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The Development of Tehran: An Unfinished Project

Big cities gradually become like the people who administer them. In general it can be said that governments are similar to the spheres of influence they dominate. But applying such correlations to Tehran and its governors is somewhat paradoxical. The fact is that Tehran is basically a city inhabited by villagers.

Exactly a hundred years ago the newly-established Iranian parliament passed a law regulating administration of the capital, and Tehran officially acquired a mayor. Over the course of this century, forty-eight mayors were entrusted with administration of the capital. One was executed, thirteen ended up in prison, and twenty-three were dismissed because of corruption or incompetence.

In the past hundred years this turbulent city has survived two revolutions and two coups. Four kings and one president were sent into exile. Tehran witnessed the assassinations of a shah, several prime ministers and a president; it was occupied once by foreign troops and several times by Persian soldiers.

Even more amazing, however, is the fact that for some decades now this city has experienced rapid expansion, swallowing up all the surrounding villages and gradually also incorporating two neighbouring towns, Rey and Shemiran. These days it is reaching out towards towns which not all that long ago were over a hundred kilometres away from Tehran. Perhaps in the not-too-distant future all that will remain of Iran will be Tehran and a huge desert, for the capital sucks in workers, capital, institutions, and much else besides from all over the country without ever satisfying its appetite.

Encircled by islands

For centuries now hundreds of thousands of impoverished people seeking an existence fit for a human being have been streaming endlessly towards Tehran from villages near and far and from destitute little towns. However, the capital's cultural and economic bulwarks have kept these people on the periphery, where they have formed their own closed societies. Three decades ago, just before the Revolution, there were fifty such communities, unintentionally and unknowingly constituting a counterforce.

During the demonstrations on the streets of Tehran by the urban middle-classes calling for

the overthrow of the Shah, and as the police yielded to their onslaught, a tremendous energy was released. There was suddenly extensive freedom. Confronted with this freedom, people in need occupied plots of land on the outskirts of the city and started to build there, as part of a slow and instinctive movement towards change. Tehran suddenly had innumerable satellite towns, both large and small! Then settlers constructed roads, erected hospitals, mosques and libraries, and there came into being forms of unofficial existence which constituted a new way of life. Revolutionary slogans spurred people on, strengthening their boldness and enthusiasm.

The peaceful migration of the islands

Some of these marginal settlers left their huts to newcomers and hatched plans for taking over unoccupied accommodation. Newspaper reports spoke of around 150,000 items of real estate – from palaces and hotels to villas and apartments ready for occupation or half-built – standing empty in Tehran on the eve of the Revolution. Their owners had either fled abroad or were in hiding inside Iran. Just a few days after the definitive overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of a new regime, some marginal settlers issued a threat in the name of the deprived and dispossessed to the Islamic authorities who had come to power, saying that they would occupy empty flats if appropriate accommodation wasn't made available. It is clear that no one expected to receive an answer in the prevailing revolutionary circumstances. Two or three days later, three thousand mostly armed families occupied the newly-built apartments in a half-completed settlement, putting in the doors and windows. Each family received just one room, and during the days that followed they brought chickens and even goats and sheep to their new dwellings. One day passengers in a city bus passing this settlement saw the head of a cow poking out of a top-floor window, looking down onto the road.

These marginal settlers thus imposed their personal interpretation of the Islamic Revolution, an interpretation founded on a sense of their own excellence in relation to the ruling classes, one which was at the same time a reaction to Tehran's most striking characteristic: its modernity, expressed in cars, neckties, unveiled women, luxurious apartments and villas. So everyone was ready to join revolutionaries' demonstrations, deploying crowbars and steel pipes to remove existing street-names and establish new, revolutionary designations, endowing the city with a new identity.

Alongside occupation by the needy of 4,500 villas in the first month of the Revolution, students stormed a number of luxury hotels. The Shah's literacy campaign, which had seen an 'army of teachers' enabling village youngsters to gain access to the capital's universities, achieved completion with the occupation of these hotels that had previously existed for the well-being of foreigners and the elite.

During the first university year after the Islamic Republic's accession to power, a thousand students took over two large international hotels in Tehran's most luxurious street. They

were furnished with a reasonable argument: the government is incapable of providing us with suitable hostel accommodation.

Other students adopted this strategy and one after another more hotels were occupied. Tehran succumbed to a dubious coalition consisting of Islamic revolutionaries, young radical communists, street-traders and the unemployed, and the mob and marginal settlers. With the euphoria of retribution inspiring urban Tehran, a number of clergy joined the movement so as to gain mass support and at the same time weaken the provisional revolutionary government, which consisted of a number of tie-wearing Muslims.

This practice soon received official sanction and a cleric set up a committee in support of 'Houses for Those Deprived of Their Rights'. A procedure was thus established. A working-group reconnoitred suitable hotels, houses, and undeveloped plots of land; the transfer of ownership was officially signed and sealed; little then remained to be done besides occupying these places. Scarcely an hour later men, women and children turned up, carrying their few possessions under their arms or on their backs, depending on their age and stature: bundles of clothes, mattresses and bedding, headscarves and samovars, birdcages, brooms and buckets, petrol cans, chairs and cradles ... At the heart of each group was always a number of students from the provinces, obviously happy about the weakening of the rich, who with pride and satisfaction handed over to each occupier his share. The victorious population stood at windows observing their new neighbours. The occupiers really did feel they were equals, and distanced themselves from their past without having the prospect of a future – yet of this they were unaware.

Students and leftist activists took over the organisation of tasks. They formed groups of guards and defenders to counter possible action by the forces who wished to repossess these properties. They also set up literacy classes and workshops providing training in practical skills.

This revolution in the procurement of accommodation spread. Property rights were ignored without difficulty, and Tehran was faced with a moral dilemma. The authorities decided to react using different strategies. Initially they reprimanded house-occupiers and amicably called on them to return the property to its owner. One or two ayatollahs even issued a fatwa declaring expropriation to be contrary to religious law. Obviously they were not aware that the house-occupiers had been encouraged by revolutionary slogans promising rule over the country to those in need, not to mention the possession of doors and walls! The government set bulldozers to work, under the protection of the police, but people did not leave the houses they had occupied. Sometimes there were even violent confrontations, from which the house-occupiers usually emerged victorious. A city that for decades had experienced an empty display of luxury and excess now revealed another attitude.

The students capitulated earlier than anyone else. Occupation of the American embassy in

November 1979 accelerated the evacuation of the hotels which had been turned into hostels. It stands to reason that an embassy – above all an American embassy – offered greater comforts than a hotel!

After successfully securing a roof over their heads, the unemployed sought ways of earning a living. Of course there was no prospect of work for such an enormous number of people, so marginal settlers, the unemployed and the homeless took to the streets to scrape together a means of subsistence. Suddenly Tehran's pavements were transformed into bright and colourful little shops: bakeries, butchers, haberdashers, and workshops for repairing all kinds of worn-out objects. This situation offered further advantages to house-occupiers who had settled in elegant districts in the north of Tehran, freeing them from the necessity of shopping in the surrounding supermarkets and luxury shops. Ghettos thus came into existence within the city in the form of autonomous islands with their own customs and usages, leisure occupations, preferences, and enmities. Their inhabitants created a personal environment for themselves, seeking to transform poverty into a powerful ideological force.

Part of this multitude appropriated roadsides and established lucrative and easy earnings for themselves by helping to park cars and receiving tips. The majority were convinced that the overthrow of the Shah had opened up the way for their betterment; they recognised that they now constituted an important element in the city's cultural life. The ongoing peaceful advance of an illegal population had achieved its objective.

With the arrival of street-traders, Tehran's unofficial living space was further extended. A joyous secular milieu ignored the grim and strict atmosphere prescribed by the religious authorities. This lively scene with its orally-transmitted anecdotes, its tiny mobile stalls offering tea, ice creams and vegetable soup, with its music and youthful cheerfulness, was essentially anti-totalitarian. A culture of minorities offered a kind of non-urban freedom, characteristic of villages and nomadic campsites, that did not accept peremptory religious laws. Nevertheless, the regime had declared laughter offensive and tears the source of redemption.

Direct confrontation was simply not possible, since that would have gone completely against the slogans which had brought the new rulers to power and which were still much in favour at well-attended political meetings. So thuggish militias, formed from another stratum of the huge army of unemployed now serving the new rulers, were set to work. That was the start of the organised suppression of the urban population of Tehran. The militias were not particularly successful in these confrontations, and as a result the authorities were forced to set up permanent commercial spaces in small urban markets for the majority of the street-traders.

To keep the newly-founded militias busy, they were given new tasks: to begin with, the enforced dispersal of all opposition political groupings, and then the intimidation and

disciplining of girls and young women who appeared in public dressed contrary to the Islamic Republic's prescriptions. This mission has still not been completed after thirty years of Islamic rule.

At that time the fact of being a woman in Tehran suddenly became an explosive issue (which it still is). Sometimes the laws passed by the new authorities were in total contradiction to what had been usual under the previous regime, and women recognised that they had become the object of discrimination. This coercion, launched with the slogan 'Headscarf or shaven head', intensified in the silence for which the war with Iraq provided a pretext. The Islamic hijab for women completely changed the Tehran street-scene. The new authorities maintained that failure to adhere to clothing regulations aroused diabolical desires in men. Controls got under way with the employment of women from the lower classes. This was a new sphere of activity which endowed these women with a power and self-assurance they had never previously known. They stood at the entrances to public buildings sniffing the women going in and out to prevent the use of seductive perfumes.

Differential exchange rates and annual distribution of foreign exchange (at a favourable rate) to all citizens generated jobs for a considerable number of people. Then the start of the Iran-Iraq war and rationing of basic foodstuffs created new full-time employment for those previously without work. Buyers and sellers of ration coupons became a familiar sight on all of the city's streets and squares. Nevertheless, some of these street-traders were called up to play their part in what was generally seen as the most important of social commitments. This war also supplied the governments of the time with an apparently convincing reason for putting the entire city under the aegis of an effulgent spokesman for the divine. Everyone had to maintain silence in time of war.

A decade or two later the exchange rate was unified and currency for travelling abroad withdrawn. In conjunction with other economic measures, this weakened trade in coupons for basic food supplies. As a replacement another job market developed, the dimensions of which probably exceed those of any other country: the extended network of the drug trade. According to official statistics, the number of drug-takers across the country (the majority probably in Tehran) has now reached five million.

The income from these shady dealings has brought a boom in illegal settlements around Tehran. To assure the integration of their districts into urban structures, inhabitants negotiated with the city authorities, and once their demands were approved that led in turn to the development of new forms of illegal settlement. Tehran's ongoing growth has basically become possible thanks to a cyclical process: immigration and the establishment of illegal settlements, integration in a city that, like spilled oil, spreads ever further, and the foundation of more illegal settlements.

Tehran's administrators have officially extended the city limits from a radius of 225 kilometres to 520 kilometres (i.e. 2.3 times greater than previously), so that innumerable

communities on the periphery have been granted a legal right to city services. Those in power were spurred on to provide active support for this process of incorporation by the need to regain political ground: paying people to keep quiet and thereby transforming the army of the dissatisfied into obedient citizens. However, this game will never come to an end. News of what former marginal settlers have gained brings new marginals to the capital.

Twenty-five years later Ahmadinejad achieved electoral victory with his slogan of 'Distribution of oil money to all'. This came as a surprise to Iranian intellectuals, because they are unaware of the make-up of their capital's population. After several decades of marginal settlements around Tehran, the Islamic Revolution has made available to their inhabitants new strategies for survival. These strategies have fundamentally changed the marginals' structures of employment. By now they have established and consolidated themselves in the city with make-believe jobs, and it doesn't seem as if they will allow themselves to be removed from Tehran's social configuration over the long term. Who knows – perhaps petrol-rationing, which only recently came into force, will provide them with the basis for new economic activities!

Tehran, an imaginary postcard

Tehran possesses the unusual talent of being able to seduce its poets, artists, and writers into deceiving themselves. In this place you can detach yourself from reality, and only people who are active creators can gauge the significance of that.

In my early novels I described a city which no longer exists and perhaps never existed. This borrowed nostalgia, mingled with drowsiness and reverie, attributes to the city a vanished power of attraction in order to endow us, the citizens of Tehran, with a legendary and venerable past. I was seeking fleeting aspects of this city's inner core: a conglomerate of photographs and memories, excerpts from now-vanished books, melodies recollected only on the border between dreaming and wakefulness, and scents and sounds once again bringing ancient echoes back to memory. This hotchpotch generates the Tehran of nostalgia, a city whose most important characteristic is confusion, where the reverberation of its name in human remembrance does not accord with reality.

I admit that I've borrowed part of this nostalgia from other people's way of seeing things: a city of A Thousand and One Nights, with the blissful lethargy of shadow-filled alleys where only the plaintive murmur of dripping gutters is to be heard; with mysterious dark corners in mosques, turquoise minarets, copper-roofed bazaars and sleepy traders, slanting beams of light, the tangy aroma of spices, and shimmering silk; with carpet-weaving and great pots of dyes and spindles filled with wool, inscrutable black-eyed women, and suddenly the muezzin's call, earthy scents, an azure sky, and stillness and expectation.

The real Tehran

However, everyday reality makes such dreams vanish in a puff of smoke that covers the sky, and what remains is a city of confused geometry, constantly changing outlines, and irregular spaces and acute angles vanishing behind smog and mist. As the project of a city, Tehran will never be completed because it devotes much of its vital energy to trying to transform villagers into urban people – a role for which they don't show any particular talent.

Nevertheless, for me Tehran is the only place in the world that fascinates me with brutal, multi-coloured, unexpected, and bizarre impressions. In my recent novels I invoke this Tehran, a city without a river, saturated with the beguiling allure of love and death, a fear-instilling city full of unsleeping adventurers akin to imaginary, fleeting shadows, who constantly suffer the torments of hell and yet are forced to lie and dissimulate. A citizen of Tehran looks out onto the world from this confusion, which shapes in depth his view of life.

I have described this Tehran in my most recent novel, *The Morality of the Inhabitants of Revolution Avenue*, with the specific sensibility of a man describing the wounds on his own body.

Translated by Tim Nevill

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