Chapter 8: Exile, Culture and Identity
Rasoul Nejadmehr

This essay concentrates on the cognitive values of being born in a nomadic family, of being an exile and of organizing a music festival, Culture in Exile. I see exile and nomadic thought as the two main inter-connected features of thought in a world characterized by movement and the dissolution of boundaries, where few stable positions can be adopted by the individual. I insist on exile as a creative state of mind that enables a radical critique of the dominant discourse about culture and identity.

Culture in Exile

The music festival *Culture in Exile* was held in Stockholm and Gothenburg, Sweden, from 2000 to 2006. The first edition of the festival tried to highlight the role of exiled musicians in modernising Iranian music and conveying new influences to a society like Iran as well as their interplay with musicians in their host countries. The second widened the scope by taking in musicians from Iran, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, embodying the trans-national cultural heritage of a region extending from the Middle East to Central Asia, based on the common use of Persian as the language of poetry, and the role played by exiles in creating this human heritage over the course of centuries as well as their conveying it into new contexts. The third festival put the focus on exile and resistance. It placed artists from the Middle East and European countries on the same stage, in order to show that resistance has different shapes and is going on everywhere. 'Women, Voice and Resistance' was an attempt to make the forbidden voices of Iranian women heard.

Currently, *Culture in Exile* is developing into a working method for the inclusion of marginalised people. This means that it embraces a wide range of activities and networks connecting cultural and academic institutions with NGOs. The leading idea of my work with *Culture in Exile* is that exclusion has a cognitive dimension related to the way in which knowledge is produced and distributed. While in an age of increasing internationalization the context of knowledge comprises the experiences and achievements of non-Western people, or the concerns of women, gay people and lesbians, the prevailing knowledge paradigm excludes these experiences. It insists on homogeneity of knowledge based of intellectual hegemony of a Western male perspective. Famously, Marx based his analysis of modern societies on the ways in which commodities are produced and distributed. Nietzsche highlighted the importance of the production and distribution of ideas. Bringing these insights together, we can motivate our activities by references to social justice on the one hand and cognitive pluralism on the other. This enables us to operate with a notion of democracy that embraces social and cognitive inclusion of the margins. My work with *Culture in Exile* is strongly autobiographical as well, closely related to the question 'who am I?' More precisely, the question of identity and our situation as human beings in a globally interconnected and interdependent world. It asks what happens to us as human beings in a world of intensified cultural encounters. What is the role of exiles in ongoing cultural exchanges and cultural intermingling? How can art and music help us orient ourselves in a time of general disorientation?

Exile and Nomadic Thought

Culture in Exile is an attempt to use the notion of exile as a starting point regarding contemporary social and cognitive issues by bringing into focus the highly significant role played by exiles in the history of thought. In the course of my work with the festival, my view of

exile has developed from an exclusive notion of exile to an inclusive one. Edward Said signifies exile as 'a jealous state'. He defines the predicament of exile as follows: '...it is in the drawing of lines around you and your compatriots that the least attractive aspects of being in exile emerge: an exaggerated sense of group solidarity, and a passionate hostility to outsiders…' (Said, 2000:178). I cannot identify myself with this state of mind. Neither 'group solidarity' nor 'hostility to outsiders' signifies my approach. Am I an exile then? Surely. I relate the notion of exile to that of nomadic thought introduced by Deleuze and Guattari in their *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). According to these writers, nomadic thought is characterised by connections, heterogeneity, multiplicity, rapture and engagement with the other. Indeed, their observations confirm my personal experiences of nomadic society's lack of stability, its being perpetually on the move, ready to settle for new territories, face new challenges and its feature of border crossing. Being based in such a lifestyle, nomadic thought becomes engaged with the world by crossing boundaries and making interconnections with diverse arrays of ideas and across multitude of cultures and disciplines. This mindset is indeed similar to postmodern thought in its emphasis on continuous change as well as its lack of stable meaning-creating structures. A nomadic knowledge paradigm is then an inclusive, open and flexible system with close interplays with the surrounding world, where the boundaries between inside and outside are continuously transgressed. Rather than excluding the other in the name of absolutes like exile, reality or truth, it champions an inclusive mindset, an epistemology of becoming that acknowledges the heterogeneity of knowledge. This point is in tune with my anti-Platonic/Socratic view of knowledge as not being inborn, but something that emerges in the meeting/confrontation between the self and the epistemological other. To include the other in the domain of knowledge is thus a necessary condition of the growth of our knowledge.

The notion of exile as used here is also close to Nussbaum's (1979) notion of 'philosophical exile'. Rather than merely being confined to geographic displacement, it brings in a cognitive displacement. It destabilises stable knowledge systems, it involves shifts of perspective and critical examination of one's own values in the light of the perspective of the other; the inter-changeability of being the self and the other; the awareness of us being the stranger in the eyes of the other. Strangeness is then not an essential otherness that should be kept away for ever; it is with us and within us.

The position advocated above may bring to the mind talk about 'routes and roots'. Some leading intellectuals of our time have argued for the primacy of 'routes' rather than 'roots'. Such people can settle as easily in London as in New York or New Delhi. I can do the same, to be sure, but I believe in some kind of rootednesss in a tradition. However, Deleuze and Guattari teach us to replace the notion of root by that of rhizome 'that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:10). For my part, it has been about creative rebounding of fragments of scattered roots and connecting them with new elements acquired through new encounters. These fragments contain traces of a past, open to assemble with lines of the present and ready to unfold toward a future. Here as everywhere, I implement a multiple logic. My being a nomad, an Iranian…ties back to my past. They are assembled with my being an exile, a cosmopolite and an Iranian/Swedish in the present. Together, they indicate my path toward the future. This mindset encompasses both routes and roots and transcends them. Nobody can take my Iranian identity from me and I am more Swedish than native Swedes, because I have chosen to be Swedish rather than simply being born into it.

Yet belonging to these communities does not mean neglecting my being a part of human community at large. I believe in a notion of universalism as the inter-translatability of the local

styles of life and the universal human achievements. This notion of universalism is different from the Eurocentric one, based on an exclusive notion of Reason. Inspired by Weber (2002), I see clear connections between capitalist/protestant notions of rationality and prevailing scientific rationality, the basis of the Western knowledge paradigm. This notion of reason is exclusive, since, as Weber shows, it not only was initially inspired by the interests of specific religious and economic groups, but also continues to keep the interests of these groups in view. This narrow basis makes the operating notion of rationality quite local, its universal claims notwithstanding. I work with an inclusive notion of rationality based on translatability of different meaning-creating systems. This notion of universalism is based on border-crossing and sharing experiences and values with the other.

From Stockholm to London…

To put my work into context, I have to say a few words about Sweden and Swedish identity. Although Sweden never has been a homogenous country (we have Sami, Roms, Jewish and Finnish minorities), the Swedish culture has commonly been considered as homogenous. The purity of the 'Nordic race' has been a political and aesthetical concern. Sweden was the first country in the world to give eugenics an academic status by establishing a race hygiene university department. Today eugenics is officially banished and the state has apologised to the victims of this ideology. But its cultural heritage is still at work, in the form of hidden values, thoughts and institutional structures. Another important point is the Swedish encounter during World War II. There was organised sympathy for Nazi Germany in Sweden. The Swedes never went through the same process of self-criticism as some other European countries, however. The relics of Nazism were therefore left intact and made Sweden a favourable place for a variety of xenophobic and racist parties. The economic boom after the war and its concomitant welfare

have also had a huge impact on the Swedish people as a nation, their self-image and their view on others, especially on non-Europeans.

I came to Sweden 1990, a decade of economic recession. I escaped Iran after eight years of imprisonment and had no idea about the Swedish welfare being endangered. In a society like Sweden everything is of course economically rather than humanly motivated. The questions were: What are immigrants/refugees good for? And at the cultural level: Are they a cultural promise or a danger? Obviously migrants as such were seen as a danger and something had to be changed in order to neutralise the risk, though not the established structures and institutions, although they were too old and in acute need of some renewal. Immigrants have either been integrated or assimilated.

This was the setting in which I had to live and construct my identity. My first reaction was to surrender myself to the Swedish culture. It provided an alternative, a cultural choice that gave me a sense of personal autonomy vis-à-vis my original culture, a culture that I wished to disengage totally from it as it was related to religious fundamentalism, violence and torture. I accepted Swedish culture as a whole rather than embracing some parts of it and refusing others. I had knowledge concerning my Iranian culture and competence as a teacher, but I chose to leave them in order to experience what was new. I engaged deeply with learning the Swedish language and in achieving competence in the Swedish culture; I was seeking a Swedish identity and had no time to think about xenophobia or racism. I could not believe that there were such phenomena in Sweden. However, after six years in Sweden I encountered the crude reality of being a refugee. I wanted to go further and claim my rights as a citizen in a democratic society rather than being grateful eternally for receiving asylum. I had also plans to attain a PhD degree in philosophy. Suddenly all doors was closed. Due to this change in my relation to the society, the question of

identity emerged at a very deep level. It was like a loss of identity. Am I Iranian? Am I Swedish? What am I? Which kind of logic do I have to use in my approach to these questions? A logic of 'either/or' or 'both/and'?

I became disillusioned and was sinking into a passive nihilism. However, Nietzsche has taught us to use each sickness as a remedy against that sickness itself. This is an active approach enabling the individual to start anew whenever old values lead into intellectual impasses. I was prepared to use my nihilistic insights against nihilism itself. My illusions about Sweden were collapsed. I had to reinvent my values anew. I moved to London. My studies there gave me a new perspective on my life. It became a new beginning enabling me to rethink my notion of identity. My contacts with the Iranian community in London brought me in touch with a new sense of being Iranian, developed in exile. I experienced it as trans-territorial and trans-national. Moreover, my being away from Sweden gave me new perspective on my citizenship in Sweden. It detached Swedishness from territory and origin. Facilitating my encounter with British academe, Swedishness became a performative notion released from the essentialist attachment with the hierarchical order of being a native or an immigrant; it became a Swedishness of my own related to my life as a political refugee. Becoming de-territorialized and portable, my different identities come together much easier in London than in Stockholm; they appeared as opportunities rather than burdens.

I became a nomad anew and on a different plane. My old nomadic experiences were reconciled with the modern cosmopolitism and became the framework of my life and conduct in a post-modern situation. This was as a homecoming. I became enjoying my perpetual movement between metropolises in Europe ready to settle wherever circumstances were favourable. Released from the burden of belonging to a single and fixed identity, I could address my

problems from a multiplicity of perspectives. My studies in philosophy strengthened this new ontological and epistemological position. It strengthened my belief in an ontology of change and process vis-à-vis an essentialist one. It also enhanced my belief in an epistemology of becoming that makes the very idea of boundaries meaningless. Elevating change over permanence enables me to challenge essentialist assumptions about centre and periphery. It also enables me not only for a radical critique of the established cultural practices, but also for a critique of the position that fixes peoples with ethnical affinities other than European in a inferior position based on a set of prejudices and assumptions of what an immigrant is. Through highlighting the indebtedness of European cultures to exiles, the Festival challenges the predominant culture's talk about non-European emigrants. This is to make identities a matter of change, power, position and negotiation. Without such a position, thinking will be constrained by taken for granted identities based on commonplace beliefs and ideas.

It was in London that I observed how Iranian music in exile has developed certain distinctive features compared to music in Iran, as well as differences between Iranian music in London, Stockholm and in Los Angeles. My encounter with Iranian music in exile drew my attention to the huge role played by exiles in the cultural and artistic life of our age. Through their work, exile has become a constitutive element in our identity and the new European identity is going to be deeply influenced by the artistic and cultural creativity of exiles and emigrants. So why not use art and music as a remedy for my own wounds and to put a perspective on social issues?

Exile, Creativity and Resistance
Addressing the identity crisis from such a position enabled me to start an aesthetic offensive as it were on both my original culture and my new culture. It was a response to their driving me into double-exile and alienation as none of them accepted me as I was. My old culture expelled me

because I deviated from and opposed its values; I was discriminated against by the new one because of my origins. I called this offensive *Culture in Exile*, meaning exile as the habitat of culture. This home is open and provisional based on the logic of change and border-crossing. It does not confine its inhabitant within barriers and boundaries, but lets it grow through encounter with the other. This is a reshaped notion of home where one is not 'at home in one's home' (Adorno, 1993:39). For me, it is the aesthetics of resistance vis-à-vis the aesthetics of conformity. It is a way to break barriers between centre and periphery and make the marginalised voice of migrated musicians heard and to take a step further toward a polyphonic society where all voices, regardless of their ethnical origins, are heard as in one orchestra. The festival related my ideas of exile and nomadic thought to my specific circumstances of being an exile. It creates a basis to address the issue of power and exclusion. The question has two sides: one side is the Swedish society and its established discourse about immigrants and other cultures; on the other side we have immigrants and their readiness or lack of readiness to participate in the social games. Instead of enclosing ourselves within our cultures, we have to learn to negotiate and renegotiate power and positions, to define and redefine identities and images. We have to communicate, to understand and to be understood in order to come closer to each other, unify our abilities and build up our common home, where diversity is accepted and appreciated. We have to create spaces where we can meet and mutually enrich our experiences and stimulate our creativity. Such an intermingling paves the path for border-crossing, for a culture that does not demand uniformity. It is a harmonious unity of diversity, a growing interconnectedness of different cultures, as well as new elements without clear origins in any specific culture or territory. It is precisely these new elements that open new horizons of life.

Having a nomadic mindset, I do not care about geographical, political, religious and cultural borders. Others have drawn them in order to maintain hierarchies of power and

disempowerment. This enables me to rethink notions like identity and ethnicity; they get a universal dimension without their local aspects being denied. My experiences of being a nomad and an exile merge in a sense of cosmopolitanism as my mindset. It signifies the willingness to become involved with the other, the concern with achieving competence in new cultures, openness toward divergent and unknown cultural experiences. It is a culture of becoming, not of being, of going through metamorphoses rather than a culture of fixed identities; in this culture the multiplicity of identity is not considered as something dangerous. We can use this sense of nomadism as the basis of a notion of globalisation different from the one signified by war and militarization of the world by new liberals and fundamentalists. While the latter tries to impose unsurpassable divides between good and evil on us, the former offers new opportunities for border-crossing through revealing the arbitrary nature of these divides. Through exploring the alternative ways of conduct and offering images of a desirable world, human creativity has a crucial role to play in this regard. Such a notion of creativity cannot be confined within specialized territories such as the arts, as if the rest of life can do without it. A better alternative, it seems to me, is to connect creativity to human ability to work as Marx suggests. We can then recognize, with Nietzsche, that any human being is a creative artist by definition. Indeed, as Isar and Anheier (p.4) observe, media like *YouTube* signify a crucial step toward providing practical prerequisites to such a view of humanity.[1] Rather than being mere curiosity or time-waste, such non-hierarchical, unconventional and decentralised creative activities demonstrate efforts to resist the dominant will to power and its hegemonic imperatives. Challenging established values, they not only explore new territories of human creativity, but also bring to the fore the endless diversity of human creative resources. This is also to invite the other into conversation through using ever new means of communication worldwide. Indeed, a notion of communication across

---

[1] We have however to be careful in using 'technology is turning humanity into individual cells' (The Brief, p. 4) as it may bring an atomistic notion of individualism to the mind, while in reality new communication technologies connect individuals in unprecedented ways.

boundaries is needed in order to connect diverse efforts to make the planet a better place to live in, since creating such a world is beyond the ability of any single group, nation or culture. This view of creativity recognizes and promotes creativity within our everyday cognitive activities and conduct as an indispensable condition for human flourishing in a time of increasing global interconnectedness and interdependencies. Informed by this notion of creativity, critique of authoritarian efforts to level out differences goes hand in hand with a critique of the form of life to which they belong.

The cultural literacy required by the world of today requires the ability to put the right questions to the culture of the other: the ability to be critical and selective, to choose from different cultures those elements that suit us in constructing our own perspectives, identity and knowledge. The latter may then be fragmentary and heterogeneous, but there is nothing wrong with that. For any true artist uses her creativity in the work of constructing, to transcend fear of the consequences. Acting in this way, we can expose ourselves to change and meet challenges without being afraid; we can engage with ideas and become agents of change without becoming fanatics. Open towards the full multiplicity of experiences, are cosmopolitans at home. *Culture in Exile* manifests such an attitude.

REFERENCES

Adorno, T. (1993), *Minima Moralia*. London: Verso.

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*; *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

      New York: Continuum.

Nussbaum, M. (1997) *Cultivating Humanity; a Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal*

Educations. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

Said, E. (2000) *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Weber, M. (2002) *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Routledge.