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1 *Introduction*
Public Space and Urban Life

> The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite . . .
>
> Charles Baudelaire 1965 [1863]: 9

It is a cloudy January afternoon in Tehran. The sky is gray with pollution and with clouds that never seem to let down rain. Walking down the street toward the subway station, I pass a street vendor selling oranges and pomegranates and another selling colorful scarves. I enter the subway station and make my way to the southbound platform. As I wait for the train in the area designated for women-only cars, I see three women carrying huge black plastic bags. They are part of a new landscape of transportation in Tehran: subway vendors who try to sell without being caught by the guards tasked with cracking down on them.

Off the train at my destination, I follow the signs toward Tabiat Bridge, a newly built pedestrian-only bridge in the north of Tehran that connects an older park on one side of a major highway to a new park on the other side.[1] The walk is long and uphill, but the park is beautiful, even in winter. Before reaching the bridge, I stop by a platform with a huge flag at the center. Smaller flags line the platform's edges, all visible from the highway beneath. I look at the mountains to the north and at the vast city extending toward the south. The sun is setting, and the image of the city fading in a thick gray layer of smog gives the scene a sad air. The flags do not move. There is no wind, even here up on the hill.

When I make it to the bridge, it is already dark, but it is getting more crowded. I pass a group of five who are taking group selfies and laughing loudly, and I walk by three middle-aged women strolling

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leisurely as they talk. Young couples stand on the side of the bridge or sit on the benches. The bridge, named Tabiat, which literally means "nature," offers astonishing views of the city, but it passes over a river of polluting vehicles. The views are beautiful, but the highway noise is intrusive.

I meet Nahid on the bridge. After she complets a survey form I had given her as part of my research, we walk together to the new park (Ab-o-Atash) on the other side of the bridge, where she has arranged to see a friend in the open amphitheater. She is 22, lives in a neighborhood south of Tehran, has a part-time job around the center, and studies at a university south of her home. She has taken the subway to meet her friend. "I was working today, so it was easier to make it here. The subway station is right outside my office." She is confident and pleasant and agrees to meet with me some time the following week for a longer interview.

Nahid knows the park very well. "I can show you where you can find 'the rich kids,'[2] where you should not go if you want to avoid the drug addicts, where you should go if you are with your boyfriend and do not want anyone to disturb you. This park is huge, but I have explored every corner," she says. It is getting colder and darker when she waves at her friend. Before I say goodbye, she suggests: "Go to the food court if you want more people to complete your forms. Here it's cold and people will not sit or use their hands to write." I ask her friend if she is willing to complete a survey form, and she says no. Nahid says, "Come on ... help her," but does not insist, and her friend politely refuses again. As I prepare to leave, Nahid repeats: "Go to the food court. ... Not that I have ever eaten there, but I have checked it out. It is nice and warm, and you'll find rich people from the north."

Later, when I leave "the nice and warm" food court to head home, I decide to take a cab to avoid the long walk to the subway station. Outside the parking lot close to the food court, taxis are lined up. As I negotiate a price, I wonder if Nahid would have been able to get on one if she had been too tired to walk to the station. Probably not. On my way home, I think about Nahid and her friend, the "rich kids" of the food court, the middle-aged women, the couples on the bridge, the drug addicts, the guards, and the new space that has brought all of them together. Then I think: "Has it?"

This book charts the experiences and perceptions of the citizens of Tehran, people like Nahid, who move around a newly accessible city

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and visit public spaces, some of which did not exist a few years ago. It explores social relations that are interrupted, facilitated, forged, and transformed through processes of urban development. Focusing on the use of public spaces and on perceptions of the city, I study urban social relations in the broader context of economic, cultural, and political forces. Approaching public spaces as multilayered sociological entities – rather than mere physical containers of events, people, and the built environment – I discuss how the geographical characteristics of cities shape perceptions of class, status, and sociocultural coexistence and conflict. My arguments draw on my extensive fieldwork in Tehran, including observations, survey data, and interviews, and on careful readings of texts and cultural products related to the city.

The book takes us to the streets and squares, parks and plazas, and malls and bazaars of Tehran, and it explores urban relations in the context of a rapidly changing metropolitan area. Through this expedition, public spaces emerge as key places where economic, political, gender, and social hierarchies are both reinforced and undermined. The case of Tehran illustrates how public spaces function as manifestations of social relations among citizens of different backgrounds, between citizens and the state, and between social, political, and cultural forces that shape the physical realities and the conceptual meanings that citizens create and assign to those places.

A small village at the end of the eighteenth century, Tehran is now a metropolis with more than 8 million inhabitants.[3] The city is a mixture of old and new public spaces and of diverse ways of living and consuming in public. The spatial order of the city reflects its unequal socioeconomic structure, with the wealthier and more prestigious neighborhoods located in the north and a gradual shift to poorer neighborhoods in the south. This historical order has been reinforced and exacerbated in recent years, but it has also been accompanied by investment in public transportation, urban infrastructure, and new public spaces across the city, which overall have made the city more accessible to a larger population. Thus, the case of Tehran allows for an examination of how long-standing developmental patterns on the one hand and rapid urban transformations on the other influence social interactions and change group dynamics.

Through the lived experiences of the citizens of Tehran and their perceptions of the city, I engage with a number of sociological concepts, including inequality and stratification, boundary work and

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identities, and cultural production and consumption. By studying everyday, mundane activities in public spaces (i.e., objective realities) and the ways the citizens of Tehran experience and perceive these spaces (i.e., subjective insights), I examine how public urban places mediate social relations, transform (and are transformed by) consumption patterns and cultural practices, and constitute holistic images of the city beyond each individual space.

While examining these theoretical questions within the context of Tehran, the book also provides an understanding of the day-to-day activities that shape the lives of local people in a developing metropolis in the Middle East. Significant attention has been given to the ways wars, religious and ethnic conflicts, and authoritarian regimes have impacted (and continue to shape) lives in the region. My narrative sheds light on a more pervasive but less studied aspect of life in the Middle East: how citizens make sense of the self and society in a rapidly changing urban context, characterized by physical changes in the built environment and the emergence of new forms of consumption tied to a global market economy (despite sanctions and political limitations). The book tells the story of a dynamic city, as reflected in the lived experiences, behaviors, and perceptions of citizens as they negotiate everyday life in public spaces.

Urban Contexts and Spatial Mechanisms

This book is a contribution to studies of urban contexts that engage with space not as a passive background but as an essential component of complex social relations.[4] Following Manuel Castells, I argue that the social experience of public space is related to both spatial form and cultural content, which are interconnected and need to be discussed as such.[5] I examine how urban development influences city structure, the use of public spaces, and perceptions and experiences of the city, eventually impacting and transforming social relations. Not only do the physical, material, and symbolic characteristics of places influence their social functions,[6] but the location of places within the spatial structure of the city matters too.

A long legacy of spatial thinking in sociology, from the works of the Chicago School scholars[7] and Du Bois's writings[8] at the turn of the twentieth century to the more recent scholarship on space, indicates that "social facts are located."[9] Indeed, using space as a means of

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understanding the complicated and changing relations that shape the social landscape of cities is as old as the discipline of sociology. In recent decades, attention to space as an important venue for understanding social, political, and cultural relations in cities has been reflected in valuable studies across disciplines that consider history, design, function, and meanings of space in different urban contexts.[10] Scholars also explore the subjective experiences of space, showing that social groups may use and experience space in distinctive ways at different times.[11]

Public spaces are essential to urban existence and experience, and they function in many different ways: as places of being and belonging,[12] as places where social identities and hierarchies are performed and transformed,[13] as manifestations of capital flows and patterns of consumption,[14] and as places of protest in times of social and political conflict,[15] among others. Moreover, public spaces evolve through dynamic relations among the envisioned space, the built space, and the lived space, loaded with meanings inherent in the design and construction of the actual space, as well as meanings created and assigned by those who use the space over time.

These dynamic relations are more pronounced in large urban projects, spaces that function beyond their locality and those that are likely to transform the structure of the city (which are referred to as "city-level public spaces"). Relatedly, the empirical data for this book were collected primarily in public spaces that serve a population beyond the adjacent neighborhoods and local communities. The fieldwork sites are city-level public spaces, determined by a combination of size, location in the city, and unique functions that make them attractive to a larger public.[16] My findings indicate that the meanings and values assigned to such places are closely tied to where they are located and how they are used.

When I met with Nahid a few days later for a recorded interview, we sat in a park in the south of Tehran, close to where she lived. This park, like the one where we had initially met, was a new addition to Tehran's growing infrastructure. Nahid, however, recounted how her experiences of different public spaces were shaped not only by what these spaces offered as new urban amenities but also by where they were located and who used them. "Who wants to be in this park? Maybe people with young kids who live close by … for their kids to run around … maybe people who know nothing beyond this

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neighborhood . . . but never young people like me, especially not young women like me." She paused and continued: "It can be suffocating to go to a park near where you live, especially when you live in the south. . . . I always go to public spaces in the north if I want to have fun."

For Nahid and many other participants, the long-standing spatial hierarchy of the city (which I will fully explain in Chapter 2) is omnipresent, not only in their day-to-day experience of urban life and use of physical space but also in defining their position on a social spectrum that is closely connected to the city's spatial structure. Although using spaces in more prestigious parts of Tehran – places that were formerly much harder to access – "empowers" Nahid and makes her "feel closer to where [she] culturally belongs," it constantly reminds her of where she actually lives and what she can consume relative to "others" who temporarily share a space with her. While physically in the same location as the "rich kids," she is aware that her experience is not the same as theirs; it is indeed as far as the neighborhoods they come from.

These overlaps in physical space and social space create new dynamics that, while bowing to existing hierarchies, complicate and sometimes undermine them. As Pierre Bourdieu indicates, one's "position in social space is expressed in the site of physical space" where that person is situated and relative to others' locations.[17] Whether temporary or permanent, location is consequential in social relations. Thus, as people move from one space to another, they move from one social or symbolic position to the other, even if temporarily.[18] Throughout this book, this movement of people, this being "copresent" in public spaces, is approached from multiple angles to explain place dynamics that are as social as they are physical and locational.

Through this spatial approach, I revisit and advance two other key sociological discussions. First, I engage with experiences and perceptions of inequality in relation to city structure and geographical location. While considering socioeconomic class as a fundamental aspect of inequality in Tehran, I develop a framework to understand other forms of inequality that may not be directly rooted in class or economic background. Indeed, the state's empowerment of certain ideologies and lifestyles, at the expense of others, results in unequal power relations in politics and culture, some of which are primarily experienced in public. Second, I explore the ways spatial, social, and

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symbolic boundaries are forged and negotiated in changing urban contexts and show how identities and perceptions of "others" are formed and performed.

In studying both urban inequalities and boundary work, scholars often focus on the very poor and on extremely deprived neighborhoods. My work diverges from this approach by following those who have the financial and cultural means (however modest) to use public spaces beyond their immediate local communities. Accordingly, while there is no way to study the public spaces of Tehran without encountering the underclass, the disadvantaged, the street vendors, and the drug addicts, the book is not primarily about these groups.[19] By engaging with users of city-level public spaces, I examine the nuanced experiences of those who can afford the time and money (even the smallest amount) to be present in public spaces, sometimes outside their residential neighborhoods.[20] Although their difficulties may not be as acute as those of the urban poor, the various strata of this group (mostly middle and working classes) experience spatial inequalities in the city and engage in boundary work in different ways.[21] Dissecting their experiences, as I will show, contributes to sociological knowledge on spatial inequality and offers new ways of thinking about social and spatial processes in metropolitan areas. Without attempting to generalize the findings to the whole population of Tehran, this study advances theoretical discussions by engaging with the spatial experiences of particular groups within the city.

Inequality

In the first empirical part of the book, my spatial approach focuses on urban development and inequality. Decades of urban research shows that location in cities matters in social, economic, and cultural relations. Spatial thinking, as Logan indicates, provides a useful tool for understanding urban inequalities and place-based disparities.[22] The literature suggests that at least some forms of inequality are spatial. Racial and class segregation[23]; gender and sexuality disparities[24]; access to opportunities such as jobs, education, and networks[25]; and problem behaviors and health outcomes[26] have been discussed as social relations that are embedded in geographical locations or situated in particular spatial arrangements. Indeed, as much as day-to-day

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activities and neighborhood transformations produce and reproduce urban inequalities,[27] lack of access to other parts of the city can also influence neighborhood outcomes.[28] In many contexts, disparities are related to "being trapped" in certain areas (for instance, in the inner city in the American context). The barriers to movement, whether physical (lack of public transportation and private cars, being "surrounded" by highways or other obstacles) or socioeconomic and cultural (class, race, ethnicity, belonging to stigmatized groups, etc.), separate residents from other parts of the city, limiting their access to jobs, opportunities, networks, and social, economic, and cultural capital.

Considered against the backdrop of this research, Tehran's development in recent decades raises interesting questions. Has the gradual expansion of transportation (public and private) changed group dynamics by providing easier access to more people? When structural barriers (such as lack of access) are at least partially removed or lowered, how do we account for the persistence of real and perceived inequalities in economic wealth and social status, especially those that are associated with location in the city? By answering these questions in the case of Tehran, I speak to broader social processes in large metropolitan areas: those that have been impacted by urban development on the one hand, and by increasing inequality on the other.

To better understand the various aspects of spatial urban inequality in Tehran, I first explain the stratified structure of the city as a result of natural settings and human interventions. I then demonstrate how recent urban transformations, including the expansion of infrastructure and public transportation and the construction of new public spaces, have enabled the less privileged (in the south of the city) to move more freely and use public spaces in the north, resulting in a fairly mixed social landscape. I examine the implications of this increased mobility and discuss how it influences underlying socioeconomic inequalities. I show that inequality, both as a real phenomenon and as a symbolic relation, persists even as its expressions are transformed via new social representations and meanings. Moreover, I consider how other forms of inequality, those that are rooted in ideological differences and the state's preferential treatment of certain belief systems and lifestyles, complicate the discussion of urban inequality in Tehran.

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Boundary Work and Identity

In the second part of the book, I shift the spatial focus to boundary work and identity processes. I suggest that in Tehran, where expressions of other markers of identity and differentiation are scarce, the geographic "location of others" takes on a pronounced importance. I argue that in the absence of major categories of boundary making and bodily representations of identity (markers of race and ethnicity are largely absent due to a relatively homogeneous population, and markers of religion, gender, and sexuality tend to be hidden due to state restrictions), "self" and "others" are defined and redefined, at least partially, based on perceptions of geographical location as people interact in public spaces. Observing how social groups traverse spatial boundaries in a city that has become more accessible, I discuss processes of boundary work in public spaces and the ways they impact group relations and social interactions. At the same time, I show that Tehran, as a whole, is fostering an unprecedented form of identity, especially for younger generations. Through the narratives of Tehran, I explore the origins of this form of identity and its consequences for social relations inside and beyond the city.

Boundary work in urban contexts has been studied primarily in neighborhood contexts or places in close proximity,[29] but as sociologist Marco Garrido suggests, patterns of residential segregation are reproduced and extended to all spaces where class interactions occur.[30] While public spaces of all sizes and categories are sites of boundary work, studying city-level public spaces offers an unparalleled window to the evolution of boundary negotiation processes in Tehran. My approach nods to previous scholarship that shows that people move around the city for many reasons – to meet friends and family, to connect to (nonlocal) communities that they belong to or identify with, or simply to explore the city they live in[31] – and that boundary work is part of the urban experience in nonneighborhood public spaces. Research that engages with these spaces reveals that a combination of political and economic forces, everyday individual and group interactions, and community activities shapes and reshapes public spaces and the social dynamics within them.[32] It also shows that when boundaries are reinforced in public spaces, it is often done to protect the interests of the middle and upper classes at the cost of excluding the more vulnerable groups.[33]

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While the same is true in Tehran, a more complex image emerges from my empirical data. Although the city's dividing lines among different social groups are at least conceptually powerful, they are not merely class-based or economically defined; rather, they are expressions of a complex set of values and relations. In the case of Tehran, ideological differences, political orientations, and lifestyle choices complicate economic disparities and play a significant role in boundary work and identity. For instance, with the marginalization of the modern, more "Westernized" and less religious groups after the 1979 revolution (many of them belonging to the middle class or upper classes), some public spaces in the north and in central Tehran gradually turned into enclaves for these marginalized identities in the postrevolutionary era. Thus, for these groups, the recent expansion of access translates into more marginalization (as they lose their near-exclusive access to these spaces) in an ideologized context where the state rewards certain lifestyles while banning and punishing others. Public space, as both an origin and outcome of identity, becomes a site of struggle, not only against a controlling state but also against "others who do not belong." Such examples shed light on the complex nature of interactions with "others" in Tehran and call for a nuanced discussion of spatial, social, and symbolic boundaries.

At the same time, I find that while experiences of space highlight social divisions, the city itself works as a unifier. Indeed, many residents of Tehran identify with the city and rely on it – both as a material object and as a conceptual entity – to define who they are and how they relate to others. Through narratives of citizens and examples of Tehran's presence in arts and literature, I discuss spatial and temporal aspects of identification with the city and how it fits within the broad processes of boundary work and othering.

The Problem of the State

Although my focus is primarily on citizens' experiences, the production of public space occurs within an extensive web of social relations in which states play an important role. Foucault formulates space as a site of power, and in Lefebvre's writings, the state emerges not only as an important spatial actor but also as the producer and controller of space.[34] The space produced by states becomes a means of production,

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