

Globalization and Iranian Cities: A Discursive Approach

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Abstract

Globalization is a meta-process that forces us to change our understanding of the world. Globalization forces reconsideration of how we interact with spaces. As places of converging networks, globalization is a key factor in the changing nature of cities. The proclamation that Iran is not part of globalized capitalism has prompted the main question addressed in this paper; 'How does globalization affect Iranian cities?' In response, this paper presents the argument that globalization affects cities in Iran through discursive domination and that the discourse presents a linear-scalar interpretation of globalization. From a critical point of view, globalization has reduced to the ranking of cities according to 'world city-ness' so that under globalization, cities compete to attract different forms of capital. Therefore a country's development is related to processes that raise its position in relation to other global cities in terms of ability to attract more capital. This discourse is professionally practiced by Iranian planners, decision makers and municipal authorities. So it seems reasonable to say that 'reproducing Iranian cities for globalization flow' can help Iran to be an integrated part of the globalized world. Building 'urban mega-projects' could help the process. In such projects, hegemonic ideology and oil-driven money are platforms for urban development in Iranian cities.

Keywords: *Discourse; Globalization; Iranian Cities; Neoliberalism*

Introduction

Globalization is a meta-process or a set of processes that describes the free movement of capital, goods, people, technologies and ideas, across the world. This "time-space compression" (Harvey, 1991) and formation of "space of flow" (Castells, 1997) is changing the way we understand our contemporary world, or in other words, it compels us to think about space in a seriously different way. At the same time, we are living in an urban era, often referred to as "Planetary urbanization" (Brenner, 2014). This development presents the question of

whether or not there are any spaces remaining that can be described as non-urban (Ash & Thrift, 2002). Juxtaposing these above mentioned ideas, be they considered concepts, phenomenon, historical events or [meta]process, it is in cities that globalization occurs. This has led to a body of studies on urban space (Friedmann & Wolff, 1982; Friedmann, 1995; Sassen, 1991, 2001; Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Derudde, 2016).

Iran, as a so-called developing, oil-exporting country with an ideological government, is not part of this global space of flow or "Actually Existing

Neoliberalism” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). But is it valid to say that any process that forces a new way of relating to space does not affect Iranian cities? The answer must be NO. This paper addresses the problem of Iranian cities in relation to the discourse on globalization. This paper sets out to determine “How does globalization affect Iranian cities?”

This article aims to answer the above-mentioned question through a discursive approach with many references to post-structural French philosophers, namely Foucault and Deleuze. The coming pages present a review of the dominant literature on cities and globalization in order to develop ideas and imagery of “*Global/World Cities*”. Then Iran and Iranian cities are discussed in relation to this process. After the introduction that explains the current discourse on globalization of neoliberalism, and then the case of Iran is introduced.

Literature Review

Globalization describes the “*Process which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions—assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity, and impact—generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power*” (Held et al., 1999; 16). The processes associated with globalization mark a new ontology of place/space relations that need to be theorized and to think “*Seriously about space, about the spatiality of the social, about territories and their delimitations*” (Massy, 2005). At first glance, there are two approaches to globalization:

1. The pessimistic approach; concerned about the loss of local economic integrity and autonomy under the pressure of trans-local flows.
2. The Optimistic approach; welcomes global flow and searches for localized economic spaces in order to present the case that cities and regions find a competitive advantage in the virtues of face-to-face contact and trust, local know-how and local clustering.

Besides being pessimistic or optimistic in relation to globalization, its role in the world today is undeniable. The juxtaposition of globalization and urbanization was presented for the first time in 1982. In 1985 John Friedman proposed “*The world city hypothesis*” as an agenda for research and action in urban studies, this was followed by another article in 1995, “*Where we stand: a decade of world city research*”, describing a decade of studies on world cities. Friedman suggests a hierarchy of cities in his work that act on the global scale, this idea was continued and developed by many other scholars, namely Saskia Sassen (1991, 2001).

Sassen’s “*Global City*” (1991) is a comparative study of the internal characteristics or attributes of several key cities (London, New York, Tokyo). Based on her studies, what world cities contain (Trans National Corporation (TNC) headquarters in case of Friedman and/or Advanced Producer Services (APS) for Sassen) global cities can be described as “*the command and control centers of the world*”.

At the global level, a key dynamic explaining the place of major cities in the world economy is that they

concentrate the infrastructure and the servicing that produced a capability for global control (Sassen, 1995: 63).

The idea of “new frontier zones” can be recognized in the NY-LON life (Newsweek, 2000) is a progress in Sassen’s theory.

In “*the Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture (1997)*”, Manuel Castells re-conceptualized new forms of spatial arrangements under new technological progress. He suggests “*space of flows*” versus space of place. The idea of space of flow and network, leads to the idea

of a “*world city network and Interlocking Network Model*” (Taylor 2004; Taylor & Derudde. 2016).

Cities are different because there are gaps between them. But they are not separate from each other: in those gaps there are flows, of people, commodities, information, and ideas that connect cities. No city is an island (Taylor, 2008; 214).

These two approaches are dominant in the field of globalization and urbanization and can be summarized as set out below:

Two dominating approaches to globalization and city



It has been mentioned above that the processes associated with globalization mark a new development in place/space relations, but the current body of literature, as reviewed, refers to globalization as a “*flattening of social processes*”(Therborn: 2000; 154). This is linked to the global spread of hegemonic social practice (such as the neo-liberalization) and to the ideology of “*The End of History and the Last Man*”(Fukuyama, 1992). In other words, according to the current dominant literature, presenting an alternative view seems impossible. In this regard Thrift has noted

that the literature on world cities seems to have come to a “*dead stop*” (Thrift, 1998: 54). This view is justified by saying that the literature related to evaluation of world cities is limited to ranking cities on a scale of ‘*world city-ness*’.

Globalization serves as a ladder and cities have to strive to improve their status by climbing this ladder to reach the ideal of a global/world city. This process has led to better development ranking and better competitive positioning but its impact on the wellbeing of its citizens and the realization of well being, remains questionable.

Iranian cities in the age of Globalization

Analysts have stated that Iran, with its minimum share of global capital circulation, is not part of the global space of flow. Figures show that foreign direct investment is only 2 percent of Gross Fixed Capital formation in Iran, so Iran has low ranking on globalization indexes. This is indicative of the situation of Iran, in that Iranian cities are not interacting globally and as such are outside the world city network. Short (2004) termed Tehran as a '*Black Hole*', whereby it "*had a population of over 3 million, were not identified by GaWC as a world city and did not share their national territory with a world city*" (Short, 2004: 295).

There has been some research on globalization and cities in Iran; for example Sarvar, 2008; Abdollahi, 2008; Rahnama & Tavangar, 2010; Mohammadi, 2011; Ghourchi, 2012; Moucheshi, 2013). Most of these subscribe to the dominant discourse and study positions of Iranian cities in terms of global ranking. In general, these studies highlight the necessity of improving the position of Iranian cities in terms of global ranking. As a result '*urban reconstruction for globalization*' has become a key agenda for urban planners and city authorities in Iran. Other papers have concluded that the reason for the failure of Iranian cities as spaces of flow have blamed the Constitution because it represents a specific geo-political code that limits cities in active participation of this space of flow (Ghourchi, 2012). This problem has been described by Short, who has suggested that Tehran is a "*Resisting City*" (Short, 2004; 299).

Few studies on globalization and Iranian cities have been done from out-side Iran. More recently, some researches on

globalization and cities have focused on South-east Asia (McKinnon; 2011; Biau, 2012). Biau (2015) attempted to apply results using Iran as a case study. The paper discusses urban changes in this part of the world and presents the view that they do not qualify for consideration under globalization. Research has suggested that nation-state formation was a much more important factor in urban changes than globalization and summarized their hypothesis as in terms of a kind of "*Semi-globalization*" in SouthEast Asian cities.

Toward a "Globalization of Neoliberalism Discourse"

Afore-mentioned in this article, are current trends in the field of globalization and cities; they present a hierarchical, linear-scalar view of globalization. A list of global/world cities has been compiled, termed world city-ness echoing *TINA Syndrome* (Hackworth, 2006). It shows a stage in capitalism called "*Actually Existing Neoliberalism*" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). We call this approach to globalization the "*Globalization of Neoliberalism discourse*".

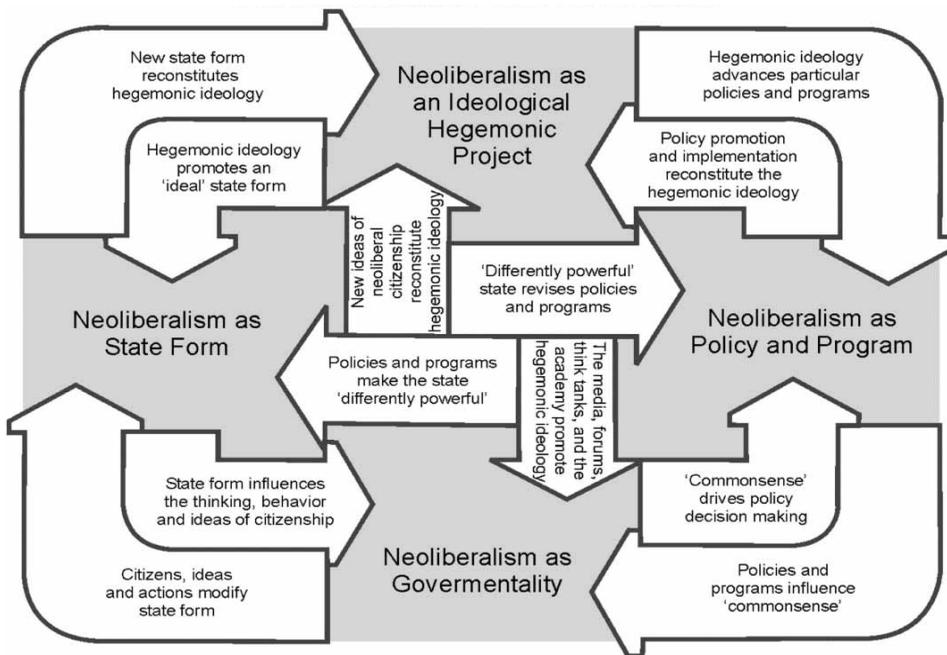
Analysis in this article follows the Foucault approach to discourse. In short, according to Foucault, a discourse is a group of statements on a subject and his particular approach is through power relationships in a society. A statement is a linguistic unit; as such it is different from a sentence, a proposition, or an act of speech (Foucault, 1972: 86). So Foucault does not study sentences, propositions, or acts of speech (Deleuze, 1986: 18).

Inspiring Springer (2010 & 2012) and following Ward and England (2007) four different understandings of globalization

of neoliberalism discourse are suggested. These four understandings are neatly interconnected:

1. Globalization of neoliberalism as an ideological hegemonic project: This understanding maintains that elite actors and dominant groups organized around transnational class-based alliances, have the capacity to project and circulate a coherent program of interpretations and images of the world onto others. (Cox, 2002; Springer, 2012; 136)
2. Globalization of neoliberalism as policy and program: The understanding itself is premised on the idea that opening collectively held resources to market mediation engenders greater efficiency, motivated by privatization, deregulation, and depoliticization (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Springer, 2012; 136)
3. Globalization of neoliberalism as state form: In this understanding, globalization of neoliberalism is considered as a process of transformation that states to purposefully engage in remaining economically competitive (Peck, 2001; Springer, 2012; 137)
4. Globalization of neoliberalism as a form of government: This understanding implies power as a complex, yet very specific form centering on knowledge production through the ensemble of rationalities, strategies, technologies and techniques concerning the mentality of rule that allow for the de-centering of government through the active role of auto-regulated or auto-correcting selves who facilitate “*governance at a distance*”(Foucault, 1991; Springer, 2012; 137)through “*the conduct of conduct*” (Larner, 2003; Springer, 2012; 137).

Globalization of Neoliberalism discourse (Springer, 2012; 138)



Iran and globalization in neoliberal discourse

This understanding of globalization, which itself is discursive, can be presented as follows; “It is necessary to reconstruct the city for globalization”. This is one of the most important statements in today’s urban planning in Iran. It can be claimed that this statement is the “*episteme*” or “*planning habitus*”(see Friedman 2005 for more information) amongst Iranian Planners and City authorities.

Set out below is a short description of some understandings of the globalization neoliberalism discourse related to Iran.

1. We can recognize the role of globalization of neoliberalism as an ideological hegemonic project in urban development in Iran. Iranian cities are the locus for Islamic ideology but the idea of an Islamic urban space is rhetorical and the term “*Islamic-Neoliberal Assemblage*” is more common. This process of urban development is very similar to urban changes that are currently taking place in Istanbul (Karaman, 2010, 2013). Istanbul is also governed by an ideological hegemonic system.
2. According to globalization of neoliberalism, the term “urban reconstruction for globalization”, is the most appropriate description of urban policy practiced in Iran. This policy has been translated into a series of programs such as promoting city diplomacy, revising urban master plans. It seems that globalization and neoliberalism is most apparent in urban mega-projects. Iranian cities host various “*international exhibitions on urban investment opportunities*” that promote large-scale investment opportunities. Public-Private-Partnership, which is known as “*the Trojan horse of urban neoliberalism*”(Miraftab, 2004), is the economic model for financing such urban mega-projects. Due to lack of Foreign Direct Investment in Iran, the military and oil-sector are important for financial investment in this Public-Private-Partnership.
3. In the case of globalization of neoliberalism as a form of statehood, it can be said that in Iran there is agreement between the different actors that the state should deliver such developments. There is, also, a body of studies demonstrating the role of Foreign Direct Investment on Iran’s economic development (Hosseini & Molaei, 2006), on employment rate (Komeyjani & GhaviDel, 2006) and on productivity (ShahAbadi, 2007). This body of research promotes competitive policies and could be considered a signifier of globalization of neoliberalism by the state.
4. Globalization of neoliberalism as a system of government is especially obvious in the 11th government (during the presidency of Mr. Hassan Rouhani). Some thinkers have called this period the era of “*transformation from sovereignty to governmentality*” (Sarkhosh, 2014; 7). In this regard, scalar-linear discourse of globalization and the necessity of urban reconstruction for globalization have already become common practice. This is realized in the minds of citizens as well as by city authorities and urban planners.

Conclusion

The dominant discourse on globalization, known as globalization of neoliberalism, presents a linear-scalar interpretation. The key statement within the discourse is “reconstructing Iranian cities for globalization flow”. Based on this common sense or practice, cities compete to attract different forms of capital. Based on the afore-mentioned statement, it is acceptable to say that building “*high-tech global trade zones*” and “*investing urban mega-projects*” could support the process. This process will result in raising a city’s position among global ranking. Increased flow of capital will inevitably lead to development. Other considerations are Islamic ideology and funds from the oil sector (with reference to Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in urban planning, for example, the latter plays a major role in financing urban mega-projects without Foreign Direct Investment.

The discussion above has addressed globalization and global scale. But the local scale is also relevant. It is clear that local communities continue to retain political potential in an age of globalized power. So the distinction between “*local*” and “*global*” as separate scalar fields remains problematic, as do matters of shifting boundaries between and inside territories or as “*in here*” and “*out there*”. If it is agreed that the unit for development is local and community, then in this age of globalization we need to think about new forms of community. Globalization and new communication networks offer the potential for “*action at a distance*” so a new type of community entitled “*distanciated community*”(Amin & Thrift, 2002, Thrift, 2010)in “*open source neighborhoods*”(Sassen, 2013).

Thus, locality can be regarded as the site of intersection and juxtaposition of the newer space/time loci with older ones for discussing of Iranian cities. This approach is preferable to terms of global hierarchy or APS spatial distribution.

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