

Comment on

Mina Marefat's "Fractured Globalization: A Case Study of Tehran"

Wolf Schäfer

How Global is Tehran? Tangential Remarks on the Globality of Cities

In the lists of global cities, Tehran is included.¹ Although Tehran does not belong to the growing number of urban agglomerations with over ten million people, it is one of the second tiers of big cities with well over five million inhabitants.² To infer the globality of a city from the population total, however, is not intuitive. One has to explain how ever larger urban populations are linked to globality. What seems to be evident about global cities is perhaps only that some big cities are considered *more global* than the rest. Saskia Sassen's seminal work³ counted three global cities, New York, London, and Tokyo. For Sassen, these cities "are strategic sites in the global economy because of their concentration of command functions and high-level producer-service firms oriented to world markets."⁴

¹ See www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/history/historylab/LAPUHK/Maps/Global_Cities/Global_Cities.htm and Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*, (London and New Delhi: Pine Forge Press, 2000), 151.

² The UN lists Tehran with 6.979 million inhabitants in the year 2000; see the 2001 revision of "World Urbanization Prospects," www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup2001/wup2001dh.pdf.

³ See Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁴ See Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*, 177.

Clearly, Tehran is not in Sassen's league of power cities – then why is the current capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran considered a “global city”?

Let me commend Mina Marefat for asking, *how do we measure a global city?* A good question always forces us to admit that we do not have a good answer. To have questions that one cannot answer has worked very well before. Scientific greats like Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton ensured progressive scientific research by readily admitting their ignorance: not knowing *why* gravity works (Newton) or *why* the air has a “spring” (Boyle), characterized the early modern scientific revolution. The new global historians can learn from science in this respect; “good” questions provide valuable points of reference and enable us to recognize blind spots and eventual progress in our matters.

The globality of Tehran is an iffy issue. One could ask, for example, does Tehran's connection to the Internet make it a global city? An affirmative answer is problematic because it would make Tehran, and all other wired cities, as global as New York, London, or Tokyo. But to deem some cities *more global* seems problematic too. How can a globally connected place be more or less global? Consider the following: if, at this point, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has “more Internet addresses than all of China”⁵ – would you say that MIT is more global than China? The numbers of connections make a difference, but it is not clear how to weigh them. No website ranks the world's cities according to their degree of globality. We may think that Tehran is somewhat less global than Tokyo but the research that would support or falsify this conjecture is not readily available. Dr. Marefat's good question is thus marking one of our blind spots and now we have to ask, how shall we approach the globality of a city like Tehran?

Marefat's case study of Tehran makes it very clear that any answer to this question must pay attention to the twin forces of culture and politics. Reading the city in the tradition of Walter Benjamin as a layered “cultural map,” Marefat unravels the distinctive urban historicity of Tehran; and showing how the interaction between internal (local) and external (global) forces created “four key stages,” she reveals the dynamics of historical change. Her successful approach yields two perplexing insights: cities like Tehran “can be both global and not global at once” and their “global status may not be the same at different historical moments.” The fluidity of the “global status” of Tehran is Marefat's key finding.⁶ However, what does the apparent contradiction between global and non-global really

⁵ According to Prof. Lee McKnight, Syracuse University, quoted in *The New York Times*, Dec. 8, 2003, C3.

reflect: a conundrum of the urban situation in a developing country, or an artifact of the underdeveloped theory of globality? If we assume that the "global status" of Tehran depends to some degree on what defines this status, I suggest giving some thought to the conceptualization of urban globality.

Freeing ourselves from single-factor hypotheses and developing the theory of globality towards a comparative, multi-factor analysis would overcome all either/or dichotomies and enable us to translate the global/non-global realities of any city into *degrees of urban globality*. The urban alphabet from Aachen to Zwickau could be rearranged on a spectrum from low to high globality with numerical values that would specify "global status." Tehran's degree of globality, an aggregate number, would thus emerge from the chosen parameters. These measurable factors would include economic, demographic, socio-cultural, infrastructural, and environmental data. One can imagine that this kind of globality-charting would put Tehran in a new and possibly surprising context. Unforeseeable questions would arise, and new atlases would become feasible.

Mapping urban globality in this way would require a daunting amount of work, yet to envision the new globality map is easy and may indeed help us to ask more "good" questions. For instance, how shall we map Marefat's general observation that "Iran is now connected to the world only by the global Internet"? Believing that the World Wide Web represents a very important connection, I would not dwell on other Iranian world-connections (air- and seaports, roads and travelers, magazines, letters, tapes, videos, satellite dishes, and so forth) but try to gather empirical data about this particular global link. The informational resources of the Internet provide a good amount of useful data about Iran and the Internet, which one could then feed into a Geographical Information System (GIS) to display and query the data.

This data-gathering could begin with the geographic-dispersion dimensions⁷ of the Internet for Iran: one would find that Iran was a level 2-country in 1999 with most of all Internet-use in Tehran. Available data

⁶ Using Marshall Berman's liberal adoption of a Marx quote, Dr. Marefat frames her essay with a nifty play on Berman (notes 9 and 54). Yet I am not sure that the all too easy exchangeability of "modern" with "global" is a good thing: either the truth-content of our social-scientific key words is rather minimal or the presumed sea change from modernization to globalization is a mirage and globalization theories are but another coming of yesterday's modernization theories.

⁷ A numerical scale could distinguish spatial distribution as follows: 0 = non-existent, 1 = single location, 2 = moderately dispersed, 3 = highly dispersed, 4 = nationwide.

include the location and number of Internet Service Providers, the location and rise of Internet users, location and number of cybercafes (or "Coffeenets," as some were called locally) and Internet magazines. One wants to know, how many of these ventures were shut down by the government and for what reason? (It seems that cybercafe-closings in 2001 had an economic reason: Iranian chat.yahoo-users abandoned the expensive state-owned phone company for voice chat about "Isfahan Love" and other pertinent topics.) How many clerics have built websites to spread the word of the prophet? How many websites conflate Persian history and culture with the Iranian nation-state? How many Iranian websites are in English, how many in Persian, and how widespread is the knowledge of English? What are the usage data for cards with prepaid Internet access (these cards have a scratch panel that reveals a password and temporary username)? What data exist for the Iranian e-commerce,⁸ the use of communication technologies in Iranian industry, and the number of credit cards? Answering these questions would go a long way towards assembling Tehran's degree of Internet-globality and rendering it comparable to other global cities.⁹

Tehran's environmental footprint is another, eminently comparable and increasingly important aspect of measurable globality that global historians would want to research. *What is the global environmental impact of Tehran?* No doubt, New York, London, and Tokyo wield great financial power and are thus set apart from other "global cities." However, from a New Global History point of view, not just three but an ever larger number of big cities are globally important.

Without going too much into the details, we can say that ca. 1,000 years ago, the bulk of the population (90 – 95%) lived outside cities even in the most urbanized parts of the world, China and the Islamic Middle East. Five cities had more than half a million people around 1700: Istanbul, Tokyo, Beijing, Paris, and London. Come 1900, this number rises to forty-three (eight hundred in 1990). Until 1900, more people died in cities than were born. John McNeill has summarized the historical change after 1900: "For 8,000 years cities had been demographic black holes. In the

⁸ So far, the Internet has not played much of an economic role in Iran with the exception of a flower delivery business in Tehran. The shop thrives on orders from Iranians abroad for Nowruz, the Persian New Year. For the historical continuity involved, see Marefat note 12.

⁹ For an informative essay about "The Spatial Politics of Leisure: Internet Use and Access in Tehran," see Farhang Rouhani, <http://nmit.georgetown.edu/papers/frouhani.htm>.

span of one human generation they stopped checking population growth and started adding to it: a great turning point in the human condition."¹⁰

The census of 1851 revealed that England was the first country in which half of its population lived in cities – yet at the end of the twentieth century, the whole world had become half urban. Now there are hundreds of cities worldwide with more than 1 million inhabitants and quite a few with more than 10 million people. The largest growth rates are in the developing world. The fact is that cities have become the “common habitat for the human species.”¹¹ Covering only 1% of the earth’s surface (since 1990), cities have gained a big environmental footprint: they take water, food, oxygen, and fuel in from nature and return sewage, garbage, and carbon dioxide into nature. Gauging the complex processes that drive Tehran’s urban metabolism, mapping their paths, and charting their consequences, should be instructive and prepare the ground for global comparisons and *maps of the environmental globality of the world’s cities*.

My last point concerns the vulnerability of Tehran as an urban organism. A tantalizing line in Marefat’s contribution highlights the fact that Tehran sits “on one of the world’s potentially deadliest fault lines.”¹² This powerful local reality was brought home in December 2003 by the earthquake that destroyed the ancient city of Bam snuffing out tens of thousands of lives. A major Tehranian quake, which is considered likely in the next ten years, will probably kill hundreds of thousands.¹³ Thus, Tehran’s environmental globality has two sides, one where Tehran is a risk factor for the environment and another one where the environment threatens to affect Tehran. I have discussed the historical relevance of this situation elsewhere by showing that global historians encounter two global histories in the world today: a global history that is human-made and another global history that is nature-driven.¹⁴ The latter imposes nature’s power on urban agglomerations and triggers the question, *how is the natural vulnerability of the world’s cities constituted, perceived, and managed?*

¹⁰ See John R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2000), 282.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹² See Marefat’s text with note 53.

¹³ See www.payvand.com/news/03/feb/1092.html and <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/009461.shtml>.

¹⁴ See Wolf Schäfer, “The New Global History: Toward a Narrative for Pangaea Two,” *Erwägen Wissen Ethik* 14, no. 1 (2003), 75-88 and “Making Progress with Global History,” *ibid.*, 128-35.

Many Iranian commentators have faulted the Iranian authorities and criticized the absence of adequate building codes and other reasonable defenses, yet one has to keep in mind that the geobody of our planet is still ruled by plate tectonics and not by mayors or mullahs. However, neglecting the possible defenses of an urban organism against nature's global history is indeed criminal. Collecting the data that show how environmental policies (or the lack thereof) have shaped both sides of Tehran's environmental globality as well as that of other global cities could eventually produce another revealing set of globality maps.

Let me conclude by saying that a global city like Tehran is too important to leave the leading question unanswered. We know that global cities are sited geographically as well as geologically, that they are complex social systems that operate on, and within, complex natural systems, that they are numerous and growing in the poorer parts of the world, and that we need to learn much more about them.

References

- McNeill, John R. 2000. *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*. New York and London: W. W. Norton.
- Rouhani, Farhang. 2003. "The Spatial Politics of Leisure: Internet Use and Access in Tehran." <http://nmit.georgetown.edu/papers/frouhani.htm>.
- Sassen, Saskia. 2000. *Cities in a World Economy*. London and New Delhi: Pine Forge Press.
- . 1991. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- United Nations. 2001. "World Urbanization Prospects," www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup2001/wup2001dh.pdf.
- Schäfer, Wolf. 2003. "The New Global History: Toward a Narrative for Pangaea Two," *Erwägen Wissen Ethik* 14, no. 1, 75-88.
- . 2003. "Making Progress with Global History," *Erwägen Wissen Ethik* 14, no. 1, 128-35.