

## RIGHT TO THE PUBLIC SPACE; THE CASE OF TEHRAN

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### INTRODUCTION

When the discussion is revolved around the concept of ‘right to the public space’, it is important to take into account the establishment of the two main concepts within the Western literature and context; known as ‘right to the city’ and public/private space’. Therefore, reading a non-western city, such as Tehran, under the lenses of ‘right to the city’ and ‘public/private space’ theories would be insufficient if the above-mentioned concepts are to be applied ‘directly’, without considering Tehran’s sociopolitical context. This study, first and foremost is set to reconfigure the Western categories of public/private space when applying into Tehran which can be done by reflecting upon the already reconfigured categories of Arbab/Raayat space by Iranian scholars. After re-conceptualizing the sociopolitical setting of Iran from a different angle, this study will depict a picture on how people, unexpectedly, re-claim the mechanism of established power, transform the qualities of public space and perform a number of ‘segmented roles’ within public. It is discussed that instead of being confined merely to the two well-established schools of thoughts on the notion of public and private sphere; say Arendt or Habermas, it is also possible to recognize people’s right to the use of public space by accounting their expressivity and minutiae of behaviour while in public; performativity. This discussion starts with an overview on two main schools of thoughts on the notion of public/private realm.

### PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Not to mention how the expansion of privatization, gated communities, walls, fences, and ubiquitous CCTVs, transform the modes of ownership, absorb much of the public tissue of streets and squares, reduce the texture and scale of public spaces, and put the notion of the public and private realm into question, but originally the discussion of public and private realm is tied to Arendt and Habermas. In her book, *Human Condition* published in 1958, Arendt depicts the picture of an ideal public sphere in which people can discuss and debate freely and equally. The large, dense scale urban centres – such as the agora in ancient Athens, or the Uffizi piazza in medieval Florence, or Trafalgar Square in modern London – are vibrant centres where people with different origins, gender, style of life, class, can have an equal voice to discuss and debate freely as citizens.

It is debated, by Lefebvre<sup>1</sup> that this condition in which all citizens can come together to debate freely and to make a collective decisions is in fact the spatial configuration of a democratic citizenship: ‘where less than half the population actively participated in political life - its agora did at least provide the forum for debate and communication and so helped pioneer the principle of democratic

citizenship’. This is to say that the discussion about public and private space takes into account the right of the citizens. The second school of thought relates to Jürgen Habermas, which is less political, but more practical. Habermasians pay attention to the economic interests of different social classes in the society, in a way that people, instead of simply mixing together or mixing their activities in public, account the economic, ethnic, and cultural circumstances in order to learn about one another's interests and needs. So Habermas's public space is more communicational than political. It is not only tied to the town centres but consisting of any medium, occasion, or event which leads to an open communication flow that itself eventuates shared understandings and common purposes.

## TEHRAN

The discussion is that when it comes to Iran, it is not practical to follow Arendtian notion of public space which can be found in Greek Polis in which citizenship is practiced or Habermasian model that interests the free flow of communication among strangers that breeds awareness of the interests of others. Here, Iranian scholars, amongst them Homayoun Katouzian, Parviz Piran, Iman Vaghefi look into how the streets of Iranian cities, instead of practicing the equal participations of citizens in collective decisions, were, in fact, a manifestation of the Shah (king)'s power and will. Vaghefi for example argues that up until twentieth century, Iranian cities were considered as extension to the King's property and their names depended on the king who was ruling at the time.<sup>2</sup> For example, Tehran, was called Dar al-Caliphate of Naseri which literally means the Home of King Naser. In order to imply his sovereign policy, the Shah had a total right to rule over the boundaries of his territorial space and the center of his kingdom was called Dar al-Caliphate where the Shah's political administration was concentrated. On the other hand, historically, the ordinary people of the Iranian kingdom was called Ra'yaat (bondsmen) who had to follow the Shah's orders and, in his territory, they were deprived of their rights and their properties even were subjected to the will of the Shah.<sup>3</sup> Even reading the modern history of Iran, namely beginning by the emergence of Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, shows that the more power the Shah gained, the more control he exerted across its territory. The result was that the conception of Dar al-Caliphate remained as a persistent element that continued even after the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy.

However, as it was mentioned before, the aim of this study is to explore how people, unexpectedly, change these models and codes of public, private and social life, attaching new meanings to the use of public/private spaces and re-inventing them in order to overcome the limitations. It is, in fact, argued that “totalitarian cities are vivid and active, because of the culture that is being developed by the sub-underground networks that make productive urban districts”.<sup>4</sup> As a result, a new relationship between people and their environment has been emerged that is needed to be considered.

Not only Reza Shah was a ‘royal dictator’<sup>5</sup>, whose ‘modernization from above’ programme created a [pseudo]‘modern Iran’ through negation of all traditions, institutions, and Iranian values that were counted as ‘backward’ and believed to be the sources of inferiority,<sup>6</sup> his son, Mohammad-Reza also, as a result of the oil revenue boom following its nationalization in 1951, acquired and retained the dominant position in ruling the country until 1979. While Tehran was transformed into a site of ever-increasing consumption, because of the adaption of new spending patterns and Western lifestyles, Pahlavi's modernisation also led to a massive urban migration that intensified the sharp spatial segregation of the city, manifested in the south-north binary.<sup>7</sup>

In order to improve their lives, the urban poor, who were mainly migrants from other towns and villages and were living informally in shanty towns and poor areas outside and inside the boundary of the city of Tehran, formed a degree of constant resistance, not as a form of what Bayat<sup>8</sup> calls a ‘deliberate political struggle’ against the state or against private landowners or the system of private

property. Rather, their resistance was reflected in the struggle over ‘the use of public space, community development, and cultural autonomy’.<sup>9</sup> For example, ‘unauthorised land takeovers, illegal siphoning of electricity and running water, demanding basic amenities, extending private domain into the public space, sputtering the public thoroughfares, using streets as markets, assembling in the communities’ can be counted as part of these routine actions.<sup>10</sup> For Sassen these sort of activities are the assertion of the urban poor to say that ‘we are here’ and ‘this is also our city’.<sup>11</sup> For example, in Lalezar Street of the pre-revolutionary Tehran, these sorts of assertion of the right to the city could be seen; as the sidewalks of the busy thoroughfares and local market places led the urban poor (among them vendors and hawkers) to distributing goods in informal ways and interacted with middle class on the daily basis in the same geographical areas. Out of this, developed a complex relationship, between the middle class and lower class, and between the lower class and the police – in a way that the boundaries between favour and friendship, bribe and assistance, control and cooperation was often blurred when police were allowing the urban poor to occupy the thoroughfares.<sup>12</sup>

The response to the rapid westernisation programme and uneven distribution of wealth and the rigid spatial polarisation of Tehran in Pahlavi era, with rich occupying the north (bala-shahr), while the poor were settled in the south (paien-shahr), was the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This time Khomeini began his ‘Islamification from above’ in order to create a ‘classless society’ or a ‘spotless city’ and he began his ‘city Islamisation project’ which was, in fact, the first response of the revolutionary state to the public life of the city, based on the negation of Western culture by means of Islamification.

## RIGHT TO THE PUBLIC SPACE

During the first year after the revolution, a sense of liberty was in the air which led to a collective participation – from diverse schools of thought, classes, and genders – in building a new, independent, and free Iran. This, in fact, had an extraordinary impact on the atmosphere of the city at the time, creating a revolutionary ideology, energy and optimism which reshaped the practice of using public space in Tehran. It was the spatial and social fabric of the city that was expanded widely and haphazardly, with little managerial direction and few amenities that led everyone – including the marginal groups; women and poor – to claim the city through their physical, vocal, and symbolic presence.<sup>13</sup> Central streets, public parks, taxis, buses, and lines outside bakeries turned into vivid sites to debate and dispute over the meaning of the Revolution as the central authority was collapsed and there were no secret police, no municipality guards, not even traffic police.<sup>14</sup>

Central sidewalks and pavements of the better-off central district, around Tehran University turned into theatrical stages where street vendors (mostly rural migrants, politicized, unemployed youth or students), the stalls and kiosks holders were selling books, newspapers, music cassettes, and tapes of political speeches while taking electricity from nearby power lines to illuminate their surroundings with colorful lights. The sidewalks of central Tehran in the evenings was turning into funfairs, with shoppers and passers-by browsing amid heckling, jokes, music, and plenty of politics.<sup>15</sup>

It can be said that Tehranis, temporarily, could experience what Lefebvre proposes as the recognition of a ‘right to the city’, which is to:

*‘make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller (citadin) and user of multiple services. It would affirm, on the one hand, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the center, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the ‘marginal’ and even for the ‘privileged’.*<sup>16</sup>

### Codes of being in public

This temporary turn of the streets of Tehran into a theatrical stage in post-revolutionary period created moments in which, according to Jacobs an open city was created; the city where its streets and sidewalks are the vital organs of a public life and opportunities for unexpected encounter, discovery and innovation are proliferated through complexity, diversity, and dissonance of the built environment.<sup>17</sup> For Sennett reaching to these sorts of openness needs one to be exposed to strangers, to turn outward and to be able to experience differences. It means that when one be able to become a segmented self and excludes his/her self from ‘the familiar framework of identities’ and social fixities such as race, class, age, gender or ethnicity, then the [modern] fear of exposure to strangers – through debate or talk with another citizen – becomes low and publicness intensified. This society is dominated by ideas of public where the amount of interaction among its members is very high.<sup>18</sup>

However, exercising the right to use of public spaces in any way according to people’s will was momentum, since giving this sort of freedom to people also could not be practical for the Islamic Republic that taking the fundamentalism of Shi’a religion into account. As a result, Khomeini unleashed reigns of terror after the revolution – in the form of executions, Cultural Revolution, *amr-e be ma’ruf va nahy-e az monkar* programme which literally means ‘commanding what is just and forbidding what is wrong’, etc. – which reading them in detail will take us to Foucault’s ‘production of fear’ concept, as he believes that ‘fear is what must be produced and reproduced by governmental agents in order to establish the control, supervision, or enhancement of the social body through multiple mechanisms of measurement, calculation, improvement, and preservation of life’.<sup>19</sup>

However, removing diverse and complex activities from the public scene of the city led people to learn ‘how to organize their life in the closed spaces of their homes, far from both the missiles of war and the revolutionary guards’ and as a result ‘all social and cultural activities were driven underground’ and the public life became internalized.<sup>20</sup> According to Khosravi, when public space is policed and controlled, domestic interiors cease to be the exclusive domain for individual and family life.<sup>21</sup> It means that in this situation, home and interiors become the spaces of practicing new forms of collective life such as art galleries, workshops, clubs, cultural centers, and offices. It can be said that, since the revolution, the edges between the political/public and private/domestic sphere began to blur in Tehran and Iran at large. The highly controlled public spaces of the post-Revolutionary Tehran, and the existence of police and revolutionary militias that enforce moral and dress codes imposed a specific dimension to the private sphere that, until today, turned the domestic realm into an underground public realm for collective, productive and political actions.

Not only Iranians learned how to become invisible within the boundaries of their home to carry on both functions that formerly were happening within the boundaries of public spaces, the Reformation programme by Sayed Mohammad Khatami in the second decade of the Revolution also helped marginalized groups, especially women and youth, to cry out for their rights in the city. They re-defined the codes of being in public and attached new meanings to the use of public/private spaces by working outside the home, exercising in parks, running businesses in the male preserve of the bazaar and walking in the streets while less frequently wear the traditional chador, but wearing more ‘new hijab’ consisting of a tight, short, colorful jacket (manteau) exposing their body shape, with a small scarf exhibiting some of their hair.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the city of Tehran first, and subsequently, other major cities, faced massive contradictions and ‘in-between’ balances between freedom/control, tradition/modernity which manifest itself through a subtle or ‘velvet’ form of resistance and transgression in physical and virtual space, which are called ‘civil disobedience’ (*nafarmani-ye madani*).<sup>23</sup>

The female body, in fact, began to function as a disturbance to the state's social construct and it turns the practices of resistance into a 'tangible and visible gestures' that embody the basic promises of democracy on rights and freedom to choose how to use public spaces in the city.<sup>24</sup> The 'new hijab', in fact, was the female body's 'counter-intuitive' provocation, surprise and stimulation that occurred in the controlled environment of Tehran.<sup>25</sup> It is a counter-intuitive insight because it works at once as a defense against the rigid Islamic codes, and as 'deviance' to alter what Robert Park would call the 'moral order'.<sup>26</sup> To alter the moral order, the urban actor, according to Sennett 1990 – has to perform a number of 'segmented roles'. Here, unlike what is reflected on city, in western literature, as a place that encourages the contradiction of difference, it is hijab that gives women the freedom to segment their roles from 'place to place, activity to activity, taking on the coloring of each scene, as easily as a chameleon changes colors in various surroundings'.<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to understand when it comes to Islamic urban context, and the aim is to understand the right to use the public space, gender and the study of the visibility and experience of the female urban actor, matters in a quite significant way as women [and other marginalized groups] in these sociopolitical contexts are in a 'competition for public visibility and conquering public space'.<sup>28</sup> If, the attempt of Iranian scholars in reading the sociopolitical context of Tehran is to re-conceptualize and transform the western theories such as public/private into Arbab/Raayat, this study, therefore, suggests to not be confined merely to the two well-established schools of thoughts on the notion of public and private sphere; say Arendt or Habermas. There is another possibility to recognize people's right to the use of public space by accounting their expressivity and minutiae of behavior while in public. The works of anthropologists and sociologists (among them Ervin Goffman, and Richard Sennett) can be considered in this way of thinking as their points of departure are less political, but more cultural than either Arendt or Habermas. For them, the composition of public realm is depended on how people behave in public, which itself takes into account 'the street clothing, customs of greeting, rituals of dining and drinking, ways of avoiding eye contact, the places people crowd together and the places where they keep their distance, when people feel free to talk to strangers and when they do not, the bodily gestures which excite a stranger's sexual interest and the bodily signals which forbid it'.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, cafes, shopping malls, taxis, metros, buses, and even private cars can be counted as a sort of semi-public/semi-private spaces in Tehran where people re-claim and re-invent new codes for their right to the city.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In Merrifield, Andy. 1996. "Public space: integration and exclusion in urban life". *City* 1(5-6), 59.
- <sup>2</sup> Vaghefi, Iman. 2017. *The Production of Post-Revolutionary Tehran: A study of transformation of contemporary Tehran through a Lefebvrian perspective*. [PhD Thesis]: Durham University.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid: 197
- <sup>4</sup> Christiaanse, Kees. 2011. "Kees Christiaanse on open cities", YouTube video, 13:03. March 21, 2019.
- <sup>5</sup> Halliday, Fred. 1979. *Iran Dictatorship and Development* (England: Penguin Books), 25.
- <sup>6</sup> Bani-masoud, Amir. 2011. *Iranian Contemporary Architecture; An Inquiry into Tradition and Modernity* (Tehran: Honar-e Me'mari-e Qarn Publication), 100.
- <sup>7</sup> Bayat, Asef. 2010. "Tehran: Paradox City". *New Left Review* (66).
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid: 102.
- <sup>9</sup> Bayat, Asef. 1997. *Street Politics*. (New York: Colombia University Press), 57.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid
- <sup>11</sup> Sassen, Saskia. 2015. "Gating as Variable". In Uduku, Ola. Bagaeen, Samer. 2015. (Eds). *Beyond Gated Communities* (Abington: Routledge).
- <sup>12</sup> Bayat, Asef. 1997. *Street Politics*. (New York: Colombia University Press), 135.
- <sup>13</sup> Bayat, Asef. 2010. "Tehran: Paradox City". *New Left Review* (66).
- <sup>14</sup> Bayat, Asef. 2010. "Tehran: Paradox City". *New Left Review* (66), 103.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. 1995, "The right to the city". In Lefebvre, Henri. 1996 (Ed). *Writings on Cities*. (Cambridge: Blackwell), 34.
- <sup>17</sup> In Sennett, Richard. 2006. "The Open City". *LSE Cities*. 15:00. October 15, 2018.
- <sup>18</sup> Sennett, Richard. 1990. *The Conscience of the Eye; The Design and Social Life of Cities*. (New York: Alfred A. Knope), 126.
- <sup>19</sup> In Debrix, Francois. Barder, Alexander D. 2009. "Nothing to Fear but Fear: Governmentality and the Biopolitical Production of Terror". *International Political Sociology* (3), 400.
- <sup>20</sup> Amir-Ebrahimi, Maserrat. 2006. "Conquering Enclosed Public Spaces". *Cities* 23(6), 457.
- <sup>21</sup> Khosravi, Hamed. 2017. In Khosravi, Hamed. Djalali, Amir. Marullo, Francesco. (Eds). *Tehran, Life within Walls; A City, Its Territory, and Forms of Dwelling*. (Berlin: Hatje Cantz), 11-17.
- <sup>22</sup> Amir-Ebrahimi, Maserrat. 2006. "Conquering Enclosed Public Spaces". *Cities* 23(6), 99.
- <sup>23</sup> Amir-Ebrahimi, Maserrat. 2008. "Transgression in Narration: The Lives of Iranian Women in Cyberspace". *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4(3), 94.
- <sup>24</sup> Butler, Judith. 2020. *The Force of Nonviolence*. (London: Verso Books), 195.
- <sup>25</sup> Terms have been taken from: Sennett, Richard. 1990. *The Conscience of the Eye; The Design and Social Life of Cities*. (New York: Alfred A. Knope), 126.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid, 127.
- <sup>28</sup> Abaza, Mona. 2014. "Post January Revolution Cairo: Urban Wars And The Reshaping Of Public Space". *Theory, Culture & Society* (31), 165.
- <sup>29</sup> Sennett, Richard. 1998. "The Spaces of Democracy". In Annette W. LeCuyer (Ed). *1998 Raoul Wallenberg Lecture*. (The University of Michigan: College of Architecture + Urban Planning).

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