Buses in South and North Tehran: Education and Schooling

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The bus I was riding on my way to Tajrish (north Tehran) was beyond maximum capacity with its passengers. We were cramped and people stood and sat in areas they were not allowed to- between seats, corners, next to the automatic door, the area meant for the passengers' leg room, the areas where the tires are located underneath. The air conditioner was not turned on. Naturally, we all began sweating.

The women near me in the women's section, including those who did not wear the chador (large black cloth), fanned themselves with loose notebook paper, handkerchiefs, or newspapers. I had difficulty tolerating the heat because I was sitting further back near the engine. The other women near me loosened their shol (wrap around scarf) to let some air reach their necks. I followed suit. The bus driver decided to drive slow all of sudden. The women around me began complaining to each other, some raising their voices. By the time we passed Hemmat, a man complained loudly about how uncomfortable we all were. Irked by this, the bus driver shouted in response. Another man became angry. The driver drove even slower.

> *"Ey, baba!!" everyone said in unison. The bus driver pulled to the side.*
> *"Boro! Birun!! Boro! Boro!!" (You [all] get out!!! Go! Go!) He shouted.*
> *"Naa, baba! Tsk. Tsk." They said in unison.*

Of course, no one disembarked. The bus driver eventually merged onto the street after shouting his last words to the man who complained. The women around me smirked and shook their heads. Some laughed. As we approached Tajrish, the man who had been angered was standing next to the bus driver. The two were getting acquainted with each other, both smiling.

The Bus Driver And His Passengers

A type of education, a transmission between individuals of 'how to do the right thing at the right time', had already taken place before this bus ride from south to north Tehran. The nuances of this interaction had been learned elsewhere, not exclusive to the space of schools or universities. The process is less noticeable (De Certeau 1984) to the untrained eye perhaps because the effort to transmit or passing on knowledge (ways of being) in public spaces like buses, street corners (Bayat 2010), parks, homes, cafes, the bazar (Keshavarzian 2007), guild meetings

(Erami 2011), machine shops, or tailor shops (Lave and Wenger 1991), is less organized or permanent, and maybe assumed of lesser value, than in schools or universities.

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In this bus ride, we can see that somehow the passengers understood that they could sit or stand even in places where they were not allowed. Women, including myself, knew how far back to draw their scarves over their heads without causing a stir. The passengers likewise knew that this experience would conclude with relative ease, and it was not necessary to step off the bus as the driver commanded. They knew the bus driver did not literally mean what he said, even as angry as he was. 'Get off the bus!' stood for something else taking place, unnamed, but understood by most everyone inside the bus. The driver, too, was uncomfortable with the heat, perhaps with his responsibilities towards his passengers. But, to openly 'complain' or admit so to his passengers would be unacceptable on all registers he identified with – manager, man, and masculine. The ideal response to discomfort beyond his control would be to endure. By driving slow, he was able to bring the passengers to protest with him against the horrible conditions inside the bus, which he was responsible for, but he could not control.

This moment, I think, exemplifies an ongoing how to think with others, a moment of 'critical thought' between everyone inside the bus where circumstances and ideals are unable to fully dictate or determine human behavior and interaction.

My analysis reflects Lawrence Cremin's expansive definition of education

"...as the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, or sensibilities, and any learning that

results from the effort, direct or indirect, intended or unintended" (Cremin 1978: 567).

These take place beyond schools and universities. By assuming this definition, which essentially differentiates education from schooling, I am able to show that the processes of "critical thought" take place everywhere. This is important to lay out.

Thinking Together From Tajrish

Tajrish is a section of north Tehran Iranians considered liberal, modern and secular. The area is home to a handful of embassies, but also where expats lived. Clothes, food, and household items sold in Tajrish are imported and sold at prices most Iranians cannot afford. The streets are lined with mansions new and old, and men were known for driving expensive top-of-the-line European cars. There is a distinct social urge in Tajrish to dress in ways that challenge the Islamic regime. Instead of wearing the full veil, women wear the hijab to the bare minimum – tight fitting clothes and thick make-up. It is one of the few places in Tehran where women were not always reprimanded for smoking cigarettes in public areas like cafes and parks.

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The feeling of ease at the end of the bus ride stood in contrast to the spirit of frustration among my friends in north Tehran when I arrived in Tajrish. Many of my friends in north Tehran drove their own cars, rarely took public transportation, much else visit a part of south Tehran where I lived. Many Iranians would consider them, as they considered themselves, well educated. Some of them were engineers, dentists, architects, and artists, while some

worked in their family businesses or owned a business. They saw themselves as worldly, having traveled to North America, Europe or Southeast Asia, and marked themselves in ways identifiable as educated or "cultured". For example, they dressed in European-imported attire, sat with upright posture, spoke Persian with a distinct Tehran accent, also spoke either German, French or English, maintained impeccable eyebrows and complexion as a sign of self-respect.

Though not unique to the upper class, proper self-presentation for them was at the same time an expression of respect and appreciation for those in their company. They excelled in balancing between deference towards elders, mutual respectability towards their peers, and discreetness about their scholarly or financial feats. Like, my fellow bus riders, my friends had also become educated in these sensibilities to fare well in their daily lives among the upper class.

After having finished a master's degree from the best universities, like Tehran, Sharif, Shahid Beheshti, or Allameh Tabatabaei universities, my friends were expected to marry a properly educated and wealthy Iranian man with potential to own or inherit a family business. Another ideal possibility for them would be to accompany their future husbands outside Iran in completing a doctoral program. The pressure they experienced in order to be the same, if not better, than other educated Tehrani was immense. They saw themselves as educated yet 'unsuccessful' when these said expectations were not met.

One of the themes I coded for at this juncture is the hierarchy related to forms of education. The way schooling is valued while other forms of education are devalued is socially constructed and produced.

Because schooling in Iran is synonymous with mastering the sciences, thus technological innovation, schooling is valued over other forms of education such as religious, vocational, and informal apprenticeships. These attitudes and perceptions are tied to systems of power and competing ideologies.

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The second theme, the purpose of schooling, is borne directly out of the aforementioned. That is, schooling, as singled out from other forms of education, must then serve a specific purpose, again, tied to systems of power (See De Certeau 1997; Gramsci 1971; Ranciere 1999 & 2011). Universities are idealized as spaces where people learn 'how to' think critically together about their conditions; thus, be able to challenge the hegemony of ideology.

> *For instance, in Iran students learn how to think critically with others, not necessarily about the Islamic regime, but about American and European global domination. Iranian universities are meant to function as producers Iranian Shi'i citizens that are both scientific and revolutionary in defending the nation from western imperialism.*

I use the word *idealize* because "critical thought" must then be related to its utility, either in service of the state, capital and so on. What does utility of critical thought imply not just in Iran, but overall?

The third theme hinges on human agency – what people do with their education as an apparatus of the state. Here we see that for the the secular-leaning upper class in north Tehran what one does with an education is subject to assessment and social approval. This force risks undermining the purposes of higher education as an apparatus of the Islamic regime as I explain further.

My friends were not invested in becoming the future Shi'i revolutionary citizens the Islamic regime had hoped they would become through the schooling system designed by 1979 revolutionaries. In the company of university-educated Tehranis in different patogh (cafes frequented by people from distinct occupations), they talked about how friends have made it out of the country. Being educated or well traveled was not enough for them. They wanted to see Iran reach its greatest potential in technological advances and social freedoms. They felt hampered, and

they placed the blame on what they perceived as two tragedies – the Shah's oppressive rule and the 1979 Iranian revolution that followed. For them, learning how to think together in universities did not result in becoming revolutionaries. A successful higher education was, rather, tied to a checklist, that if fulfilled, would lead to a life that resembled their upper class counterparts in Europe and North America.

In this description, we see that when other ideologies grounded in political, social and economic affiliations compete for the social imaginary, Iranian schooling and higher education objectives are destabilized. Laying this out allows me to interrogate further the more difficult task of coding the following; what constitutes "Iran" for my friends in Tajrish, and what did they mean by technological advances and social freedoms? Who is not considered in their definitions? How? Who is enabled? How?

> *This brings me to my fourth theme – factors that facilitate. The hierarchical understanding of schooling, socioeconomic status and the exclusion of others enable the secular upper-class in the public sphere, as Taylor characterizes this (see Taylor 2007). That is, this idealization of higher education as spaces of critical thought overshadows the effects of exclusion.*

In Iran, the infrastructure for higher education cannot accommodate all university-age youth. Standardized entrance exams and interviews work to separate those who are meant to take a seat in a university classroom and those who are not. Many Iranians do not make it into universities.

Unlike my friends who came from well to do families and had resources that would guarantee their entrance to the best Iranian university classrooms, there are those from the lower socioeconomic classes and non-urban populations who are unable to compete for a seat in the best universities. They are unable to show their ability to 'maintain' the demands of the university and are excluded from that space in order to make room for those who exhibit required sensibilities. Here we can see that the university as a place where learning to think together

takes place is also, and more importantly, a space of exclusion. As meritocracy undergirds school participation, schooling stands as proof for the ability to think critically. Therefore, those who are excluded and then relegated to lesser forms of education are then 'spoken for' or assumed to be represented by those who are privileged to "learn how to think critically with others" in universities. Again, this is not unique to Iran.

This post is a part of Allegra's Summer 2015 Fieldnotes series. See earlier installments [here](#).

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