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The ‘Sweet Spot’ between Submission and Subversion: Diaspora, Education and the Cosmopolitan Project

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Introduction

Diasporic living is necessarily ‘diasporic praxis’. That is, in their everyday living diasporans explicitly or implicitly implicate, critique, expose, define, subvert, sometimes even extend, the integrity and hegemony of *both* the nation-state and the diaspora. Diasporic praxis, then, is a double-edged sword always with the potential to work in two directions towards inclusivity and exclusivity – cosmopolitanism and essentialism. But I nonetheless believe it to be an extremely important capacity of diasporic living, firstly because regardless of the direction in which the sword cuts, ‘being diasporic’ always implies a unique mode of agency; but more importantly because in the right circumstances diasporic praxis can provide vital impetus and *concrete tools* for the ongoing journey towards a cosmopolitan (i.e. more equal, inclusive, reflexive and globally oriented) future. This chapter is about these issues, and about the difficult but pressing question of how we might begin to identify such concrete tools and ‘harness’ their potential. It takes the view that diasporic communities and diasporic living are a normal and permanent feature of the world and is thus interested in bringing their modes of agency to bear upon critical social questions regarding diversity and equality particularly through education. In other words, although diasporic communities are often erroneously viewed as *problems* in debates around diversity, one of the arguments of this chapter is that they in fact hold key solutions, and any serious attempt at finding solutions must be equally interested in what diasporic communities ‘are doing’ and how their actions engage wider societal structures.

A key issue in this context is cooperation between various actors/stakeholders in the global arena. And as Carment and Sadjed suggest in the introduction to this volume, our very understanding of global cooperation needs to be reconceptualized to include diasporas and the advantages they offer. In this chapter I am interested in a particular mode of cooperation between certain diasporic and host-national organizations. As I explore below, this form of cooperation is intriguing because it is the result of a set of circumstances, and produces a set of outcomes, which neither the diasporic nor the national organization can fully control. As

such, it allows us to revisit the debate around the relationship between diasporas and the nation-state and move it forward by focusing on some of the possibilities for cosmopolitanism which arise from their interaction.

Much has been said in recent years about the challenges which the ‘global postmodern’ is posing at various levels for the nation-state, seen usually as a top-down, ideologically proscriptive entity. And diasporas have featured prominently in that literature. Since the mid-1990s, diasporic communities have been seen – both theoretically and empirically – as the very embodiment of the problematization of the logic of the national; as the main arbiters and perhaps the best agents of alternative models of living. Theories have ranged from Gilroy’s declaration that diasporas may spell the end of nation-states, to the by-now-famous ideas about hybridity, new ethnicities, third-space, and so on (Appadurai 1996; Bhabha 1996; Clifford 1994; Gilroy 1987; Hall 2000). However, there is also compelling evidence which alerts us to the still predominant power of nation-states in the configuration of human living and experience across the globe (cf. Holton 2011). This is mainly because the logic and hegemony of the nation-state – thanks not least to the violent expansionist projects of the modern West – have over the last few centuries been very successful in ‘nationalising’ the globe; and because all of us, even diasporas, are to some extent subject to the social, political and legal apparatuses and structures of the nation-states in which we reside. A third dimension in this debate is the equally important reminder from within diaspora studies that some diasporic groups can be every bit as essentialist and exclusivist as any nation-state (Anthias 1998). In such cases, diasporic groups utilise their transnational connections and citizenships, and all the advantages these afford (perhaps we could call this their ‘diaspora capital’), to influence or radically alter the politics of home and host nation-states in their favour (cf. Kapur 2004; Axel 2008).

The literature is right to highlight the conflictual relationship between diasporas and the nation-state and to draw attention to and critique the myopic and essentialist tendencies rife in both. However, a problem with these debates is that not enough attention is paid to instances or processes of interaction/cooperation between diasporas and nation-states. And I argue that this is a necessary move if we are to seriously challenge those essentialist tendencies. The first step in doing this is to understand that – at least for now – the *settlement* of a diasporic community in a host nation-state is deeply significant. To paraphrase Tololyan (2007), the logic of the sedentary is a persistent feature (and desire) in people’s migrations; and diasporic

communities rely on ongoing engagement with the homeland¹ as well as the civic spaces which host nation-states provide to continually define and assert themselves. Thus, the nodes, as Tololyan calls them, between the connections are of crucial importance. Put differently, the activities of diasporic communities, many of which are transnational in nature, depend very much on local settlement to become meaningful and to have any social, political or legal manifestation. As such, diasporas are not so much about dispersion or return. In fact, subsequent generations may have no recollection of the former and no desire for the latter. Rather, they are about the practices and discourses – which do not belong fully in either home or host country – produced by those generations as settled citizens within ‘host’ nation-states.

Having established the importance of settlement and locality, we can begin to inquire more intently into those practices and discourses and examine how diasporic communities engage and cooperate with the local and national structures of their ‘host’ societies. This in turn provides an opportunity to explore the potentially transformative role that diasporic communities and individuals are playing in the contemporary world in terms of undoing nationalistic and ethnic hegemonies and cosmopolitanizing human societies. Of interest, therefore, is mainly the question of what diasporas *do* (cf. Raman 2003), given that ‘what they do’ is always significant for social life at ethnic, national and transnational levels.

I argue that there are some practices through which diasporic communities continually resist and challenge the power of home and host nation-states on the one hand and their own potential essentialisms on the other whilst maintaining some sort of a relationship with those positions. I also argue that such practices and modes of interaction are of crucial significance to the project of cosmopolitanization generally; and that identifying and studying them allows us to ‘harness’ and redeploy their potential. Using a case study from my ongoing research among UK Iranians, I will analyse what I have called ‘diasporic education’ as an example of such diasporic practice. Diasporic education refers to recent pedagogic and curricular activities and logics in Iranian supplementary schools which due to social and historical shifts engage with myopic national and diasporic positions in the way described above. They are also always-already transnationally produced and globally-oriented. They thus point towards an important inter-relationship between the local, the national and the transnational centred on the particular activities of the diaspora. I aim to show that these activities and interactions open up a ‘sweet spot’ between submitting to and subverting both nationalist and diasporic

¹ Gaibazzi’s chapter in this volume shows that the home society as well as those who ‘stay behind’ play a far more central and productive role in the life of the diaspora than we may have previously appreciated.

essentialism. As we will see with the case of diasporic education, the sweet spot is pregnant with the energy and concrete tools required to challenge extant hegemonic practices and logics in a more explicit and systematic way. That is, the social and cultural practices which ‘enter’ the sweet spot have their excessive nationalism and diasporicity ‘stripped away’ rendering them cosmopolitan. A more radical implication of my argument is that being diasporic is not only about asserting and living a diasporic identity (cf. Clifford 1994) – and perhaps it should not be studied and theorized as such. Rather, being diasporic – a normal/constant feature of human life – is potentially the most potent tool and logic available for gradually undoing said hegemonies and essentialisms as we move towards a cosmopolitan future.

Towards Cosmopolitanization via ‘Stripping Away’

Nation-states can no longer lay exclusive claim to or fully control all the processes that take place within their borders. Nor do those borders have the power – if they ever fully did – to act as hermetic seals. They have little choice but to let in all kinds of flows and movements, some of which are regarded as ‘pollutants’ – and not just environmental – by national ideologies. This is largely the consequence of globalization. That is to say, globalization also acts inside nation-states. Beck (2002) calls this cosmopolitanization. And in this way, ‘globality’ reaches and touches the bodies, minds and souls of everyone – even those vehemently opposed to it.

Beck’s notion of cosmopolitanization differs substantially from any definition we might derive from the modern European bourgeoisie. It is instead predicated upon being self-critical and is characterised by a ‘dialogic imagination’ which

...is aware of the clash of cultures and rationalities within one’s own life, the ‘*internalized other*’. The dialogic imagination corresponds to the coexistence of rival ways of life in the individual experience, which makes it a matter of fate to compare, reflect, criticize, understand, combine contradictory certainties. (2002: 18, original emphasis)

Thus, as opposed to the monologic imagination of the nation-states which constantly strives to exclude the otherness of the other, cosmopolitanization very much includes all kinds of otherness. More specifically, for Beck the cosmopolitan (citizenship of two worlds – *cosmos* and *polis*) comprises five dimensions:

1. including the otherness of nature;
2. including the otherness of other civilizations and modernities;

3. including the otherness of the future;
4. including the otherness of the object;
5. overcoming the (state) mastery of (scientific, linear) rationalization.

While the first three relate to external factors, the last two are internal to the subject (ibid.).

Beck's contention is that the implication of cosmopolitanism in this sense (i.e. globalization from within) is a pluralization of nation-state borders, or an implosion of the dualism between the national and the international. This means that all sorts of cultural, social, political and economic borders operating within and between nation-states become increasingly challenged and redrawn. Furthermore, the incongruence of borders leads to what Beck describes as 'a legitimation crisis of the national morality of exclusion' (ibid.: 19) and poses critical questions about the rationale for national hierarchies as well as for how we understand, experience and deploy our sense of responsibility. This, I think, is a hugely important point, for it underscores the fact that over the past couple of centuries nation-states have hijacked and 'nationalized' intrinsically human capacities such as feeling responsible. Instead of experiencing and deploying this capacity globally, most people's absolute sense of responsibility extends only as far as their country's border. Why should this continue to be the case? And why should powerful groups within arbitrarily demarcated geo-political spaces have the ability to shape the lives of so many others – often through exclusion, stigmatization, persecution and exploitation?

These and many similar questions challenge the logic of the national at its very core. So much so, I think, that they render it untenable in any serious consideration of a more egalitarian, less harmful future. But such a challenge raises further questions. Beck talks about the importance of having cosmopolitan principles, norms and memories which gain expression through the law – he uses the transnationalization of the memory of the Holocaust as an example. But the most important question must surely be: how? How, that is, do we mount any *serious* challenge to the hegemonic structures of nation-states while – at least for now – we depend on those very structures to mount any sort of challenge? What if those structures suddenly decide that they have had enough of our challenges and shut us down – as is indeed the case in many countries? I think we can get at these questions by posing another about the Holocaust example which Beck draws attention to: why – as others have also asked – has the memory of the Holocaust, arguably much more than other episodes of genocide and ethnic cleansing, been so successfully transnationalized and cosmopolitanized? This is in no

way meant to detract from the horror of the Nazi atrocities against Jews; nor do I think there is anything to be achieved from a comparison of scales of violence and bloodshed. What I am interested in is examining whether a particular type of interplay between the national and the diasporic is able to produce circumstances *conducive to* cosmopolitanization, and if so, whether we can make this explicit.

The case of the Holocaust – how it became so prominent especially in the US – is indeed instructive. Not surprisingly, it manages to sharply divide opinions among Jews and non-Jews, Zionists and anti-Zionists, alike (cf. Finkelstein 2000; Novick 1999). Novick has talked about how collective memories such as that of the Holocaust lose or gain significance at certain times and become redefined according to the felt needs of a given generation. And Finkelstein has located the ‘Holocaust industry’ as a powerful force in American and Israeli politics. Both agree that the Holocaust has come to feature so prominently in American consciousness not so much because of the event itself or any links it may have to notions of trauma, but because of certain types of representation and interaction between American Jews and the American nation-state and its institutions and industries. From this perspective, whatever the reality of the Holocaust, its entanglement in national and minority politics and culture makes it emblematic of exactly the excessive forms of nationalism and diasporicity which I mentioned above. However, it cannot be denied that the Holocaust is also significantly about persecution and suffering as well as the human capacity to kill indiscriminately. It is about resistance and hope, too. Once we strip away the disagreements and accusations, which seem to me to be almost entirely related to excessive nationalism and diasporicity, that is where we end up. Therefore, the fact that a certain set of social, political, cultural and historical processes have coalesced to give particular prominence to the Holocaust in powerful countries such as the US and the UK is in the context of this chapter not so much important because it answers the ‘why the Holocaust?’ question. It is more important for looking at its prominence ‘after the fact’ and asking: how were the specificities of nationalism and diasporicity stripped away to leave us with something that is deeply relevant to all human beings everywhere – something which transcends nation-states and ethnic groups and has the power to influence the ways those assemblages live their lives in political, legal, social and cultural arenas?

In order for the Holocaust to gain common recognition and form the basis of common experience first at national and then at transnational levels the event itself has necessarily had to be disconnected from sub-ethnic, ethnic and national specificities. Novick has described it

as a ‘common denominator’ and a ‘consensual symbol’ which could only have come about in a “‘folk Judaism” – less bound by tradition and less scrupulous about theological consistency” (1999: 200). This does not mean that when diverse school children in the UK today talk about the Holocaust they are unaware of its particular links to German Jews during the 1930s and 1940s, or that specific ethnic and religious groups (not least Jews) can commemorate the event in their own unique ways; it means, rather, that the event has been decoupled *enough* from, and does not lend itself to being fully claimed by, any particular ethic, religious or national set of ideologies or practices. So, whether it happened through a historical accident or ideological and financial manipulation, a rather serendipitous by-product has been this ‘stripping away’ of excessive nationalism and diasporicity.

Crucially, this has taken place mainly within the educational and cultural spheres of multicultural nation-states such as the USA. The key words in that sentence are equally significant. Diasporic communities, in general, have more and easier access to host nations’ educational and cultural sectors than to political and financial ones. It is interestingly also in those very spheres that the host society ‘values’ them – where they ‘enrich’ the national culture and must be given space to ‘be themselves’ – citizens with a (non-threatening) difference. This, we are told, is the necessary logic (or price) of living in a multicultural democracy. I argue that it is in this political approach to educational and cultural ‘exchange’ that ‘stripping away’ happens. Here, a ‘sweet spot’ is opened up where the national and the diasporic find themselves in a potentially uncomfortable position: they have no choice but to listen to one another and to make some concessions. Sure: after the exchange they may tell themselves that all their forms and institutions are still intact; that their integrity has not been compromised at all. But the reality is that once any event, practice or belief enters this sweet spot and undergoes the necessarily resulting ‘stripping away’ – as indeed has been the case with the Holocaust – it will become forever transformed, and open to ongoing transformation. It can no longer be completely claimed by any nation-state or diasporic entity, and can thus be reclaimed, recreated, re-experienced and redeployed by all humanity.

The Iranian Diaspora in the UK: Excess and Engagement

It strikes me as a foolhardy undertaking to even attempt a detailed overview of the UK Iranian diaspora given the vast heterogeneity of that group and the limits of this chapter.² UK Iranians will serve here mainly as an example, a case study which derives its usefulness from

² For a detailed coverage including demographic information see Gholami 2015.

the fact that it is (1) replete with what I have called excessive diasporicity (mainly related to issues of secularism and Islam); (2) it actively tries to engage Britain (the host country) along a number of educational and cultural axes; and crucially (3), sweet spots are now becoming more and more commonplace. This section will, therefore, look at the Iranian diaspora in these three dimensions, focusing in particular on emerging models of Iranian ‘supplementary’ education as a way to exemplify processes of stripping away and the coalescence of a sweet spot.

Secularism and Islam

It is widely known that the Iranian diaspora largely owes its existence to Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution. The particular events and currents of the revolution, their history and their subsequent developments are all essential for having any sort of understanding of Iranian diasporic living. Chief among them, of course, is Shi`ism and its contested social, political and cultural role. During the revolution, Shi`ism became more than anything a focal point, a symbol of Iranian national unity which drew together vastly heterogeneous social and political groups and positions. It is important to remember that many of the factions/groups who ‘bought into’ the unifying clout of Shi`ism did not do so out of religious belief or theological agreement, but rather pragmatically found in Shi`ism a force and discourse powerful enough to mobilize the country against the heavy-handed and pro-West rule of the monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (cf. Keddie 2003; Spellman 2004). As such, although post-revolution discourse has tended to cast the whole issue as a conflict between Islam and Western secularism (and so has the West), the conflict was in fact primarily about social inequality, the lack of political plurality, and felt cultural misrepresentation. Nonetheless – and owing to the fact that post-revolution Iran became an explicitly Islamic state; and the fact that the pre-revolution elite who left Iran were overwhelmingly secular royalists and were followed by many other secular or non-Muslim groups – social, political and cultural contestations and conflicts have continually centred on the place of Islam and secularism in Iranian life.

It is, among others, for this reason that I find the concept of secularism less than useful in the Iranian context. Especially in the Iranian diaspora, ‘secularism’ has come to denote a set of discourses, practices and sensibilities which foremost problematize Islam, not other religions. In other words, much of Iranian diasporic living – whether explicit or implicit; whether important or prosaic – proceeds through a problematization, even detestation of ‘Islam’; and

in many cases, it aims to totally eradicate the Islamic from the Iranian (or ‘the Persian’). I call this non-Islamiosity (Gholami 2015). Examples of non-Islamiosity range from seemingly mundane daily activities which people engage in without necessarily being fully conscious of them – such as children who were born and raised in Britain and have very little knowledge of Persian history and language performing subjectivities of ‘being free’ and ‘having fun’ in ways which presuppose the long history of the problematization of Islam in Iranian modernity – to seemingly more calculated and serious political expressions – such as *all* Islamic events being excluded from diasporic media; and famous TV personalities and intellectuals slandering Islam on air using extremely crude and offensive language³ (see *ibid*). Non-Islamiosity, in this sense, is a considerable force of social and personal transformation in the Iranian diaspora today (and I believe its impact is increasingly being felt inside Iran as well). In the UK, for example, its negative representations and social exclusions are influencing the ways in which devout Iranian Shi`a live and experience their religious identities (*ibid.*). By the same token, non-Islamiosity is also being used by many Iranians as a mechanism for self-making. It is thus a productive, liberatory modality of power which allows subjects to fashion their desired selves by helping them to subdue/defuse their ‘residual’ religious inculcations. As such, it opens up new spaces in which subjects can live ‘free’ lives.

In all these ways, non-Islamiosity is diasporically excessive. That is, it deeply implicates and is implicated within particular understandings of *Iranian* living – its contested terrains of culture, language, heritage, history, politics, social organization, and so on. It is about being or becoming Iranian by way of a problematization of Islam. A non-Islamious identity may be open to non-Iranian ways of living; but this inclusiveness is far from the inclusive dimensions of Beck’s cosmopolitanism. It is probably far more strategic and is predicated upon realising for the subject a particular, desired experience of Iranian-ness. As I have already alluded to, it is my contention that non-Islamiosity is one of the defining features of contemporary Iranian diasporicity, and the epistemological and ontological contours of notions of community are being defined with reference to its discourses and practices. It is therefore not surprising that we have been witnessing cultural and institutional practices which correspond to its increasing predominance. A good example here is the University of Mehrafarin, based in Encino, California, whose sole aim is re-write Iranian history in a way which discredits and

³ One TV presenter, for example, declared that the Qur`an has less value than pornography (Gholami 2015: 136).

eradicates what it sees as the ‘evil’ influence of the Muslim ‘intruders’. It acts to educate Iranians who understand their ‘true’ Persian identity, speak a ‘pure’ Persian language,⁴ and are not ‘duped’ by ‘Islamic nonsense’, following instead ‘Persian’ sources of morality such as Ferdowsi’s national epic, *the Book of Kings (Shahnameh)*.

Engaging (with) Britain

It is clear that diasporic practices such as those emanating from non-Islamiosity are unlikely to pave the way for a cosmopolitan future. They are in many ways as myopic, violent and exclusive as any other ideology or discourse which fights to establish its own utopia. However, settlement in a host country and the challenges of conviviality, particularly in super-diverse societies, can compel even myopic positions into mutual engagement, with potentially interesting effects. Studying diasporic institutions can provide useful insights in this regard. As the 1980s became the 1990s, many UK Iranians came to the conclusion that their stay in Britain was far more long-term than they had hoped – it was perhaps permanent. These people, as well as their off-spring, then began to engage much more seriously in British and Iranian social life, seeking out business, employment and education opportunities, participating in existing institutions and setting up new ones. Of course, Iranian institutions in the UK include those which cater to the needs of a specific religious or ethnic minority such as Zoroastrians or Baha’is. They also include those which are affiliated to the Iranian government (e.g. The Islamic Centre of England). But what interests me here are the institutions which engage directly with wider British society and often with the British authorities. These include, among others, the Iranian Heritage Foundation (IHF), the British Iranian Business Association (BIBA), the British Iranian Medical Association (BIMA), the British Iranian Community Development Organisation (BICDO), Refugee Women’s Association (RWA – founded and currently run by an Iranian woman), and SAAM Theatre Company. An important point about these organisations is that due to their ‘British-Iranian’ nature they have to be culturally and politically diverse and inclusive. They therefore tend to value/promote Iranian culture in its broadest sense – including *some* of its Islamic aspects – whilst commemorating key events of the British calendar, and possibly others, as well. In the case of RWA and SAAM, inclusion extends explicitly to other ethnic minorities from Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe.

⁴ Which would probably mean eliminating around 40 percent of the Persian language. Persian is influenced by many languages including Arabic, Turkish, Russian, French and English. However, Arabic is the one influence usually singled out in discourses of non-Islamiosity.

We can explore the reasons for inclusivity more specifically by looking at three factors. Firstly, whether directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, these institutions usually end up representing or speaking for ‘the Iranian community’. In this vein, they often construct an image of ‘the Iranian’ which is amenable to the Western palate, so to speak, and conforms to idealized images of a highly successful, sophisticated individual. For BICDO, for instance, this is an overt aim, as its leader and two of its board members recently made clear to me in interviews. BICDO has ambitions of seeing Iranians in Britain’s ‘corridors or power’ as top politicians, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and so forth – a goal which is given official backing by Britain’s political establishment. This, then, acts as a determining factor in the organization’s behaviour and activities. That is, regardless of the personal attitudes of its decision makers, the organization must behave in a way which is deemed culturally, politically and legally satisfactory by wider British society. Secondly, as the public profiles of those in charge of such organizations gain strength, there is also the potential that the Iranian government takes an interest in them, especially as many regularly travel to Iran for business and pleasure and own assets there. Again, therefore, regardless of personal politics and beliefs, they often have to take positions which do not open them up to unwanted scrutiny and criticism.

The third factor is funding. Funding is particularly instructive here because both funder and funded depend for their continued existence on the transaction taking place. It would seem, therefore, that funding transactions allow national and diasporic institutions to assert and maintain their integrity; but in reality the transactions end up destabilizing that very integrity. British-Iranian organizations – whose activities have tended to revolve either around community support, education and culture, or around a specific professional identity – find themselves in an environment of intense competition with a multitude of other organizations for relatively limited funding opportunities. Between them, RWA and SAAM cite the European Union, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, London Development Agency, Arts Council England, the Lottery Fund, and the City of London, as well as a host of charitable organizations, as their sources of funding. And BICDO, being interested in building research capacity, often bids for funds from relevant organizations such as the British Council. In this climate of competition, it goes without saying that funders are able to impose some requirements on an organization’s projects. The British Council, for example, plays an important role in building relations between the UK and Iran (despite officially not having any political involvement). This position hugely influences the Council’s funding

activities. Clearly, however, funders cannot exert total control either and must recognize a diasporic institution's identity and objectives, which is usually why they consider funding it in the first place. Funding, then, is a significant reason for cooperation between diasporic organizations and the social, political and cultural spheres of mainstream British society. What is noteworthy, however, is that although both sides are able to dictate the terms of engagement to an extent, none is able to do so fully. That is, the result of their interaction is something which is greater than both of them; something which always-already challenges and undermines the integrity and power of national and diasporic structures, forcing them to make concessions, thus opening the possibility for new/alternative modes of praxis. This is what I have been referring to as 'sweet spot'. But it is not so much a 'new space' in the sense of Homi Bhabha's Third Space (1994) – a disruptive space resulting from the encounter of usually colonizing and colonized cultures which throws into sharp relief the ambivalences of self, other and historical narrative. Rather, 'sweet spot' denotes *the potential* to reclaim and/or re-create human practices from the grip of excessive nationalism and diasporicity and render them cosmopolitan. And it offers specific energy and tools for doing so. It results from the suspension of notions of absolute power in national and diasporic imaginations *in relation to one another*; and it is very much predicated upon the fact that both nation-states and diasporas live significant parts of their lives through trans-national processes. Their differing modes of trans-nationality are an important gateway to the global and the cosmopolitan. All this will hopefully become clearer as I examine the particular case of Iranian diasporic education.

'Supplementary' Schools

In the Iranian diaspora, education has been a key site for this kind of cooperation. This is because of the high emphasis which Iranians in general place upon 'being educated' and achieving success through education as well as the importance they have tended to attribute to the Persian language and notions of Iranian culture. Iranian educational activities have tended to be aimed at Iranian children and young people (ICYP) and usually take place in the form of supplementary or Saturday schools – though there is also some provision of adult education offered by community organizations such as Iranian Association.⁵ In London,

⁵ Iranian Association claim that they annually deal with between 14,000 and 20,000 requests for support in a host of issues ranging from education to migration. In terms of education, they respond to the community's needs by providing classes on English language (ESOL), how to pass the UK's Citizenship Test, job searching, general literacy and numeracy, health and hygiene and so on (<http://www.iranianassociation.org.uk/index.php/services/>).

schools such as Rustam School, MTO College and Andisheh School are dotted across the city and offer ICYP tuition, with Farsi as the medium of instruction, on a range of subjects. However, they also increasingly offer tuition using English as the medium of instruction on the core subjects of the National Curriculum (English, Mathematics and Science) across all levels from Key Stage 1 to A-Level. This is underpinned by the aforementioned emphasis on success but also relates to issues which I will discuss presently. Moreover, the schools support those pupils who wish to take Persian language GCSEs or A-Levels,⁶ which is a popular way of studying Persian while increasing one's chance of going to university. Some schools boast a high percentage of pupils who have managed to achieve A*s and As in their GCSEs/A-Levels in Persian.

The discussion which is most of interest here relates to the fact that the nature of Iranian supplementary schooling has been changing over the last decade. Mrs White, Head of Rustam School, the first and currently largest Iranian school in London, told me⁷ the history of this change in her school. Having been established in 1981, Rustam quickly gathered support and momentum, rising to its current leading status and boasting an impressive 300 pupils and fifty-four staff. Mrs White also believed that her school acts as a role model for the other sixteen⁸ Iranian schools in London. Rustam's founding principle was to ensure that the children of Iranian immigrants in Britain learned Persian, their mother tongue. In this way, it also wanted to support the survival of Persian language and culture. However, over thirty years down the line, today Persian can hardly be said to be ICYP's mother tongue, as their parents overwhelmingly also speak English as their first language. Farsi, therefore, said Mrs White, is being taught as a second language.

This shift has posed some significant challenges – but I think also opportunities – for supplementary schools. The first challenge is to their business model. Whereas in the past schools such as Rustam relied financially on tuition fees and community support, they are now facing a potential decline in pupil numbers and must therefore look elsewhere for funding whilst also rebranding themselves somewhat to stay relevant to contemporary clients and funders alike. In the case of Rustam, this has meant networking and collaborating with a

⁶ The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification in specific subjects taken by students aged 14-16. The General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A level) is an academic qualification in specific subjects taken by students aged 16-18.

⁷ I interviewed her at Rustam School in November 2014.

⁸ This was her estimate and is difficult to verify as official numbers do not exist. As for Rustam's role model status, this argument has merit as Heads of other schools I have spoken to often reference Rustam and their teaching materials.

wide range of Iranian and British organizations, including the IHF (from which Rustam has successfully obtained funds in the past), BIMA, BICDO, the BBC and the National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education (which imposes a quality assurance framework). As a result of these collaborations, Rustam now reaches wider sections of the local (not necessarily Iranian) community and offers a more varied educational and cultural experience – such as a range of activities aimed at improving physical and mental well-being. In this vein, some Iranian schools are beginning to embrace and capitalize upon the increasing demand of parents of all ethnicities for supplementary tuition in Maths and English, subjects which the National Curriculum values above others. Therefore, the Iranian schools I have worked with have increasingly attracted children and young people from an array of ethnic and religious backgrounds. MTO College, for example, which is based in Highgate in north London, now enrolls a number of Turkish, Serbian and even white British pupils. It goes without saying that this diversification has a considerable impact on pedagogy, curricula, school management and the cultural events which abound at these schools. Heads and teachers now find that they cannot take ‘Iranian culture’ for granted in their teaching and cultural activities. But interestingly, this has not meant using ‘British culture’ as a common denominator for their activities. The ‘alternative’ nature of these schools is never in question, and staff are acutely aware of their difference from the mainstream. As I mentioned earlier, it is often this very difference which makes them attractive to funders and clients.

The key point here is that in the context of the aforementioned changes, the reason d’être of Iranian supplementary schooling has shifted to be about allowing minority groups to live well and succeed within British society on the one hand – an interesting position which, similar to the issue of funding, seems to retain the integrity of those positions but actually ends up destabilizing them – and about encouraging pupils and parents to see and commit to the value of living multi-lingual and multi-cultural lives. This brings us to the second challenge faced by Iranian schools. They are finding it difficult to identify teaching materials suitable for the current situation. For years schools like Rustam relied on text books used inside Iran. However, with increasing professionalization and diversification, those text books are losing their appeal and viability. Furthermore, they are also increasingly ideologically and culturally alien to British-Iranian children and young people and so prevent deep levels of engagement. In this context, schools – and Rustam has been at the forefront of this – are taking it upon themselves to develop entirely novel educational materials. These materials can come from formal, long-term projects such as writing and publishing entire text books, or informal, more

immediate activities such as synthesising existing materials or ‘making up’ materials from relevant socio-cultural texts.

Two points are particularly important here: firstly, schools sometimes develop their materials in collaboration with similar organizations across the world. Rustam, for instance, has worked with schools in Canada and Australia. This is a highly *diasporic* activity which utilises transnational networks and local realities simultaneously whilst largely by-passing the regulatory powers of any given nation-state. Secondly, however, the contents of these materials are entirely relevant to, in fact presuppose, living life in a Western nation-state, whilst raising in the pupil a positive awareness of his/her difference. What is more, they show the host country to be full of or defined by all sorts of differences, thus painting a horizontal rather than vertical picture of difference. Similarly, the materials emphasise Iranian-ness and teach Persian language and culture, but do so in a way which is inclusive of difference and aims to help young Iranians to lead happy, successful, integrated lives as citizens of respective countries. They very much assume permanency of residence (which today often encompasses mobility); in fact, they are predicated on the assumption that being Iranian is significantly entwined with being British. Thus, they challenge discourses of exclusive Britishness (or ‘little Englandism’) and exclusive Iranian-ness and do not allow either to fully ‘close’ – i.e. they neither completely submit to nor subvert either position.

Diasporic Education

Crucially, ‘supplementary’ schooling in the way I have described happens within a space which is not and cannot be fully nationalized. That is, the power structures which operate within a mainstream, state-funded school and demand a particular and strict sort of allegiance to a particular and strict understanding of the Britishness do not operate in the same way or to the same extent in ‘supplementary’ schools. During my observations of and interactions with staff and pupils, they always conveyed an understanding – sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit – that the school is not ultimately bound by the National Curriculum; that alternative curricula are used, even created, all the time; that home and host governments cannot exert absolute control over what goes on at the school. It is for this reason that I have been placing ‘supplementary’ in inverted commas throughout the chapter. These schools are much more than that. Of course, supplementary schools and schooling have been the subject of academic discussions at least since the early 1980s (e.g. Stone 1981). The main focus of these analyses was West Indian Saturday schools in Britain (also called Black Saturday schools), which

were shown to be a form of grass-roots collective action against the institutional and personal racism which was rife in the British education system and placed black children at a disadvantage (see Chevannes and Reeves 1987; Mac an Ghail 1991). Similarly, including children of other ethnic backgrounds may be relatively new in the Iranian context, but it is not new in the wider context of black supplementary schooling in Britain, as Reay and Mirza (1997) have highlighted. What the literature has not paid attention to, however, and what I believe emerges very clearly from the Iranian case, is that we can usefully begin to think of some forms of supplementary schooling as a ‘diasporic’ activity; or ‘diasporic education’ to be more precise.

I started this paper with the statement that diasporic living is diasporic praxis in that it is predicated upon modes of thought and action which necessarily – even if implicitly – engage, critique and destabilize the national. I also argued, inspired by Tololyan (2007), that ‘the diasporic’ is crucially about the activities of *settled* communities and their transnational connectivity. This casts a wholly new theoretical light on supplementary schooling with some potentially very useful implications, including for how we view diasporic communities themselves. Focusing on diasporic education, thus, means focusing on a concrete set of educational practices which:

- Come to exist through the transnational connections of diasporic communities;
- Engage and problematize notions of ‘home’ and ‘host’;
- Are aimed at improving the lives of diasporan children as settled citizens of ‘host’ nation-states, usually in ways which fall outside the ability/willingness of mainstream education;
- Prevent the ‘closure’ of essentialist hegemonies at national and ethnic levels;
- Cannot be ultimately regulated by any national or diasporic policies.

Diasporic action is also about a commitment to action – to praxis – aimed at securing a better future for everyone. And education seems like a particularly apt field for the unfolding of such praxis. That is, educational practices offer a proactively radical sort of edge which can enable teachers and students to engage with the cosmopolitan project much more consciously and intently. *Diasporic education, then, also involves seeing supplementary schools as possible sweet spots and exploiting their immense potential to further the cosmopolitan project.* As we will see, they are sites in which we can reclaim, recreate and re-experience those aspects of our humanity which have been so successfully hijacked by nationalist and

ethnic ideologies. If it is retorted that people live those aspects *through* specific national and ethnic identities as a way to imbue them with meaning, my response would be that we need different/better strategies for conviviality henceforth, strategies which allow for specific identities and meaning-making but without an insistence upon full closure, historical essentialism and the ever-present potential for exclusion/exclusivism. I would argue that diasporic education is concrete enough that it enables us to understand, ‘harness’ and redeploy the processes through which excessive nationalism and diasporicity are stripped away to leave us with knowledges and practices which can be called cosmopolitan.

Allow me to see if I can pin down its concreteness more precisely. A key characteristic and contribution of diasporic education, as we saw above, is the development of transnational teaching materials which are germane to diasporic and national living without fully succumbing to either of them. Here, although the ‘host’s’ nationalism and the ‘identity’ of the diaspora meet one another in a space of mutual respect and recognition, this very encounter destabilizes both of them at all levels. Thus, being Iranian, British, or British-Iranian (or anything else for that matter) all become fundamentally re-imagined and re-experienced. This, of course, as I also mentioned, is intensified by the fact Iranian schools are becoming more and more ethnically diverse, and must therefore find ways of catering for that diversity. To ground this more concretely in an example, the cultural events and celebrations which punctuate the Iranian calendar are increasingly developing a cosmopolitan flavour – not too dissimilar to what Beck describes as the transnationalization of the memory of the Holocaust. Nowruz⁹, the most widely celebrated of all Iranian festivals, is a good example. Rustam School now celebrates Nowruz in a way which openly recognises that the festival ‘belongs to’ many other cultures and not just to Iranians – something which traditionally Iranians tend not to talk about. In fact, it posts on its Facebook page a video clip in which people from around the world, including high-profile individuals such as the Obamas, congratulate Nowruz in many different languages. It has posted another video which explains the international importance of the spring festival. In this way, any Iranian specificity is ‘stripped away’ and Nowruz becomes foremost about how people around the world celebrate the arrival of spring, which is something that virtually anyone anywhere could choose to participate in. I should note, however, that ‘stripping away’ does not mean that Nowruz loses its Iranian-ness for Iranians. Not at all. What I mean is that stripping away *loosens the rigid grip* that any culture might believe it has on Nowruz, so much so that insisting on a tight grip

⁹ The first day of spring (vernal equinox) which also marks the New Year in Iran and other Persianate cultures.

all but seems illogical in the minds and experiences of people. Stripping away, in this sense, has a *real and palpable* effect upon the human experience. After this loosening, however, Iranians, or anyone else, can celebrate Nowruz in any way they wish, knowing that theirs is just one way amongst many, *and* knowing, crucially, that they can choose to celebrate the festival differently. I should perhaps also reiterate here that whereas this stripping away happens relatively easily in Rostam school – a particular type of diasporic organization which cooperates with British society in the ways described earlier – it is difficult to see how it could happen at, say, the University of Mehrfarin, which I also referred to above.

Other important celebrations are undergoing similar processes. The two most-widely celebrated festivals after Nowruz in the Iranian calendar are *Charshanbe soori* – a ‘fire festival’ which takes place on the eve of the last Wednesday before Nowruz – and *Sizdah-be-dar* – the thirteenth and final day of Nowruz during which Iranians leave their homes and spend the day with their families on picnics. I studied these celebrations during my research on non-Islamiosity and found plenty of examples where they stood for a very exclusive and myopic Iranian identity, linking them to essentialist notions of ‘Persian’ history and using them to devise a narrow blueprint for the future of the Iranian nation. In schools such as Rostam, however, that essentialism is largely stripped away because they face, and are to an extent accountable to, wider British society, and because of their own internal diversity. Non-Iranian pupils who see the fun-looking tradition of jumping over fires for the first time cannot be excluded from the fun; and once they have experienced it they begin to associate their experience with their own creative vocabularies and forms of knowledge. Thus, *Charshanbe soori* stops signifying highly ideological (and usually erroneous) ideas about an inherently Persian desire to relinquish Islam and reclaim the true Zoroastrian identity of Iranians (or any other number of common explanations on offer) and becomes about all sorts of other things which make sense to the people who are participating. As it happens, an emerging definition of *charshanbe soori* which diverse people can relate to and build upon focuses on the heat and life-giving properties of fire; and *sizdah-be-dar* has been rebranded as ‘nature day’, which is also suitable for teaching all children about treating the natural environment responsibly. It is in these ways that diasporic education is concrete – in the fact that its very practice constitutes a sweet spot in which stripping away takes place.

The final point to make relates to pedagogy. *Diasporic education proceeds through the principle that teaching and learning are inherently global (dare I say, cosmopolitan) activities.* That is, however one defines knowledge and skills and their transmission, they

relate to – and have always related to – all humans everywhere. The fact that curricula have become nationalized and their subjects neatly distinguished and placed in hierarchies is, if anything, a historical aberration, an anomaly which must be undone. This is not a nostalgic suggestion that we somehow ‘move back’ to past logics and practices. Indeed, it is entirely about the present and the future. I think there is great merit in Beck’s idea that the future can now more easily be imagined globally rather than nationally. And it is this moment we must capitalize upon. Teaching diasporically, therefore, is foremost a pedagogical commitment. It is a commitment to the principle that knowledge must no longer be allowed to be defined and monopolized by revisionist national politics which use it to address the skills requirements of the capitalist economy. Students may well wish to learn those skills; but they must have a say in what knowledge is and what they want to do with it. Furthermore, it is a commitment to actively design curricula which have been ‘sourced’ globally and instil global thinking. Current national curricula go to great lengths to offer pupils ‘experiences of the national’, which is a deeply problematic imposition, perhaps an act of symbolic violence. They off-set this through discourses and practices of multiculturalism and thus also offer pupils experiences of ‘other cultures’. But this is equally problematic because ‘other cultures’ are carefully selected and defined in accordance with wider national politics and hegemonies. They can also usually be mapped on to existing nation-states. It is high time, therefore, that education offer students meaningfully human experiences – experiences which have undergone ‘stripping away’. This sort of pedagogy will open doors to far more reflexive, inclusive and critical approaches to teaching and learning especially as they relate to issues of selfhood and otherhood. It will enable teachers and students to plan, design, learn, teach and develop as human beings *together*.

Conclusion

Above all, this chapter has been about the role which diasporic communities play in the societies in which they have settled as well as in the contemporary world more generally; it has been about what diasporas (can) do. The question which has concerned me throughout has been whether or not diasporas have anything concrete to contribute to the project of cosmopolitanization. That is, whether their modes of interaction/cooperation with host-national structures have any bearing on challenging and undoing the essentialist tendencies of both the nation-state and the diaspora, thus giving rise to modes of living that are more inclusive, reflexive and global. I have argued that their settlement in host nation-states, the fact that they ‘simply’ live their daily lives, is immensely significant because it

simultaneously engages national and diasporic structures in transformative ways. Diasporic communities should therefore be seen as a permanent and useful feature of the world. And I think we should begin to conceptualize them in a way which reflects that. For it seems that even within academic discourses, much like political, cultural and economic ones, diasporas are still seen as entities which somehow ‘stand out’. We have not yet managed in our imagination to ‘blend them into’ the world. Once we do that, we can focus much more intently on the implications of their agency. I would argue that of central importance in ‘being diasporic’ is exactly the field of tension between settlement and mobility which diasporas embody and straddle. It is there that they draw the logic of the national into all sorts of encounters which it would much rather not be drawn into. And it is there that they open up ‘sweet spots’ where the excesses of the national *and* of the diaspora itself can be stripped away, yielding an immense potential to reclaim, recreate and redeploy practices and knowledges which are – and have always been – globally human.

I considered British-Iranian organizations in general and supplementary schools in particular as a concrete example of these processes. In the schools we find the right conditions for studying the ‘stripping away’ and harnessing the potential which results from it. Every time such a potential is harnessed and redeployed, I believe we take a step towards a more cosmopolitan world – however small that step may be. I have also tried to advance the concepts of diasporic education and diasporic pedagogy as concrete tools for stripping away excess from cultural practices and for their redeployment, whilst outlining some preliminary ideas for how a commitment to this pedagogy can bring about a more global and inclusive approach to education, and how it can challenge existing power structures which distribute educational opportunities unequally and monopolize them mainly for their own perpetuation. Diasporic education, I argued, comprises a set of formal and informal pedagogies and curricula which are always transnational in nature but possess a *globally*-oriented and cosmopolitan impetus, and which exploit the potentialities of the diasporic *and* the national whilst escaping their ultimate grip and destabilizing them.

Whether in education or elsewhere, the particularity of the type of cooperation between the diasporic and the national is of crucial importance. As I showed above, ‘sweet spots’ – which neither the national nor the diasporic can fully control; which undermine hegemony and essentialism at national and diasporic levels; which make the logic of excessive nationalism and diasporicity seem nonsensical and indefensible; and which possess the quality of ‘rendering cosmopolitan’ – only come about when diasporic and national

entities/organizations interact with each other *willingly and 'on friendly terms'*, each promising, as far as possible, to maintain, even celebrate, the integrity of the other; to respect and support the objectives of the other. It is only this sort of cooperative encounter which allows for such promises to be made – and there is no reason to doubt the good intentions of both/all parties for keeping them – yet produces an impetus, and energy, all its own which takes away something from the very integrity it was supposed to protect. In the process, it also shows that integrity to have always been arbitrary, contingent, problematic; compelling us to re-think our understanding of and commitment to diversity and conviviality no longer in terms of asserting endless differences along ethnic and national lines, but to foreground our shared humanity.

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