

Paper prepared for
The 7th Euroacademia International Conference
Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

Lucca, Italy
14 – 15 June 2018

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Art of presence: The challenge for recognition

An analysis of spontaneous street celebrations of Iranian youth

Abstract

Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution was a major shift in the cultural and public discourse. Having religion as the main source of inspiration for culture, the institutions were built, and the rituals were designed to establish a new set of values and beliefs.

Abdolkarim Soroush, (Mashayekhi & Farsoun, 1992, p. 6) the contemporary Islamic thinker has argued that the Iranian society can be characterized by three different yet coexisting cultures; national culture, religious culture and western culture. The shift in public discourse after the Islamic revolution, put some aspects of Iranian collective identity and culture under spotlight and promoted them with setting new institutions and rituals and neglected some of the aspects.

Many of the national oriented rituals, such as the carnivals, which were to cherish and celebrate the pre-Islamic heritage, were removed or faded from the official calendar and the street carnivals became limited only to few rallies in some occasions such as anniversary of the victory of the Islamic revolution. The official narration of political culture was built based on the new ideology and different groups regardless of age, financial or religious status, had to be assimilated into this homogenous discourse of political culture.

But what was the resonance of such identity construction, and how did the society respond to this process?

Using the concepts of encroachment in everyday life and art of presence by *Asef Bayat* in this part of my research, I will try to trace the challenges of hegemonic political culture and the society's reaction (negotiation) for recognition through some of the highlighted rituals over the last decade.

Key words

Political culture, collective identity, carnivals, encroachment, public space

Introduction

"Presence" no longer implies merely the presence; especially when it comes to the societies in middle east, where the daily life is bonded with politics in one way or the other. ¹ based on such understanding, the presence in public space, the agents of the field, and the related occasions are meaningful concepts to be discussed and analyzed. even if this presence would not be followed by a clear social or political demand. In this paper, I will try to unfold one of the hidden dimensions of presence in public sphere which is gaining recognition.

This paper is part of my PhD thesis, which is on the alternative performance of rituals; the rituals which are marked in formal calendar as indicators of the official political culture, and the resonance of the political culture in the society; the way people perceive, perform and remember those rituals.

Throughout the ethnography of the selected rituals, I will try to trace how the society challenges or negotiates the formal narration of political culture and understand what the social consequence of this challenge would be.

presence is this paper refers to the spontaneous, collective and carnivalesque attendance of people after some nationwideⁱⁱ victories. They were selected among many street attendances because of the level of international reflection as well as their avant-garde roles in the societal dynamics.

The main question is how the young generation use the collective presence and street celebration in public space for recognition?

Islamic revolution was beginning of a new chapter in political culture of the Iranian society. The spiritual elements of the revolution's discourse were so strong that could overshadow the other aspects. Imam Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution, metaphorized the Islamic revolution to the holy battle of Imam Hossein in Karbala in 680 ADⁱⁱⁱ and called it in different speeches the battle against the Satan.

For that reason, prior to many other things, the cultural policies as well as the structure of cultural institutions changed to rebuild the public discourse. One of these institutions, which was subject of major change, was the calendar and the form and essence of the collective rituals. (management of time). Also, streets and the famous spots which were politically used and occupied in the course of Islamic revolution and had its mark on the collective memory of people, became the territory of the authority and any presence in public space or participating in a public performance had to be carefully observed and authorized. Public space changed its social function over time and many public performances and celebrations such as carnivals or the street music were common before the revolution vanished^{iv}.

Theoretical concepts

Formation of a public sphere in Iran in most of the political periods confronted barriers. Mostly because of the essence of an authority and the extended government.

The spirit and philosophy of "street" as part of the public sphere and the concept of presence in middle east, do not imply the same meaning as they do in European context. Pedestrians, cafe houses, carnivals in all its examples, indicate that how public sphere in western culture has been developed and found its place in everyday life.

But how the Public space became the battlefield between the ordinary and the authority. Asef Bayat discussed this with the concept of **encroachment** of the ordinary (and poor) in his piece, street politics. (2010,17) This encroachment challenged the strict codes and regulations.

Historically after the revolution and after the ceasefire of 1988 and end of the 8-year war with Iraq, a period of economic development started. Cities developed, and part of this urban development could be traced on streets. Economically, many of the workers who immigrated to the big cities to find their fortune, stayed marginalized and ended up on having temporary street market jobs. (1997,28) These street sellers were not authorized by the state, but nobody could deny their presence on every corner. Streets and pedestrians soon became the scene of confrontation between authorities who wanted to control the public and those who were challenging and interrupting the public with their presence.

The other level was emergence of the street artists. First painters became part of the cultural map of the city and much later on, came the street musicians. The Presence of these groups in public like many other daily activities, could change the morphology and face of the city. It went on so much that one cannot draw a picture from the contemporary Tehran without having the street artists and street sellers^v.

Looking the Tehran's photos in new media such as Instagram, one would notice to what extent, the encroachment of the ordinary and especially youth changed the structure of the public. the old houses with balconies, pedestrians and allies in old parts of the city are occupied by the youth' present and their

encroachment. culture cafés, street foods and local amateur musicians are part of the effort for recognition, existence and accomplishment their rights for being part of the street life. These concepts are part of what Asef Bayat called “social non-movement”, or just life movement. (2010,3)

Social non-movement is a concept that have been downrated by the western academia. They still focus more on the classical social theories, classical definition of social movements and classical forms of protests. (2010,4) The social dynamics of youth, the creative ways of encroachment and negotiation and the change they are acquiring is hidden in the social and political studies just like mainstream media. The orientalist approach towards eastern societies overlook the eastern societies, calling them either Islamic world or middle east, which pre-assumes the citizens of such societies not agents of change but subject of change from outside who have to be rescued. But in social studies and especially when we discuss different societies with different morale, different, different collective values and different historical background we may consider that we cannot always implement the same social theory and then expect the society to react in the same way that another society reacted^{vi}. In the time periods that the sense of collective identity is so strong, one of the main challenges for people and especially youth subculture is the recognition of the self on the side of the strong sense of collective identity and keeping the individual narrations alive. one of the ways to pursue the idea of recognition is by the politics of life and everyday negotiation, such as being presence in off-limits areas are. Some of the unexpected victories in the course of last 4 years were amongst the opportunities that younger generation have used to indicate their existence, sense of individuality or personal identity.

The lifestyle movements, different expression of self and appearance in recent years indicate that the process of the identity construction could be challenged especially among the younger generation.

To discuss it from another perspective, public space as a social space constitutes the Streets as is social fields. It's the space for showing the power positions. It is under the control of the daily rhythms, Normative rules and actors who are some strangers just “passing”. Suddenly the game changes in a collective attendance, and the everydayness becomes subject to a sudden change. Those individuals and strangers with no face, suddenly became the agents, occupying a position or status and perform. (Bourdieu, 1977)The authority should react because street in Iranian political culture has not been defined as a space for communication, dialogue or for celebration. There are certain spaces designated and assigned for such occasions. Even in aftermath of political protests the representative suggested that we need to assign a certain place for people to show their dissatisfaction. Street battle is in the political culture strongly disgraced and any sort of collective presence, even to praise a national victory, could be challenging for both sides; for the performers to be out of everyday order for a while and for power to indicate the control of the public like control of everything else is still in hand.

Street: conquest of an off-limits

“Street” is highlighted in Middle East; it is the symbol of change and symbol of power and symbol of resistance. (Bayat, 2010, pp. 161-169) Street in societies such as Iran, Turkey and Egypt are somewhere that the youth act, protest, fall in love, live and practice their sentiments.

1979 Islamic revolution and the 8year war with Iraq, politicized the concept of street. Any kind of assembly could have been labelled political. Especially in the course of war (1980-1988) and by returning the corpse of martyrs, the streets became the arena for the public funerals the streets were filled with families and neighbors of those who sacrificed their live for their country. Aside from the rituals in praising the martyrdom and mourning ceremony of Muharram every year but there were no room for the other street celebration.

In 1998 Iran national football team was qualified for the first time after 20 years.^{vii} It was a big turning point in the contemporary history of Iran. First, it was the first national happiness after end of war, which everybody could feel associated with. Some media called it the epic moment for every Iranian alive. whoever is not old enough to remember this day, misses one the epic moments of Iran's history. It was the first collective return of

people to public and for a reason different than political protest or public grief. It remained in the collective memory of people after 20 years.^{viii} It depoliticized the concept of presence in public.

In societies with solid ideology and solid political cultures, any carnivals, celebrations or street attendance of individuals aside from occasions which have already been set in the official calendar are not allowed or not being accepted and those occasions are to practice certain values and common beliefs. However personal identities (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995) especially the youth subculture would still grow unauthorized or parallel or in the shadow of the official discourse; in this way they utilize the existed opportunity to express their selves and their different identity or cultural being.

In the example of the 1998 world cup qualification, the unexpected celebration was the first time that many types of people, having different habitus appeared on the streets in a collective celebration. They used a field which was a “national victory” and celebrated in a way which is not appreciated in the official culture. The carriage of flag, painting it on faces, having the both sexes singing along and dancing without segregation and the idea of pop music on the streets were something that could only happen in an unexpected and unplanned occasions. It was beginning of a pattern. To use national victories, for celebration and for collective exhibition otherness especially for those who had other sources of values or culture.

The strategic importance of this epic victory and the celebration afterward was that it became a pattern for those with other sources of cultural values and personal identities different from the constructed collective identity to celebrate life via football; It was safe. It was nonpolitical and with combination of football, music and street, they could exhibit their presence in the social field reclaim the youthfulness and the fun^{ix}, and owe the street even though temporarily.

This celebration and other similar unplanned spontaneous events after that, may not fit the classical western Bakhtinian definition of carnivals (Ravenscroft & Gilchrist, 2009), yet they could be associated with that in some ways; One of the objectives of carnivals are to challenge the authority and the spontaneous presence of people and the flow of energy and emotion into streets, which had its own codes and regulations were positively a new challenge public.

Such street celebrations, repeated itself in the next football great victories; victory against the US in 1998 world cup and in other qualifications in 2006, 2014 and 2018. Even after a game with Argentine despite the fact that Iran lost the game, people again flew on streets and celebrated the honor and patriotism of the national team.

These spontaneous occasions became the frames for the social actors to take part in, find the like-minded other actors and practice their own sense of self and cultural identity (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995).

One could also look at the 1998 street celebration as the belated celebration of the youth generation ((Bayat, 2010, p. 7)) in victory of Sayed Mohammad Khatami as elected president. Using the spontaneousness and somehow timelessness, the urban youth could celebrate the new chapter of political arena on the side of a national football victory, freely on the “streets”. This occasion made it possible for people to learn how they can be seen, they can be recognized and how they can belong, and celebrate their own version of happiness after political conquests, peacefully yet out of the institutional authorization.

During the last 4 years there were some occasions aftermath of political turning points in public space. Dissimilar to the 1998 national football team’s qualification, these other events were not “national celebration” or just youth searching for recognition and visibility, rather they were the efforts for recognition and visibility in another level. In the course of 2013 presidential election campaigns, in which president Rouhani was elected, his first and most prominent promise was making a “nuclear deal” with the west. In his 2013 election campaign’s speeches, He said nuclear energy is the undeniable right of our people but also living life is deniable right of our people. We want to have dialogue with the world, not to be isolated.^x This was a clear shift from the discourse of the government. People especially youth felt It had been so long and they were not only frustrated of the economic sanctions but just also the unfinished negotiations. Rouhani with the promises of having the political discourse shifted from the dominated one. could grasp the attention of urban youth who were feeling culturally

subordinated. His discourse seemed to be the continues of the reform discourse of Khatami. Although he did not accept any label and did not campaign directly under a name or a party, but the speeches were designed to constitute at least partially the need and demands of the urban youth and 3d generation. His election was seen as a victory and people marched outside celebrating the victory of their discourse. in another word we can say the election was a referendum on Nuclear deal. the main spontaneous street attendance happened after the nuclear deal. The public was divided to supporters and opponents of the deal.

The observation on the Persian channels outside of Iran and the social media, indicates that the negotiation progress was followed live by people to see if the final result is out. After making the deal the very unexpected occurred. Suddenly the silence was broken, and the streets were filled with the car horns in the form similar to what happened after football qualification. By looking at the pictures, it is difficult to recognize which one belong to the football celebration and which one to the others unless with hearing the slogans or looking carefully to signs and symbols. Aftermath of nuclear deal. Youth carried funny notes and jokes from social media^{xi}, carrying flag of Iran, pictures of Rouhani and Javad Zarif in a heroic way.

It was not just celebrating a deal; it was a clear manifestation of us versus others in frame of an unplanned celebration and it was brought on the “streets”; those who celebrated on streets were representing a discourse. they were supporters of political development and dialogue and with west and they felt for long they were alienated from the official cultural discourse and consequently they look for a space to feel belong to. Street, the space of normative rhythm and the passage of ordinaries, suddenly turned to the symbolic scene of sending the message of recognition.

In such occasions, there are highlighted places in the collective memory of the society, where this is more likely for people to gather/ celebrate/ protest. They have the traces of history and signify the togetherness, union and achievements and it makes them the spaces people feel more belong to in social unconsciousness.

Many of these streets have just certain spatial features, or they are geographically easier accessible for people joining from different parts of the city. For instance, *Valiasr* street, the longest streets of the Middle East have been used a lot in the last decades political and non-political presence of people. *Vliasr* starts from the northern spot of Tehran and end in Central train station in the southernmost spot of the city and in the collective unconscious of the city it is the connection of south and north. In pre-2009 election campaigns, it was used by the youth in a carnival called a *human chain of hope*, where people stood from the beginning to the end of the street holding hands as the symbol of togetherness no matter from where or belong to which geographical point.

Enghelab and *azadi* square were the key spots in the days leading to the Islamic revolution. They are connected by a street called *azadi* street and ever since the Islamic revolution they were frequently used in the lyric literature and poets. They are recalled by the accumulation of people’s presence over time. In revolution, in war, and later in claiming the collective happiness and collective youthfulness and even leisure in the way they want. (Bayat,62)

Conclusion

This interaction of the society and different subcultures with the state’s political culture by the society can be best framed within the rituals. (Goethals, 1997)

In my research I work on three dimensions of rituals; Spatial, temporal and personal or heroic.

Specifically, I work on how people perform the written calendric rituals differently use existing opportunities and frames, to perform and exhibit their sense of self, sentiment and identity in forms of unplanned carnivals in public space, which in hegemonic political culture is not designated to applause the profane but is a place for religious and approved rituals.

In the countries where the culture is not carnivalesque, or political culture is predefined as a homogenous matter, streets become remarkable scene and frame for ordinary citizens to send symbolic messages to the power. celebration especially in an unplanned manner and having the public space under control, can give the individuals different positions in the society’s power hierarchy.

What they achieved within the years and throughout their sudden presence can be mentioned as follow:

1. Every performance of individuals gathering in public even without a political meaning, is a step forward in the path of democratization. It keeps the social dynamic in balance and changes the position of citizens from passive individuals to agents who can find the other likeminded and be part of the reality of their social field even without being part of a network or community. Street presence/celebrations change the surrounding social space in a way that it is not just a strange geographical territory or a name, but it becomes part of people's narratives and the collective memory of them from their city and make them visible and identifiable. It is a liberating act which brings back the Leisure and the elements of pop culture in public and reclaim what the society thinks it was missing.

2. These festive presences also sent significant message of recognition to the hegemonic culture discourse inside and the hegemonic media discourse outside. It changed the image of Iranian streets and public and showed how the solid and controlled regulations can be negotiated. It deconstructed the cliché about Middle Eastern streets; where traditions are dominated and there are no other voices and exhibited a non-political and non-violent image.

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ⁱThe description is borrowed from the title of the Asef Bayat's latest book "Life as politic".

ⁱⁱI have called this nationwide and not national, because the victory of the national football team is different than that of one candidate in presidential election; while in first the whole country regardless of the belief are celebrating the victory, in second, part of society feels proud of the big achievement and part of the society feels sad over "losing".

ⁱⁱⁱHusayn Ibn Ali is the grandson of prophet Muhamad and the third Shiite Imam and one of the most influential figures among Shiites

^{iv}The national celebrations in the form of carnivals were often praised by Shah. The revolution was a shift in the political culture discourse as well as the implemented rituals; carnivals such as 2500 years celebration of Persian empire or street celebration of rituals such as *Yalda* and *charshanbe soori*.

^v The metro sellers are a new emerged social group, mostly women appear in metro once the journey begins and sell different productions such as make up, clothes, food and snacks, hand-picked herbs and so on.

^{vi} The study does not necessarily advocates local or global implementation of social theories, but it suggests enjoying the sensitive approach when it comes to different cultural contexts.

^{vii} Documentary of *sokoote E Toolani*(long silence) (Asgharzadeh, 2000)

^{viii} Every year on the 8th of Azar, the day that Iran won in Australia, there are hashtags on twitter with Melbourne epic or Iran Australia with which people share their memory of this day and you can trace its strong remark on the collective memory. on Twitter Many remember to have pretended to be sick, so they do not go to school or to work. The video of the last minutes of the game, the reporter and the details of the game are all among the things people are still talking about.

^{ix} One can follow this collective effort for leisure. After the last Earthquake in Tehran on 20.12.2017 which reportedly was not followed by casualties or serious damage, many of those who evacuated their homes with the fear of probable aftershock, made it as a get together with neighbors in local parks or alleys. One YouTube video was captured: "if dancing and happiness is off-limits, people would dance even after an earthquake". Available at <http://news.gooya.com/2017/12/post-10342.php>

^x The speeches in the time of election campaigns are collected from the social media (Instagram and twitter) of president Rouhani

^{xi} Such as "now the party is on! What do we wear?" or having prime minister Zarif praised "Pride of Iran"

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