

The West as imagined in cafes in urban Iran – An anthropological essay –

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Abstract

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has perpetuated a negative rhetoric of the West and the United States in particular since the Islamic Revolution. With the help of ethnographic examples, this essay argues that parts of youth in urban Iran are fascinated by the West in a way that stands in stark contrast to the negative image given by the Islamic Republic.

Keywords : Iran, urban, Geertz, walking, anecdotes, imagining

Résumé

Le gouvernement de la République islamique d'Iran a perpétué une rhétorique négative de l'Occident et des États-Unis en particulier depuis la révolution islamique. À l'aide d'exemples ethnographiques, cet essai soutient que des parties de la jeunesse de l'Iran urbain sont fascinées par l'Occident d'une manière qui contraste fortement avec l'image négative donnée par la République islamique.

Mots clés : Iran, urbain, Geertz, marche, anecdotes, imagination

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to explore images of the West among the urban youth in Iran, as perceived by an outsider during several longer stays in Tehran. While gathering this material I have primarily used participant observation, as well as observation (without participation), and loosely structured interviews. My argument is simple: while the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran is hostile in rhetoric when speaking about the West, the people in Iran are to a much greater degree positive, and have often idealized and romantic images of Europe and the United States. I will illustrate this argument with the help of ethnographic data, ethnographical scenes from Iran, mostly from Tehran, focussing on urban young adults, their daily life, the city, and the milieu in the cafés in which they are regulars.

1. In Defence of Anecdotal Evidence, against Generalizations and the Importance of Chance and Luck while Conducting Research

Anecdotes point to something that occurred, they tell us something about a behaviour that can be recounted as a short true story. The interface between a story and us is much larger than the extent to which we can relate to numbers and statistics. And, the anecdote points to an actual behaviour, as opposed to information that can be gathered from surveys,

where people say what they sympathise in, rather how they really behave. The task for us then, is to interpret the anecdote, in the fashion of Clifford Geertz (1973): anthropology is an interpretative science.

While interpreting and drawing conclusions of the material I have gathered through participant observations and semi-structured interviews I am not drawn to making vast generalizations. Fredrik Barth writes in an article based on material from Bali: "We are trained to suppress the signs of incoherence, yet we know that all cultures have always been the conglomerate results of diverse accretions" (Barth, 1989: 122). Looking for structures and similarities while on fieldwork I cannot see much of coherence. Instead, it is the diversity that strikes me: people are unpredictable. Barth writes: "we must expect a multiplicity of partial and interfering patterns, asserting themselves to varying degrees in various fields and localities; and any claim to coherence should be contested where it has not been demonstrated". People take part in different social environments depending on the context, "they construct different, partial and simultaneous worlds in which they move; their cultural construction of reality springs not from one source and is not of one piece". Social scientists are obsessed with patterns or rules that purportedly govern behaviour, but what is striking in ethnographical fieldwork is the irregularities among people (Cohen, 1996 : 28). What is poignant, in fieldwork as well as in life, is the strange diversity and the irregularities among people – people do not live under abstract laws. Cohen goes on arguing against generalizations : [...] "by failing to extend to the "others" we study a recognition of the personal complexity which we perceive in ourselves, we are generalizing them into a synthetic fiction which is both discredited and discreditable. We fall back too easily on the assumption that in important matters the members of collectives think alike" (Cohen, 1996 : 29). I agree that we, in anthropological writing, should look beyond "the blandness of the general to the sharpness of the particular" (Cohen, 1996: 30), while we at the same time need to attempt to formulate general conclusions. In anthropological writing, I like to strive after the principle employed by fiction writers: show, don't tell !

2. Lucky Findings on Foot

While being on the field collecting material I want to stress the role of chance and luck. Most of the material I gathered were the fruits of chance encounters during walks.

Serendipity, "the art of making an unsought finding", as contrasted against purposeful experiments, might be an ideal while conducting anthropological fieldwork. Serendipity is all the more fitting for my field

of interest since it is believed it was coined by the English novelist Horace Walpole who based it on a Persian fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*, in which the main characters travel around and make fantastic and unexpected discoveries (quoted in Rivoal and Salazar, 2013: 178). In the tale Walpole not only stresses the significance of luck when making discoveries, but puts equal emphasis on the importance of being “sagacious” enough to link seemingly unconnected phenomena in order to come to a conclusion. More than purely happy coincidences, serendipity has to do with the ability to see connections (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013: 178). Since the concept includes both chance and sagacity, serendipity has been paraphrased “accidental wisdom” – an ideal to strive for during anthropological fieldwork. It is a practice that requires time for the accidental findings to appear.

During my fieldwork I relied to a large extent on walking, and I think that walking and serendipity are closely linked. Walking is an excellent activity to conjure up serendipity – to move through a city in search for situations and encounters conducive to the research, while at the same time take in the energy and atmosphere of a place. Serendipity on foot while on fieldwork was probably my most important way to find my informants. Indeed, serendipity, along with reflexivity and openness, can be essential in anthropological fieldwork (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013: 179). Serendipity may perfectly mark the intuitive logic that transcends both subjectivity and objectivity, by which fluid anthropological sense is articulated (Hazan and Hertzog, 2016: 2).

What follows in this article is a short section about the Iranian government’s stance about the West followed by ethnographical data and anecdotes from Tehran about images and perceptions of the West in urban Iran.

3. The Islamic Republic’s View of the West

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the West, and in particular the United States, have demonized each other since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the foundation of the Islamic Republic. American diplomats were taken hostage for 444 days and Iranian cities are filled with anti-American propaganda. The walls outside the former American embassy in Tehran is covered with paintings, almost in style resembling a comic-book, of the Statue of Liberty as a skull, and the American flag with bombs instead of stars. Correspondingly, one American president famously called Iran, with Cuba and North Korea, “The axis of evil”.

By the autumn of 2015 the tensions between the West and Iran seemed to fade. Iran was an ally against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. President Rohani was more diplomatic than his predecessor, Ahmadinejad, and foreign politicians – mostly Europeans – could not wait, it seemed, to visit Iran. The nuclear energy discussions in Geneva between Iran and the world powers including the US with its Secretary of State John Kerry were going well and a deal was reached. The Iranians promised to end the uranium enrichment provided that the rest of the world would lift the sanctions. Many thought that now there would not be as much aggression against the West in the public sphere as before - now it must be important to emphasise good relations. But upon visiting Iran in October 2015 I noted that the anti-West propaganda was as powerful as ever. For example, in one of the main squares in the centre, Vali Asr, there was a new poster large enough to cover the wall of an entire building, depicting a pile of dead bodies and on the top an American flag. In May 2018 Donald Trump left the Iran-agreement made in 2015, and in media it was shown how the American flag was being burned in the Iranian parliament.

4. Cafes in Tehran

One sphere in which images of the West are easily observed is in the popular coffee shops in the Iranian capital. While walking around central Tehran, as I did for about ten months in 2011 – 2012, it struck me how many cafes had come up the last years. During earlier visits between 2003 and, 2007 and 2009, I had hardly noticed them, but arriving in Tehran in September 2011 I quickly discovered the nice cafes that functioned as meeting-places for the young. In Tehran, there are not many public places where people can hang out. In that way, the cafes really stood out as relaxed places where people could socialize. Similar to the situation in cars, where people can behave as if in the private sphere rather than in public (Mahdavi 2009), life in the cafes were semi-private.

What was striking while spending time in Iran was the great discrepancy between the official Iranian view of the West and the United States, “The Great Satan”, and the image ordinary inhabitants seemed to have of the West. Indeed, not least in the cafes, people seemed to romanticise Europe. Along *enghelab street*, a few hundred meters from the main entrance of the University of Tehran where every week the Friday prayer is held, in the direction of the City Theatre, there is Café Godot. On its walls are several photos of Samuel Beckett, they play Western classical music, and its young customers sip coffee. Being close to the political

Friday prayers, one of the most political weekly events there is in Iran, and the liberal coffee places next door, the blocks around *enghelab* and the University of Tehran are highly charged and political. Behind the City Theatre there is the Theatre Café, another popular place to hang out, listen to Western music and to daydream about going abroad. One common topic of discussion in these places was how to get out of Iran and to move to Europe. Often people had their favourite European country, without having been there, based on hearsay and mass media. Often their ideas of how to reach Europe, how to arrange visas, housing and to get an occupation, were vague. Often the walls were covered with photos of European writers. Cafés had names such as Kafé Prague, Kafé Kafka, Mortelle, Kafé Godot and one of the most well stocked music shops in the city is called Beethoven.

5. Surveillance and a Cat-and-Mouse Game

Often the activities in the cafes bordered what the authorities thought was acceptable. For example, at one cafe where I became a regular, live concerts were organized every Thursday (corresponding to Friday in Europe since Friday is the day off in Iran) – events that became very popular and attracted plenty of people. Musicians and local bands were given the chance to perform, until *they* let the café-owners know that they would not tolerate the concerts any more. The authorities were often spoken of simply as *they*. The police had been at the concerts in civil dress and did apparently not approve.

The authorities were omnipresent, listening to phones and monitoring activities on internet – that was what people said but then it was difficult to know, creating an ambiance of uncertainty and worry – and it was always difficult to know what was legal, since they were inconsistent. One day they could come and close an establishment that had become too popular. The cafes were often discreetly located, almost hidden, and they opened and closed frequently.

Surveillance as a way to control is relevant when it comes to life in Iran. The Iranian intelligence service is powerful. It affects the mind and behaviour of every one, and it is easy to get paranoid. The phones are supposedly bugged – that is what people say – and emails are read. The fact that it is impossible to know whether anyone is actually bugging your phone conversations adds to the paranoia.

Foucault (1995) borrowed the model of the panopticon, used from the late 18th century, a prison where a minimal number of guards could watch the entire prison population. In the centre of the circle shaped

prison was the guard tower from where the guards could see the prisoners. Since the prisoners could not see the guards they had to assume that they were always being watched. Faced with the possibility of being constantly under surveillance and the threat of punishment the prisoners adjusted their behaviour. While the panopticon ostensibly keeps the body entrapped, what is targeted in surveillance is the psyche. Being constantly watched by an invisible and unknown power makes one want to adjust to given norms. Emotionally there is a difference between being looked at by someone directly and through the lens of a camera or an invisible spectator, respectively.

When today cell-phones and the Internet play an important role for the youth to communicate, the same technical systems are, ironically, used by the authorities to keep track of people. Iran has, after China, “the most active experimental site in the cat-and-mouse game between state authorities’ efforts to control these media and citizen efforts to push the envelope of open access and information circulation” (Fisher, 2010: 521-522). The police might, symbolically, function like a panopticon.

The phone application Telegram, the most popular app for chatting in Iran, often used to be in touch with the foreign world, was banned and censored during the spring of 2018. Still, people access the application with the help of VPN. Similarly, American TV-serials are in my experience at least as popular in urban Iran as in Sweden, and accessed by installing different VPNs, since most such webpages are censored by the regime.

6. Examples of Images of Western Alterity in a Contemporary Urban Iranian Context

In the everyday life on the field – and the field appeared whenever I communicated with anyone relevant to my study – I used and was inspired by psychogeography. A practice on foot, psychogeography has been described as “cutting across established routes and exploring those marginal and forgotten areas often overlooked by the city’s inhabitants” (Coverley, 2006, 12), and further, that “psychogeographers seek to reveal the true nature of that lies beneath the flux of the everyday” (ibid., 13). Psychogeography as a method and inspiration while conducting research on foot can be helpful for the anthropologist working in urbanity. Without relying on my feet I would not have found the nodes around which my fieldwork came to gravitate – the coffeehouses. With the help of psychogeography and findings on foot, I found my self in webs of situations conducive to the research. The crux of my research was the

situations where, for the lack of sharper terms, the foreign, or more specifically, Western, met with what was perceived as Iranian. In the milieu where I moved, these situations were a constant, a state of being. What follows are instances of images of Western alterity in an Iranian context, as perceived by an outsider.

6.1 A Café that Turns into a Private Social Gathering in the Nights

In Tehran in December 2015, while walking around between the *park – e laleh*, the “Tulip Park”, I found a coffeehouse on the second floor of a building in a lane off *kargar*, the “Worker Street”, where I became a regular. They had a piano in a corner, and a wooden bar. By 9PM, when the place closed, the owners locked the door downstairs, but all guests who wished to were welcome to stay. A pianist and singer, a guitarist and one man playing *daf*, the large flat Iranian drum, formed a group who played most of the evenings. Over the piano was a large poster of the famous German romantic painting “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog” by Caspar David Friedrich, and the curtains were long and heavy. Around ten guests stayed on until midnight, listening to the music, many were European songs, and socializing.

6.2 Game of Thrones and Friends; Marx and the Frankfurt School

A friend and I watched the American TV-serial Games of Thrones in the nights in his flat in central Tehran. “The signature melody is written by an Iranian!” I was informed. We watched many episodes of the immensely popular serial which is forbidden in Iran. The Iranian state television would never air a programme with that degree of nudity. In order to be able to watch it, people need a VPN, and download it. One evening we were watching a football-game on the Iranian state television and soon enough there was a familiar melody – to the football game the state television played, in certain exciting moments of the match, the melody of Game of Thrones in the background! During the days in the cafes I spoke to women who more than once spoke about the TV-serial Friends. “Which character do you resemble most in the serial?”

Another group of friends, with whom I lived, were reading and discussing European philosophy. They were the most serious readers and students (autodidacts, “it would be useless to be registered at a university, at least here”) of literature that I have encountered, and had formed informal reading circles, focussing on Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Marx. To me, the ambience was highly charged and romantic, with the nights filled with the demanding literature. They liked Iranian literature and music – we often played Shahjarian, or Kurdish tanbur music, or a

tar – but more often, my flatmate would play Western classical music – once he came home carrying a CD with Shostakovich – and Iranian classical and pop from the seventies, thus before the revolution. When people would meet for hours in the flat where I stayed to discuss literature and philosophy, it was as if life and books were taken seriously in a way that I, from Sweden, was not used to among younger adults.

They all planned to move abroad, to the West. After attending the study circle in continental European philosophy, the group of friends planned to continue their studies in Europe or the United States. Usually, they gathered sometime in the evening, someone brought some food – often pizza – then a long night followed of reading and talking, and sometimes smoking some opium – very common in Iran – by the stove in the kitchen. One by one, people would doze off in the large room. A few years later, five people from that group had moved to the West, to the United States, and the UK, for further studies. Despite the sanctions and the totalitarian government of the Islamic Republic, there was a certain positively charged atmosphere among the young urban people, at least as perceived by me, an outsider.

6.3 A Walk with stops in Central Tehran

To illustrate images of the West in central Tehran, what follows is an imaginative but realistic walk. The City Theatre, *teatre shahr*, is a good meeting point, where one can start to explore the coffee-places in the centre. In the adjacent park there was no place to sit until May 2012, when a café in traditional style was set up. The park, the Student Park is its name, is known to be a meeting point for homosexuals, at least in the evenings. Hundred meters down on Vali Asr, besides the City Theatre, in a small *passage*, shopping centre, there is café Kafka in the basement. It is a small café with a young clientele. Everyone knows everyone, and everyone comes every afternoon, to chat, drink coffee, smoke and play backgammon. Sometimes they do something together, all of them, on a Friday, the day off, such as going to someone's house or garden and have a barbecue. Then everyone in the café is invited. They ask me not to make photos or film, since some of them have had problems with the police and are afraid of more attention – and just having contact with a foreigner such as me attracts attention from the authorities. Solmaz was a student in the law faculty until the election in 2009. She had a blog and was thrown out of university because of her writings. She was inspired by a female professor at her faculty, she says, who was relatively radical and inspired students to engage themselves during the elections. The professor, Solmaz tells me, was sent straight to Evin, the notorious prison

for political prisoners, and we have not heard from her since then. Solmaz has black, straight hair, smokes, and bad teeth, high heels and lives with her parents. A computer is placed on one of the tables and people are choosing which music to play.

Sometimes a few people dance spontaneously. A few hundred meters from there is the Theatre Café, behind the theatre. They usually play western pop and rock, and there are large black and white photos of Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. There are two sofas and a table in between where the employees and the regular customers sit and there are a few wooden tables. They serve coffees and tea, and also the popular *chips o paneer*, potato chips, slices of sausages and plenty of melted cheese. It tastes good and is enormously greasy. Out on the main street again, to the revolutionary street and the packed *charrahe valiasr*, the crossroad, across the metro station and the minibus that belongs to the *gashte ershad*, the morality police, there are a few popular cafés, among them café Godot. Inside, the employees have bohemian clothes and long hair. The walls are covered with photos of Samuel Beckett, couples lean on each other, girls with piercings, short hair that might be dyed and usually with a cigarette between the fingers and a colourful headscarf. They are open until midnight, and open around ten in the morning. They play classical western music, or western pop.

On the menu there is pasta and pizza. We go out again, and walk northwards, on Vali asr, the main south-north axis in Tehran, which before the revolution was called Pahlavi Avenue. That's the correct name of this street, a bus driver said out loud to me while boarding the bus. Along Vali Asr, not far from a complex with computer shops, is a beautiful building with a large dome in the middle, and white pillars, reminding of Indian, Mughal style. There is an attached large art gallery, and the architect behind the building is Mousavi. He is in house arrest since the summer of 2009 and the Green Revolution and the extension of Ahmadinejad as president for the second term, and Mousavi's name is removed from the building. It is a popular spot for young people to sit and chat, leaning against the pillars. We continue north, and after a few minutes we reach Taleqani Street, with heavy traffic, then we are soon at the Vali asr Square, a major roundabout. Not far from there, towards Hafez Street, is Café Asal.

Nima, who works there, knows all the guests, and takes it as his role to make people get to know each other at the café. There are usually the same guests. Today Nima makes a gesture and makes me understand that I should take a seat with him and his friend Narges. She is a student in

theatre, 24 years old, and grew up in Tehran. She likes music, and attend any concert she finds. Something that has come strongly, she says, is fusion music. It has come the last few years. Seven or eight years ago, people listened to either classical music with lyrics from Hafez or Rumi, or pop music. Then people began to mix the genres. The first one I noticed was Mohsen Namjoo – who has been called the Bob Dylan of Iran (by New York Times) – who played fusion music, *talfiki*. Fusion, not in the European meaning, not jazz fusion, but a mix, a creole kind of music, a mixture of classical Iranian music and contemporary western pop. Then others came after Namjoo, people like his friend who never really became big. He is seen in the cafés, playing sometimes.

Before, a few years ago, there were concerts in the cafés, small spontaneous concerts, but these days *they* do not allow any concerts. *They* do not let them happen. Instead, concerts are held in private homes, quietly, and in order to gain access to them you need to know someone. Social media help to spread the word. But most musicians have left the country, at least those who had reached somewhere with the music and gained some kind of fame. One of the more famous bands, O-Hum, that plays rock and use lyrics from Hafez and Rumi, had a concert recently, just before noroz, the Persian New Year. The sound system was a catastrophe, and *they* had not allowed people to stand up, to sing in the refrains or to clap their hands. They forced the audience to act as if they were at a chamber-music concert. The event had nothing of the attributes usually accompanying a rock concert. Narges changed topic and started to discuss Murakami's books. The walls of Café Asal are decorated with photos, often made by customers. They have exhibitions that change every few weeks. Benjamin, who usually sits in the café, is responsible for the exhibition right now. He has attempted to show loneliness through his work. We listen to Mohsen Namjoo and Queen and Nima talks about his film project. "Children that grow up with so disparate ideals get problems distinguishing what is right and wrong, fake and real, and this affects them in their adult life too. My film will be about that. I want to film it here, but then I can't release it here, since it will be more explicit than what *they* tolerate. We will have to have left for Europe before I release it, in other words, I and Neda and the main characters in the film," Nima says. A few years later, Nima would leave Iran and apply for a Schengen-visa from Turkey. He would stay in Turkey for over a year, attempting to get to Europe.

6.4 An Encounter with an Iranian in Italy

In May 2018 I met an Iranian man in his 40s in Italy, who was finishing his PhD. His sister was in the United States, and he said that most of his friends and acquaintances were abroad or wanted to leave Iran. It has to do with the situation in Iran, but also something to do with social status, he said. “Many Iranians in Italy would have a better life in Iran, but they stay because they want to be able to say that they live abroad”. He is upset by how the US is bullying Iran. Because of the sanctions, the Euro has become eight times more expensive in the last few years in relation to the Iranian rial. He did not wish any radical change in Iran, but rather little by little. He did by no means approve with any Western interference in the politics in Iran. Still, he preferred to live in the West.

Conclusion

As we know, there is an aggressive anti-Western propaganda from the government of the Islamic Republic, with Friday prayers depicting the United States as the Great Satan and huge mural paintings of the American flag with bombs instead of stars. In May 2018 the media showed the American flag being burned in the Iranian parliament. This negative image of the West can be contrasted with the romanticising, the fascination, the interest and often the outright obsession with everything Western among large sections of young urban adults.

With the lack of free speech and the oppressive character of the Iranian government, and the high unemployment as well as the weak Iranian economy, many young people see no future in Iran. Instead, it is common to dream about a life abroad. The sour official relations between Iran and the West make migrating to Europe or the United States more difficult. With these realities, substantial parts of the urban Iranian youth view the West positively and see migrating to the West as an attractive life path.

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