

A trip to Shiraz and back

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That which lodges in the mind isn't always the most obvious aspect of a trip. When I was asked to deliver a key note address and run a workshop for the annual Philosophy of Education Society meeting in Shiraz University, Iran, I did not know what to expect. The fascinating history and consequent identity of modern day Iran has been hidden to those of us in the west by political events since the 1979 revolution. The 'west' as it is characteristically defined, has retreated from the depiction of the everyday lives of Iranians. In its place, we are fed through our media outlets with 'the war on terror' and images of seemingly perpetual conflict in the Middle East. Iran is associated with these conflicts, yet the precise geopolitical forces behind this conflict are rarely discussed or analysed through the western media. In effect, we in the west are left in a vacuum of geopolitical information, the reality of war is readily displayed on our screens, yet the root causes of the conflict, any real discussion about the forces in opposition, and the consequences for global populations (including the Iranians) is hardly understood. I stepped into this vacuum, and have been trying to consider what it means ever since.

I initially had to stop over on my way to and back from Shiraz via the shining desert coastal city of Doha. Enormous mineral wealth and access to global financial exchange markets, has bought the Qataris an immense airport complex, which will probably always be under construction, and presents the stop over flyer with the latest in consumer distractions. This gigantic monolith dwarves the traveller, engulfs the senses, and leaves one feeling cold, lonely and rather under-awed. I had a petrol-punk vision whilst I was in Doha, after the oil and gas fields had run out of their seemingly infinite supply of commodity, and Qatar was flat broke. The desert had reclaimed the matt airports concourses. The air conditioning had given way to oppressive, year-long, glass and metal augmented heat. The tremendous monument to anthropocentric money and power was now a shell for the desert and sea winds to blow through. Nobody came and went to Doha anymore. Doha's airport is the very paradigm of unsustainable development, based on flows of capital that will last only as long as the commodities that they sell are in demand. With a planet heading for super warming, and the vast unforeseeable consequences in terms of planetary upheaval, revolution, and future wars for survival, places such as Doha airport point to the current heedless squandering of resources and attempts to invest in the fossil fuel empire, as if it will never end. These places will disintegrate and fall apart and be reclaimed by dunes of sand, just as quickly as they have been erected by the currently 'moneyed up' sheikhs of oil and gas.

And lost in such thoughts, I crossed the short distance from Doha to Shiraz by air. The glitzy show of power and money was immediately replaced by an ancient culture, which has recently been hidden from the extreme ravages of globalisation. The airport in Shiraz, Iran, was on a much smaller scale, the cars and trucks on the road were older — the buildings that I saw were not in the style of the mirrored towers of Doha. Shiraz still sat in its dry valley setting, as it had done for hundreds of years. The people of Shiraz milled around in their daily pursuits, seemingly oblivious to the scale of the disaster being created across the ditch. Yet the sands of the Arabian Peninsula reach Shiraz if the winds blow from the north-west. The politics of the current global situation, and the world dependency on fossil fuel, is undeniable. Further, Iran sits at the heart of this situation, and the effects of the western embargoes and sanctions, are discussed in street cafes and in the corridors of buildings throughout Persia. The fact that the current geopolitical situation *can* be competently discussed at the street level, sets Iran apart, and points to a robust Iranian identity, which is set uniquely against the mainstreams of western capitalism.

My time at the university in the philosophy of education workshop, giving the key note address for the conference, and touring around the ancient sites in and beyond Shiraz was a delight. I was particularly struck by the high quality of the interactions with the workshop audience, and the penetrating questions that were asked. I realised that the audience were engaged in a different way to audiences in Australia. Perhaps this is because the philosophy of education is still studied in Iran, whereas it has been relegated to a fringe dwelling activity in most Education faculties in Australia. Whatever the precise reasons for the differences in audience engagement levels, the facts as I perceive them are that Iranian students of education are able to articulate questions about the philosophy of education in a far clearer manner than most Australian students of education. I pondered whilst I was in Shiraz if the differences in philosophical depth and acuity between Iran and Australia have anything to do with the superficial, social media impregnated screen culture that has been promulgated in the west. Even though I certainly saw buy in into western values operant in Iran, I didn't see the wholesale commercial 'free for all' that is promoted in the west under the guise of neoliberal, market values. Perhaps having a ruling clerical class is not such a bad thing after all?

In sum, I have fond memories of and a desire to return to Iran. As the global geopolitical situation seems to thaw somewhat and Iran re-enters the mainstream of international politics and life, it would do well to pick and choose the values and modes of being that it wants to adopt. A headlong rush into westernisation would be a disastrous mistake. A considered, thoughtful reintegration into world affairs, would not only benefit the Iranians, but also, significantly, would benefit the rest of the world, which would be able to re-engage with one of the well springs of philosophy, culture and possible new articulations for the future.