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Chapter 23

STREET PROTEST AND ITS REPRESENTATIONS

Urban dissidence in Iran

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Introduction

The street as a site where citizens can demand and practice democracy is praised in the literature on social movements; however, what is less examined – concerning Iranian protests – is that it is on the street that the crowd becomes a visible object that can be regulated and potentially killed. This chapter explores the politics of space in general and the role of urban streets in social movements in particular through an analysis of the recent examples of urban dissidence in Iran, particularly the urban protests of 2019. *Pouring into the street* is not a recent phenomenon in the Iranian context. It can be traced to narratives surrounding the 1979 Islamic revolution, through which an image of the agency of urban space in social movements was constructed. The urban street in Iran is not a place where political change can be achieved, or at least the price is extremely high – the number of people being killed, executed or arrested for political protest on the streets is proof of this – which I will examine later. I argue in this chapter that we cannot separate the *street protests* from the *representation of the bloodshed on the street* if we want to investigate whether the urban street is a catalyst of meaningful political change or not. By considering them as intertwined, we will understand how the street and its representations establish who is human and who is the crowd.

To analyze the role of the urban street in social movements in Iran, first I examine the works of historian of modern Iran Ervand Abrahamian and sociologist Asef Bayat, whose analysis of the revolution of 1979 renders *pouring into the street* as an inevitable part of this event. I show that although their accurate account of this revolution highlights the role of the left and urbanism in mass mobilization, they do not discuss the human cost involved. Such historical studies document the number of people who were killed, injured or arrested but they do not discuss whose lives are framed as disposable. Another field of study helpful to better understand the complexities of spatial characteristics of such dissidence is the urban social movement discourse.

This term, *urban social movement*, was first introduced by Marxist sociologist Manuel Castells in the 1970s, and was used in both pessimistic and optimistic ways.[1] On the one hand, he argued that social movements are reactionary and cannot produce any structural change because of their inevitable institutionalization.[2] On the other hand, in 2015, he suggested a third hybrid space made up of cyberspace and urban space as a space of autonomy.[3] His optimism was

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criticized for not considering the limitations on the internet imposed by corporations.[4] To go beyond the optimism/pessimism duality and beyond discussing whether a structural change can be achieved or not, I turn to Marxist geographer David Harvey's work in which the *urban* is considered as the fundamental condition for any radical change.

By considering the urban *street* as an urban space that is first and foremost constructed by rows of individual buildings on its edges, this chapter shows that the discipline of architecture mainly engages with form and material, and as such it is very limited in its critical analysis of these urban areas. The ways that streets facilitate or restrict mass mobilizations are obvious from an architectural point of view. For example, a long, wide boulevard allows military tanks and large crowds to occupy this urban space, and tall buildings provide a convenient shooting platform for anonymously killing protestors on the street. Although such architectural analysis can be extremely useful in human rights activism, this chapter suggests that this is in fact the limitation of the discipline of architecture/urbanism in its critical analysis of the street. To develop another creative perspective, one can examine the role of architecture in the politics of truth-telling.

In order to develop this perspective, I will draw upon the notion of *population* by philosopher Michel Foucault, who suggests that population is a *constructed political subject* that is governed in specific ways to protect the state. Population, therefore, is not a collection of individual human beings, but rather it is statistics, birth-rates, infection rates or well-being-rates. By drawing a parallel between the population and the crowd, I argue that it is in fact the street that constructs a mass, which becomes an object and a potential target to be shot, killed or injured. This perspective stops me from losing sight of human lives when analyzing urban protests. It enables me to highlight those certain individuals who are rendered disposable and their death on the street framed as the norm.

This critical framework is developed to analyze the bloodshed in urban protests on the streets of Iran in 2019, which is the main case study of this chapter. I should also note that by focusing on the street, I am not disregarding the potential of virtual space in social movements, or the various techniques of mobilization in digital space. It is not to undermine or deny their role, but rather to concentrate on one specific spatial realm in which public discontent has been continuously expressed all across the world, as evidenced by the various Arab Spring protests in the early 2010s up to the Black Lives Matter protests during the pandemic in 2020. By focusing on physical space, this chapter examines the expression and representation of discontent on the urban street in Iran during a series of protests in 2019. The urban street is analyzed as a space in which crowds gather, protest, move, run and shout, and in which they are arrested, wounded and killed – while the images of such events continue to be captured and ceaselessly broadcast in media and the news.

Pouring into the street

For sociologist Asef Bayat, the *street* is a significant spatial element in urban struggles, specifically in terms of the displaced urban poor. He uses the term *street* in three different ways: first, as the main and only public space left for ordinary people outside of institutional power, or those who have lost trust in institutional politics, to express discontent;[5] second, as a vibrant public space for informal economic activity that operates against the regulation imposed on the market by the state; and third, as the representation of the modern urban theater of contention par excellence.[6] The politics of the street are significant for Bayat because the street has the potential to galvanize a revolution. Moreover, he is well aware of the physical character of the street and its spatiality. He notes:

> [I]n addition to thinking about why revolutions take place, who participates in them, and how events unfold, we should also be thinking about where they actually take place. More specifically, why do certain spaces/places, such as urban streets, more than others become the sites of acts and expressions of public discontent?[7]

Bayat is acutely aware of how streets allow contentions to build up, resulting in mass marching. He suggests that when a particular group of people march on the street, a sense of solidarity can extend to much more diverse groups of people and include strangers as well.[8] He continues his urban analysis to suggest that street protests usually occur in the locus of mass transportation networks, and specific streets allow the crowd to escape police by fleeing into adjacent narrow alleyways or shops, or by taking sanctuary/refuge in homes.[9]

Bayat's works are notable in addressing the role of neoliberal economics and neoliberal rationality in creating social inequality through the restructuring of Middle Eastern cities, a situation that led to the Arab Spring in the early 2010s. He is also quite specific about the limitations of the street as a space in which structural change can be achieved, implemented and sustained. However, he does not engage with the issue of bloodshed and the role of the street in allowing violence to occur; rather, he views bloodshed as an inevitable cost that must be paid on the streets by the crowd. What remains problematic, however, is that the street represents the only space left for expressions of discontent outside the hegemonic system. The price of such expressions is human lives. I argue that Bayat has a nostalgic and idealized view of the street, regarding it as an arena in which a radical shift can develop to disrupt a system. However, the cost to human life is secondary to this vision, despite the evidence pointing to the devastating impact of violence, both on the political and human level. The same problem is also evident in the works of the established historian of modern Iran, Ervand Abrahamian.

The studies of Bayat and Abrahamian are influential in their analysis of the Islamic revolution. While Bayat highlights the role of class struggle and the urban poor, Abrahamian presents a wider context by emphasizing the role of the Left in mass mobilization. I refer to their works because of their consistent reference to street protests as a self-evident and almost inevitable component of the formation of the revolution. In Abrahamian's work, for example, street protests are stated as historical facts without any examination of the nexus between violence and the street.[10] For example, he writes:

> [T]housands wearing white shrouds to show their willingness to be killed violated the night curfew and poured into the streets [of Iran]. An estimated seven hundred died. In Qazvin, 135 were killed when tanks rolled over demonstrators. In Mashad, some two hundred – many of them high-school students – were fatally shot.[11]

> If the two middle classes were the main bulwarks of the revolution [of 1979], the urban working class was its chief battering ram. Oil workers pushed the state to the verge of bankruptcy. Transport and factory workers brought industry to a halt. Moreover, slum dwellers provided much of the youth that defiantly challenged the military authorities, many of the martyrs that died in the major massacres and the bulk of the vast crowds that tenaciously marched in the streets.[12]

Here *pouring into the street* is reported in conjunction with the agency of the crowds and their eventual massacre. The nexus between crowd-street-violence is treated as self-evident, meaning that crowds pour into the street to demand change at the expense of their lives. It would be unfair to criticize Bayat or Abrahamian for not examining this nexus as this is not the topic of their investigations. However, it is exactly the point of my chapter – to consider the frameworks

though which *pouring into the street* is constructed as an inevitable or ultimate action toward social change.

While Bayat and Abrahamian use the word *crowd* to refer to a group of people, it is worth questioning this word. A crowd is not simply a collection of individuals; it is a constructed idea with a specific history that explains why certain lives are rendered disposable or able to be sacrificed to achieve certain demands. As argued by economic sociologist Christian Borch in his semantic studies, crowds, masses or mobs have been produced to situate people in relation to modern societies: "the crowd is often observed as the dark side of modern society" because it is opposed to the individual liberal autonomous subject.[13] As such, it is understood in negative terms – as a danger. The crowd is associated with "irrationality, violence, and de-individualization," and therefore questions and upsets the ideal of a distinctive individual living in a liberal modern society.[14] Drawing upon the works of philosopher Chantal Mouffe, Borch believes that interest in the crowd phenomenon should be rekindled based on its relevance to the reconceptualization of contemporary politics.[15] Mouffe, following Sigmund Freud's analysis of libidinal investment in the creation of collective identification and Jacque Lacan's concept of enjoyment, emphasizes the role and significance of affect in politics. For her, crowd theory matters as it highlights collective identification, which is necessary for people to become interested in politics – specifically in liberal individualistic societies – and more importantly, "the need for collective identification will never disappear since it is constitutive of the existence of human beings."[16] Mouffe's analysis is illuminating because she highlights the significant affective role of the formation of this collective identity in mass mobilization.

This brief introduction to the notion of the crowd aimed to problematize its self-evidentiality. The crowd is a constructed collective identity, a *we*, that can be used to affect people in positive or negative ways and to achieve a different range of demands. Now, I want to return to the nexus between the crowd and the street – the spatial aspect of this collective act. Foucault's concept of *population* helped me to explore the very spatial aspect of a collective act as he locates urban demonstrations in much wider spatial, social and political settings.

In *Security, Territory, Population* (1977–78) Foucault argues that the notion of *population* emerged as a new political concept through a new form of power, called the *apparatus of security*, and this new system of power was itself the result of the transformation of the town.[17] The new town, which was no longer walled, posed specific economic and political problems which required different governmental techniques. Here, Foucault highlights the urban aspect in the emergence of the new art of government through specific historical references to town/ scarcity/epidemic and street/grain/contagion in western Europe, which led to the emergence of what Germans called the police-state (*Polizeiwissenschaft*) in the 18th Century. The number of citizens, their necessities of life, health and activity as well as the circulation of goods all became objects of concern for the police, whose role was to affirm and increase the power of the state while procuring the happiness of its subjects. Foucault offers the tantalizing conclusion that "to police and to urbanize is the same thing."[18] To better understand this relationship between the urban population and the police, a brief summary of Foucault's argument will follow.

The European towns of the 18th Century were changing spatially, juridically, administratively and economically, as the key problem became how to make the circulation of goods more efficient, productive and secure when the city was no longer enclosed but rather opened up to the outside, leaving it vulnerable to unpredictable events and an unknown future. Transformation of the town from an enclosed space within the city walls to an open matrix, Foucault suggests, required a different form of government, that is, one providing *security*. Security manages probabilities – it "will try to plan a milieu in terms of events or series of events or possible elements, of series that will have to be regulated within a multivalent and transformable

framework."[19] As such, the apparatus of security operates to manage probabilities and open series of events, and consequently it works on the future. The apparatus of security is exercised over a whole population and is concerned with multiplicities. What makes its treatment of space different from sovereignty and discipline is that it is centrifugal rather than centripetal:

> [...] the apparatuses of security, [...] have the constant tendency to expand; they are centrifugal. New elements are constantly being integrated: production, psychology, behavior, the ways of doing things of producers, buyers, consumers, importers and exporters and the world market. Security therefore involves organizing, or anyway allowing the development of ever-wider circuits.[20]

This mutation of "technologies of power" manifested in the apparatus of security is a typical feature of modern society.[21] The result of this mutation of power is the production of a political subject called a population, which is different from people or individuals. The apparatus of security in 18th Century Europe removed the threat of scarcity by enabling the free circulation of grain and allowing the prices to fluctuate and run their own 'natural' course. Consequently, the population always had access to food because the grain was now free to circulate at whatever price the market demanded. Individuals, however, could also starve to death in this system, because they fell through the cracks of what constitutes the population, which is different from people. By associating the question of population to political economy,[22] Foucault articulates the division or opposition between population/people – those who subscribe to the social contract and laws, and those who break it, for which reason they fall outside the collective subject.[23]

Population is no longer a source of wealth or a productive force requiring disciplinary supervision, nor a collection of juridical subjects; rather, it is "a set of processes to be managed at the level and on the basis of what is natural in these processes."[24] Population becomes a "technical-political object of management and government."[25] The central point in the definition of this new entity, population, is the relationship with biology and "the entry of a 'nature' into the field of techniques of power."[26] The new technique of power has to understand the nature of this object and allow it to run its course naturally, in terms of birth/death or contagion. For example, when there is an epidemic, this new form of political technology calculates the rates of contagion to identify the nature of how a population reacts toward the epidemic. Foucault calls *population* an "absolutely new thing,"[27] meaning that men are no longer mankind (*le genre humaine*) but rather the human species (*l'espèce humaine*). One could argue that a population is entangled with the development of power over life, a new technology that regulates the territory to ensure the state remains secure. By translating this to the Iranian urban protest context, it becomes clear that the violence of the totalitarian regime continues to guarantee the continuation of the state itself, while the killing of people is legitimized through representing the protestors as a threat to the security of the population.

In short, the notion of the crowd opens up two avenues of thought: a crowd is a constructed collective identity which poses a threat to individualistic ideals; and a crowd can be distinguished from a population in its resistance to being governed by the power over life. Therefore, the crowd/people is counter to the ideal of an individual while it problematizes the governable subject. The rethinking of the notion of the crowd/people is also extended to the notion of urban social movement.[28] By using Foucault's concept of counter-conduct – the will not to be governed by certain people at certain costs – political economist Carl Death presents a pessimistic account of social movement by showing that protest and government are mutually constitutive. Protest against something, reinforces it. This dual relationship is evident in liberal societies where dissent is tolerated to a certain level because by legitimizing *the governable subjects'* ability to protest, the

prevailing practices of government are challenged while stabilized at the same time. For example, Death points to protests at global summits that attract media attention, which consequently gives more visibility to global governance and its hierarchical order. Moreover, the more violent the protests, the more they are captured as a spectacle in the media.[29] Ultimately, they contribute to the stability of the structure they aim to unsettle. This is the contradictory aspect of collective protests: without undermining their necessity, endurance or potential, one might argue that protests also help to support the image of an oppressive regime – and construction of an oppressive regime can be used to legitimize invasion, attack or sanction on that regime as evident in the invasion of Iraq for example. Death shows that urban protests should be analyzed in close relation with their representations and framings in the media. While the brutal oppression of urban social movements in Iran between 2009 and 2019 escalated rapidly, the representations of the protests and the violence in the media followed a simple narrative both inside and outside the country: protestors are threats to the security of the population and the state and hence they should be eliminated at all costs; and there is an oppressive regime that is killing, arresting, torturing people because it is what totalitarian regimes do. Before starting to question whether the urban social movements in Iran between 2009 and 2019 resisted the oppressive regime or in fact reinforced it, it is necessary to explain a term – *urban social movements*.

Urban social movements

The popular term *urban social movements* was first introduced by Castells in *The Urban Question* to describe the coming together of trade unions, political parties and urban-based groups.[30] If the struggles of these three could be linked together, *urban social movements* would bring structural and radical change in power relations. Later, in *The City and the Grassroots*,[31] Castells expands this term's meaning of struggles over "state-provision of collective infrastructures and services" to include "collective consumption services, cultural identity, citizens' rights and trade unionism."[32] More importantly, Castells, on a more pessimistic note, shows the limitation of such reactionary movements in producing any structural change. He goes even further to argue that in fact "all social movements are unable to fully accomplish their project since they lose their identity as they become institutionalized, the inevitable outcome of bargaining for social reform within the political system."[33] By referring to urban movements as *reactive utopias*, Castells concludes that they are symptoms of resistance to social domination and not agents of change because "they are unable to put forward any historically feasible project of economic production, communication, or government."[34] Urban movements are powerless in the context of a technologically sophisticated global economy, media empires and computerized bureaucratic governments. However, these movements continue to emerge, not because people do not know they need "an international working-class movement," but because people are left with no other choice.[35] All the organizations and agents that are supposed to stand up for their rights, have failed them. Castells maintains that when people pour into the street as a form of social movement, it is solely a reaction to exploitation and domination, a symptom of the society's contradictions. In his later works on the network society and the significance of the internet in social movements, Castells is more optimistic. However, he has subsequently been criticized for not adequately considering the role of multinational corporations in controlling the internet or for casting doubt on the autonomy of the internet and the influence of capital in this space. Although the internet plays a significant role in the formation of what Castells calls the *space of autonomy*, which is a third hybrid space made up of cyberspace and urban space,[36] the unprecedented event of shutting down the internet in Iran in 2019, for example, is enough to make one question the autonomy of this

space. In November 2019, within 24 hours, most traffic from the global internet was cut off in Iran, a technological blackout that lasted around six days to further suppress the political demonstrations against the regime. During this blackout, the civil society was denied access to the internet and as such was unable to plan for mobilization or for sharing information about the unfolding events. Disconnecting the Iranian domestic network from the global internet by using the "kill switch," is an example for how totalitarian regimes can use cyberspace for geopolitical control.[37]

Urban social movements, however, remain popular in their symbolic role regardless of their ambiguity – an ambiguity which is also present in Castells' own writings. On the one hand, urban social movements represent the potential achievement of the highest level of change, as opposed to participation or protest, while on the other hand, the term can be used generically to refer to any collective act irrespective of its outcome or effect.[38]

Harvey offers a more optimistic view regarding the potential of the urban to create radical change. From an economic point of view, Harvey regards the city as a production machine where value and capital are created and accumulated. This mode of economics creates the social inequality inherent to capitalism, which can only be resolved through a revolutionary act. For Harvey, this uprising will arise from urban streets. The key concept for Harvey in *Rebel Cities* is in fact Henry Lefebvre's *the right to the city* rather than *urban social movements*; however, the two concepts have a lot in common, or can be used to serve similar purposes.[39] They both theorize how a collective struggle can form to demand access to the resources that the city offers while at the same time to gain power over the ways in which the city is made and remade.[40] For Harvey following Lefebvre, the right to the city should not be reduced to demanding access to the resources that the city embodies, as is typically the case. Rather, the right to the city should encompass an anti-capitalist collective movement that seeks to retain the value produced by collective labor under collective control, and in doing so, abolish the trajectory of capital growth while reimagining a city without inequality and environmental degradation.[41] The right to the city is not just about access to so-called public space, or housing, basic services or safe spaces; it is also about creating new common spaces for socialization and political action.

For example, the Green Movement of 2009 in Iran's modern history, noted for the eruption of revolts, mainly in urban centers, was to demand the right of people in the governance of the country rather than mere access to resources. This movement developed as a response to sinister election fraud, with protestors demanding a vote recount. Peaceful street protests in Iran were violently oppressed – 10,000 people were arrested, and at least 71 were killed.[42] Consequently, protestors' demands grew "wider, targeting the reform of the state – accountability, neutrality of the security apparatus, and limiting the power of the supreme leader."[43] According to Bayat, the Green Movement, which was neither a class struggle nor a secular war against the religious rule, "brought the Islamist regime to its most profound crisis," and at its core it sought to reform the state rather than overthrow it through a revolution.[44] In the aftermath of the election protests, the leader of the Green Movement, Mir Hussein Mousavi, was arrested and has been under home-arrest for almost 11 years. Supported by the supreme leader, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who implemented neoliberal populism in Iran,[45] continued his second term as the president (2005–09, 2009–13). The Green Movement was opposed to the reelection of Ahmadinejad for his second term as it was believed that the election had involved fraud. As Bayat writes, during his first term presidency, massive repression swept across the country: "scores of independent NGOs were closed down, key activists incarcerated, intellectuals and journalists detained, dissenting faculty and students removed, women activists put behind bars and mass protests of teachers and bus drivers put down."[46] Additionally, the poverty rates increased to 13%, and Ahmadinejad's cabinet built strong links to the military, the Revolutionary Guards and informal

credit associations.[47] In the following years, numerous protests swept across the country as the economy increasingly destabilized followed by increasing unemployment and poverty.

Everyday challenges faced by the urbanized working class who are fighting for or demanding access to basic needs, such as housing, health care, education, sanitation, water and equality, are not undermined in the right to the city discussions, but rather the lack of access to such services is framed as a clear result of capitalist urbanization. Harvey defines the right to the city beyond short-term, individualistic, reformist approaches and instead grounds this right on a revolutionary movement that seeks to create a whole new system, different from and opposed to the logic of capital accumulation. As Harvey writes:

> While these public spaces and public goods contribute mightily to the qualities of commons, it takes political action on the part of citizens and the people to appropriate them or to make them so. […] Syntagma Square in Athens, Tahrir Square in Cairo, and the Plaza de Catalunya in Barcelona were public spaces that became an urban commons as people assembled there to express their political views and make demands. The street is a public space that has historically been transformed by social action into the common of revolutionary movement, as well as into a site of bloody suppression. […] There is always a struggle over how the production of and access to public space and public goods is to be regulated, by whom, and in whose interests.[48]

Here, Harvey reveals the two layers of an urban street: it can be a common and a site of oppression simultaneously. He continues to define four features of urban-based, anti-capitalist revolutionary movements. First, such revolutionary movements have the potential to disrupt urban economies, to disrupt the flows of production, of goods and services in major urban centers, and by doing so claim a demand in return. Second, urban protests also have a symbolic role such as May Day, and this is important because it reminds people of their collective potential. Third, it is difficult to understand the complexity of the politics and revolutionary potential of such movements.[49] And finally, there is a close correlation between the spatial/territorial organization of such urban spaces and the protest itself, meaning certain spaces are more conducive to facilitating protests. This feature has not remained unnoticed by the powers that predominate. Controlling the population through reorganizing urban infrastructure and urban life is manifested in the well-documented Haussmannization of 19th Century Paris and various city reengineering projects in Iran for example. For Harvey, the actual characteristic of urban space is important in political action and revolt, and at the same time, "the physical and social reengineering and territorial organization of these sites is a weapon in political struggles."[50] This feature of urban-based class struggle, which mostly centers on physical and spatial organization, can be used as a tool of oppression or resistance.

The various urban uprisings in Iranian modern history at the beginning of the 20th Century can be rethought based on the four features of urban-based movements discussed above. First, any closure of the Tehran bazaar (located in Tehran, the capital of Iran), as a form of protest, can disrupt the Iranian economy. For example, in 2010 merchants closed their shops in protest against state tax-hikes,[51] and in 2012, merchants went on strike against the government's economic mismanagement and the significant drop in value of Iranian currency against the US dollar. To which social class the *bazaaris* (merchants) belong (working class, bourgeois, capitalist or linked to the state's military sector) is still a contested debate among historians of Iranian modern history. The point here is not to discuss whether the collective protests of *bazaaris* is an anti-capitalist movement or not, but rather to highlight that their collective action disrupts the economic system for claiming a particular demand in return.

In terms of the symbolic role of urban demonstrations and their value in keeping the memory of collective potential alive in people's minds, in an Iranian post-revolutionary context, two types of such demonstrations are worthy of consideration. They are both legal, annual and set in the Iranian calendar, with clear locations, routes and agenda. However, one is engineered and state-sponsored and the other is not. For example, the Anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in February each year is celebrated by the regime to legitimize its popularity, and events generally run smoothly and peacefully. This annual political celebration includes mass marching in the streets and is widely broadcasted by the state-sponsored, monopoly media across the country in the absence of a free press. On the other hand, Labor Day and Student Day often lead to brutal oppression and widespread arrests under heavy surveillance. This is largely the result of the opposition grasping rare legal opportunities to conduct public demonstrations in protest against the state's illegitimacy and brutality. These two annual, legal demonstrations, that have run continuously since the 1980s, remind people that their presence and movement on the streets toppled a 2500-year-old, long-standing monarchy – however, whether this a true historical fact or not should remain an open question.

Not all collective actions are social movements – it depends on the scale. For example, participation is at the lowest level that operates on symbolic urban and political changes. At an intermediate level we have protests that seek reforms without demanding fundamental changes in power at urban and societal levels. Social movements are the highest and rarest, through which fundamental changes in power at urban and societal levels are sought.[52] Such categorization shows that analyzing any *urban social movement* is complex, and social sciences are empirically more equipped to provide answers to or deal with questions around what establishes a social movement. However, the discipline of architecture can also contribute to discussions around urban social movements by creating city-conscious architecture. Overall, any collective action is inherently spatial and becomes visible when manifested in the streets, in the empty space between the buildings. For example, the Green Movement was initially manifested by a long human chain which gathered in the 17.2 km long *Vali-e Asr* Street in Tehran and joined hands along one of the longest streets in the world to show their presence. As evident in the 2019 urban protests in Iran, which I will examine in detail later in the chapter, a crowd running in an urban square enclosed by medium density buildings, blocking a motorway, marching in a street under surveillance of shooters on rooftops are examples of the expression of the spatial dimension of riots.

Architecture and the urban street

If an urban revolution is necessary for overthrowing capitalism from a Marxist point of view, one could argue that the gathering of people in public spaces, whether physically or digitally, is an inevitable part of any collective movement. It should also be noted that so-called public spaces are already policed, which means that a collective movement within a public space is generally controlled with a high likelihood of oppression at the time. Examples can be seen worldwide, such as the recent Black Lives Matter protests (following the killing of George Floyd by a police officer) held across the US during the coronavirus pandemic that were heavily controlled by a militarized police force. The point to make here is that oppression, surveillance and bloodshed occur alongside praise for social movements. Several questions clearly arise concerning how many lives must be lost for practicing democracy or seeking freedom; whose lives are dispensable. Perhaps these are not questions an architect can respond to. By defining architecture as "political technology that regulates our lives,"[53] we, as architects or urbanists, can provide examples to show how spatial practices regulate our lives, but that is all.[54] I consider this point as the limitation of the discipline

of architecture and urbanism, because it deals with symptoms of a problem (the negative impacts of architecture on our behavior and psychology) rather than the problem itself. Moreover, it becomes extremely difficult to imagine a creative avenue after we accept and provide examples showing how space can be used as an oppressive tool.

With a focus on the street as the object of his study, Anthony Vidler in *The Scenes of the Street* argues that architecture should not be separated from urbanism.[55] If it is, *the form of the urban realm* will not be understood, and this split will reduce architecture to single buildings defined by economic developments and urban policies.[56] Similarly, analyzing the street should not be restricted to urban studies. Another key edited book, *On Streets*,[57] remains one of the very few texts with *streets* in its title (not public space or urban space) and more importantly, despite the age of the publication, it presents the main frameworks through which the street can be studied.[58] In short, for architects, the street can be analyzed from a formal or material point of view – dimensions, proportions, materials, traffic, urban furniture and density. However, these frameworks tend not to offer new insights when analyzing the nexus between the architecture of the urban street and social movements. It is self-evident that from a formal point of view, the proportions of a street (its width and length), the density of the neighborhood and the traffic and/or legibility of routes, will all have a direct impact on crowd mobilization. Policing of these urban spaces is also facilitated by the visibility of the crowd, and dimensions play an equally important role. Long Haussmannian-style boulevards not only make the movement of the military faster in a city but also open up wide corridors in which people are exposed to the gaze of the buildings' windows, CCTVs, drones and helicopters/airplanes. The street is a military tool. This function is not an addition to the urban space, but rather inherent to its formation – as discussed by Foucault, to urbanize is in fact to police. The street is a mechanism for controlling the circulation of goods, ideas and people – with the ever-present possibility of removing any obstacle that could pose a threat to that circulation. I argue this is another limit in the discipline of architecture because this perspective mainly documents, historicizes and analyzes existing examples of the militarization of urban space. A less-explored field is to shift the focus to the representation of the urban street in collective uprisings, examining how architecture frames the politics of truth-telling and studying the ways media construct spectacles from ordinary people's struggle through these representations, spectacles that can be consumed by others, by those in front of their screens surfing the news – myself included. Thus, the focus is better to shift from street-violence-crowd to street-mediation-crowd, where mediation helps with performing various forms of violence.

Street protests become visible when videos and photos are published and disseminated widely in media. This chapter argues that if we examine how representations of specific places or buildings are manufactured and framed, we can open up a new avenue for thinking about the political role of architecture beyond the oppressive/liberating dichotomy. The Iranian protests of 2019–20 provide a specific opportunity for an alternative way of thinking, whereby the streets can be analyzed afresh because these protests were reported in the absence of reliable data, a free press or an international press, along with a countrywide internet shutdown. These protests should be first understood in a wider, historical-economic context that began in 2009.

2019 urban dissidence and bloodshed in Iran

Following years of labor unrest during 2012–16, two widespread protests expanded across the country in 2017 and later in 2019. According to a study by Kevan Harris and Zep Kalb at UCLA, 400 labor protests occurred in 2015 and 340 in 2016.[59] Harris and Kalb suggest that these numerous, popular mobilizations led to the bloodshed of 2017–19. The protests of 2017–18 were started by the middle-class poor (largely unemployed, educated and young – mainly in

their 20s) in December 2017 in reaction to high prices in the city of Mashhad and soon after erupted in 85 cities and provincial towns across the country, resulting in at least 25 people killed and 3700 arrested.[60] Left unsupported by any coalition or party, these protests failed to galvanize a political force and were suppressed by the regime. In 2019, following the triple increase in fuel price that was abruptly enforced in Iran on 15 November 2019, urban protests swept across the country starting with the blockading of highways. The peaceful unarmed protests were brutally suppressed (people were shot to death, arrested, injured, detained) by the state's lethal force,[61] alongside a total internet shutdown. In its report of 16 November 2021, Amnesty International documents the details of 324 men, women and children who were killed by Iran's security forces between 15 and 19 November 2019.[62] According to a Reuters report on 23 December 2019, more than 1500 people were killed and 7000 arrested.[63] In the UN Human Rights report of 2020, the special rapporteur writes in shock about the:

> unprecedented use of excessive and lethal force by State security forces during the November 2019 protests, including by the police, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its Basij militia. … [A]t least 304 people, including 23 children and 10 women, were killed between 15 to 19 November 2019 in 37 cities across the Islamic Republic of Iran, although the death toll is believed to be much higher. […] The pattern of shooting at vital organs, established by eyewitness accounts, video footage and the documented causes of deaths, demonstrates that security forces were "shooting to kill" or with reckless disregard as to whether their actions caused death.[64]

Information regarding the resources used to kill or arrest people is derived from Amnesty International reports, which are substantially different from those of Reuters. Moreover, the execution of detainees and the death of the injured remain unclear and mostly undocumented for each event. As such, I found it difficult to write a single sentence in which I could mention the number of people who were shot and killed – were there hundreds or thousands? Not that responding to this question is important to this chapter, but the ambiguity and lack of reliable information is worth thinking about. The continuous work of human rights activists in Iran and abroad has documented this violation with the hope of holding the Iranian regime accountable.[65] The increasing protests and unrest, followed by the unprecedented killing of unarmed protestors, mainly in their 20s, makes one question the price being paid for a future democratic state – whether bloodshed in the street is the only way forward.

The simple answer is that the street *may* be the only space left for people to express discontent. However, this proposition leaves no room for creating alternative spaces that might become more effective forums for structural change while protecting lives. The street operates at two levels simultaneously – as public space in which democracy can be practiced and as a corridor that transforms individuals into crowds and targets to be shot dead. This is the trap of visibility *par excellence*.

Street protest and its representations

With a GDP contracted by 6.8%,[66] an unemployment rate of 12.3% and 23–40% of the population below the poverty line in 2019,[67] Iran's currency continues to lose its value under US sanctions. In its October 2020 report of post-Covid Iran, the World Bank raised concerns about Iran's increasing poverty: "High inflation, increased gasoline prices in 2019, economic slowdown, and the economic shock caused by Covid-19 have given rise to concerns about household welfare and poverty."[68] The protests began on 15 November 2019 immediately after

the 50–200% fuel price hike was announced. Fixed-line and mobile provider outages, followed by an internet shut down for a week across the country, occurred on the same day and worsened as the protest intensified.[69] This meant that people in Iran were not only unable to communicate with each other, but they were also unable to report on the protests.[70] In the absence of a free press, it was left to protestors to report state violence in previous upheavals by posting amateur videos and photos on social media. This time, both the virtual and physical spaces were blocked. It took a week for news, photos and videos to appear online. In this instance I am referring to three videos in which the video footage can be seen as screenshots in Figures 23.1–23.4.

In Figure 23.1, we see a group of unarmed protestors chasing a few armed police from a green space in an urban square onto the adjacent street. A gunman turns around and shoots a protestor in the foot from a 1–2 m distance. The protestor does not appear to be threatening the life of the police officer. The investigation conducted by *Justice for Iran* used collated images as legal evidence in criminal courts to identify the criminals and hold them accountable (Figure 23.2). In Figure 23.2, which is based on the *Justice for Iran* report, the scene is cross-referenced with other images to locate where the event took place, showing the same event from different angles. All videos and photographs were taken by civilians, one at the top of a multi-story building and others on the street. Architecturally speaking, such events explicitly point to the inherent violence of the policed urban space. I suggest that identifying the repetitive spatial narrative these scenes (photographic or video) reproduce will allow us to go beyond the duality of oppression/liberation. For instance, Figure 23.2 provides images of streets filled with a crowd of people who presumably decided to voluntarily risk their lives. This is a typical act under a totalitarian regime and an act necessary in the fight for a democratic society, despite the fact it renders human lives disposable. Architecture in this instance is not only buildings, but a point of reference that situates events and gives them a point in time and space – *here* the

Figure 23.1 The shooting of an unarmed protestor in his foot based on video footage in Shahriar, Tehran 25 Aban 1398 (2019) published at Manoto TV. Diagram by Jamikorn Charoenphan © Farzaneh Haghighi.

Figure 23.2 Spatial analysis of video footage based on the works of human rights activist Justice for Iran, derived from Shoot to Kill. Providing evidence that police shot directly at an unarmed protestor. Diagram by Jamikorn Charoenphan © Farzaneh Haghighi.

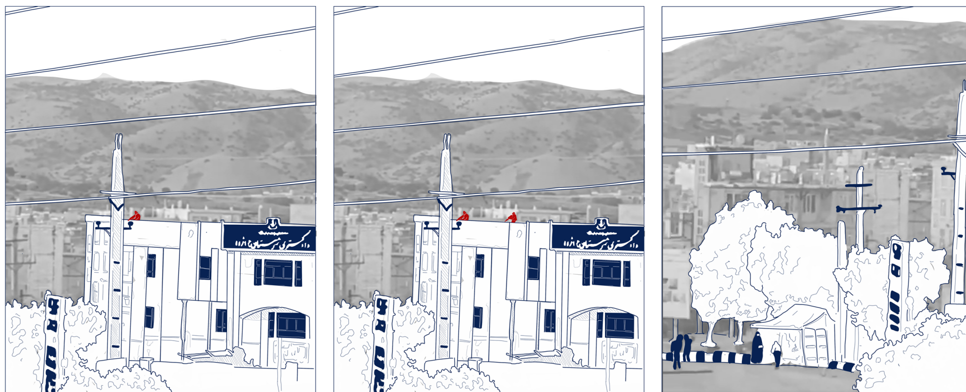

Figure 23.3 Individuals stationed on the rooftop of a governmental building, the Justice Department, using firearms against the protestors in the street below in Javanroud, Kermanshah, November 2019, based on video footage posted on YouTube by Freedom Messenger and Nazeran R.F.I. Diagram by Jamikorn Charoenphan © Farzaneh Haghighi.

Figure 23.4 Protest in Sattarkhan Street, Tehran, Iran, in November 2019, based on video footage posted by BBC. Diagram by Jamikorn Charoenphan © Farzaneh Haghighi.

shooting occurred. And in doing so, architecture and urban space give visibility not only to the contained and controlled crowd of people but also to the violence imposed on them. In other words, architecture gives a *form* to spatial violence.[71]

The same narrative, as a normalized practice in urban social movements, continues in another scene, where gunmen standing on the rooftop of a three-floor building shoot at the people on the street (Figure 23.3). In the original video, we also hear several gunshots and then the camera turns to the street, showing several people screaming and running in distress. The building is a governmental office – the Justice Department of the District of Javanrood in the city of Kermanshah – making it more probable that the gunmen were given access and the right to use the rooftop to kill people while remaining away from the street itself. The higher the building, the better the surveillance of the surrounds and the greater the opportunity for these unlawful forces to crush protests. Architecture here, in the form of a building, is used as a tool of oppression and as evidence for locating the crime – making it far from being a neutral container. It makes manifest the particular relationship between architectural dimensions and violence. However, the point of my investigation is to trace the repetitive spatial narrative in this scene too: the crushing of urban protests through human deaths becomes a normalized practice under a totalitarian regime when the masses use the streets to express discontent. I also found Judith Butler's essay on the leaked torture photographs at the US detention centers illuminating as she explains the numbing effect of images of war that aestheticize the suffering of others to satisfy consumer demands. She also pays particular attention to the ways images are framed in order to include and exclude certain information, and in doing so to establish "who is human and so entitled to human rights and who is not."[72] In fact, these videos and images create a numbing

effect toward the pain of the other – rendering life disposable, inevitably to be lost for a higher purpose.

After a week of internet shutdown, numerous videos and photos began to appear online and were sent to various news agencies by civilians – as reflected by the amateur video quality. Among these, a video published by BBC-Persian depicts a surreal scene that surpasses the previous shocking depiction of violent events (Figure 23.4). It does not seem real; it is as if it is an action sequence in a movie in which the actors are playing their roles. The camera is held by someone in a car, and the car is turning at an intersection of two streets in Tehran. We see multiple encounters occurring one after the other in the space of 35 seconds: several men attack another; a woman screams at a police officer – both are caught between two parked cars; police officers with batons chase a man; a police officer raises his baton in the air ready to knock someone out; we hear the voice of a woman (possibly the camera operator), telling the driver to go, go – to leave the scene as quick as possible.[73] It is hard to believe this scene is real rather than staged, as it reaches an aesthetic level that is far beyond the chaos of reality revealed in other amateur videos. Jean Baudrillard's notions of the hyperreal and simulation may explain this phenomenon, as he shows the disappearance of the distinction between copy/real, concept/being and map/territory. That is, we are left with the hyperreal because the real does not exist anymore – in fact, "the real is no longer possible."[74] We live in the age of simulation in which all referentials have been liquidated, reappearing in a much more ductile sign system. The double of the real has substituted the real itself.

I am not suggesting that this video is forged in contrast to the *real* videos that preceded it, but rather that it is beyond real. The scene is situated in a street and the signs on the shops indicate *where* it is exactly, along with other signs such as police uniforms, people's clothes, types of cars, street signs and street curbs. As the car leaves the scene, we see a crowd amid the smoke of tear gas. The moving images in the video appear to be created in order to be captured by the camera, as if they preexist the real, as if we have seen these before not on the street but on the screen, in photos, in movies. As if the videos and photos were meant to be communicated from the start.[75] The photos and videos of people being shot, beaten or killed on the streets of Iran seem to reach an aesthetic level that is constructed as a spectacle within a practicing democracy and hence there is no international outrage when these photos and videos are published, circulated and consumed. In the age of simulation, what is essential is the production, reproduction and overproduction of the simulated for a consumer society. As such one could argue that the *street* and the *representation of the bloodshed in the street* both establish who is human and who is not. Therefore, it is an ethical obligation to analyze the street protests alongside their representations aimed at consumers' narcissistic desire to see, and to understand, as Butler writes, that "to learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter."[76]

Concluding remark

This chapter was a preliminary attempt to create a link between two seemingly unrelated topics – *urban social movements* and *representation of the bloodshed in the street* – from a spatial point of view by drawing on the Iranian urban protests of 2009. The ongoing brutal suppression of protests in Iran was considered counter to narratives that construct the urban street as a conduit for political change. I listed and discussed the numbers of civilians who were killed and the complexity of reporting accurate data, in order to highlight the importance of not losing sight of the human lives lost. While analyzing how the street constructs a mass or a crowd, the chapter argued that certain people are rendered disposable; their death on the street is framed as the norm in the fight against a totalitarian regime and for democracy. Highlighting this problematic in the literature

that praises *pouring into the street*, I turned to the discipline of architecture in order to explore the potential tools for analyzing the inherent spatial dimension of such demonstrations, and to assess and capture the ambiguity of street protests. The chapter identified certain limitations within the discipline of architecture and urbanism when examining such collective urban dissidence centered on the following: materiality and form; mere documentation of examples of the militarization of urban space; and the duality of the oppressive/liberatory impact of space on our behavior and psychology. As an alternative, this chapter suggested a shift from street-violence-crowd to street-mediation-crowd, mainly because urban street protests essentially concern visibility and representation which are inherent to architecture as a discipline and as a practice. The crowd on the street is a potential target to be shot by the gun and by the camera simultaneously. Examining how this mediation operates, the chapter highlighted a specific deployment of architecture, not as a *container* but rather as a *critical lens*. In this way architecture as a discipline covers certain spatial aspects of social movements that the frameworks of urban sociology or political philosophy, for example, cannot capture. As a critical lens, architecture allows for careful analysis of forces, and interdependencies, while bringing together seemingly disparate sources – from anonymous street videos to gunshots and street signs as material witness.

Notes

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