

ROUNDTABLE

Civic Culture and Spatial Politics in Contemporary Iran

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On 4 January 2020, United States President Donald Trump announced via a tweet that he would attack fifty-two locations in Iran, including cultural sites, if Iran retaliated for the US-authorized assassination of military commander Major General Qasem Soleimani at Baghdad International Airport. Iranians and non-Iranians alike voiced their opposition and flooded Twitter with images of their favorite cultural sites in Iran. This recent incident illustrates the interplay between spatial politics and civic culture that this roundtable addresses. What are civic and public cultures, and how do we “find” them? How do civic and public culture interplay with bottom-up vernacular culture to invite unexpected subjectivities and contestation of space? What are the particulars of a society such as Iran at this historical moment—postrevolutionary, confronting new shifts in relations with the US, attempting to curtail or bypass international sanctions, confronting continued social unrest, and living in an increasingly authoritarian global setting?

This roundtable brings together scholars from North America, Europe, and Iran, with disciplinary specializations in translation, contentious politics, gender and sexuality, economics, and cultural studies. These articles, which were prepared amid the transformations in US–Iran relations that have been in progress over the course of the past year, explore a variety of sociopolitical phenomena at the intersection of spatial politics and civic culture. In response to state violence in the post-2011 era, scholarship on spatial politics and civic culture in the Middle East points toward shifts in state manipulation of infrastructure and bordering. Scholars are employing a security perspective to study civic culture and spatial politics in mobility literature more broadly.¹ This roundtable joins a burgeoning body of interdisciplinary work that focuses on the innovations that emerge at the intersection of different scales of state surveillance and the social imaginary.² By foregrounding spatial politics as central to civic culture, but mediated by creativity, these articles illustrate the application of multidimensional methods that advance the field of Iranian studies.

Mazdak Tamjidi sets the tone for a critical look at culture by pushing readers to consider the problems with conceptualizing Iran as a case study. Indeed, one of the main conclusions of this roundtable is that the researcher is not exempt from state surveillance or social engagement and hence also must search for innovations in research methods and concepts. According to Tamjidi, generalizations even within a particular social group become difficult given the cultural and other differences and inequalities that exist in the country. Tamjidi and also Amirhossein Vafa argue that a distinction should be made between post-colonial and decolonial studies in Iranian universities, pointing us toward the concerns that arise from the positionality of researchers studying Iranian society. Where exactly is Iran, and which Iran are Iranian studies scholars discussing? How closely do scholarly analyses of social life reflect the spatial, temporal, and affective perspectives of nonelite citizens in Iran? This roundtable suggests that research on Iran

¹See, for instance, Hagar Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom: On Liberal Governances of Mobility* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019); Todd Miller, *Empire of Borders: The Expansion of the US Border around the World* (London: Verso, 2019).

²Setrag Manoukian, “Two Forms of Temporality in Contemporary Iran,” *Sociologica* 3 (2011): 1–17; Pnina Werbner, “The Mother of all Strikes: Popular Protest Culture and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism in the Botswana Public Service Unions’ Strike, 2011,” in *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 222–59.

requires not only that we move with agility between different sites of research but that we should remain mindful of the politics of doing so.

The articles show that field research is necessary for insightful scholarship. Yet how can we conduct ethical research when international sanctions that threaten the lives of Iranian citizens also change their cultural norms in relation to research as well as the researcher? Is it even appropriate to carry out fieldwork in a context in which segments of the Iranian public, as Tamjidi points out, believe there are more urgent tasks to address in relation to their predicament? Scholars should remain cognizant of how the spatial politics of research intersect with the evolution of civic culture in Iran. At certain junctures, the researcher residing abroad is seen as a cultural site for the performance of foreign domination, and in the current Iranian context scholars should be acutely aware of this association.

The contributors to this roundtable, including Stella Morgana and Manata Hashemi in their investigations of class politics, rely on innovative multidimensional methods to delve into the social ramifications of spatial segregation in contemporary Iran. The authors use not just interviews but also photography, images, theaters, museums, and architecture to extrapolate how spatial politics intersect with vernacular culture to produce citizenship regimes from the ground up. What new research avenues are forged for primary archival research when scholars engage more regularly with visual material? For instance, what if we imagine that the conversations taking place in photos are far from final? What narratives are revealed through this practice of thinking with photography, sculptures, paintings, a theatrical performance, or the dead? How do physical spaces for promoting formal civic culture, such as museums, become spaces for inventing new subjectivities from the ground up, unforeseen by the state or by citizens themselves? How do secondary sources support research when field access is limited? These articles suggest that political contention is intimately connected with space in contemporary Iran, and finding methods to explore the social ramifications of civic culture exposes the intricacies of this interplay.

The articles in this roundtable point toward the tensions between the individual and the collective, and they elucidate the practical and conceptual importance of foregrounding these frictions in our investigations. Examining the Islamic Republic's official cultural policies with a spatial politics lens poses questions for how we study politics at the juncture of individual, collective, and state interactions. Hierarchies, binaries, and boundaries in the international system are contested in contemporary Iran. Contributions by Paola Rivetti and myself posit that the influence of individual actors who improvise and innovate their ways through the administration of the state's official cultural preferences is vital to understanding the political uncertainty unfolding in Iran today. The images, words, and sounds that films, paintings, posters, and museums generate hardly hold "stable referents," and they demand that we move beyond the binary of resistance and submission when thinking about the meaning(s) of social practice.³

These articles do not separate individuals' situatedness within polities from the historical contingencies that shape their lives. However, the contribution from Kaveh Bassiri suggests that future investigations should pay closer attention to the importance of individual improvisations during everyday life evolving from the state's manipulation of space. The article engages with different forms of art and play to show that it is indeed the case that individuals intentionally or indirectly undermine the cultural policies of not only the state but also their collectivities, with personal creativity and agility. This critical lens on agency also exposes the long-term ramifications of the Islamic Republic's ground-up cultural projects.

We need to reevaluate the ways we define political significance within the tensions and frictions created at the intersections of the individual, the collective, and the state. What new forms of citizenship and reform emerge if we take seriously the moments when individuals break away from their polities and sociopolitical norms? Is this even citizenship any longer? Should the current discussions in academia, since 2011 heavily focused on citizenship formation as central to Middle East politics, also give thought to other conceptual approaches?⁴ For instance, could we consider liberation, as an expansion of

³Setrag Manoukian, "Where Is This Place? Crowds, Audio-Vision, and Poetry in Postelection Iran," *Public Culture* 22, no. 2 (2010): 240.

⁴Sara Mourad, "The Naked Body of Alia: Gender, Citizenship, and the Egyptian Body Politic," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (2013): 1–17; Sherine Hafez, *Women of the Midan: The Untold Stories of Egypt's Revolutionaries* (Bloomington, IN:

subjectivities that connect humans and nonhumans, to be an alternative configuration of how we theorize individual interventions?⁵ There are moments when individuals do not fit into the collective or are pushed out deliberately. These articles suggest that, as long as certain kinds of politics “oppose particular relations,” it is important to explore the alternative forms of subjectivity, activism, and ethics that develop from this condition of absence.⁶

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Indiana University Press, 2019); Shirin Saeidi, “The Islamic Republic and Citizenship in Post-1979 Iran,” in *Routledge Handbook of Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Zahra Babar, Roel Meijer, and James Sater (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁵Rosi Braidotti, “A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 6 (2019): 31–61.

⁶Giraud Eva, *What Comes after Entanglement? Activism, Anthropocentrism, and an Ethics of Exclusion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 7.