

The Peoples of Iran

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Before anything else, I begin this essay in memory of those who, in distant and recent years, gave a part of their lives for freedom, dignity, and the possibility of living in Iran; those whose names we know, those whose names have been lost in collective memory, and those who still continue in our everyday lives. If this text is going to speak of the “peoples of Iran,” it has to begin here: with respect for the lives that, before us, carried the meaning of Iran on their shoulders.

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Everyone Speaks from Their Own People

This essay begins with a simple suspicion: perhaps the word “people” in today’s Iran hides more than it reveals.

Almost everyone speaks of the people. The word is repeated constantly in political analysis, everyday conversation, media, social networks, and even family arguments. The people want. The people do not want. The people are tired. The people are still hopeful. The people have moved on. The people want stability. The people are ready for change. But the more this word is repeated, the less certain we become about what it means. Because every group builds a different image of the people and places that image in the position of the whole society.

The problem is not only that interpretations are different. The problem is that these different interpretations are often stated with the same certainty as if they were speaking of a clear and unified reality. Each group speaks of the people as though it has seen them, known them, and understood them. But no one experiences the people completely. Each person sees the people through a limited path: family, city, class, media, language, migration, the experience of repression, the experience of poverty, the experience of security, the experience of religion, the experience of unbelief, or the network of people around them.

For this reason, when someone speaks of “the people,” they are usually not speaking of the whole society. They are speaking of that part of society that is visible and believable to them. That part may be large or small, real or distorted, but in any case it is not all of Iran. This is where the misunderstanding begins: one part of society places its own image of the people in the position of the people themselves.

This is not merely a linguistic issue. Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, says that the nation is an “imagined community”: not in the sense of being false, but in the sense that members of a nation will never know most of one another, yet an image of shared belonging lives in their minds. A nation, before it is the direct experience of all its members, is a kind of shared imagination. The same logic applies to “the people.” The people are not only the

numerical sum of citizens; they are an image made through narrative, media, memory, language, experience, and social imagination. [1]

So when different groups speak of the people, maybe the disagreement is not only over correct or incorrect analysis. Maybe each group is seeing its own “people”: the people who exist inside its own social world. People formed through its family, its media, its neighborhood, its migration, its social network, its lifestyle, and its memory. In this sense, “the people” is no longer a neutral word; it is a field of struggle. Each group wants to show that the part of society it sees is the real people.

In this text I use the word “peoples,” not in the sense of ethnic groups, but to point to the different societies that live under the name Iran. In some recent discussions, the phrase “people-s” has been used to show this lack of uniformity, but in this essay “peoples” is both more natural in Persian and more precise.

The question of this essay begins here: when we say “the people of Iran,” what exactly are we talking about? A general will? A unified society? A silent majority? The group we happen to see most? Or different peoples who experience different social worlds, yet still live under one name?

So the issue is not only what the people want. The prior question is: which peoples?

From Disagreement to Different Social Worlds

A simple way to explain this situation is to say that Iranian society, like any other society, has disagreements. Some are more religious, some less. Some want change, some fear instability. Some see migration as salvation, some see staying as the answer. This explanation tells part of the truth, but it is not enough. Because in many moments, the issue is not only disagreement. The disagreement is over reality itself.

Two people may talk about the same event, but in practice they may be speaking from two different worlds. For one, that event is a sign of collapse; for another, a sign of media exaggeration. For one, the crisis is immediate and personal; for another, distant and manageable. For one, the future is closing down; for another, there are still ways through. These differences do not come only from opinion. They come from one's position in life.

Each person's social world is built from a set of possibilities and limits: money, education, family, city, media, religion, language, migration, age, gender, the experience of security or insecurity, and the memory inherited from previous generations. People do not only have opinions; they have positions. And that position determines what they see sooner, what they take more seriously, what they fear more, and what kind of future they are even able to imagine.

Here Pierre Bourdieu becomes useful. In his discussions of distinction, habitus, and cultural capital, he shows that taste, lifestyle, and everyday judgments are not simply free and individual choices. They are shaped by social position, economic capital, and cultural capital. In other words, people do not see the world from outside their lives; they see it from within the structures in which they were raised, educated, limited, and given possibilities. [2]

This matters for understanding the peoples of Iran. Because if lifestyle, taste, fear, hope, and even the imagination of the future are tied to social position, then we can no longer say that all groups are merely giving different answers to one shared question. Sometimes even the question is not the same for them. What is central for one group may be marginal for another. What is unbearable for one group may still be part of ordinary order for another.

On the other hand, the social identity theory of Henri Tajfel and John Turner shows that humans take part of their identity from membership in groups. A group is not merely a collection of individuals; it is a framework for understanding oneself and others. The individual looks at the world from within a “we,” and this “we” makes some experiences, sufferings, and threats appear more real than others. Across from this “we,” there is usually also a “they”: a group that does not understand, sees wrongly, has been deceived, or is distant from reality. [3]

For this reason, peoples are not formed only through differences in lifestyle; they are also formed through identity boundaries. Each group may see itself as closer to the “reality of the people” and imagine others as exceptions, deviations, minorities, the deceived, or the uninformed. In such a situation, disagreement slowly turns into disagreement over reality. The issue is no longer only who is right; the issue is which world each person even considers real.

This is exactly where the concept of “peoples” becomes meaningful. Peoples means groups that are not necessarily separate from one another, but whose worlds do not completely overlap. They may buy with the same money, live under the same law, be harmed by the same crisis, and carry one shared name; but they touch reality through different paths.

So to understand Iran today, it may not be enough to ask what opinions people have. We have to ask which social world these opinions come from. What forces have caused different groups in Iranian society to experience problems, fears, hopes, and the future so differently?

Here the essay enters its next layer: if the peoples of Iran experience the world differently, how have these different worlds been made?

Ethnicity; a Layer of Memory, Not the Main Unit of Analysis Today

If this essay had been written a hundred years ago, it would probably have started somewhere else. To understand Iranian society, we would have had to speak of ethnicity, language, region, tribe, local religion, modes of livelihood, and each region's relationship to the central state. In that Iran, ethnic or regional belonging was not only a cultural identity; it often built a network of trust, support, marriage, security, work, defense, and shared memory. Where someone was "from" could determine whom they were closer to, which network they relied on in danger, which language they understood the world through, and which past they narrated from.

But today's Iran cannot be explained only with that same map. Ethnicity still matters; it is present in language, accent, music, food, memory, discrimination, pride, suffering, and belonging. But by itself it can no longer explain how the peoples of Iran live, what they want, what they fear, or how they imagine the future. An urban middle-class Kurd, a religious bazaar-based Turk, a borderland Baluch, a migrant Persian, an Arab from Khuzestan, a university-educated Gilak, or a Lur living in Tehran cannot be understood only through their ethnic name. Ethnicity is an important layer, but it is not the whole story.

Over the past hundred years, large forces have displaced that older map: the modern state, school, military service, urbanization, internal migration, university, national media, revolution, war, the labor market, the internet, and external migration. These forces have not destroyed local and ethnic societies, but they have dissolved, dispersed, or recombined them within larger networks. Under Reza Shah, policies of disarming and forcibly settling tribes, and later land reform and the policies of Mohammad Reza Shah's government, weakened the economic and social position of many tribal and nomadic structures. This was not only an administrative change; it also changed part of the old mechanism of alliance, security, and livelihood. [4]

So when we say ethnicity has become less central in today's Iran, we do not mean that it has disappeared. That claim would be both wrong and simplistic. Ethnicity is still activated in many situations: in discrimination, in linguistic humiliation, in

cultural demands, in the relation to the center, in the memory of repression, in music and ritual, in jokes and accents, in marriage and family, and sometimes in politics and protest. But its role has changed. For many people, ethnicity may no longer be the main container of everyday life; it has more often become a layer of memory and belonging that is sometimes quiet and sometimes reactivated in particular moments.

Here the concept of collective memory becomes useful. Jan Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory is the memory transmitted through family, conversation, generational narratives, and close experience; a memory that usually covers a few generations. Cultural memory, by contrast, is transmitted through ritual, text, symbol, education, official narrative, and more durable cultural forms. For our discussion, the last hundred years matter because they are still within the range of family and generational memory; they are not only history in books, but remain alive in the stories of grandparents, family migrations, fears, displacements, marriages, and local memories. [5]

From this angle, ethnicity in our essay is neither the final point of analysis nor something to be ignored. Ethnicity is a layer of memory. A layer that shows that before the peoples of Iran were dispersed into today's lifestyles, they were rooted in older local histories, languages, sufferings, and networks. But if we stay only in this layer, we lose today's Iran. Because in today's society, two people from two different ethnic groups may have much closer social worlds because of class, education, migration, media consumption, and lifestyle than two people from the same ethnic group, one of whom lives in a metropolis and the other on an economic or geographic margin.

For this reason, this essay does not remove ethnicity, but it does not put it at the center of analysis either. Ethnicity is necessary for understanding roots and memories; but to understand the peoples of today's Iran, we have to see how these memories have combined with the city, university, media, class, migration, economy, and lifestyle.

If in the past ethnicity could be one of the most important answers to the question "who are we?", today that answer has become less certain and more complex. "We" is no longer made only in ethnicity, language, or region. "We" may be made

in lifestyle, in media, in migration, in university, in class, in economic suffering, in one's way of facing religion, or in the future each group imagines.

So ethnicity is still present in the basement of Iran's social memory; but on the surface of today's life, other signs have become more visible. To see the peoples of Iran, we have to see both that basement and the surface on which they live today.

Is This Only an Iranian Problem?

Of course, the plurality of society is not only an Iranian phenomenon. Every modern nation is, to some degree, made of different peoples. In Turkey, the centralized state, the official language, secularism, religion, and Kurdish identity have given plurality a particular shape, to the point that the Kurdish question cannot be understood apart from the project of building a centralized and secular nation-state. [20] In Afghanistan and Pakistan, ethnicity, language, religion, tribe, colonial borders, and the weakness or conflict of the central state have played more prominent roles. In Saudi Arabia, official religion, tribe, monarchy, and the oil economy have made another kind of society. In Russia and China, territorial vastness, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and centralized security states play more central roles. Europe also has plurality, but in many countries more established institutions, law, parties, social welfare, and mechanisms of representation have managed part of these differences. From Charles Tilly's point of view, modern state-making has to be understood in connection with war, extraction of resources, army-building, bureaucracy, and control over rivals; that is, nations have not been built only with shared culture, but also with mechanisms of power and institutions. [21]

So the issue is not that Iran is the only country with different peoples. The issue is that Iranian plurality has been made from a specific combination: a long history, ethnic and linguistic diversity, Persian as a field of public communication, a centralized state, revolution, war, migration, sanctions, inflation, the breaking of a single narrative, and the erosion of trust. If, with Benedict Anderson, we understand the nation as a kind of "imagined community," then we should say that every country imagines its "people" in a particular way. The question of this essay about Iran is exactly this: how has this shared imagination cracked in today's Iran, and what still keeps different peoples under one name? [1]

Lifestyle; the Visible Surface of Underlying Forces

If ethnicity is no longer enough by itself to explain the peoples of today's Iran, we have to see which signs have become more visible on the surface of everyday life. One of these signs is lifestyle. But lifestyle here does not mean luxury consumption, clothing, leisure, or personal taste. These are only the visible appearance of the matter. Lifestyle, in a deeper sense, is the repeated form through which people live: what is possible for them, what is normal for them, what is forbidden or costly for them, what they consider a sign of success, what they feel shame about, what future they think about, and what kind of life they can even imagine.

From this angle, lifestyle is not a completely free and individual choice. A person does not simply decide to live this way or that way. They have grown up in a particular family, been educated in a particular school, lived in a particular city, become used to a certain level of security or insecurity, faced a certain form of religion or distance from religion, consumed particular media, and lived with a certain amount of money, possibility, limitation, and fear. What later appears as taste, behavior, consumption, relationship, desire, or choice is often the product of these more hidden layers.

Here Pierre Bourdieu becomes useful. Bourdieu shows that taste and lifestyle should not be understood merely as personal preference. They are formed by social position, economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and what he calls "habitus." This means that people see the world from a position in which they have been formed; a position that is not only income, but also education, language, networks of relations, forms of upbringing, cultural access, and the possibility of social recognition. In a summary of Bourdieu's work on distinction, social space is described as being made through different forms of capital, while habitus and lifestyle reflect social position. [2]

This view matters for discussing the peoples of Iran because it helps us avoid reducing lifestyle to slogans or moral judgment. When we speak of lifestyle, we are not trying to say one group is "more modern" and another "more traditional," or one group is "more aware" and another "more backward." That is the trap of

simplification. The point is that lifestyle can carry the trace of deeper forces: money, education, city, family, religion, media, migration, security, language, and the individual's relation to the future.

In today's Iran, two people from different ethnic groups, different cities, or different religious backgrounds may be closer to each other in lifestyle than two people from the same ethnic group or the same extended family. Conversely, two people may live under the same ethnic name or even in the same city, but their social worlds may be very far apart. This is where lifestyle helps us see what ethnicity or geography alone no longer shows.

Lifestyle does not only tell us how people live; it tells us what they consider "life" to be in the first place. For one group, life means building an individual future: migration, everyday freedoms, cultural consumption, travel, chosen relationships, and distance from family tradition. For another group, life means preserving what exists: family, stability, reputation, religion, economic security, kinship networks, and avoiding risk. Neither of these should be judged too quickly. The question is not which lifestyle is "more correct"; the question is that these lifestyles make different social worlds, and each world has its own definition of fear, hope, danger, success, and even "normal life."

For this reason, lifestyle in this essay is not merely a cultural topic. It is a way of seeing fissures that are not always visible at the level of politics or ethnicity. When different groups speak of the people, behind their words there is often an image of normal life. Each group imagines that what is normal life for it should also be normal for others. But perhaps one of the crises of understanding Iran today is exactly this: what is called "normal life," I think, does not have the same meaning for all the peoples of Iran.

So if we want to move beyond the word "people," we have to see how different peoples experience life, what they consider natural, what they see as unbearable, and what future they consider possible. Lifestyle here is not the margin of analysis, but one of the ways of seeing society itself; the surface on which deeper forces appear.

Lifestyle Is Not Only an Outcome; Sometimes It Is a Motor of Change

If we see lifestyle only as the outcome of underlying forces, we have still seen only half the story. It is true that lifestyle comes out of family, money, education, religion, city, media, and social position; but after it takes shape, it can itself become an active force. People do not only inherit lifestyle. Sometimes they see it, desire it, imitate it, pay a cost for it, and change themselves on the path toward it.

There is an important difference here. At first glance, we may think that someone has a different lifestyle because they have more money. That is true, but it is not enough. In many situations, the relationship also works in the opposite direction: someone first sees an image of a desired life, and then tries to move closer to the possibilities needed for it. They want more money, another job, another city, another relationship with family, another definition of religion, more everyday freedoms, and sometimes they even build another narrative of themselves.

In this sense, lifestyle is not only “what is”; it is also “what should become.” It is an image of the future. People may still live in one condition, but mentally and emotionally connect themselves to another lifestyle. That lifestyle is not only consumption or display for them; it is a kind of promise. The promise that one can live differently, make relationships differently, face family differently, be religious or nonreligious differently, be a woman or a man differently, imagine the future differently.

This desire to resemble another life is not a marginal phenomenon. Leon Festinger, in social comparison theory, shows that humans evaluate themselves and their situation in relation to others; that is, in the absence of definite standards, looking at others becomes part of our understanding of ourselves. This comparison is not only about ability or opinion; it can extend to lifestyle, success, freedom, family, consumption, and the future. When an individual constantly sees other lives, they do not only receive information; they measure their own position again. [6]

At the social level, this comparison can become a force of movement. If a group of young people sees that another kind of life is possible, they may no longer see

their family or local lifestyle as the only available possibility. If a family sees that the path of its child's success passes through education, migration, or a change of work, it may adjust itself to that image. If an individual feels that the lifestyle they desire does not fit the traditional definition of family, gender, or religion, they may push to redefine them. Here lifestyle is no longer a silent outcome; it is a motor of change in values and decisions.

Thorstein Veblen, in his discussion of conspicuous consumption, shows that consumption may not only satisfy needs, but can become a sign of social position. Of course, our issue here is not only luxury goods or displays of wealth. The discussion is broader: many everyday behaviors can carry a social message. Home, clothing, travel, language, the child's school, relationship style, forms of leisure, even the way one distances oneself from tradition, can signal which social world a person wants to be seen in. [7]

But we have to be careful that this discussion does not turn into moral judgment. The fact that people see another lifestyle and want to move closer to it is not necessarily a sign of superficiality or blind imitation. Sometimes imitation is an early form of social learning. Humans have always learned from others: language, behavior, work, customs, techniques, clothing, desires, and even forms of protest. The main question is not whether people imitate or not; the question is what they see as valuable, why they see it as valuable, and what they change in order to move closer to it.

In Iran, this point becomes even more important because lifestyle is often not only an individual choice; it collides with social, familial, economic, and political limits. Someone who wants to live differently is not facing only their bank account. They also face family, law, custom, neighborhood, language, fear, social judgment, and sometimes political danger. Therefore the desire for a different lifestyle can turn into a real struggle: a struggle between the life the individual sees and the life that the surrounding structures make possible for them.

From here we can understand why lifestyle matters in the discussion of the peoples of Iran. Because lifestyle does not only show how each group lives today; it shows the direction in which each group wants to move. One group may want to distance itself from family tradition; another may want to preserve that same tradition. One group may see the future in migration; another in building a

business inside the country. One group may push religion back into the personal sphere; another may see it as the core of social order. These are not only differences of opinion; they are different directions of movement.

So lifestyle, in this essay, is both sign and force. It is a sign because on its surface we can see the trace of money, education, media, family, religion, migration, and generation. It is a force because, once it becomes an image of the desired life, it can push people to change jobs, cities, relationships, beliefs, language, and futures.

If we want to understand the peoples of Iran, we have to ask not only how each group lives, but what kind of life each group considers possible, desirable, respectable, or unbearable. Perhaps the distance among the peoples of Iran is not only the distance between existing conditions; it is the distance between the images each group carries in its mind of a desired life.

University and Social Networks; Fields of Contact with Other Lifestyles

If lifestyle is not only the result of social forces and sometimes becomes a motor of change, we have to ask where people see the image of other lives. That image does not come from a vacuum. As long as a person lives only in the limited world of their family, neighborhood, and city, they may see that world as the most natural form of life. But when they are exposed to other lives, comparison begins. And comparison is never only knowledge; sometimes it produces desire, sometimes dissatisfaction, sometimes shame, sometimes longing, and sometimes movement.

In Iran over the past few decades, one important field of this contact has been the university. Not the university merely as class, degree, and formal education, but the university as a social space that places young people, at the age when identity is being formed, next to others from different families, cities, and backgrounds. A student at university does not only study. They encounter other languages, other forms of clothing, other relationships, other families, other desires, and other definitions of success, freedom, religion, the future, and normal life.

This point should not be exaggerated. University has not been the cause of all lifestyle changes in Iran. Even universities themselves are not uniform: state universities, Azad University, Payam Noor, nonprofit institutions, applied-science universities, the University of Tehran, provincial universities, small local universities; each makes a different social world. But with this caution, the expansion of higher education can be seen as one of the important points of contact among different peoples. Especially when university moved from a relatively limited and elite experience into a broader and more mass experience.

Azad University played an important role in this process. The WES report on education in Iran notes that Azad University, with more than 1.7 million students across the country, was one of Iran's largest university systems. This scale matters because it shows that university did not remain only in a few limited centers, but reached more cities, families, and social layers. The social meaning of this expansion was not only an increase in the number of degrees; it was also an increase in contact among worlds of life. [8]

In this space, a young person who comes from a more traditional family may, for the first time, encounter other styles of relationship, dress, speech, thinking about the future, or distancing from family religion. A young person who comes from a more limited class may face people for whom travel, foreign languages, migration, cultural classes, or a particular kind of consumption is normal. A young person from a small city may see that what was impossible or costly in their world is part of everyday life in another world. These encounters do not necessarily lead to immediate change, but they open the possibility of comparison. And this possibility of comparison is part of the motor of lifestyle change.

In recent years, social networks have made this field of contact much wider. If university placed people beside one another in a physical space, social networks have brought other lives nonstop onto people's personal screens. Here, one no longer needs to leave one's city to see another life. It is enough to open a mobile phone. Other lives, other homes, other relationships, other travels, other kitchens, other clothes, other freedoms, and even other sufferings are all placed within reach in a condensed and visual form.

This access does not only produce awareness. It produces comparison. Research on exposure to "upward comparison" targets on social media shows that seeing selected and idealized images of other people's lives can create comparison, a sense of lack, longing, or psychological pressure, though the effects are not the same for everyone and depend on the person, context, and type of use. [9] For our discussion, the main point is this: social networks are not only media of news; they are showcases of lifestyles.

In such a space, lifestyle is no longer inherited only from family and neighborhood. People are constantly exposed to lives that may not be close to them, but become imaginable for them. Someone may still lack the financial or social possibility for a lifestyle, but see it, want it, compare themselves with it, and make part of their decisions in relation to it. This is where lifestyle turns from an outcome into a goal.

University and social networks, each in their own way, have broken the borders of more closed worlds. University through in-person and generational contact; social networks through visual, constant, and widespread contact. The result of both has

been increased comparison: comparison between what is and what could have been.

But this comparison is not always liberating. Sometimes it brings awareness, sometimes dissatisfaction. Sometimes it creates the possibility of movement, sometimes the feeling of falling behind. Sometimes it distances the individual from their family world, sometimes it only deepens the gap between desire and possibility. In a society with many economic, familial, cultural, and political limits, seeing other lifestyles does not always end in being able to reach them. Sometimes it only increases desire while leaving possibility just as limited.

For this reason, university and social networks should be understood as fields of contact, not as single-line causes of change. They have shown different peoples that other worlds also exist. But what each person or group does with this seeing depends on the money, family, gender, city, law, religion, migration, work, and future they see before themselves.

In the end, the importance of this section for the essay is here: if the peoples of Iran today experience different worlds, part of this difference comes from the fact that no group is any longer enclosed only within its own world. Different lifestyles are constantly seen, compared, and sometimes pursued. But the possibility of reaching them is not equal. This distance between seeing and being able to reach is one of the important fissures of life in today's Iran.

Media; the Collapse of a Single Narrative

If university and social networks have been fields of contact with other lifestyles, media is a field of contact with other narratives. But these two should not be confused. Lifestyle shows people how one can live; media tells them what matters, what is dangerous, what has remained hidden, what has been enlarged, and from which angle the world should be seen in the first place.

For a long time, official media in Iran had more power to build the dominant narrative. This does not mean that everyone believed that narrative, or that society had no other narratives. Family, mosque, bazaar, university, intellectual circles, cassette tapes, books, foreign radio, and later satellite television always created cracks in the official narrative. But despite all this, official media could still claim to be the main center of public narrative; the place that determines which news is important, which issue should be seen, which voice is permitted, and which reality should remain on the margin.

With the spread of satellite television, the internet, and then social networks, this monopoly cracked. But the breaking of the official narrative's monopoly did not necessarily mean arriving at a shared truth. The simple expectation is that when there are more media, reality becomes clearer. But in practice, something else sometimes happens: the single narrative collapses, yet a shared truth does not replace it; competing narratives take its place.

This point matters for understanding the peoples of Iran. Because media does not only transmit news; it gives weight. It can turn one event into the country's central crisis and make another event almost invisible. It can turn one suffering into a sign of collapse and push another suffering to the margins. It can present one group as the representative of the people and another as an exception, a threat, a minority, the deceived, or insignificant.

In agenda-setting theory, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw showed that media do not only tell audiences what to think about a subject; they also play a role in determining which subjects audiences think about and which things they consider important. In their classic work on the agenda-setting function of mass media, they write that the selection and display of news plays a role in shaping political

reality, and audiences learn the importance of a topic from the degree of attention media gives to it. [10]

For today's Iran, this discussion is not only a theory of communication; it is part of everyday experience. Many people no longer face only one narrative. At the same time, they see the official narrative, the narrative of media outside the country, the narrative of social media activists, the narrative of friends and family, and the scattered narratives that come from videos, channels, pages, and messaging apps. In such a situation, the problem is not only a shortage of information; sometimes it is an excess of narrative.

The result of this situation, for part of society, is a new form of living with news: complete trust gives way to estimation. A person sees a piece of news, but at the same time adjusts its weight. They know this media may exaggerate, that media may omit, another may steer the meaning, and the official narrative may essentially invert the issue. So the audience does not only consume news; it is constantly validating. It is as if every piece of news has to pass through several filters so that perhaps something closer to reality remains.

This situation deepens different social worlds. Because different groups do not only watch different media; they live with different devices for weighing reality. For one group, a piece of news is a definite sign of crisis. For another group, the same news is part of psychological warfare. For one group, media silence is a sign of concealment. For another, the same silence means the issue was not that important. In this way, the disagreement is not only over the interpretation of an event; it is over how real, important, or trustworthy the event is in the first place.

This is where media connects to the discussion of the peoples of Iran. Different peoples do not only have different lifestyles; they may have different narratives of reality. Each lives in a particular media field, builds trust or distrust through particular sources, and sees the world through priorities that that field has made prominent for them.

Of course, here we have to avoid a simplification. Media do not create people out of nothing. People enter media with their backgrounds: family, class, religion, migration, language, the experience of repression, the experience of poverty, the experience of security, and lifestyle. These backgrounds determine which media

seems more believable to them and which narrative fits their world better. So the relationship between media and peoples is not one-directional. Media shape the social world, but the social world itself also determines which media the individual listens to and which narrative they accept.

In this essay, we keep the discussion at this point. Propaganda is a separate and heavier subject and should be opened in an independent essay; because propaganda is not only news or narrative, but the mechanism of producing meaning, enemy, fear, hope, and political direction. Here it is only necessary to say that the collapse of a single narrative has placed the peoples of Iran in different worlds of news and interpretation.

So if lifestyle shows how different peoples experience life, media shows how they see and weigh reality. In today's Iran, perhaps one of the important fissures is exactly this: everyone lives in one country, but they do not always consume one shared reality.

An Evolutionary View; Why Does Everyone See Their Own People?

So far we have spoken of ethnicity, lifestyle, university, social networks, and media. All of these are historical and social forces. But there is another layer that, if we look at it carefully, can make part of the issue clearer: the limits of the human mind itself.

Humans were not made to live in societies of tens of millions. A large part of human history passed in smaller groups, closer networks, more traceable relations, and worlds in which the individual could know many of the important people around them, remember their behavior, trust them, or avoid them. But the modern nation, urban society, mass media, and social networks have placed humans before something whose direct experience is almost impossible: “the people.”

No one sees the people. We always see samples of the people. Family, friends, coworkers, neighborhood, city, political group, social network, consumed media, the migrant community around us, or those who live like us. Then our mind builds a larger image from these limited samples. This image may be very far from the statistical reality of society, but it seems real to us because it is built from our close and repeated experience.

Here we can use Robin Dunbar. Dunbar’s “social brain” hypothesis says that the growth and capacity of primate brains are connected to the complexity of their social relations. From there, Dunbar reaches the question of humans’ limited capacity to maintain stable social relationships; something later known through the famous Dunbar number. There is disagreement over the details and numerical precision of this argument, but the main idea is useful for our essay: the human cognitive and emotional capacity for direct relationship with others is limited. We cannot know millions of people in the same way we know the members of our close network. [11]

This simple limitation has a large consequence. When someone says “people think this way,” they are usually speaking of the people who fall within their cognitive, emotional, and media range. They may not be lying at all. They may be saying

sincerely what they have seen and experienced. But the problem is that close experience does not necessarily create an accurate image of the whole society.

The human mind is not only limited; it also makes groups. We understand ourselves in relation to groups: family, city, ethnicity, religion, class, generation, political current, lifestyle, or even an online community. These groups give us a sense of meaning, security, and recognition. But at the same time they make borders. What is inside our group seems more understandable and more human; what is outside the group turns into a label more quickly.

In human cultural evolution, cooperation with non-kin has been one of the important questions. Joseph Henrich and his colleagues have shown that human cooperation cannot be explained only by instinct or kinship; culture, norms, social punishment, learning from others, and shared institutions have played important roles in expanding cooperation among humans. In simpler terms, humans have been able to cooperate with strangers beyond small natural groups, but this cooperation requires norms, trust, rules, and cultural mechanisms. [12]

This point matters for the discussion of the peoples of Iran. Because when the shared narrative weakens, when media produce different realities, when lifestyles move apart, the human mind easily retreats to the close network and the in-group. In such a situation, “the people” for each person becomes more like those they know, understand, see, and trust. The rest of the people may become invisible, or be seen as vague, dangerous, deceived, uninformed, comfort-softened, backward, irreligious, regime-aligned, Westernized, or any other label.

This does not mean that humans are condemned to tribalism. Such a conclusion would be both simplistic and dangerous. In fact, human history shows that we have been able to expand the circle of cooperation: from family to tribe, from tribe to city, from city to nation, and from nation to global networks. But this expansion does not happen by itself. It needs shared language, institution, law, exchange, education, narrative, and trust. The weaker these mechanisms become, the more easily the human mind returns to smaller and safer circles.

From this angle, the issue of the “peoples of Iran” is not only an Iranian issue. It is an Iranian version of a general human problem: our mind was not made for the direct experience of large societies, but it has to judge them. We are forced to

speak about “the people” while not seeing the people completely. We are forced to decide about society while experiencing society through our limited windows.

In today’s Iran, this human limitation has combined with specific historical and social conditions: lifestyle fissures, competing media, distrust, migration, inflation, repression, different generational experiences, and the weakening of shared narratives. The result is that each group has not only its own opinion, but sometimes its own people.

So the evolutionary view in this essay is not meant to explain everything. It only gives us a warning: when we speak of “the people,” we must know that our mind tends to build the people from the closest and most familiar samples. If we forget this, we may confuse our limited world with the whole society.

From Differences to Knots

So far, the path of this essay has mostly moved toward seeing differences. We began with the word “people” and saw that despite its simple appearance, it can hide large parts of reality. Then we reached “peoples”: societies that live under one name, but do not see the world from one point. We spoke of ethnicity, memory, lifestyle, university, social networks, media, and the limits of the human mind in seeing a large society.

But if we stay here, the essay remains incomplete. Because seeing differences is only the first half of the problem. If the image of “one people” erases differences, the image of “separate islands” ignores the knots. Today’s Iran may not be understandable through the imagination of one unified people, but it cannot be understood as a collection of completely separate worlds either.

Here we have to change the question. The question is not only what differences the peoples of Iran have. The more important question is what, despite these differences, connects their lives to one another. This connection is not always made of similarity. Two people may be very distant from each other in lifestyle, religion, media, politics, class, and family experience, yet their lives may be practically dependent on one another through work, money, healthcare, education, rent, family, city, migration, law, services, and infrastructure.

To understand these knots, Douglass North is important. North sees institutions as the “rules of the game”: formal and informal rules that structure human interaction. This means society does not hold together only through a feeling of belonging or cultural similarity; it also holds together through rules, limitations, contracts, habits, and mechanisms that force different people to interact with one another. Law, contract, money, property, market, family, office, school, and hospital are not only administrative tools; they are fields in which different people meet, even if they do not share the same mental world. [13]

So perhaps we have to move from “commonality” to “knot.” Commonality means people have something similar. But a knot means their lives are tied together. These two are not the same. The peoples of Iran may be less similar than before,

but they are still caught in a network of everyday dependencies. It is these dependencies that prevent difference from becoming complete separation.

Mark Granovetter, in his discussion of the “embeddedness” of economic action, shows that even economic behavior does not happen in a vacuum; it is rooted in social networks, trust, relationships, and structures of connection. This matters for our discussion because it shows that the connection among different peoples is not made only through shared emotions. Sometimes it is made through exchange, need, minimal trust, and practical relations. [14]

From this angle, society should not be understood only by asking “who is similar to whom?” We should ask: who needs whom? Who is forced to trade, work, care, decide, compromise, trust, or at least accept common rules with whom? Perhaps one of the important answers of this essay is hidden here: Iran has not held together only through cultural similarities or national narratives; it has also held together through a network of practical dependencies.

At this point, the main question gains a new meaning: if we have all these different peoples, why is the name of all of them still Iran?

The answer should not be sought only in history, land, language, or the state. These are important, but not enough. Perhaps part of the answer lies in this everyday entanglement; in the fact that peoples with different worlds still live in one common field of work, money, family, healthcare, education, law, services, crisis, and hope. They may not fully understand one another, but their lives are still tied to one another in visible and hidden ways.

So from here the essay enters its second half: not denying differences, not stopping at differences, but seeing the knots that continue beneath these differences. If a new language for understanding Iran is to be built, it has to be able to see both at once: different peoples, and intertwined lives.

Shared Suffering; a Common Field, Not Necessarily Unity

One of the clearest places where this entanglement can be seen is shared suffering. But this phrase has to be used carefully. Shared suffering does not mean that everyone suffers in the same way. Inflation, uncertainty, the labor market, healthcare, education, migration, and distrust affect everyone, but not with the same intensity, not with the same meaning, and not with the same consequences.

Inflation is not the same experience for an asset owner, a salary-earner, a renter, a shopkeeper, a migrant, a retiree, and a day laborer. But it forces all of them to readjust their relation to the future. Inflation does not only change prices; it shortens the time horizon of life. It makes planning difficult. It erodes trust in promises, contracts, and the future. In such a situation, even peoples with different worlds are forced to arrange their lives in relation to a common force.

Healthcare, education, migration, and the labor market are similar. They do not make everyone one, but they place everyone in a field. A family worried about its child's school, a young person who sees their job future as unclear, a migrant who from outside Iran is still involved with family inside Iran, a patient who weighs the cost of treatment, and someone constantly checking the credibility of news do not necessarily share one lifestyle or one political narrative; but each faces, in some form, forces that cross group boundaries.

Here we can use Paul Slovic's research on risk perception. Slovic shows that people do not understand risks only through technical and numerical data; experience, fear, unfamiliarity, controllability, and social position play roles in the perception of risk. This matters for our discussion: a shared force, such as uncertainty or economic crisis, can create different meanings for different groups. A shared field of risk does not mean a shared experience of risk. [15]

So when we speak of shared suffering, we should not turn it into a slogan of solidarity. Shared suffering does not automatically create unity. It may even deepen fissures if it does not find a common language. Each group may see its own suffering as more real, imagine another group as uninformed or privileged,

or locate the root of the crisis in the behavior of that other group. If suffering is not named, if it does not become a public narrative, and if it is not translated into institutions, law, and mechanisms of trust, it may produce only scattered anger.

Here Robert Putnam's discussion of social capital also becomes important. Putnam connects social capital with networks, norms, and trust; things that make cooperation possible. This means that even if people have a shared problem, in order for that problem to turn into cooperation, there have to be networks, trust, and rules that make collective action possible. Suffering makes a common field; but trust and institution are what can turn that field into cooperation. [16]

From this angle, shared sufferings have to be placed in the right position. They are not the end of the argument; they are an intermediate bridge. They show that different peoples still stand in a common field. But for this common field to become dialogue, trust, cooperation, or a shared future, one has to pass through suffering and reach the knots: economy, law, exchange, family, city, services, education, healthcare, and institutions that force different people to live with one another.

Perhaps the commonality of the peoples of Iran is not in their similarity, but in the degree to which they are caught up in common forces. But this is only the first step. The next step is to see which forces only produce suffering, and which forces can build cooperation. Inflation places people in a common field, but it does not necessarily bring them closer together. Economy, when accompanied by law and trust, can sit them around one table. Family may not unite them, but it can keep the other human. The city may not make them similar, but it forces them into coexistence.

So the final part of the essay should not merely say that the peoples of Iran have shared sufferings. It has to take one more step: shared sufferings show that a common field still exists; but the future of this field depends on whether trust, exchange, law, and a common language can be built from within it or not.

From Suffering to Connection; Practical Everyday Dependencies

Shared sufferings show that different peoples still live in a common field, but suffering alone does not build cooperation. Inflation, uncertainty, healthcare, education, migration, and distrust can involve everyone, but this shared involvement does not necessarily turn into dialogue, trust, or shared action. For different peoples to be able to work together, something more than the experience of pressure is needed: rules, trust, predictability, and practical dependency.

Here we have to distinguish between “commonality” and “connection.” Commonality means people have something similar or touch a similar experience. But connection means something brings them into relation, even if they are not similar. Two people may have no shared narrative of Iran, may not accept each other politically, may have distant lifestyles, and may even have different moral worlds; but if one needs a service the other provides, if one gives work and the other works, if one rents out a house and the other is a tenant, if one is a doctor and the other a patient, they enter a field of relation.

This relation is not necessarily emotional or moral. People do not have to love one another in order to exchange with one another. They do not need a shared narrative of history in order to make a contract. They do not need a shared lifestyle in order to act beside one another in one city, one office, one school, one hospital, or one market. Society is not made only through similarity; sometimes it is made through mechanisms that make differences manageable.

At this point, Douglass North becomes important. North defines institutions as “humanly devised constraints” that structure political, economic, and social interaction. Institutions include formal rules such as law, contracts, and property rights, but also informal rules such as custom, tradition, codes of conduct, and norms. The main function of institutions, in North’s words, is to create order and reduce uncertainty in exchange. This is crucial for our discussion: different peoples can cooperate when the rules of the game are to some degree clear, predictable, and reliable. [13]

If law and contract are not trustworthy, people retreat for cooperation into smaller networks: family, friends, ethnicity, acquaintance, connection, in-group. In such a situation, the larger society weakens because cooperation with strangers becomes costly and risky. But when rules are reliable, two people from two different social worlds can work together without becoming similar to each other. This is exactly where social connection forms: not from similarity, but from the possibility of safe cooperation across differences.

Economy is one of the clearest examples of this connection, but economy does not work in a vacuum. Mark Granovetter, in his famous essay on “embeddedness,” shows that economic action is not separate from social relations; economic behavior is rooted in a network of relations, trust, recognition, and social structures. In other words, the market is not only a place where unknown individuals meet through the cold logic of profit and loss. Even economic exchange depends on trust, reputation, relationship, history, guarantee, and social networks. [14]

This point matters for Iran. If different peoples are supposed to come closer only through similarity, there is not much hope; because similarities have diminished, or at least are no longer self-evident. But if they can enter relation through exchange, services, work, contract, city, healthcare, education, and law, the possibility of cooperation still exists. Economy, when accompanied by trust and law, can sit people with different worlds around one table. Not because they have become one, but because they need one another and understand the rules of relation to some degree.

Here the concept of social capital also becomes useful. Robert Putnam connects social capital with networks, norms, and trust; things that make coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit possible. If trust and networks of cooperation erode, even shared problems are not enough. People may have shared pain, but be unable to do anything together. [16]

So at the end of this path, we should say that shared sufferings only show that different peoples are in one common field. But the real connections are those things that make relation possible: law, contract, trust, exchange, family, city, infrastructure, services, and everyday institutions. These may be less poetic, but they are more important for the survival of society. Society does not hold together

only through great emotions; it also holds together through thousands of small, repeated, reliable relations.

If we want to understand today's Iran not as one people, not as separate islands, but as intertwined peoples, we have to look at these practical dependencies. The peoples of Iran may not have a shared narrative, but they still, in different ways, give work to one another, buy from one another, provide services to one another, receive care from one another, live with one another in cities, sit together in intertwined families, and live under rules whose weakness or strength affects everyone.

This is where the question of the essay moves beyond "what things are shared?" and reaches a more serious question: what still makes cooperation possible? Because the future of the peoples of Iran depends not only on how similar they are; it also depends on whether they can, despite differences, trust one another enough, exchange with one another, and live beside one another in a predictable field or not.

The Persian Language; a Common Field of Dialogue and Misunderstanding

One of the connections that should not be overlooked in this discussion is the Persian language. Persian in Iran is not only the language of one group; it is the language of school, administration, media, a large part of public literature, higher education, news, jokes, quarrels, protest, and shared memory. Article 15 of the Constitution also introduces Persian as the official and shared language and script of the people of Iran, while allowing the use of local and ethnic languages in media and the teaching of their literature. This institutional position matters because it shows that Persian is not only a tool of everyday communication; it has also been part of the mechanism for making Iran's public field. [19]

But Persian should not be understood as simple and unproblematic. For many non-Persian-speaking peoples, Persian is both possibility and pressure. It is possibility because it opens the path into education, administration, media, the labor market, and public conversation. It is pressure because it can push the mother tongue, local memory, and ethnic experience to the margins. Therefore, in this essay, Persian is neither simply a symbol of unity nor a tool of erasure; it is one of the fields in which Iran is made, experienced, and even contested.

From Benedict Anderson's angle, a shared language, especially printed and media languages, can play a role in building national imagination; because peoples who do not know one another can, through language, text, media, and narrative, imagine themselves as part of a common field. In Iran, Persian has played such a role. Even when the peoples of Iran experience different worlds, many of their disagreements, protests, jokes, news, memories, and narratives are still expressed in one public language. [1]

From this point of view, Persian is not only the language of agreement; it is also the language of disagreement. This is important. The peoples of Iran may disagree over politics, religion, lifestyle, the future, and the past, but a large part of this very disagreement is still expressed in a language that others can hear. Perhaps Persian is one of the last fields in which different peoples can still address one another, even when they do not convince one another.

Economy; a Practical Field of Cooperation among Different Peoples

In this essay, economy should not be taken only to mean inflation, poverty, or the crisis of livelihood. These are important, but economy does not only produce suffering; it also produces relation. Economy is where people, even when they are far apart in lifestyle, politics, religion, media, and memory, are forced to enter exchange with one another. Buying, selling, work, rent, healthcare, education, repair, transportation, production, services, investment, loans, salaries, wages, and contracts are all fields in which different peoples meet one another.

This meeting is not necessarily a matter of empathy. Two people may have no shared image of Iran's future, but one may need the other's skill. They may stand against each other politically, but trust each other in the market. They may dislike each other's lifestyle, but one buys the other's goods, works for them, receives services from them, or becomes their partner. This is where economy becomes something beyond numbers and prices: a field of cooperation among people who are not necessarily similar.

The importance of economy lies here. Economy can sit different peoples around one table, not because they have agreed on values, but because they have mutual needs. In a society where shared narratives have weakened and lifestyles have moved apart, economic exchange may be one of the few places where relation is still possible. Of course, this relation is fragile. If there is no law, trust, and predictability, economy can turn into distrust, rent-seeking, exclusion, and closed relations instead of connection.

Douglass North matters precisely from this angle. He sees institutions as rules that structure human interaction and reduce uncertainty. In economy, this means that when people trade with strangers, they have to be able to trust the rules of the game to some degree: contract, property, court, market custom, guarantee, reputation, and the possibility of pursuing one's right. Without these rules, exchange with a stranger becomes risky, and individuals retreat into smaller and safer networks: family, acquaintance, ethnicity, connection, in-group. [13]

This point matters for the discussion of the peoples of Iran. If the rules of the game become weak, different peoples work with one another less and remain more within their own circles. Cooperation moves not through law and contract, but through acquaintance, connection, and limited trust. In such a situation, the larger society is harmed because people cooperate only with those they already know or those who count somehow as their own. Economy, instead of becoming a field where differences encounter one another constructively, turns into a network of small islands of trust.

But if the rules of the game are reliable, economy can cross social borders to some extent. A seller does not have to accept the buyer's lifestyle. A doctor does not have to accept the patient's political narrative. Employer and worker do not have to share one moral world. They only have to know that their relation is regulated within a predictable and relatively fair framework. This "relatively" matters, because no society is completely without friction. But the more reliable the rules are, the lower the cost of cooperation among different peoples becomes.

Mark Granovetter opens the same issue from another angle. In his famous essay on "embeddedness," he shows that economic action is not separate from social relations. The market is not merely a collection of isolated individuals acting through cold calculations of profit and loss. Transactions occur within social networks, trust, reputation, history, and human relations. Economy is embedded in society, not outside it. [14]

This view helps us see economy not only as a financial matter, but as a social mechanism. When two people trade, not only money and goods move; a small amount of trust is also tested. When someone receives wages, a contract is honored, a service is properly provided, a debt is paid, or work is delivered on time, society is practicing trust at a small level. This small trust may not be visible, but its repetition is what makes collective life possible.

From this point of view, economy can be one of the most realistic answers to the question of this essay. If the peoples of Iran are different in their social worlds, how can they still do something together? One answer is: through mutual need, exchange, and reliable rules. Economy does not necessarily make people similar, but it can place them in a practical relation. A relation that, if healthy, can produce trust; and if corrupt or ruleless, can deepen distrust.

For this reason, economy is both a field of connection and a field of danger. If economy is founded on law, contract, transparency, and the possibility of fair competition, it can push different peoples toward cooperation. But if it is built on rent, connection, corruption, monopoly, and instability, it deepens the fissures. In the first case, the stranger can be a partner, customer, coworker, or service provider. In the second case, the stranger is a threat; someone who may cheat, take what is rightfully yours, exploit you, or have support from somewhere behind them.

So economy should not be placed only in the section on sufferings. Economy can be both a factor of erosion and a possibility of connection. Inflation, uncertainty, and economic instability exhaust different peoples; but exchange, work, contract, services, and mutual need can build relation among these same peoples. These two faces of economy have to be seen at the same time.

Perhaps for this reason, economy can also be the subject of a separate essay. Because if we want to understand how different peoples can still cooperate despite differences in lifestyle, media, memory, and future, we have to look at economy more seriously. Not only as the index of inflation and the exchange rate, but as a field of trust, contract, institution, and relation.

In the end, economy reminds us that society is not made only by great agreements. Sometimes it is made through thousands of small exchanges: a purchase that is done properly, work delivered on time, rent arranged fairly, treatment given with respect, a wage paid, a contract not broken. These small relations, if they are reliable, can build connection among different peoples. And if they collapse, even shared suffering will not be enough to keep people together.

Family and Kinship; Forced Contact with the Other

Economy can bring different peoples into relation, but it is not the only field of connection. Family and kinship are also among the oldest and deepest fields of contact among people, with the difference that their function is not the same as economy's. Economy can build cooperation, create exchange, and put relation in motion. Family does not necessarily do this. Family is more often the place where differences are forced to remain beside one another.

Family should not be romanticized. Family is not always a shelter. Sometimes it is a field of pressure, silence, control, judgment, discrimination, violence, or erosion. But despite all this, family is still one of the few places where people from different social worlds cannot completely turn one another into abstract and enemy-like images. Because the "other" in family is not only a label; they have a name, a relation, a memory, a face.

In media and political space, people quickly become "they": they who do not understand, they who have been deceived, they who are backward, they who are softened by comfort, they who are rootless, they who are dangerous. But in family, these same "they" may be an uncle, a sister, a father, a cousin, a son-in-law, a mother, a nephew, or a relative. This relation does not solve the disagreement. But sometimes it prevents disagreement from being completely emptied of a human face.

From an evolutionary perspective, this position of family is not accidental. Kin cooperation is one of the oldest forms of cooperation among social beings. W. D. Hamilton, in his theory of inclusive fitness and kin selection, showed that helping behaviors among kin can be understood evolutionarily, because helping relatives can help transmit shared genes. Of course, human society today cannot be explained by this theory alone, but the theory reminds us that kinship has been one of the first mechanisms of trust and cooperation in human biological history. [17]

But human family is not only biology. Family also gathers culture, law, memory, economy, inheritance, care, reputation, religion, gender, and generation into itself.

In Iran, family is often not only an emotional unit; it is a network of support, pressure, care, control, moral debt, and shared decisions. Someone may have grown distant from their family in lifestyle, but still be involved with a father's illness, a sister's future, a child's migration, a mother's treatment costs, inheritance disputes, weddings, mourning, care for the elderly, or family decisions.

This is where kinship connects to the discussion of the peoples of Iran. In a society where lifestyles have moved apart, family is still a place where these distances are seen in a compressed and everyday form. In one family, religious and nonreligious, migrant and remaining, traditional and individualist, regime-aligned and opposed, wealthy and exhausted, the 1980s generation and the 2000s generation, an independent woman and a traditional father may sit beside one another. This being-together is not necessarily beautiful or constructive. Sometimes it is only endurance. But even this endurance is not socially meaningless.

James S. Coleman, in his discussion of social capital, shows that family and social relations can be a resource for the formation of human capital and the possibility of action. He sees social capital as something located in the structure of relations among individuals that makes certain actions possible. This matters for our discussion because family is not only a collection of individuals; it is a structure of relations that can make care, transmission of experience, pressure, trust, control, and support possible. [18]

But here we have to be cautious again. Familial social capital is not always positive. Family networks can create support, but they can also reproduce monopoly, pressure, silence, dependency, and the exclusion of the other. Family may be a bridge to the larger society, or conversely, it may imprison people in the circle of their own. Therefore, in this essay, we do not treat family as a solution. Family is more one of the last fields in which different peoples are still forced to face one another with a human face.

This small compulsion should not be underestimated. If economy can bring different people into practical cooperation, family can sometimes prevent differences from turning into total hostility. Not always, not for everyone, not

without cost. But at a limited level, family is still a practice of coexistence; a tense, incomplete, and sometimes exhausting practice, but a real one.

Kinship is not a motor of change. A shared social project does not necessarily come out of a family gathering or a mourning ceremony. But perhaps the fact that people still have to sit beside someone who does not think like them, does not live like them, does not vote like them, does not understand religion like them, or does not see the future like them, is a barrier against the complete collapse of relation. Family does not solve disagreement; but sometimes it does not allow the “other” to become completely faceless.

In a society where media, lifestyles, migration, and economic experiences have distanced peoples from one another, this having-a-face of the other matters. Perhaps family cannot unite the peoples of Iran, but it can remind us that behind many labels, there are still people with relation, memory, and dependency.

So if economy is a field of cooperation, family is a field of contact. Economy asks: how can we work together despite differences? Family asks: how can we still not completely strip one another of humanity despite differences? These two answers are not the same, but both are necessary for understanding the entanglement of the peoples of Iran.

Different Peoples, Intertwined Lives

Now we can return to the opening question. When we say “the people of Iran,” what exactly are we talking about? If we mean one single will, one single experience, one single lifestyle, or one shared narrative of past and future, such a people probably does not exist; or at least we can no longer speak of it with certainty. Today’s Iran is made of peoples who experience different social worlds; in different families, different media, different memories, different lifestyles, different sufferings, and different possibilities.

But this conclusion should not push us toward another exaggerated image: that Iran is only a collection of separate islands. Such an image is as incomplete as the image of “one people.” If, with Benedict Anderson, we understand the nation as a kind of imagined community, we have to ask what replaces this shared imagination when it cracks. The answer is not only in slogans, identity, or a shared past. Part of the answer is in everyday life; in those places where different peoples are still forced to have relations with one another. [1]

This entanglement is not always beautiful, calm, or voluntary. Sometimes it comes through suffering: inflation, healthcare, education, migration, the labor market, uncertainty, and distrust. Sometimes it comes through need: work, services, exchange, contract, rent, buying and selling. Sometimes it comes through institutions; the same rules of the game that Douglass North speaks of as important for reducing uncertainty and making human interaction possible. Sometimes it also comes through family; a place where differences, even when they are not resolved, still do not completely lose their human face. [13]

So perhaps the main mistake is to look only for similarity in order to understand Iran. The peoples of Iran may be less similar than we would like. But society does not hold together only through similarity. Society is also made through relation: through dependency, rules, exchange, care, everyday compulsions, memory, language, economy, family, and the thousands of small contacts that repeat every day. As Granovetter shows, even economic action does not happen outside social relations; it is embedded in a network of trust, relation, and history. [14]

This view is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It is not optimistic because it takes differences and fissures seriously. It is not pessimistic either because it does not equate difference with complete rupture. The issue is not that the peoples of Iran must once again become one uniform people. Such a thing is neither possible nor perhaps desirable. The issue is whether, among these different peoples, languages and mechanisms can be built that make cooperation, minimal trust, and mutual understanding possible; the same thing Putnam highlights from the angle of social capital, networks, and trust as necessary for cooperation. [16]

Perhaps today's Iran should be seen exactly this way: not one single people, not separate islands, but a land of different peoples whose lives are still tied together. Understanding these knots may be the first step toward building a new language; a language that can speak of the people without erasing the difference of peoples.

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