

ROUNDTABLE

When and Where Is Iran? Fragments of Ethnographic Work in Iran

Mazdak Tamjidi

Department of Anthropology, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.
Corresponding author. E-mail: mazdak@princeton.edu

A perfect railway station, according to Heidegger, is one that never fails to offer a train ready to depart when one walks in. Otherwise, the station becomes a site of boredom, an essential mood that one experiences as being dragged by time, held in limbo.¹ However, on a winter day in 1980 the railway station in Ahwaz was neither a perfect station nor a site of boredom. The station welcomed `Abbas with an uncanny scene of departed bodies when he walked in: “It was then that I truly realized that the war had begun.” A few months back, when Iraq dropped its first bomb on Kermanshah, that very first bomb hit Maryam’s neighborhood. Her parents were at work. Her little sister was injured. Through the echoes of explosions and screams, she too realized that something, something immense and unknown, had begun. I interviewed `Abbas, now in his sixties, and Maryam, now in her forties, several times at a small office in central Tehran. The office belonged to a talkative middle-aged man who was in the illegal business of selling wolves’ skins and talismans to the superrich.

About three years ago, before leaving Princeton to begin my dissertation research in Tehran, I intended to investigate the impact of international sanctions on the temporality of everyday practices and collective modes of “sense-making” in Iran. I proposed that the prospect of an economic breakdown under the sanctions had contributed to the formation of a new temporality in which, for the first time in postrevolutionary Iran, the preservation of the present had found a constitutive role in the ways in which people navigated their personal and collective lives and attempted to make sense of the world and their milieu. I planned to address how the experiences and expectations of my interlocutors, along with their actual life practices, were temporally constellated and historically transformed. To provide a comparative context, I was going to conduct ethnographic research at two field sites, Tehran and Zabol, a small city in the impoverished Sistan and Baluchistan province.

When I arrived in Tehran in February 2017, the economy seemed prosperous and the centrist Rouhani government was cheerful. Tehran looked glossier than ever, and the outbreak of a liberal lifestyle was to be seen everywhere, all thanks to the freshly achieved Iran nuclear deal and the lifting of suffocating economic sanctions. The emergence of technology companies such as Snapp (offering a service similar to Uber) and Digikala (Amazon’s equivalent) had significantly altered patterns of transportation and consumption in the capital city. It also took me a few months to get used to everyday encounters with several women without scarves in public spaces, exhibiting no apparent concern about it. Cafés and art galleries had sprung up in almost every alley and corner of central Tehran. Uptown, about a year after the nuclear deal was implemented, there were numerous brand new affluent restaurants and shopping malls celebrating the luminous days of the Iranian bourgeoisie. International travel was no longer a privilege for the few but rather had become a habit of the Tehrani middle class, thanks to high economic growth and a low inflation rate. It was cheaper and easier to plan a visit to Istanbul than a visit to Zabol, my other field site inside Iran.

At the same time, the everyday news about environmental crises, droughts, and sandstorms around the country was overwhelming. The Tehrani intelligentsia was preoccupied with debates on neoliberalism and nationalism. On the other hand, reformist newspapers and magazines close to the government were attacking the leftist university professors who, rather than celebrating a new era of economic growth and

¹Martin Heidegger, *The fundamental concepts of metaphysics*. (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2012).

partnership with the West, were criticizing neoliberal policies and cautioning against a new wave of nationalist movements. I soon realized that the predominant discursive frame of liberal versus conservative lifestyle that had been the central political struggle in postrevolutionary Iran had melted into thin air.

Three months after my arrival, the twelfth presidential election was held; the centrist Hassan Rouhani was reelected, defeating the right-wing candidate Ebrahim Raisi. Interestingly, the top slogans of Rouhani's campaign were temporal axioms. For instance, "With Rouhani to 2021, with Raisi to 1921" (*ba Rouhani ta 1400, ba Raisi be 1300*), implying that if Raisi was elected the country would be pushed a century back. In my pre-fieldwork talk I proposed that, in the context of an Iran surrounded by neighbors devastated and experiencing humanitarian interventions and civil wars, the temporal imagination of a progressive time that made a promising, wealthier, more modern future inevitable was compromised by the competing image of a dystopic future. Indeed, Rouhani's campaign was explicitly based on the danger of traveling back in time. He presented himself as a leader who, although he could not guarantee Iran's acceleration toward a future as a fully developed and successful country, was able to resist the combined backward pressures of regressive domestic forces and the West.

Levi-Strauss famously distinguished between hot (resilient to change) and cold (resistant to change) societies.² If I employed the same terminology, I would call Iran a boiling society, in which the currents of change were constantly disrupting the surface. Only a few months after the election, in December 2017, an unprecedented series of protests took place across the country. They began in Mashhad and spread rapidly into over seventy towns. Unlike in prior protests, such as those associated with the Green Movement in 2009, the urban middle class and reformist-inclined activists were minimally involved. Rather, the main body of protesters consisted of the unemployed youth in small towns. Their chants were a mix of explicitly anti-government, nationalist, and anti-corruption slogans. The protesters did not hesitate to fight back and use violence against the state forces. The protests were a shock, not only to the government, still celebrating the nuclear deal and the promising economic numbers, but also to the middle class of major cities, the political opposition in exile, and the Tehrani intelligentsia. Many viewed the protests with suspicion and cynicism. Although the protests were suppressed and subsided after a month, they forced the government to slow implementation of some of its harsh neoliberal policies, such as cutting the subsidies for petrol and flour.

Only a few months after the protests, the United States left the nuclear deal and sanctions were re-implemented by the US government. The prospect of economic growth vanished, and an unprecedented inflation rate reduced the value of the national currency by one-third. Thanks to the sanctions and the vulgar everyday threats of US officials, I witnessed an unparalleled sense of terror in the last year of my stay in Tehran. I personally witnessed the horror of moving back in time. I witnessed cafés, restaurants, theaters, and airports gradually emptying. I received phone calls from family members, friends, and interlocutors who had panicked upon hearing the intimidating news regarding the US government or the currency market, assuming that I might know what the future would bring.

Zabol, in which I hoped to conduct a significant portion of my ethnography, is a small city 1,000 kilometers from Tehran. The majority of the city's inhabitants are Fars and Shi'a, making Zabol a natural base for the central government in a region that, with a majority of Sunni Baloch descent, borders the unstable states of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Frequent sandstorms made visiting Zabol impossible for most of my stay in Iran. Flights to and from Zabol were regularly canceled, and the respiratory allergy that I had developed at the time prevented me from visiting the city during the long period of annual summer storms. Yet I attempted to network with Zabolis in Tehran and began following everyday news in the local media. Eventually, in fall 2018, I was able to visit the city. At the time of my first visit, I was relatively familiar with the history and political and economic dynamics of Zabol from my inquiries in Tehran. I knew that the city was largely impoverished and that many of the surrounding villages had become vacant after years of severe drought. Lake Hamun, once a thriving site for fisheries, agriculture, and wildlife, had been turned into a wasteland. Based on the discursive materials (social media posts, newspaper articles, etc.) produced by Zabolis, I was aware that they considered themselves and the city forgotten and demanded that the government pay attention to their situation. Even so, I was

²G. Charbonnier, *Conversations with Claude Levi-Strauss*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1970).

shocked when I first visited. I spent the first day attempting—and failing—to find the city center. I asked many where it was. When they replied “right here,” I could not believe that a city center was in such disrepair. The first day as I watched young boys trading buckets of petrol, I encountered a form of poverty and frustration that I had never come across in Iran. I felt so overwhelmed that I decided to return to Tehran the same day. However, because of the dust in the air and the low visibility, there was no flight available. In the following days in Zabol, as I got used to the poverty, things changed; ordinary life emerged from the apparent chaos and ruin.

Last spring, the seasonal floods brought life back to Lake Hamun and the dried lands of Zabol were finally relieved of their long thirst. As of now, Zabolis are celebrating the generosity of nature, even as Mother Nature’s generosity may be temporary or become excessive, with destructive floods spoiling the joy, as in so many other areas of the country.

“Is the US better than Tehran?” a kind retired man asked me in Zabol when I told him where I study. Because of the difficulty of traveling and living there, I decided to give Zabol a marginal place in my research. I realized that I would not be able to pursue “thick” ethnography there. Ironically, the Zabolis’ political claim to prosperity countered their marginalization in national discourse and the low priority assigned to their overwhelming problems. Nevertheless, my encounter with Zabol had me question the very temporal dynamics that I was describing in Iran. Where is Iran? Is it Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz or marginalized, forgotten cities like Zabol? It seems that temporalities in Zabol are bound to the seasonal floods and sandstorms as much as to presidential elections and international sanctions and agreements.

It is not very common for an ethnographic project to be about a country. A country is not an ethnographic research site. It is clearly too big to be covered by one researcher. Moreover, I used to think that being an Iranian, being an urban middle-class Shi’a-born Fars man, automatically entitled me to write about Iran and claim knowledge of it. In the course of my ethnographic research, my entitlement lost its transparency. I realized that my vision of Iran was bound to the hegemonic discourses of the center and the priorities of the urban middle class of large cities. How can I write about Iran then? What is the Iran that I am writing about? Grappling with these questions two years ago, I failed to come up with a straightforward grant application. I needed a concrete field site for my ethnography, a particular space or sociological group to work on. But at the same time, I had an intuition that Iran was in some way fundamental to my research and could not simply be avoided. Now, I consider the Iran that I am writing about to be not a political or spatial entity, but rather an element of experience and reflection, something that is being lived and experienced in radically different ways and that constitutes a multiplicity of times and spaces to inhabit.

Ethnography is a transformative experience for the ethnographer. However, this transformation comes at the price of preceiving the world in a spatial manner. Maybe it is not ethnography per se but anthropology that somehow pushes one to think, perceive, and objectify social phenomena spatially. Is anthropology a spatial practice? We are aware of Fabian’s critique of anthropological timelessness, the tendency to presume long-standing continuities in societies radically different from ours.³ However, I think that this might be a symptom of something more constitutive of the discipline. Anthropology is somehow deeply bound to the notion of space. It turns anything that it touches into space and spatiality.

“The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world. . . . The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed,” writes Foucault.⁴ I would argue that, in an era of environmental catastrophes, of vast displacement of people and minorities, of the revival of nationalism and xenophobia, and of rapid expansion and collapse of authoritarian regimes of free-market economy, we need to revitalize our old obsession with time. For decades, under the hegemonic discourse of development and globalization, the grand idea of progress made the temporal aspect of our being invisible and preestablished. Now that this grand idea is being questioned by social movements and

³Johannes Fabian, *Time and the other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁴Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowic, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no.1 (1986): 22–27.

unprecedented protests all around the world, we have an exceptional chance to reinvent time and rethink our relationship with the past, the present, and the future.

One expects schoolboys to be obsessed with superheroes, magical worlds, and sci-fi fantasies. And so they are. I attended history classes in Tehran, asking kids about their imaginings of Iran's history. I was curious to hear their historical narratives and the ways in which the narratives were structured. For my last question, I would leave the past behind and ask about the future: "How do you often imagine Tehran in its future? What does Tehran look like in your fantasies?" In every class I attended, without exception, the responses were of ruin and dystopia. The schoolboys tended to portray the future of Tehran in a way that resembled the present of Damascus, with, of course, aliens and Star Wars battles added to the *mise-en-scène*. If one is to understand what it means to be a child in Tehran, what it means to be human in our era, one needs to revitalize our old obsession with time.

"Why would they pay you to write about us, while doing their best to cripple our lives?" Mina asked me, suggesting that the institutional arrangement of my research does not make sense to her. Mina works at a private educational institution that trains children to achieve better results in the national university entrance exam (*konkur*). From her perspective, there is no clear distinction between Trump's government and Princeton University. They are both components of a huge, destructive machine. I have been asking Mina's question of myself over and over. What would be my positionality in this research? Whom would I be writing for? Shall I choose to write about matters that seem trivial and banal to those who live in Iran but are effortlessly intriguing to Western academia? The real difficulty for a so-called native anthropologist is to write in a way that intrigues both.