



Contextualizing Exclusion: Lessons from Kambis

written by Amina Tawasil
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In my [first blog installment](#) I described one of my bus rides in Tehran in order to show that education, the transmission and acquisition of knowledge and sensibilities, is not confined to schooling. By delineating education from schooling, I was able to show that the processes of critical thought also, and perhaps more importantly, take place in moments and places unnoticed. Through my description of the bus ride I attempted to show that learning how to think critically with others necessitates learning how to relate to others. This process cannot be detailed in textbooks, and must be accounted for in order to show that learning how to think with others is not exclusive to the methods or spaces of classrooms, schools and universities (Cremin 1978; Gundaker 2008; Klemp et al 2008; Lave & Wenger 1991; Ranciere 1999; Spindler 1967; Varenne 2007).

If so, what then is schooling for? One way to explain the function of schooling is to first assume that it is tied to systems of power; specific to my last post- the state and socioeconomic class. For the state, schools are meant to produce future technologically advanced and scientific revolutionary Iranians. For the secular-leaning upper class in north Tehran, schooling is a mark of social status. They defined educative success as specifically linked to having completed degrees in prestigious Iranian, European and North American universities, and doing the right secular things with those degrees.

Here we can gather that competing ideologies inevitably undermine the intended purposes of higher education. For instance, becoming a technologically advanced Shi'i revolutionary was hardly the case among the upper middle class in north Tehran. What one does with an education is subject to assessment and social approval. For the upper class, leaving Iran for Europe and North America was a



better option than becoming a revolutionary who upheld the ideals of the 1979 revolution.



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In both competing ideologies, however, schooling has been, as in the case of Iran during my fieldwork, singled out from other forms of education and socially produced as the only acceptable proof that a person is capable of critical thought.

Although purported as a space of critical thought, schooling is also and more importantly for this blog post, a space of exclusion for those who could not perform propensities towards a particular kind of “critical thinking” that are deemed necessary to successfully maintain a seat in the university.

In other words, the hierarchical value of schooling, socioeconomic status and the exclusion of others enable the would-be revolutionaries and the secular upper class. It is this exclusion of those ‘others’, that producing technologically advanced Shi’i revolutionaries and/or upper middle class secular sensibilities become possible.

This second installment explores my interaction with a 40 year-old man from Mashhad named Kambis, whom I met after getting off the bus at Park-e Daneshju in Tehran, and what exclusion meant for him. Here, I consider DeCerteau’s *a walk in the city*. A subject enunciates its presence by taking space and making it its own place. I explore the idea that a particular kind of be-ing in Iran, that of Kambis as ‘uneducated’, is “critical thought” in action, one which sometimes escapes the itineraries of both revolutionaries and the secular upper middle class in Iran.

I stepped off the bus at chahor rah Vali Asr one early evening right before sunset, and struck a random conversation with a man named Kambis. His beard length



covered the entirety of his neck. Although I suspected he was a Basiji (member of the volunteer military organization) because he was dressed in a dark gray business suit with a black office shirt, something about his appearance did not quite fit the description of a Basiji. We walked about 100 meters to Park-e Daneshju and sat in front of the theater about three feet away from each other. I assumed, that he, too, knew to avoid being noticed by the Irshad (morality police) since we were of the opposite gender and were not related to each other.



Photo by [Jeanne Menj \(CC BY 2.0.\)](#)

He said although he had been called Kambis since he was a child, his name was actually Mojtaba. This was on his national identification card. What struck me most was Kambis's long hair because I knew that Iranians overall didn't look too kindly at men with long hair. Before meeting Kambis, the government had just decided to crack down on men keeping long hair. Visuals were being offered on both television and print on the "proper" length of a man's hair. I asked Kambis why he kept his hair long. He said, "It's love, love of religion and life." I then asked about the four rings he wore on his two fingers. One ring was from Mashhad, "For 'enerjie'," he said. One ring was from Karbala, one from Kabul, and one from Damascus. He traveled to these cities to do ziarat, pilgrimage, in the Shi'i holy shrines. When I asked if he was mazhabi (religiously conservative), he smiled, waved his hand to the side, and said, "I pray."

I asked where he went to college. Shrugging his shoulders, he told me he did not pass the Konkur exam (the nationwide university entrance exam), and he could not afford to pay tuition for the private institutions. He then pulled out his phone that had an up-close picture of Khamanei's face as his wallpaper. He turned the phone towards me so I could see. I asked him if he liked Khamanei. He said, "I like him as a person, but for the people, no." He handed me his phone to show me a short video clip of a musical group he was a part of. He explained that he knew how to play several string and wind instruments and the accordion.



For many of my friends in north Tehran, Kambis was provincial, un-aware, with the sensibilities of the lower class. Moreover, most Iranians deem Kambis as having foreclosed for himself upward mobility in what would be considered the professional job market because he failed the Konkur exam. Here, I'd like to consider the opposite- Kambis did not necessarily fail himself of opportunities. That is, certain conditions in Iran, which essentially place greater vested interest in those who do well in the university entrance exam, fail individuals like Kambis rather than Kambis failing himself of mobility. Kambis was able to join a musical group and perform in front of a large audience. That, too, necessitated a particular kind of education that made Kambis successful in what he did. Kambis did not travel to Europe, the Americas or Southeast Asia. Instead, he would frequently visit his family in Mashhad, as well as the different shrines inside Iran, the cities of Damascus, Kabul, and Karbala. For Kambis, he was well traveled.

I push this further- Kambis's ways of carrying himself was a manifestation of critical thought. That is, assuming that institutions of higher education are spaces where the ability "to think together" also involves the push to homogenize the terms of belongingness, greatness and mediocrity, as I gathered from my friends in north Tehran, there is much to be drawn out about Kambis's lack of interest in exhibiting 'sameness' based on class, intellect or merit.

To explain, I had come to learn about the visible markers of levels of religiosity by the time I met Kambis. The beard and the quintessential dark gray dress suit were markers of the religiously conservative man. At first, I became confused in trying to determine "what Kambis was" and how I should behave towards him. His dark gray suit, rings, and Khamanei's face on his phone exhibited that he was religiously conservative- what Iranians call "hizbullahi" or mazhabi.



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Yet, the way Kambis presented himself said otherwise. For one, Kambis's hair and beard length exceeded the norm. He was a Mojtaba named Kambis, who visits shrines, performs in front of crowds, makes his appearance similar to that of religiously conservative men, and likes Khamanei for himself but not for the people. His opinion about Khamanei taught me that it was possible to like Khamanei as a person enough to make his face a cell phone wallpaper, but not as a leader. It was also possible to exhibit exaggerations of religious conservativeness, to express ambivalence towards the markers of Iranian religiosity. I am not asserting that Kambis was able to escape 'structure', yet Kambis dressed, behaved and spoke in ways that unsettled my cookie-cutter assumptions of religiosity in Iran as simply Islamist or Islamist-Reformist.

I now return to the connections I draw between schooling and systems of power. The means to an education differed between my friends in Tajrish and Kambis. A university education was deemed more economically, politically and socially worthy. Expanding the definition of education beyond the classroom makes it possible to tie together the previous narratives in that it allows us to explore the different subjectivities produced out of schooling and higher education in Iran. Although not unique to Iran, recognizing that education takes place outside of schools allows us to ask what then is schooling for? Who is excluded from this project and what happens to those excluded? It allows us to examine schooling as a contested space; a tool of the state, as sites of secular or liberal resistance. And, equally telling, what and whom this binary is overshadowing.

We may also ask, which groups of people constitute the state with enough vested interests to use schooling as a tool to maintain the state? And, who is resisting as a response? That is, who is doing the decolonization of state ideology? Which system of power are they drawing from? Through time, it became more apparent that by wanting a better Iran, my friends in north Tehran meant wanting more for the urban and secular Iranians like themselves. What they meant by technological advances and social freedoms resembled what their counterparts, the elite and upper middle classes in North America or Europe experienced. My friends' belief in knowing what is best for all Iranians is grounded in their assumptions about



education as schooling, as earned merit through schooling; that, the Iranian poor's lack of 'schooling' deprives them of "critical thinking", thus, incapable of knowing what is best for themselves and for all.

Envisioning a future Iran that is defined by upper class sensibilities is not new in Iran. From the nineteenth century onwards, Iranian elite reformists deemed the non-urban, the lower class and the religiously conservative as obstructions towards modernization (Sullivan 1998; Najmabadi 2005 & 2013) that needed to be schooled and brought up to speed about becoming proper Iranians through scientific journals and literacy campaigns.

Contextualizing exclusion, that is, the fact that an 'educated' person's entrance into a university system was partly enabled by the exclusion of individuals like Kambis allows us to further examine class-based politics.

When exclusion is taken into consideration, who, then can rightfully, speak for all Iranians? When does the answer to this question matter? It is not enough to assume that the high premium Iranians place on a university education is a naturally occurring phenomenon. How this premium has been and continues to be produced (Najmabadi 1998; 2013) over other forms of education (Street 1984) must be contextualized and historicized (Menashri 1992). Especially so, since this premium is also very much tied to whose points of views, political opinions, social design, economic visions – whether one is secular, reformist, modern, or religiously conservative – are considered credible in the public sphere within and without Iran.

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