

Student Organizations; Places to Deepen the Experience of Freedom: An Attempt to Make Possible an Alternative Narrative of the History of the University in Iran

Reza Samim¹

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Abstract

In this article, through a phenomenological research, an attempt has been made to provide a conceptual framework for presenting an alternative narrative of the history of the university in Iran. Those who have studied the history of the university in Iran have not been able to narrate the history of this institution as a place where students experience a different kind of collective life. For phenomenologists, however, recognizing the university as a distinct institution is possible only through identifying places where students experience a distinct life. One of these places and perhaps the most important of them is student organizations. For any phenomenological researcher who is interested in the history of the emergence and dynamism of the university as a comprehensive and distinct institution, the narrative of the unique experiences that students go through in student organizations and through them become community activists is important. The narrative of the history of the university is an alternative narrative from the perspective of the experiences of organizational students because it helps to conceptualize the university as a distinct and unique institution. In this article, in order to make such a narrative possible, first an attempt was made to explore student organizations from a phenomenological point of view and in relation to the concept of freedom. During this research, some data from in-depth interviews with students active in student organizations was used. In the other part, an attempt was made to narrate the history of the university as the history of student organizations, relying on the conceptualizations made. This narrative is an example of possible narratives that can be obtained by relying on the experiences of students of an Iranian university.

Keywords: student organizations, Iranian university, phenomenology, experience of freedom.

Introduction

1. Associate Professor of Sociology, Institute for Social and Cultural Studies, Tehran, Iran.
Corresponding author: Reza.Samim@iscs.ac.ir

In the university setting, students have limited opportunities to experience freedom within their multiple and diverse social relationships. These opportunities typically exist in places such as classrooms, dormitories, informal communities, and student organizations, where students become who they are. In this article, we will explore the significance of student organizations as a unique place where Iranian students are provided with special facilities and opportunities to experience freedom in a distinct sense. Before diving into the importance of student organizations, we will briefly examine how the situation of "being a student" is formed in classrooms, dormitories, and informal communities.

I believe that understanding the history of student organizations is essential to developing an alternative narrative of the history of universities in Iran. Student organizations provide a platform for students to engage in freedom-oriented action in its deepest form. In order to write such a history, a phenomenological approach is necessary to conceptualize student organizations.

Once this conceptual framework is established, I will attempt to narrate the history of student organizations as the history of the formation of habits, tastes, and lifestyles. It is important to note that this article only aims to create the possibility of an alternative narrative of the history of the university in Iran and does not claim to provide a detailed history. Writing such a history requires independent research, which should be based on the conceptualizations presented in this article.

Methodology

I would like to clarify that this article is not an empirical research study based on specific data, but rather an attempt to provide a conceptual framework for presenting an alternative narrative of university history in Iran. The goal is to gain a better understanding of the unique reality of universities in Iran through the lens of student organizations, which provide a platform for free social relations.

Phenomenology is the dominant approach used in this study, as it allows us to see things in their original phenomena. To interpret the position of Iranian students in organizations, I have used four categories of data. The first category is my observations of the spaces where organizational activities take place at the University of Tehran. When discussing data from observation in this article, it refers to data collected through the researcher's presence in the field and observations of relationships. Notes were taken from all observations, and some central themes for analysis in this article are based on these notes.

All observations were indirect and covert participatory observations made between December 2017 and June 2016. The spaces observed for this research include the backyard of the professors' dining hall and the lobby in front of the library in the Faculty of Social Sciences, the office of the Scientific Association of the School of Management, the Basij Baradaran office in the Fine Arts Campus, the association's office of Mountaineering in the Faculty of Engineering, the buffet of the Faculty of Literature, and the office of the Guild Council of the Faculty of Social Sciences.

Secondly, I conducted personal interviews with students who are active in student organizations within various faculties of the University of Tehran. These interviews were organized into five focus groups: the Islamic Students Association, the Scientific Association, the Trade Union Council, the Brothers' Basij, and the Mountaineering Association. With the exception of the Mountaineering Association, whose members were all students from the Faculty of Engineering, the other groups consisted of active students from faculties such as Social Sciences, Literature, Management, Fine Arts, Basic Sciences, Engineering, and Psychology and Educational Sciences.

Thirdly, I collected qualitative data from studies that are directly related to my research. These studies have either focused on a student organization or dealt with topics that are relevant to my study of the student's position within these organizations. I organized my understanding and interpretation of this data in relation to my research.

Lastly, I examined existing historical narratives of student organizations, which I then reinterpreted to suit the purpose of my article. This allowed me to narrate an alternative history as an example.

Findings

In student organizations, Iranian students seek the freedom to experience critical situations, rather than trying to avoid them as they might do in the classroom or dormitory. Unlike informal settings, they don't run away from the situation, but rather return to it in order to overcome it. This is a perfect example of positive freedom, which can only be achieved by confronting and overcoming challenges, rather than escaping from them.

Positive freedom is not about simply being free from external constraints; it is about having the power and authority to make decisions for oneself. It's about being an active agent, rather than a passive observer. As Isaiah Berlin wrote, "I want to be an agent, not a patient. I want to be the subject of my own actions, and take responsibility for my own choices" (Berlin, 2013: 250). Ultimately, the goal of positive freedom is to develop oneself as a thoughtful, determined, and responsible individual who is in control of their own destiny.

Negative freedom is about escaping from critical situations to complete the project of liberation. On the other hand, positive freedom involves developing the desire to experience freedom "in" critical situations, to create a gap within them. This is why Iranian students often join organizations, as they offer the opportunity to confront and overcome critical situations on a larger scale.

In informal settings, students can often avoid critical situations, which can lead to boredom and despair. This kind of avoidance can prevent the project of positive freedom from deepening. By contrast, joining organizations like Arman offers a way to create gaps and holes in critical situations on a larger scale, and achieve the common goal of deepening positive freedom. This goal is fundamentally different from the goals of informal student relationships.

By understanding this fundamental difference, we can analyze the difference between being a student in informal communities versus being a student in organizations. Rezaei and Kia (2017) refer to this as the difference between "being together" and "separate beings." In short, organizations offer a unique opportunity for Iranian students to deepen their positive freedom by confronting critical situations and creating meaningful change on a larger scale.

In organizations, Iranian students can experience positive freedom more deeply by using the tools available within the situation to break free from centralized power. This kind of freedom emerges within the situation, rather than outside of it, and is only possible due to the absolute right of Iranian students to participate in public power - a right granted by the modern university.

By pursuing this absolute right, Iranian students can become "responsible" agents or actors within their new position. This transformation enables them to experience positive freedom in a more profound and complete way within student organizations. Overall, the possibility of using this absolute right to break free from centralized power is what makes student organizations a unique and powerful way for Iranian students to experience positive freedom.

Conclusion

In this article, I propose a specific approach for conceptualizing student organizations as places where individuals experience positive freedom, as defined by Isaiah Berlin. This form of freedom is a deep and meaningful experience that Iranian students often encounter when they join and actively participate in informal student communities and friendship circles. In these informal groups, students come together to exercise a collective free will, devoid of any embodied or non-embodied sources of authority such as professors, regulators, and policymakers. By doing so, they develop a form of

autonomy that is a necessary condition for entering the realm of positive freedom.

Importantly, this experience does not come to an end when some students transition from informal groups to formal organizations. Rather, it continues and is further deepened in student organizations. In formal communities such as these, individuals experience a form of autonomy and collective effort aimed at realizing their free will. The key difference is that this experience is achieved not by escaping critical situations, but through conflict and the fight against obstacles that exist in the a priori regulatory laws governing organizations. Purposeful struggle against such obstacles deepens the experience of positive freedom in organizations.

Individuals who join student organizations do so with the intention of expressing the collective will of the student body and achieving freedom through legal structures. Although this pursuit is often accompanied by serious risks, individuals in these organizations enthusiastically work towards achieving freedom within critical situations. Unlike in informal communities, individuals in organizations do not opt for restrictive situations. Instead, they face the experience of freedom through conflict with limiting obstacles that arise in their situation.

According to this interpretation, the alternative history of the university in Iran is the story of the continuous and collective effort of students to deepen their experience of freedom. Through their participation in formal organizations, individuals aim to not only sustain but also enhance their freedom. In this way, organizations serve as a means of creating a history of collective effort towards realizing a deeper and more meaningful experience of freedom in the university context.

As previously mentioned, the experience of positive freedom is completed and deepened within organizations. This is precisely why the history of organizations can be seen as a condensed version of the alternative history of universities in Iran. When many individuals narrate the history of organizations in Iran, they often focus solely on the political movements that were initiated with student intervention. However, the history of organizations goes beyond these movements and is, in fact, the history of students' collective efforts to enable the experience of positive freedom by exposing diverse cultural practices on campus. Over the years, despite the many dangers and obstacles, students have been motivated to join organizations in order to publicly showcase such cultural differences. The lack of active student organizations in university settings eliminates the possibility of cultural pluralism and differences in the official courtyard of the university. The absence of such a possibility will eventually lead to the incompleteness of the project of the experience of freedom in Iranian universities. Therefore, it is

crucial to recognize the pivotal role of organizations in promoting and enhancing the experience of positive freedom on campuses.

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