

Research Proposal

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Global Nomads or Temporary Citizens

Transnational Mobility of 'Middling' Iranians

1. Research Aims

The aim of this research is to study the applicability of 'nomadism' as a 'transhistorical analytical concept' (AlSayyad and Roy 2006) in explaining the existing transnational mobility of 'middling'¹ Iranians. This research will investigate the lives and networks of a particular group of 'transmigrants' (Conradson and Latham 2005; Smith 2001; Ong 1999). It will make an original contribution on two key levels. Firstly, it will explore debates over globalisation or 'transnational practices' (Sklair 2002) in relation to the complex mobility of 'non-Western' agents. In this way it seeks to challenge simple or uni-directional accounts of globalisation as 'Americanisation' or the extension of US-style capitalism. Secondly, I would like to study the ways these transnational practices and agents can be included in approaches to urban design, development and sustainability. Architecture and urban design frequently assume stable or sedentary populations as the basis for planning urban habitats (such as housing, public spaces and urban infrastructure). I aim to explore how the study of more traditional forms of nomadism might inform contemporary approaches to urbanism that are inclusive of temporary or transitory populations.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

The fact that the growing divergence between developed and developing nations caused by forces of globalization and liberalization (Stiglitz 1999, Lall 2003, Collier 2007) exerts strong push and pull forces on talented people of less developed regions to move to regional or global hubs of wealth and knowledge is well known in migration studies; what is less known is why

¹ The term 'middling' is borrowed from Conradson and Latham's study on young transmigrants from New Zealand: 'They are often, but not always, well educated. They may come from wealthy families, but more often than not they appear to be simply middle class. In terms of the societies they come from and those they are traveling to, they are very much of the middle' (2005, 229).

some of these people do not simply migrate and settle in the new territories². These contemporary forms of global mobility are increasingly being described as being part of a process of transnationalisation, based on ‘Sustained ties of persons, networks and organisations [that cross] the borders [of] multiple nation-states’ (Faist 2000:189). On another account, following Deleuze and Guattari we can call these sub-populations nomadic since they are ‘Deterritorialised *par excellence*’ as long as ‘there is no reterritorialisation *afterwards* as with the migrant’ (1986: 52 emphasis in original).

The analytical concept of nomadism introduced by Ibn Khaldun and Deleuze and Guattari has been criticized for being a ‘neo-vitalism’ (Urry 2007, 33). This may be because it focuses on pure forms of nomadism in stark contrast with urban sedentary life or the State Apparatus; but in Western Asia (Iranian plateau) the prevalent form of nomadism was ‘enclosed-nomadism’ that formed ‘dimorphic societies’ (Rowton 1973, 202) where nomads and sedentary societies lived close to each other in a state of ‘conflict and coexistence’ (Barfield 1993, 11). If this form of traditional nomadism is used as a reference instead of the Bedouin or Mongolian nomads used by Ibn Khaldun and Deleuze and Guattari, the transhistorical analytical concept can be adjusted to the modern world to describe the complex mobilities of translocal agents and their interaction with sedentary societies in a network of ‘global cities’ (Sassen 1991 and 2002) and ‘learning regions’ (Florida 1995 and 2002) where they reside temporarily.

Applying the concept of dimorphic societies to the spatial network of global cities can yield a number of theoretical conjectures for explaining the mobilities of ‘middling’ Iranian transmigrants:

- They may constitute the nomadic element occupying soft spaces in between the spheres of authority of sending and receiving states (Deleuze and Guattari 1986) or expanding their territories through a ‘quiet encroachment’ (Bayat 2000) into the spatial wrinkles left between ‘domestic tyranny’ and ‘colonial robbery’ (Dabashi 2007).

² The European Commission has recognised and is trying to tap into the potentials of this type of migration as ‘Circular Migration’ in its Communication COM(2007)248 Final.

- They may represent the nomadic elite groups that often reside in important urban centres and act as bridges between the state and nomadic masses (Ahmed 1973).

- They may be ‘tribal splinter groups’ or the ‘parasocial element’ that form between the sedentary and nomadic societies in dimorphic societies with potentials to play a role in history that is disproportionate to their still limited numbers (Rowton 1977, 190).

3. Subject Group

Within the large population of Iranian diaspora, this study will focus on the last wave of the post-revolutionary out-migration (Hakimzadeh 2006) that mostly includes people who have exhausted the opportunities found in Tehran’s society and then moved abroad for better opportunities. In terms of cultural orientations, a growing number of music bands born in Tehran’s underground scene and moving abroad, best symbolise this generation. These bands are fast replacing the place once reserved for LA-based diasporic musicians who have lost touch with the post-revolutionary generation growing in Iran.

This is not to suggest that Iranians are especially unique in their mobility. Similar accounts of the personal, experiential and economic opportunities offered by a period spent in an overseas destination (especially one of the active nodes on the global network of cities) has also been described in the works of Ong (1999) on the Chinese foreign elite, Conradson and Latham (2005) on ‘middling’ New Zealanders in London, and Elaine Ho on Singaporean skilled labour migrants in London (2006). However, the nomadic history of Iran and its fragmentation through building a modern centralised nation-state (Madanipour 1998, Fazel 1985) offers specific insights into the emergence of these new forms of ‘nomadic’ movement,

4. Methods of research

Against the large-scale structural accounts, and following Lyotard (1984) I am interested in the local narratives that these people have developed about transnationalism as a ‘new mode of being-in-the-world’ (Smith 2001).

This concern with local narratives guides my choice of research methods. As a core part of my methodology I intend to use interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. This approach is also informed by the precepts of Participatory Action Research, and I intend to include methods such as ‘search conferences’ and web discussions. At a broader scale of analysis, I will map the spatial territories and social networks of my respondents using my training and skills in participatory mapping techniques (refer to sample mobility map for respondent A8 below).

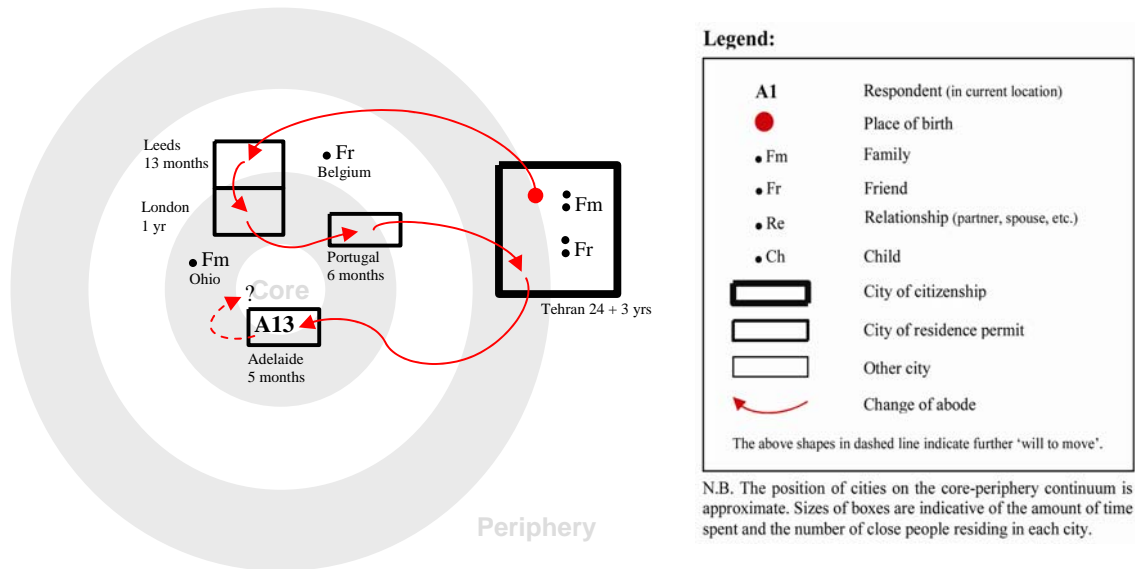
Following the mobilities paradigm, mobile methods such as email interviews and interacting in websites and blogs (Urry 2007, 40-41), where these transitory groups have a strong presence, will be used to study the usefulness of a nomadic analytical concept to compliment conventional accounts of migration theories (from neoclassical and structuralist to structuration approaches). These interviews can also be used to study the combinations of and interrelations among strategies used by these transmigrants; i.e. acquiring multiple citizenships, utilizing their network capital, and maintaining their desired mobility in a ‘process of deterritorialisation [that] constitutes and extends the territory itself’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 37) (refer to sample mobility map for respondent A8 below).

4. Implications

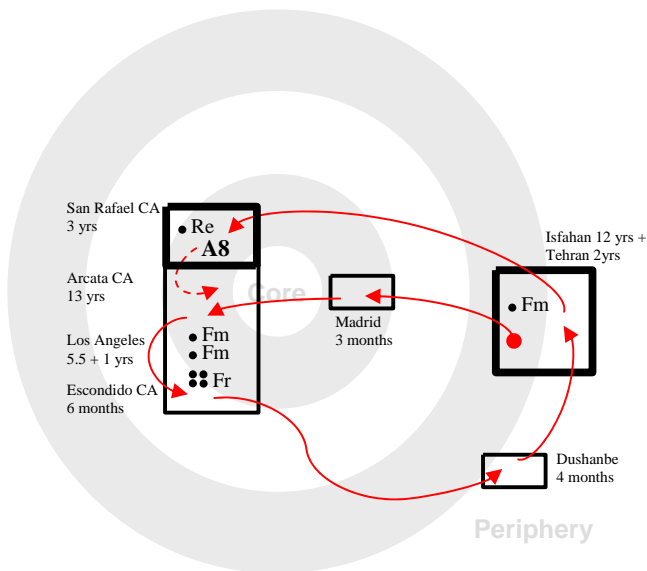
Amid heated discussions about a ‘migration-development-security nexus’, the findings of this study will be helpful to make a contribution to shed some light on a form of mobility less studied. I believe its implications will help policymakers and advocacy groups work towards creating a ‘win win win’ situation (Ruhs 2003); i.e. to identify and address not only the specific needs of these mobile peoples, but also the labour needs and security concerns of the receiving countries and the development interests and brain-drain concerns of the sending countries.

Identification of these subpopulations and their lifestyles, needs and potentials for development is also intended to lead into a growing trend in participatory dialogues around issues of planning and design in order to help create habitats that will nurture more sustainable forms of mobility as a way of life. The findings of such work may also be helpful in dealing with the possible mass population movements caused by the climate change (Sachs, lecture at GSAPP Nov 2008).

Mobility maps of respondents A13 and A8: Patterns of mobility, citizenship(s), and social networks



N.B. The position of cities on the core-periphery continuum is approximate. Sizes of boxes are indicative of the amount of time spent and the number of close people residing in each city.



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