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## **Remembering cosmopolitan Baghdad in exile**

*Narratives from Iraqi artists of the sixties and seventies generations*

**Abstract:** This paper presents the narratives of exiled Iraqi artists of the "sixties" and "seventies" generations, in which they provide portraits of a lost cosmopolitan Baghdad. By analysing these narratives from a socio-anthropological perspective, the paper explores the interactions between cities, exile, creation and cosmopolitanism.

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## **Remembering cosmopolitan Baghdad in exile**

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During my doctoral research focusing on Iraqi artists in exile in Middle Eastern and European cities, a specific use of the term "cosmopolitanism" emerged. Narratives from artists belonging to the so-called "sixties" and "seventies" generations tend to depict a period of peaceful cohabitation between all the components of society in an effervescent cultural life. Most of these artists have lived outside Iraq for more than thirty years. Both the city and the atmosphere are described as "cosmopolitan." The adjective "cosmopolitan" evokes "peace", "diversity", and a certain sense of "creativity." Did this lost Baghdad ever exist? The use of the term "cosmopolitanism" within the narratives emerges through memories, meaning through an appropriation of the past from exile. Therefore, the relation between urban spaces as agents, and exile in artistic spheres, seem to reveal cosmopolitan processes.

### 1. Combining normative and situated approaches to cosmopolitanism

This research examines, through experiences of exile, the link between "cosmopolitanism" as a grounded concept, geographically embedded in a city – Baghdad –; and "cosmopolitanism" as a normative claim. Within social sciences, the meaning of this concept has evolved in recent years – from a non-state-related cosmopolitanism to a transnational one; and from a kind of elitist cosmopolitanism, to one affecting every layer of society. Gerard Delanty (2009: 3) mentions a cosmopolitan turn in social sciences:

While cosmopolitanism has become influential within normative political theory, it has been taken up in a different guise in disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies where the tendency has been toward a more situated or rooted understanding of cosmopolitanism as always contextualized

This important move in social sciences has put the light on transnational spaces, questioning borders in a globalized world. However, according to Delanty's notion of *Cosmopolitan imagination*, we can argue that cosmopolitanism should not be reduced to transnational experiences. In other words, it is important to analyse

cosmopolitanism through concrete practices, without rejecting its normative dimension. The “self-problematization” of cosmopolitanism developed by Delanty, adds a critical dimension to the transnational character of cosmopolitanism. In other words, it questions the way migrants themselves consider their life in exile, the sense they attribute to migration and to their multiple belongings:

*Transnational movement, cultural diversity and hybrid cultures do not in themselves constitute cosmopolitanism, although they are undoubtedly important preconditions for cosmopolitanism. (...). Without mutual criticism and self-problematization, cosmopolitanism loses its force and become reduced to the mere condition of diversity (Delanty 2009: 16).*

According to Ulrich Beck, cosmopolitanization “is a methodological concept which helps to overcome methodological nationalism and to build a frame of reference to analyse the new social conflicts, dynamics and structures of Second Modernity” (Beck 2002: 18). Having underlined these different dimensions of cosmopolitanism, I should add that my study does not aim to redefine the concept. My purpose is rather to highlight its appropriation in the field of migration studies through practices and representations conveyed by Iraqi artists who have settled abroad.

Today, generations of Iraqi artists are spread all over the world. Some of these individuals obtained citizenship outside Iraq, in spite of still being connected to each other and, to a certain extent, to Iraq. Studying their trajectories contributes to the shaping of a certain cultural history of Iraq and its cities. The historicity of cosmopolitan cities in the Middle East emphasizes the relevance of this notion regarding Iraqi regional and transcontinental migrations. Urban spaces are omnipresent in my interviews and readings. From home cities to host cities, these places set the décor of the childhood, youth and journeys of the Iraqi artists I am working with, and sometimes become real agents of the narratives. In this presentation, I am focusing on descriptions of Baghdad in the sixties and seventies, as a “hometown”. Even though the “cosmopolitanisation” of space had been broadly analysed within globalisation studies, we can identify along with Ulrich Beck (2004: 151), a research gap in the study of “cosmopolitanisation” of “time”, “history” and “memories”. This paper intends to address both spatial and temporal dimensions. Based on my interviews, I will reconstruct some descriptions of Baghdad in the 1960s

and 1970s, focusing on its “cosmopolitan” dimension in the discourse. I will then propose some keys to understanding this dimension by linking urban migration trajectories to cosmopolitan cities. Having briefly introduced the challenges of this presentation, I will now move to the presentation of the methodology chosen for this study.

## 2. Voicing the city within memories: life stories as a methodology

Fieldwork among Iraqi artists was initiated in 2007. Interviews were conducted with approximately twenty Iraqis. Exiled artists’ life stories narrate itineraries from cities to cities, rather than journeys from a country to another. These narratives were themselves produced in urban areas, mainly in Damascus, Beirut, Amman, Paris, Geneva and London. Discussions took place in coffeehouses, artists’ studios or apartments. Interviewees have been selected through the personal networks of artists themselves. I was therefore conducted from one city to another through personal interrelations, revealing a continuous and transnational but heterogeneous group.

While focusing on two specific Iraqi decades, the question arises I chose to focus on collecting life stories, rather than more thematic interviews. Interestingly, these Baghdadi narratives actually developed unexpectedly during the collection of life stories, highlighting generational experiences and perceptions in a specific urban context: *“Oral histories allow for a holistic approach to the past and the present by allowing people not only to provide accounts of specific events, but also reflect on their own roles, their interpretations of events and their emotions”*. (Al Ali 2007: 9). No interviews were collected among Iraqi artists belonging to the same generations, who remained inside Iraq. However, in the analyses of these life stories, a connection appeared between these Baghdadi narratives and the migration experiences of the interviewees. Most of the Iraqis artists I am working with have not been able to visit Iraq for decades. Once they left their country in the seventies, coming back represented a threat for themselves and their family. As a matter of fact, the disconnection was abrupt and deep. Abroad, some of them tried to maintain contacts

with other Iraqis living outside in a more or less organised way<sup>1</sup>. When the ba'athist regime fell in 2003, these men and women suddenly had the choice to return to Baghdad again after years of absence. Some went, others refused. In both cases they never found the city they left.

Descriptions produced through narratives play an essential role in painting a picture of Iraqi society, complete with its diversity. In this vein, Nuha al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries* evocatively describe the city of Baghdad under sanctions, as well as the pragmatic aspects of her daily life in exile. The use of life stories enables the researcher to integrate the representations of exile from the protagonists' perspective, and to accept the complexity and the contradictions of exile. However, as Plummer points out, the collection of life stories does not necessarily lead to a revelation of truth: « *Life story work involves recollecting, remembering and re-discovering, along with the active processes of memorializing and constructing history* » (Plummer 2001: 233) The transition from oral interviews to written accounts—from transcription, to editing and publishing—is a co-construction involving the researcher and the interviewee(s). This process is challenging and providing as accurate as is possible account of the experience requires time. We can assess with Elizabeth Tonkin that the memory in the narratives is an intermediary between the individual and the society. To that I would add that memory is also an intermediary between the past and the present. The wording that recounts individual experiences of exile reconstructs life stories and forms part of the shaping of history. As Iraq faces a current, crucial period of historiographic issues, the inclusion of migrant perspectives is all the more important.

### 3. Narratives from Baghdad in the 1960s and 1970s

In the narratives I collected outside Iraq, the images of Baghdad in the sixties and seventies are blurred, contradictory and paradoxical. At this point, elaborating a coherent definition of cosmopolitanism is very challenging. This notion suggests and evokes more than it actually explains. I will start by highlighting two places omnipresent in my interviews: Baghdad Academy of Fine Arts and the coffeehouses

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<sup>1</sup> An example is the creation, in the late 1970's, of the « Ligue of Iraqi artists, journalists and writers in exile », which gathered leftist Iraqi around the world.

also called “literary cafés” of the Iraqi capital. Cultural and political dynamics are at stake in both places.

### ***3.1 Historical background: a generational outlook***

Studying migration routes from a life story perspective raises a temporal aspect, which, in this field, has emerged individually through every interviewee’s own partition of a lifetime, and collectively through the notion of “generation”. From the “sixties generation” that refers mainly to the artists and intellectuals who were considered as “leftists” to the “nineties generation” that alludes to Iraqis who left Iraq under international sanctions, we notice how the multiple waves of departures from Iraq are formulated and articulated one to another in the discourse. We can also examine different visions of Iraqi modern history. Since the 1930s, artistic life in Baghdad was characterized by international exchange, particularly through scholarships that enabled Iraqi students to obtain a European education. Simultaneously, Western artists visited the Baghdad Fine Arts Institute (Naef 1996: 260). Such movements of individuals favoured the circulation of ideas, which combined to deeply influence the theorization of visual art in Baghdad. A significant number of these artists and intellectuals were members or sympathisers of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), which was very influential in Iraq between its creation in 1934 and the 1970s. The repressions of 1978 and 1979 combined to accelerate the exodus, giving rise to a specific generation of migrants. Focusing on narratives formulated by Iraqi artists and intellectuals from the 1960s and 1970s enlightens us about the thriving and dynamic cultural scene taking shape in Baghdad up until the advent of the Ba’athist regime. These narratives examine questions of the course of their life outside Iraq while at the same time an official artistic and cultural scene was promoted inside Iraq. According to Rashid Salim (2001: 49), “for the Iraqi artist, within or without, the tension of loss is an undeniable factor towards releasing a new creating individualism in works that travel far with a contemporary global awareness informed by a profound sense of origin”.

### **3.2 Baghdad Academy of Fine Arts**

Most of my interviewees studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, founded in 1962. This place appears to have been far more than a school where they used to learn artistic techniques. Socialisation and political involvement were also at stake at the Academy. Salam Yousif (2007: 65) notes that political activism was so strong in the Academy of Fine Arts, that it had acquired the reputation of being a “leftist *bastion*”. In their early twenties, male and female students were studying painting, ceramic, sculpture, theatre (...). They were experiencing and theorising art individually and collectively. Interestingly, many of the teachers at that time had been trained in European cities at that time. Studying at the Academy also meant living in the heart of the capital for these young people coming from all over the country. The discovery of the city was part of the experience of becoming an artist. Despite of the unstable and often violent political climate in the sixties and in the seventies, in the mind of these artists in exile visiting Baghdad’s bookshops, cinemas, and cafés remain a meaningful development in their lives.

### **3.3 Baghdadi “literary cafés”**

The importance of literary cafés in Baghdad in the 1960s and 1970s first came up during an interview conducted in 2008 with an Iraqi researcher based in Beirut. Talking about his student life, he enthusiastically told me: *“I was always reading Russian, French, English and also German literature. When you were doing so, you were frequenting the literary cafés in Baghdad. I was really young, in the late 1960’s. I was listening to the ‘big guys’, we talked about everything: Marx, Hegel, Kant, Leibnitz, Sartre, Spinoza. All these names were circulating; we talked about poetry, theatre, literature. There was a kind of liberal openness in the 1960s. Really, these literary café were my first network”*. I encountered descriptions of such cafés in almost all my successive interviews. Artists, intellectuals, hobos, students gathering to discuss art, literature, politics, perhaps in search of a collective identity. Beyond the famous places and names attached to these cafés - such as Abu Nawwas street, Um Kalthoum café (...) - or the public intellectuals dominating the tables, these coffeehouses materialise an atmosphere that, to those women and men, does not exist anymore. They sometimes stand for the Baghdad they never found when some of

them returned in what was not home anymore after 2003. An Iraqi play writer and director currently living in Beirut described his return in these words: “I felt as if a butcher had come and cut my city and its political life into pieces. Without the river, I would not have recognised my city”. Others, like a painter living between Damascus and Roma preferred not come back and avoid confronting this physical place to the image they kept in mind: “I have beautiful memories of Baghdad, the river full of fishes, an active cultural life. I am afraid to go back to Iraq and not find these memories [...] I don’t want to go back because I want to keep my memories.”

#### 4. Conclusions: Iraqi artists in exile and the cosmopolitisation of space and time

Speaking about Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut, Iraqi director Jawad Al Asadi once simply told me: “Sometimes, there is nothing to say, you just love a city”. Another artist and friend of mine, a sculptor from Baghdad, declared after having spent many years in Damascus: “I now need to move from this place to find inspiration”. Common sense tells us that there are obvious links between cities and artists. Asserting that Iraqi artists in exile have been influenced by a capital like Baghdad, a city where they have studied, lived and loved seems self-evident. For some of these persons, Baghdad is also a city where they have been persecuted, sometimes jailed and forced to leave. Pictures from their home city are not fixed *souvenirs*. The image is moving along the road. This cosmopolitan Baghdad may have never existed but memories are keeping alive a certain vision of the city and its inhabitants. Edward Said defines exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (Said 2000: 173). Taking into account a certain feeling of nostalgia is crucial to understanding these narratives. According to Vladimir Jankelevitch (1974), nostalgia is provoked by the irreversibility of time, meaning that if we can come back to a place we left, we can never find back the young person we were. However, descriptions of Baghdad offered by the exiled artists’ narratives are deeply embedded in sensations and feelings. These testimonies can be understood in light of the personal experiences of those enunciating them and of the increasing categorisation of Iraqi society in terms of violent oppositions between 'communities', 'confessions' or 'ethnic groups'. In other words, we can wonder if these reminiscences of a lost

cosmopolitan Baghdad are, somehow, a claim for a peaceful, plural and creative future in Iraq, for a cosmopolitan city to be.

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