern societies—because they are culturally unsuited for democratic values and culture. In the blood-soaked fiasco of the present war in Iraq this translates either into calls to withdraw and leave the Iraqis to the barbarities of “their culture,” or into an aggressively renewed determination to rout and destroy the barbaric vestiges of the past to pave the way for a future democracy purged of the wicked old ways. Both perspectives seem to share an imaginary binary of inside/outside in spite of their avowed conflict, sharing and taking for granted basic premises which have no foundation in any social scientific research. This arouses suspicion about buried paradigms in fashionable Western discourses which look back, perhaps nostalgically, to a colonialist binary way of thinking which no longer applies in our world of globally interconnected communications and practices where the inside and outside overlap.

Yet, perversely the ruling elites in most Arab countries make the same argument, if perhaps less eloquently, in justifying the status quo. Many secular intellectuals from Islamic countries—including Iran—fall into the same intellectual trap of putting “culture” front and center in their discussions of modernity and democracy, in that they conceive of Middle Eastern culture as hostile to modernity and call for the adaptation of a “new” rationality incorporating cultural values based on Western reason and ethics. At the opposite
extreme, Islamists take the same logic several steps further by arguing that democracy represents Western “culture” and is therefore fundamentally alien to Islamic values and societies.

How can we explain this conspicuous consensus across the intellectual spectrum that seems to revolve around the dubious issues of “culture”? While representatives of all these perspectives have sharply different political programs for Muslim societies, they all share the view that “culture” is the essential factor providing hope for the future, the secret behind the inability of Islamic societies to undergo democratic change. A shared discursive shaft seems to unite the axes of contemporary international political culture, and its being is virtual rather than empirically grounded. This shaft, a binary of inside/outside, slides back into a dubious metaphysics which opposes modernity and tradition, Western culture and its other, and reifies culture as a historically stable and fixed category.

This discursive configuration has made it almost impossible to get beyond the “unreality” of current debates about the future of Muslim societies and to hope for greater democracy in this region of the world. If we look at contemporary Middle Eastern societies through a historical lens free from the often tacit teleological dogmas of Western historicism, we cannot but see their contemporary social forms as products of specific historical processes, piecemeal historical constructions, and a product of their encounters with modernity which had a global character. They are certainly not embodiments of eternal essences based on “culture.” In view of this we find no easy mandate for their forcible destruction from the outside. Instead such actions appear to be no more than naked power politics in a bid for resources or other cynical stakes. The current orgy of terrifying and uncontrolled violence that plagues life for ordinary people in Iraq, set aflame by the furious and destructive U.S. military assault on the country since 2003, provides the clearest and most harrowing example of the killing fields to which such an abstract and phantasmagorical logic of “culture” applied to real life leads.

The “culturalist” argument can be traced back historically. From the bitter twilight of the Cold War, which was after all a “cold war” over differing strategies, if not aims, for modernization, emerged an “entanglement” discourse, linking culture to democracy, and culture to modernization. This newly refashioned paradigm had an extended intellectual precedent, or parent, stemming from the uniquely racist (essentialist) conceptions of European empire in the civilizing discourse, which was redeployed and bent in the direction of culture. It is at this ideological juncture that the dominant discourse of secularism became particularly problematic,
eclipsing its original role as a political framework for nonviolent conflict resolution in favor of a new campaign of cultural superiority and histori-cist mythologizing. Islam, in particular, became the focus of such polem-ics after 1989, recast as the omnipresent obstacle to world modernization and democratization. With the demise of communism as a serious rival in the struggle over global hegemony, “tradition” resurfaced to replace the rational subversive driven by unrealizable utopias with the ubiquitous and unreasoning force of a backward-looking fanaticism. With the ongoing failure of U.S. war aims in Iraq and an ever-receding horizon of hope for any peaceful end, the ideology of “culture” was all the more loudly trum-peted by neoconservatives.

Older tensions continued to play themselves out as neoconservatism, reli-gion, and reaction gained significant ascendancy in U.S. politics. This was a sign of the continuing struggle over different traditions within moder-nity as the political passage to a new hegemony of the world market was secured in the wake of the Cold War. The hegemony of positivist econom-ics and a religious sense of mission combined violence with the conviction that productivity is the supreme measure of economic well-being. This was an antidemocratic ideological outlook which showed no regard for the value of endogenous long-term political participation or the human elements of economy. The buzz and bloom of these contending discourses centered on seminal post-millennial events. These events, like a dash of lightning in the obscurity of night, illuminated with clarity the new features of a post–Cold War political age after the murky moral and intellectual political climate of the 1990s. The attacks of September 11, on the one hand, and the U.S. war on Afghanistan on the other, were colossal articulations of newly crystallizing political tendencies. They functioned as lightning rods to render visible the assemblage of dominant ideological tendencies. These tendencies had hith-erto been dispersed, because of which their main direction had been unclear and veiled, and probably undecided. In that moment it was officially declared that organized military violence could uplift the human condition and usher in a new age, and—inspired by the writings of Samuel Huntington and Ber-nard Lewis—culture was held up as the means to do so.

These very tendencies, wrapped up in a kind of paranoiac and quasi-religious cloud, culminated in the unilateral U.S. war of aggression against the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. The “culturalist” argument pro-vided the root ideological justification for this long and ongoing U.S. war on Iraq with its appalling human cost and damage to the advance of democratic movements worldwide.
The U.S. assault first caused the collapse of the Iraqi state. Subsequently the U.S. was drawn into the whirlpool of a mounting civil war whose violence and complexity has exploded. The experience has consigned to oblivion those simplistic ideological pretexts which provided the initial rationalizations for this war, which dubiously linked military violence to necessity, progress, and a new dawn in the Middle East.

The intellectual debates laid out in the early part of this introduction are directly linked to these disturbing contemporary events by way of the essentially metaphysical worldviews which formed the basis for public persuasion and action. The Comtean/Vienna Circle positivist idea that “basic reality” is purely mathematical— influential in many a neoconservative think tank—led to the belief that economic reality should be viewed uniquely through the lens of “efficiency” and the “universal” American “free market” system. Within this context “Islam” was seen as a retroactive obstacle to the expansion of a “universal” laissez-faire logic, which held the unique key to democracy and human happiness. It was against such crassly conceived “universalist” idea complexes that Dewey and Wittgenstein long ago articulated a more complex, plural, and open interpretation of Enlightenment universalism.

This book also proposes to challenge this predominant “culturalist” discourse of universalism which is applied to the question of Islam and democracy and conceives of democratic change in terms of a monolithic cultural dynamic. It proposes instead a sociological concept of democracy and democratic transition grounded in a complex and diversified view of social and political change on the ground. A sociological perspective presents Islam—like all cultures—as existing pluralistically within an interrelated web of such varying historical-temporal structures as economies, technologies, organizations, populations, discourses, and languages. These were the achievements of Durkheimian sociology and the Annales School of history. It is, in short, a materialist perspective involving the mobile and semi-stable forms which constitute all modern societies and even personal experiences everywhere. “Islam” is emphatically not a single identity or consciousness defined by specific static ideas and practices, confronting other “cultural identities” within a global arena of separate ideologies—any more than is “America.”

Today new discourses are emerging from the broad spectrum of the Muslim community which present a complex and nuanced vision of Islam as an evolving, pluralistic, and global culture in a process of radical self-transformation. Projects abound whose purpose is to highlight and nurture the strongly democratic potential and tendencies in the culture while subjecting its more authoritarian elements to critique. As an example of this growing
and important enterprise we may point to the work of Mohammed Arkoun in articulating the “unthought” in Islamic tradition and seeking to uncover the shared but unseen ground linking monotheistic traditions using sociological and anthropological tools. At the more popular level, we may point to the French hip-hop artist and author Abd Al Malik. The son of Congolese immigrants, Malik was a youthful delinquent and involved in radical Islamist politics before becoming an internationally popular musician and spokesman for the poor and largely African youth population of the French suburbs, preaching a powerful message of secularism, nonviolence, and multireligious harmony based on a variety of Sufi Islamic and other philosophical sources. These and other cases show us that we must go beyond narrow ideas of culture as a remote and tensionless entity which may be defined by a fixed essence extracted from a book, and encounter cultures as the living human products of historically evolving social experience. This sociological approach problematizes secularism as a substantive ideology but certainly not as an effective institutional framework for nonviolent resolution of difference in modern societies. This sociological approach follows as a natural consequence of the reflexive and context-specific reinterpretations of the Enlightenment heritage by Dewey, Wittgenstein, and others.

Democracy is a sociological reality, a complex and historically evolving phenomenon, and is represented in any society by social institutions which protect and guarantee our freedom by contesting the power of the state or other forces which may subjugate us. Yet the cultural material surrounding such institutions may solidify in alternative ways and different forms. There is hence no guarantee that a “secular” culture will be democratic or that an Islamic state will embody a stark antithesis to democracy or popular aspirations. Democracy is not a “culture,” as in a set of values and practices inherited either through national, geographic, or religious sources. Rather it is a fortunate crystallizing moment in time and place that requires great energy and work to be sustained. Privileging the role of “culture” and ideas, and ignoring the vital role of democratic institutions to be used in creating and developing democracy—including the role of these institutions in creating the ideas, norms, and practices that we identify with democracy—can lead to very tragic consequences.

At the same time, “culture” is not a disembodied essence containing certain inherent possibilities while excluding others. On the contrary, every culture contains multiple and contradictory possibilities which manifest themselves historically and in unique configurations over time. It is widely accepted that the intellectual genealogy of what we call democracy goes back

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to Germany. Yet, despite the wonderful ideas that Germany has given to the world, the country has also experienced its own antidemocratic days. Likewise, the practice of modern democracy evolved in Western Europe, while the region simultaneously inflicted the darkest systems of modern oppression upon much of the rest of the world with its colonial appendages. The United States, which is in many ways a model of modern democracy, existed for much of its history as a slave state and fought a terrible civil war to overcome this legacy. And certainly today, more than ever, the diffused condition of the world’s cultures makes nonsense of the idea that any particular culture enjoys a unique claim to a supposed democratic essence.

In order to assess the merit of conceiving of democracy as a cultural problematic, as is currently fashionable in discourses on Islam and democracy, we must look closely at several seminal case studies which have much to teach us about culture and democratization. As we will see, the historical record challenges not only the culturalist argument but the entire metaphysical binary of inside/outside which typifies dominant narratives of modernity as well as the violent interventionist ethic which this logic summons into being.

The History of Democracy in Iran

The case of Iran, a country whose encounter with modernity began in the mid-nineteenth century, presents us with the opposite of the Orientalist certainty that Islamic societies lack the cultural and ethical resources to create a democratic society from within. The popular grassroots struggle for accountable and independent government in Iran began with the Tobacco Revolt of 1891–92. This employed largely nonviolent modes of mass protest based on secular claims to justice. The movement gained significant ground with the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–9, employing similarly effective nonviolent tactics. Its intellectual leaders harbored a variety of ideological views on Iranian modernity, including strong rationalist conceptions that equated the Enlightenment with the “transcendence” of all religious belief.

For one hundred years, guided by such convictions, all Iran’s resources were mobilized to transform the society into a secular, modern country in the mirror image of the West. A modern secular state was created, as well as many modern institutions, and the dominant “culture” and ideology became westernized and secularized. Yet democracy receded ever further from reach as the country, ruled by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi from 1941 to 1979, evolved into a more centralized and secularized power structure. Despite this, the force of the popular democratic movement from below remained
powerful, as testified by the democratic interval of 1941–53 and the national leadership under Mohammed Mossadegh and the National Front umbrella organization. During this phase Iran's leaders experimented with a wide variety of ideological, organizational, and cultural forms, although a full appreciation of democratic institutional arrangements was lacking.

The Pahlavi state was subsequently reinstalled by force and with outside assistance in 1953, ending the decade-long experiment with democracy which had reflected the multiple political and cultural aspirations of the Iranian masses through trade unions, political parties, university organizations, and artistic movements. The 1953 coup was primarily motivated by Mossadegh's nationalization of Iranian oil, and with the return of the Shah former relations with U.S. oil interests were restored. This contributed to Iran's long-term sense of historical persecution by Western powers and suspicion of outsiders, certainly helping to set the mood for the ideological turn from "universalism" to "authenticity" in the 1960s and 1970s.

The ten-year interval of democratic experimentation was a mere flicker against the staggering background of Iran's transformation from an essentially rural society in the nineteenth century into a predominantly urban and relatively modern society in the twentieth. This extended process of modernization from above occurred alongside Iran's inability to offer any meaningful hope for a democratic political order to the general population. In the Iranian experience, a century's history and experience of "westernization" failed to create democracy in spite of all the Orientalist prerequisites being in place.

Although the Pahlavi regime envisioned cultural modernization as identical to secularization in the Iranian context, this process was very far from being democratic. What we see is a strongly ideological vision of secularism as a totalizing program, conceiving of itself as "scientifically" clearing the path of traditional obstacles to "productivity" by whatever authoritarian means necessary. It was in this context that Islamism, as a modern hybrid ideology and mass movement promising freedom, independence, and "authenticity," became the focus of pluralistic mass aspirations. The modern secular state, in this instance, did not produce a democratic society but rather the very opposite under a regime of authoritarian modernization. In 1979 a popular revolution dominated by Islamist ideology finally destroyed the modern secular state and established an Islamic republic.

This narrative has often been simplified to fit Orientalist discourses according to which Islamic societies are inherently incapable of moving forward and must sooner or later succumb to the "return" of religious domina-
tion. Upon closer examination, the story is a great deal more complex than such nursery rhyme accounts of historical events would suggest. Yet the experience of post-revolutionary Iran has even more to teach us about the complexly evolving story of the Iranian struggle for democracy, despite lazy attempts to paper it over with easily digestible historicist stereotypes.

With the fall of the Shah the crucial oil fields of the Shatt al-Arab waterway were lost to the United States. The Iranian Revolution therefore had the predictable effect of inciting the United States to encourage, arm, and assist Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran. Out of the post-revolutionary turmoil of blood, oil, and religious dictatorship, emerged the present critical struggle for the realization of a democratic society. The popular Reform Movement of 1997–2005, using media publications and a variety of organizations, took up the mantle of the Constitutional and the National Front upsurges in endogenous democratic activism to create an independent and accountable political system. Even within the context of a reigning clerical state with an avowed hostility to Western ideas and secular institutions, it is evident that what is currently taking place in Iran represents a popular and broad-based movement for a democratic national politics. The debates occurring in different parts of the public sphere, in government institutions, and throughout the cultural and intellectual landscape illustrate the hopes, desires, and reality of a living and vital struggle in contemporary Iranian society. Democracy does not come from a blueprint dreamed up in a foreign think tank, to be imposed from above by an occupying military regime, but is generated by populations through time and struggle. From this perspective, Iran is traveling the difficult road to democracy with more certainty and experience than many other Islamic societies.

It is in this more complex and historically grounded light that we may view the living process unfolding inside Iran, and not through the virtualized lens of space images (that is, a reified “Islam” fighting “modernity”). Such reductive discourses feed off a mood of fearful paranoia, as well as dubious intellectual underpinnings, both in the West and the Middle East. The broader sociological perspective creates the space needed for meaningful dialogue not only between Islamist and secular intellectuals in the Middle East, but also between Western political leaders and the multiple political perspectives within Iran.

The case of Turkey represents a further counterargument against the image of democracy as a “culture,” and of culture as a fixed category with stable boundaries which divide societies into those “inside” or “outside” different cultural systems. A comparison of the German and Turkish cases dem-
onstrates the distorted and ideological nature of the current debate on Islam and democracy. Democracy was “imposed” on Germany by Allied military force at the end of World War II and there is no evidence that democracy would have evolved in Germany without this decades-long military intervention. In comparison, Turkey has evolved since 1923 into a democratic Muslim society. No evidence exists to suggest that any “outside” forces interfered in creating and maintaining Turkish democracy in spite of the influence of “secular ideas” and the military’s historic role in preserving the dominance of a secular state in Turkey. Yet in Western scholarly writings Turkey is routinely described as a country in which democracy had to be “imposed” from the outside, despite the will and culture of the people, or as an example of a “bad” or “atypical” Muslim society. Conversely, we rarely hear mention of the fact that Germany was democratized by outside military force despite the country’s fierce resistance.

This view of Turkey has been curiously adopted across a wide spectrum, from “pro” Islamic or “critical” scholars in the West to Middle Eastern intellectuals of various stripes. Today, both the Western media and U.S. political leaders continue to try to persuade us, despite the overwhelming and devastating evidence, that the aftermath of war and occupation in Iraq will usher in a new democracy that will serve as a model for emulation by other Islamic countries. And despite the available facts, few appear willing to present Turkey as an already existing democratic state that proves Islamic societies can democratize and are democratizing.

Neither the argument that Turkey is not a full-fledged democracy nor that it is a non-Arab country merit much consideration. It is as preposterous now as it was at the beginning of the war to seriously argue that Iraq will evolve, following the war, into a more democratic society than today’s Turkey. Moreover, Iraq cannot be considered a more “typical” Islamic society, insofar as it is an Arab state with a Shi’i majority and a large non-Arab minority of Kurds. It is thus very different from Arab countries such as Jordan or Egypt.

Germany, in spite of the U.S. military presence, became a democratic society through its own efforts and energies. Whether one thinks that democracy was imposed from the outside or evolved locally, this is irrelevant to the life of German democracy. The same holds true of Turkey. Kemal Ataturk was a staunch Turkish nationalist, a secularist, and a political leader who was influenced by ideas from the “outside” (Europe). He studiously followed the teachings of Comte and the example of the French Revolution in shaping his conception of universal modernity and the means to it. At the same time Ataturk was also a Turk, a Muslim, and a person of genius from the “inside.”
The story is invariably more complex than the simplified Comtean narratives of modernity would have us believe, as Ataturk himself learned through the inveterate political struggle he waged throughout his life. The falling away of inside/outside categories of modernity is demonstrated by the fact that we cannot tell if Ataturk was an insider or outsider to Turkish society, considering his complexity.

The democratic thrust in contemporary Iran is similarly ambiguous and difficult to place. The complex social realities, cultural practices, and what we call “democracy” are broadly influenced by multiple factors that render the implementation of simple explanatory categories—“culture” or inside/outside binary oppositions—unfeasible. Iran’s democratic Reform Movement expresses itself within the framework of a powerful Islamist state and post-revolutionary society. The main current within the Islamic political elite and among intellectuals, the mass hopes of the population, and the entire legacy of the Revolution are now possibly moving in a democratic direction. This in spite of the tenacity of certain individuals in power and influential views which tend to reproduce the worst authoritarian tendencies of the Revolution and upset the course of the democratic movement. These conflicts have to be taken up within the complex context of the Iranian struggle for democracy, and cannot be slammed into place by violent force from the outside under the guidance of ahistorical and vague metaphysical convictions founded in an imagined expertise on culture.

This book is an attempt to engage the ongoing dialogue on the possibility of a democratic society in Iran in the larger context of the more global discussion about Islam and democracy and the future of political Islamic movements. Both these questions address the predicament of modernity in post-colonial societies, and how we may understand modernity today. The book is written in the belief that it is time to imagine politics in a nonviolent and communicative way, and that the Iranian struggle for democracy will produce a society with new and different political institutions and power configurations. Clearly, however, the important movement for democracy inside Iran is fragile and can stray from its original goals and aspirations. The critical questions raised in this book, including the critiques of intellectual trends in Iran, reflect the larger goal of contributing to the debate on imagining a democratic Iran. It is my hope that they will be perceived in this light.

The book aims to challenge certain popularly accepted beliefs which have been taken as self-evident: the tendency to explain political issues by metanarratives of conspiracy theories, the desire to define cultural views and practices in terms of “authenticity” (ours/their), appeals which invoke dis-
courses of “the golden age” and are blatantly male chauvinist. These and other contemporary “habits” can influence our minds and conduct and thereby distort a democratic movement, creating a different and highly unfortunate political reality. On the other hand, the book goes to some length to discourage the equally pernicious tendency to explain democracy as a “state of mind” or “cultural system,” and the concomitant ideology or fantasy which has recently gained ground in which aggressive warfare is thought to hold the promise and the key to a future golden age.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1, “The Origins of Secularism in Europe,” is a prelude to the overall theme of the book. This chapter presents a historical survey and analysis of secularism that seeks to provide the basis for an alternative interpretation of the rise of political Islamist movements in the Middle East. There are two principal reactions to such movements: the first views them in terms of the failure to carry through a “complete” program of secularization, while the second argues that secularism is specific to the West and is therefore both alien and unsuited to societies in the Middle East. The chapter argues that secularism is a multifaceted historical phenomenon which presents both valuable political mechanisms and principles for nonviolent conflict resolution and the promotion of political freedom within complex modern societies. At the same time it has frequently contained a metaphysical dimension which constructs a narrow and inflexible vision of the future and modernity, and when linked to political power via a modernizing regime this inflexibility can result in “secularism” becoming in practice the very opposite of its own founding ideals of tolerance, liberty, and nonviolence. The chapter traces these lines within the intellectual tradition of secularism through the early natural rights discourses of the seventeenth century to John Locke, and through the subsequent diverse manifestations of the secular Enlightenment in Britain, France, and Germany. A line of continuity is identified between British moral philosophy and Kantianism as a wider Enlightenment effort to reconcile the traditional religious heritage with the emergence of new scientific forms of knowledge and democratic political orders, in contrast to the ideal of “rupture” initiated by the French Enlightenment and ultimately the French Revolution as the defining paradigm of political modernity. The chapter also takes into account efforts to “close” the crisis of modernity through an “end of history,” as in Hegel, and to thereby “transcend” the secular dilemma altogether. The overall argument of the chapter is that secular-
ism is neither a “natural” nor a “universal” phenomenon, but must remain context-specific and pragmatic if it is to preserve the integrity of the democratic principles on which it is based.

Chapter 2, “Modern Visions of Secularism,” offers the example of John Dewey as providing an open and pluralistic alternative based in everyday life to the tacitly authoritarian elements in the European secular Enlightenment as a project of “pure reason.” Finally, the chapter presents an analysis of the theory of secularism and the secular by Talal Asad, arguing that Asad’s analysis provides a great range of new insights into the problems and limits of the secular as a specific political tradition and way of being with respect to non-Western and particularly Islamic societies. Yet Asad’s wholesale rejection of secularism is problematic, and in fact the politics of secularism have become an important part of national democratic struggles in Middle Eastern and Islamic societies. Part of that struggle involves understanding the significance of secularism in a more complex and nuanced way.

Chapter 3, “A Critical Understanding of Modernity,” is an attempt to introduce and reflect on the theoretical and intellectual issues of reconciliation with the contemporary world, and it includes my own intellectual autobiographical narrative. I argue for a critical understanding of modernity, a willingness to perceive it as a “strong idea” and cultural form in order to promote the evolution of greater democratic self-consciousness in the Iranian national setting. This chapter concludes with a discussion of Marshal Berman’s idea of modernity and its relevance to modernity in Iran.

Chapter 4, “Intellectuals and Democracy,” presents a perspective on contemporary intellectual thought in Iran. In exploring the history of modern ideas in Iran, it is evident that no one gave serious attention to the critical role which democratic institutions should play in the creation and development of a democratic Iran. The dominant intellectual perspective of the Iranian intellectual on democracy and modernity has been philosophical, and has been in the tradition of philosophical rationalism. This philosophical reading of modern ideas and society has reduced the hold on democracy to an embrace of “progress,” “scientific rationality,” and “reason.” Democratic ideas and institutions have therefore either been seen as by-products of modern rationality or as the absence of intellectual sensibilities concerning culture.

I review the ideas of three important intellectuals—Abdulkarim Soroush, Javad Tabatabai, and Aramesh Dustdar—whose writings have influenced Iran in the post-revolutionary period. I argue that their works, despite important differences and the political implications that follow from these differences, are philosophically in agreement with one another. The fusion in their think-
ing is totalizing and limits their ability to offer a clear democratic perspective for Iranians. The theoretical assumption that they share is that only a radical epistemological break will lead Iran out of the current crisis, a view too totalizing to offer meaningful hope for democracy. Following Rorty, I propose that we should make democracy and the creation of democratic institutions the center of our theorizing, rather than philosophy. This chapter ends with a critical review of the current reformist strain within the government in Iran and its future prospects.

Chapter 5, “Religious Intellectuals,” is based on a series of interviews I conducted in the summer and fall of 2008 in Tehran with several prominent Iranian religious intellectuals who participated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Subsequently, they also participated in the Second Khordad Movement that ultimately brought Khatami to power on a reformist platform in a landslide electoral victory. Chapter 6, “Alireza Alavi-Tabar and Political Change,” is a detailed interview with Alavi-Tabar, a leading Islamic intellectual and activist. The interviews reveal the complex evolution these individuals’ political perspectives have undergone through the decades of political practice following the Revolution, and explain the theoretical shift that brought them to view democracy as the primary end of all practice. The interviews are set up within a larger theoretical discussion of the problem of modern revolution and social change linked to the heritage of the French revolutionary paradigm and the revolutionary experiences of the twentieth century leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s. The implications of these events for differing sociological and philosophical concepts of objectivity are discussed, as well as the significance of the Iranian Revolution within the larger twentieth-century constellation of national revolution between discourses of universal liberation and cultural authenticity. Chapter 6 makes the case for a more sociologically grounded and context-specific approach to political change focused on the construction of the institutions of civil society and democracy rather than broadly conceived philosophical goals inspired by aspirations for a totally new beginning.

Chapter 7, “The Predicaments of Iranian Public Intellectuals,” considers the principal waves in Iranian intellectual thought to have emerged from the political experiences of the twentieth century, and argues that new cognitive tools and a new imaginative vocabulary are needed to meet the challenge of building a democratic society in contemporary Iran. The prevailing ideological discourses as they stand—nativist, nationalist, and Islamist—reflect an obsession with securing “national independence” against an outside enemy. The one-sidedness of this focus has produced a rigid and dogmatic intellec-
tual perspective based on claims to various forms of either absolute truth or identity. This perspective lends itself to a totalitarian politics and is therefore detrimental to the implementation of those democratic institutions which create the basis for open public discussion or a “public sphere.” In this context it is necessary to detach the construction of a public sphere—a democratic culture of open discussion, and the building of democratic institutions—from a “politics of truth” which seeks to close the parameters of public discussion around the unifying metaphysical principle of either truth or identity.

To this end the chapter argues for the need for a “public intellectual,” one who is grounded in local cultural tradition and social reality, and at the same time keenly aware of global realities and circumstances. Such intellectuals are increasingly in evidence. In this chapter I present the portraits of several prominent thinkers from different countries whose example may offer an alternative intellectual and political path for Iran. The Algerian thinker Muhammad Arkoun has advanced challenging new ideas which seek to expand the very definition and conception of Islam and to extend those aspects of the tradition which lend themselves to a liberal-democratic project. Arkoun argues for a historical interpretation of Islam and denies the validity of any single conception of a “true Islam.” He thereby also denies any essential difference between Western and Islamic cultural values or reason, presenting Islam as a many-sided and dynamic cultural force in full evolution and without fixed possibilities. The struggle over meaning, he argues, is a hermeneutical reckoning where inherited structures of understanding must be assessed and reconstructed in light of the realities of the present. Another prominent contemporary Islamic intellectual is the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi, who subjects patriarchal or undemocratic elements in Islamic culture to various critiques while arguing that Islam as a complex historical heritage presents both democratic and undemocratic models, which may be either nurtured or curtailed as required for the construction of a democratic modernity in contemporary Islamic societies. The chapter offers a conception of the “public sphere” through which prevailing currents in Iranian intellectual thought may enter into fruitful dialogue. At the same time I offer a critique of existing Iranian academic institutions which tend toward either elitism or obscurantism.

Examples of public intellectuals from the United States are offered whose works simultaneously address highly specialized technical specialists and engage in public dialogue. Noam Chomsky has done this in the area of history and politics, initiating a courageous public discussion on the question of national history and politics and offering challenging alternative perspectives
to conventionally received historical narratives. Robert Bellah has similarly initiated public debate in sociology and history, while also publishing works on difficult sociological theory. Richard Rorty presents another edifying example of the public intellectual, dealing at once with difficult epistemological problems while also writing on timely cultural and ideological issues in American society. In the process Rorty has argued powerfully that philosophy should be consigned to the private sphere, insisting that the creation of democracy is a matter of building the appropriate institutional foundations and is not linked to any philosophical foundation claiming exclusive access to “the truth.” Truth, he argues, is a matter of public debate and discussion centering on specific issues, and its parameters should not be closed in advance. If we consider the Iranian intellectual situation at the present time, when it faces starkly different possibilities, much may be learned from a study of the contributions of such thinkers in a world where it is necessary to go beyond the old certainties of secularism and modernity as metaphysical identities and where a new democratic politics is required to meet conditions that are at once global and local.

Chapter 8, “An Intellectual Crisis in Iran,” looks at the idea of the “university” and modern disciplinary knowledge as one of the institutions of European modernity in Iran. This chapter is based on Taqi Azadarmaki’s book, *The Sociology of Iranian Sociology*. My main argument in this chapter is that the emergence and development of sociology in Iran can only be fully appreciated in the larger context of the emerging modernity in Iran. The uneven development of modernity (its emphasis on technoscientific knowledge and the neglect of a democratic vision) and the lack of meaningful creativity or participation by Iranians in the creation of modern initiatives are also reflected in the phenomenon of Iranian sociology. It is by and large an academic field of knowledge based on European and American sources (the translation of books and academic training), with almost no attempt at sociological study or the exploration of Iranian society in its historical or cultural context. Iranians also perceive the university as an agent of technoscientific development, and so sociology, like other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, are institutionally modernized and subjugated to “real” modern knowledge.

The Conclusion, “Modernity and Its Traditions,” analyses the dilemma in which modern Iran finds itself today, caught between the variety of imagined narratives of modernity that are the by-products of a troubled historical experience of modernity, often “nativist” in character, and the problematic “universal” narrative of modernity inherited from the period of European hegemony. It asks how a narrative of modernity may be generated which is critical of both the internal shortcomings of national tradition and the problematic nature of
the universal narrative of modernity. Starting with a discussion of the break that is often claimed to exist between modernity and post-modernity, the chapter argues for a more broadly nuanced and pluralistic understanding of modernity. This may be said to include the principal issues raised by post-modernism as part of its own ongoing critique, which require varied answers within different social and political contexts. Within the Iranian context the chapter opposes the tendency to interpret historical and political developments through an abstract or philosophical lens that makes “global” claims, rather than employing a sociological lens grounded in historical specificity. There is a popular tendency in modern Iran to view modernity as an “abstract project,” usually based on a single image of the higher purpose of reality as epitomized by Hegel and Heidegger. The chapter simultaneously calls upon us to recognize the sheer heterogeneity of the experiences of modernity both within and beyond the limits staked out by any particular culture as constituting a value in itself, and to transform these experiences of modernity through a democratic process of open-ended dialogue based in everyday realities. Instead of one-dimensional arguments calling for an “indigenous” or “authentic” identity, the chapter argues for the creation of a new “cultural vision” grounded in two areas of concern: first, critical discussion of the interplay of modernity with local traditions and values, and second, a minimal consensus on “traditions” in the modern world, including human rights, gender equality, and so forth. The criteria for establishing these two areas should be pragmatic or nonfoundational, based on historical experience rather than any supposed metaphysical or religious certainties of an a priori nature. This approach in turn paves the road to a way of thinking beyond the dualisms of inside/outside modernity, as if modernity were some already completed project to be acquired in keeping with some final and fixed timetable. It seeks to open the way to the complex interplay between “indigenous” and “world” elements necessary for the growth of a democratic modernity in any society. This case is made with reference to existing cultural and social institutions in Iranian society, and seeks to show where the tendency has evolved in some domains while lagging behind or being constrained in others. It particularly emphasizes where sociology has suffered from these tendencies. These observations point to the need for a democratic politics from “below” based on the fullest possible participation of the public, and not a Platonic or philosophical “ideal” of a single rationality to be imposed from above by the state or any cadre of elite “experts.” I argue that such a sociological framework and democratic politics must be grounded not in chimerical philosophical conceptions but in the experience of everyday life.