

– **EMBEDDED ENCLAVES: Cultural Mimicry and Urban Social Exclusion in Iran**

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Abstract

This article argues that symbolic boundaries and their spatial manifestation into embedded enclaves have become new forms of urban social exclusion. Based on participant observation and interviews among lower- and middle-/upper-class residents in the city of Sari, Iran, the article analyzes how the poor's physical circulations in the city and their performances of class and status have led to an elite backlash, as the latter find more refined markers of social separation in an effort to bolster their own exclusivity. Social distancing through the denigration of the poor and the construction of embedded enclaves brings to the fore the class tensions that are temporarily masked by the urban poor's spatial practices and cultural mimicry. As an advanced form of codified status inequality, embedded enclaves rely on the poor's citywide circulations and on increasing inter-class interactions in order to communicate difference. Embedded—rather than cordoned off—in prominent areas of the city, such enclaves function as a reminder to the poor of all they cannot have. The upsurge of such establishments in the wake of Iran's shifting economic environment represents an attempt to shore up social position and restore the status quo.

Introduction

Nine years ago, I first encountered Nilufar,¹ a 16-year-old high-school student who lived with her mother and sister in an apartment in a working-class neighborhood in the city of Sari, the capital of the northern province of Mazandaran, Iran. Populated with low-paid laborers and service workers, neighborhoods like Nilufar's have become increasingly common in Sari in recent years, as sky-rocketing real-estate prices have relegated more of Sari's urban poor to reside in the marginalized peri-urban fringes of the city or small, inexpensive apartments located in the city center.

Never one to confine herself to her apartment or neighborhood, Nilufar would constantly circulate in Sari's city center and middle-/upper-class neighborhoods, where she casually intermingled with elite young men and women in Sari's shops, city sidewalks and parks.² In the time I knew her, Nilufar's exposure to the cultural practices and tastes of Sari's most privileged groups shaped her own desire for upward status mobility, which was reified in the aestheticization of her body. Nevertheless, despite her attempts to fit in with middle-class society, there were emergent spaces in Sari like The Café where Nilufar felt like an outsider. The Café, a recently opened upscale coffee shop that catered to Sari's intellectual and artistic community, was one of the more exclusive

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1 I use pseudonyms throughout this paper for people and establishments.

2 While there is no official poverty line in Iran, in this article I use the term poor/lower-class to refer to those families and individuals who made less than or around the minimum monthly wage of US \$222.80 in 2018 and had trouble making ends meet. Many members of the working poor in Iran (those who work in low-wage jobs) would fall into this category. See *Financial Tribune* (2018b). Given the rapidly decreasing value of the *tomān* (the super-unit of Iranian currency) over the past couple of years, it is difficult, if not impossible, to gauge a person's class status by income. Rather, I use more qualitative indicators—as do many of the individuals I spoke with in Iran—to further assess a person's class status. Thus, the term middle class refers to those Iranians who are able to meet their daily expenses, but have little to no savings. These individuals/families pay rent or a mortgage, and perhaps have one car that is shared among family members. Upper class refers to those Iranians who have at least two homes, several cars, substantial savings, and are able to travel abroad frequently.

quasi-public spaces of the city. Emulating the aesthetics of foreign coffee shops, The Café was markedly more unique in décor, clientele and even menu items than the standard coffee shops that populated Sari at the time. ‘I don’t think you can just go in like this’, Nilufar said as she hesitatingly followed me inside the doors of The Café one summer evening nine years ago. ‘I’ve never seen a place like this in Sari’, Nilufar told me in awe that first—and last—time she accompanied me there.

Like Nilufar, many of Sari’s urban poor are rural migrants who have left their villages in search of greater economic opportunity. While rural-urban migration to cities like Sari began in earnest in the 1960s, it has nevertheless continued unabated to the present day. In the decade between 1966 and 1976, structural changes that emerged as a result of the increased spread of urban manufacturing jobs, and of Mohammad Reza Shah’s land reforms which diminished the agricultural income of rural wage earners, propelled more than two million rural poor to migrate not only to Iran’s capital, Tehran, but also to the country’s larger provincial cities including Sari (Kazemi, 1980; Madanipour, 1998; Abrahamian, 2008).

Today, a lack of adequate income and underemployment continue to push rural dwellers to migrate cityward. However, like their predecessors, families like Nilufar’s have had difficulty locating decently paid, skilled work and therefore have had to rely on relatively low-paid, unstable, entry-level work in either the informal sector or the formal sector, where they are hired on short-term contracts (Hashemi, 2018). Unable to afford the cost of housing in Sari’s more prestigious neighborhoods, many have been relegated to Sari’s *pāyin-e-shahr*—comprised of low-income neighborhoods located primarily in Sari’s rural-urban periphery or those located south of Sari’s main railway tracks. These stigmatized neighborhoods are disparaged by middle-class and elite Saravi residents as home to ‘*dehātis*’ (peasants) who lack proper origins and are backward in their mentality.

In turn, many young, poor residents like Nilufar are acutely aware of the stigma that is placed on them because of their residential address. Lacking viable dwelling alternatives, they have appropriated city streets, claiming urban public spaces for their enjoyment and for the acquisition of knowledge about middle-class lifestyles and aesthetic practices. As a claim-making practice, the presence and activity of the urban poor in the city’s middle- and upper-class spaces becomes a social non-movement, typified by the ‘collective actions of noncollective actors’ (Bayat, 2013: 15). In making their presence visible by moving around in physical, public spaces which are typically the reserve of the city’s elites, Sari’s peripheral residents affirm their right to the city and attempt to make Sari into a contemporary manifestation of the open city, one that is accessible to all urban residents, regardless of socioeconomic background (Caldeira, 2000: 299).

Indeed, a cursory view suggests that Sari’s public spaces are a remarkable display of what Caldeira (2000) has termed the modern and democratic public space. Rich and poor, young and old, recent rural migrant and long-time city dwellers all rub shoulders in the main squares, shopping centers and parks of the city. The physical proximity of strangers in the public space appears to foster equality as the social basis of city life in Sari. If it were not for the few predominately working-class, low-income neighborhoods in the city center and on the periphery, Sari would appear to be the contemporary manifestation of the ‘ideal of modern city life’ (Young, 1990; Caldeira, 2000).

However, physical proximity can also breed intolerance. In Sari, as some marginal ‘others’ like Nilufar literally and figuratively come to gain access to admired cultural knowledge and resources, they engage in consumption practices that were previously the exclusive domain of a few. The urban poor’s appropriation of global, informational flows of ‘good’, ‘modern’ fashions and trends enables these men and women to similarly present themselves as ‘good’ and ‘modern’ citizens, resulting in increased opportunities for their social recognition and status. Sari’s middle and upper class, in turn, sensing a threat to their social power and position, have created progressively more refined

markers of urban social distinction. The creation of symbolic boundaries (Epstein, 1992; Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Molnár, 2002) and their material translation in the form of the recent establishment of physical spaces of ‘controlled circulation’ (Caldeira, 2000: 319)—e.g. Westernized restaurants, coffee shops like The Café and residential subdivisions—have come to characterize both urban life and public urban space in Sari.

Empirically, this article is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork I have conducted since 2010 in Iran, and predominantly in Sari. I officially entered the field in 2010 and began conducting participant observation among the city’s young and marginalized for a period of almost two consecutive years. Since that time, between 2013 and 2018, I conducted eleven months of additional observations in Iran, with the majority of my time spent in Sari. I spoke to residents and experienced their day-to-day frustrations and struggles to move up the proverbial social ladder.

While my middle-class background and education set me apart from my informants, my shared identity and language with them catalyzed my acceptance into the communities I was observing. In the years I spent conducting fieldwork, I witnessed how Sari’s economic climate—like that in the rest of the country—slowly deteriorated. The withdrawal of the United States from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018 coupled with stifling international sanctions has today led to staggering inflation and drastic unemployment, making life increasingly difficult for Iranians, particularly those in the lower classes who generally bear the brunt of the country’s socioeconomic burdens (Hashemi, 2018). This study’s longitudinal perspective is therefore critical for understanding how national economic transformations affect subjectivities and boundary work.

To understand how the urban poor view their own positionalities, I draw from 45 in-depth interviews I conducted between the years 2010 and 2018 with individuals residing in Sari’s more peripheral neighborhoods. Informal conversations I had with Sari’s middle class and elite supplement these interviews and contextualize residents’ own subjectivities. What these residents’ experiential realities reveal enables a useful examination into how status recognition is developed and extended among those who have been traditionally situated at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and how it is ultimately challenged by those at the top.

In what follows, I detail the conceptual framing of the article, linking the urban poor’s appropriation of admired modes of cultural articulation to changes in urban configurations in Sari. Upon contextualizing the poor’s desires for middle-class lifestyles within Iran’s history of modernization, I analyze the empirical evidence to demonstrate how some of Sari’s urban subalterns consume and appropriate certain admired cultural goods and practices. Circulation in Sari’s city center and uptown neighborhoods not only provides marginalized residents with a blueprint for how to perform class and belonging, but it also enables them to assert their right to the city. This mobilization, however, has provoked Sari’s elite not only to create symbolic boundaries, but to translate these imagined lines into ‘systems of identification’ (Caldeira, 2000), namely embedded enclaves, in order to uphold their authority and privilege. These findings facilitate a number of conclusions about the nature of contemporary citizenship in cities of the global South where access and privilege collide.

Self-presentation and urban social distinction

‘Words and images are like shells, no less integral parts of nature than are the substances they cover, but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation’ (Santayana, 1922: 131–2 as cited by Goffman, 1971). The more one conforms—in image and behavior—to admired societal standards, the better one is able to make claims to dignity and social status. Wealth facilitates the embodiment of such admired cultural tastes by way of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, [1899] 1953), educational training (Bourdieu, 1984) and embeddedness in particular social networks (Bourdieu, 1986; de

Souza Briggs, 1998; 2002). As such, access to ‘good’ and ‘appropriate’ taste and lifestyles is more circumscribed among the poor and is dependent on the poor’s facility to conceal visible signs of poverty (Klaufus, 2012). Hiding one’s poverty, in turn, is predicated on the ability to gain knowledge about what is in style and to modify one’s public appearance accordingly. In Sari (as elsewhere), these modifications are often contingent on shuttling funds for nutritious food and medicines destined for private consumption to publicly visible material goods such as clothing, accessories and electronics (Hashemi, 2015).

Despite the problems endemic in such a transfer, marginalized urban residents in Sari draw from exposure to their middle-class and elite peers in uptown, public urban spaces to gain knowledge about admired cultural fashions and practices and to mimic them in an attempt to make claims to status. In the absence of decent employment, stable income or the ‘right’ address, the urban poor know that their own embodied physical appearance and behavior becomes the most visible marker of their social standing. The more they conform to accepted aesthetic and cultural norms, the greater their chances of converting this symbolic capital into social and/or economic opportunities that can mediate their aspirations for the good life (Veblen, [1899] 1953); Bourdieu, 1977; 1984; Sherman, 2009; Hashemi, 2015).

The specific ways in which some marginalized residents present themselves in urban public spaces represent their attempts to set themselves apart from the typical, Iranian middle-class stereotype of the rural-urban migrant: an uncouth country bumpkin who, try as he might, can never fully acculturate to city life and mores. As a form of ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1959) then, a fashionable presentation of self—accentuated through the purchase of on-trend, though fake, designer shoes, clothes and accessories at knock-down prices—becomes a type of currency by which these residents can figuratively purchase middle-class respectability. The lines between classes become blurred as previous forms of social distinction are momentarily suspended.

However, the urban poor in Sari engage in this form of ‘identity work’ (Schwalbe and Mason-Shrock, 1996) not on the periphery of town, but in middle-/upper-class malls, in uptown shopping districts, and in central parks and squares. By not keeping to their part of the city ‘with their own kind’, poor residents’ very visible self-presentation thus necessarily becomes transgressive, encapsulating a non-movement that provokes the city’s elite not only to recognize their existence, but also to affirm that the poor, too, have mastered the dominant symbols of cultural consumption and taste (*cf.* Caldeira, 2012). Qualitatively different from organized social movements,³ the non-movement of Sari’s subalterns has no organized leadership, direction or political intent. Rather, the goal is much simpler: to live a dignified life by partaking in Iran’s mainstream, middle-class consumer market.

While some analysts view poor people’s urban (non)movements as a potential harbinger of democratic change and cross-class tolerance in the global South (see, for instance, Bayat, 2013), in Sari, the elite pushback against poor residents’ methods of cultural articulation has led to the reification of difference and more refined systems of embedded inequality. I draw from Caldeira’s (1996; 2000) concept of ‘fortified enclaves’ as a starting point to elucidate how the struggle for social recognition and status by Sari’s urban marginalized has engendered the opposite—social segregation and distancing—through the construction of symbolic boundaries, which are subsequently translated into physical boundaries that I term *embedded enclaves*. As ‘privatized, enclosed, monitored spaces for residence, consumption, leisure, and work’ (Caldeira, 2000: 4), the fortified enclaves described by Caldeira, similar to their embedded

3 An example of such an organized movement would be the 2014 *rolezinhos* (literally cruises, or little strolls) in Brazil, whereby marginalized residents of urban peripheries gathered in elite shopping malls to demand their right to privileged spaces of leisure and consumption (see Vargas, 2016).

counterparts, are attractive to those in the middle and upper classes who feel that city life has deteriorated as a result of the influx of the poor and marginalized into central and uptown areas of the city and their appropriation of goods once considered the domain of the upper classes. In functioning as a distancing mechanism between the elite and the poor, these luxury enclaves serve once again to confer privilege and status on those who are lucky enough to use them.

Caldeira, describing how worth is constructed by the Brazilian middle and upper classes in São Paulo, argues that the establishment of racially homogeneous, fortified systems of identification—namely, peripheral, physically isolated residential enclaves that turn inwards and make no gestures to street life—serve as a means for the Brazilian elite to reinstate exclusivity and to escape São Paulo's increasing violent crime.

While Sari is similarly engaged in a process of classed spatial segregation, differences between the two cities—including the manifestation of social inequality—function to distinguish the nature of urban segregation in Sari from that of São Paulo. However, from Caldeira's analysis, it is unclear how physical spaces of closed circulation in other contexts and of other sorts—i.e. those that are instead embedded in the central and uptown areas of the city itself and do not take physical dividers such as surrounding empty spaces and the lack of pedestrian circulation as a given—reproduce social hierarchy. How does the rise of such embedded enclaves in a non-Latin American context where issues of urban violence and racial diversity do not play a structuring role correspond to the use of symbolic boundaries that serve to further entrench the social distance between classes? What does the nature and manifestation of social inequality and cultural performance look like in a Middle Eastern milieu and what does this imply for our understanding of informal claim-making practices in Middle Eastern cities?

Rather than take diminished interactions between residents of different social classes as a starting point, I argue that the advanced forms of codified status inequality in Iran instead rely on increasing inter-class exchange in order to assert the authority of the elite. In Sari, the tempering of class boundaries thus simultaneously occurs with the magnification of social difference.⁴

Modernity and urbanization in Iranian society

The combined effect of international sanctions, rising inflation and increasing unemployment has been to make life increasingly difficult for working poor families in the Islamic Republic. A minimum wage of US \$222.80 places many of these families below the living wage of US \$568 per month,⁵ indicating that full-time work is not a guaranteed path to moving out of poverty (Klaufus, 2012). While the north of Iran, which includes the province of Mazandaran, is an agriculturally rich region and subsequently often considered in the Iranian popular imaginary to be a bastion of prosperity, it nevertheless has a poverty rate of 27.41% (Ebrahimpour and Elmi, 2013). High economic inequality, reflected by the country's 38.8 Gini index,⁶ has not helped to mediate perceptions among some low-income Saravi residents that they have somehow been dealt a pretty poor hand (see also Harris, 2017).

Despite their economic circumstances, the families I knew all had access to such basic amenities as heating, electricity and refrigerators. Indeed, governmental cash transfers and social welfare assistance coupled with individual loans functioned to prevent families from falling into destitution (Hashemi, 2018). Thus, while not absolutely poor in the traditional sense of the basic needs approach, these families nevertheless experienced poverty in more subtle and relative ways, contributing to their perceptions of social inequality. Taking out loans and working for minimal pay, for

4 According to Caldeira (1996), cities experience social difference in two ways: either they tame social difference or they magnify them in order to maintain distinction. In Sari, both phenomena coexist.

5 *Financial Tribune* (2018a; 2018b); see also Hashemi (2018).

6 This estimate is from 2014, the last year available (The World Bank, 2014).

example, mired these families in debt. Indeed, most lived from paycheck to paycheck, unable to afford—in many instances—medicines and nutrient-rich foods. Above all, cash transfers, social welfare and loans could not ameliorate the social stigma that these marginalized Saravi residents faced as a result of their residential address and their rural origins. In this way, poverty most visibly manifests itself in Sari in a lack of recognition—the non-material dimension of well-being that is often equally as important as more material elements such as shelter and food in securing a person's claims to dignity (Sen, 1999; Narayan and Petesch, 2007; Klaufus, 2012). Deemed by their well-heeled counterparts as 'hillbillies' and 'traditional' at best and 'miscreants' who live in 'dangerous' parts of town at worst, poor Saravi residents have effectively become undignified 'others' in the mainstream imaginary, people who do not have the 'ability to appear in public without shame' (Sen, 1999).

The stigma placed on low-income residents as a result of their perceived backwardness is a reflection of a broader Iranian historical narrative stemming from the nineteenth century that equates modernity and civilization with material progress and urbanity. The Qajar monarchy's encounters with European institutions and cultural products during the late nineteenth century (Marashi, 2008) enabled the transmission of European knowledge and modernity into Iran, which Iranian intellectuals then sought to mimic inside Iran itself (Hedayat, 2017). The most visible manifestation of these modernizing initiatives was the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, by which a constitutional monarchy was established in Iran 'with the hope of emulating a contemporary European system of government' (*ibid.*: 7). The Constitutional Revolution ultimately paved the way for the modernizing initiatives of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1941), the founder of the Pahlavi monarchy, and subsequently those of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979), the last monarch of Iran. During the Pahlavi era, urban renewal in particular served as the context for modernization.

Urban modernization policies, developed during the reign of Reza Shah, focused on restructuring the old core in Iranian cities (Ehlers and Floor, 1993). Old buildings were demolished to give way to new, 'Westernized' residential and commercial centers, which were characterized by 'wide avenues of the European pattern' (General Staff, 1930/1931: 30, as cited by Ehlers and Floor, 1993) and by homes with neoclassical façades (Ehlers and Floor, 1993). Juxtaposing the old city core, which was characterized by traditional architectural forms, these new city quarters were often funded by urban elites who ended up moving out of the old parts of town and settling instead in the new, 'modern' city quarters (Ehlers and Floor, 1993). Abandoned residential homes in the old quarters were quickly inhabited by rural migrants, and as a consequence of migrants' inability to afford repairs, were subject to 'internal socioeconomic depreciation and degradation' (*ibid.*: 265). This had the effect of transforming the once thriving quarters into marginalized districts. The marginalization of rural migrants became particularly evident as urbanization increased during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, resulting not just in the proliferation of 'new, Western-style shopping districts' (*ibid.*: 265) and gated communities, but also in the expansion of both legal and illegal residences on the peripheries of large cities (see Kazemi, 1980 and Bayat, 1997). In the years following the 1979 Revolution and continuing to the present, old city quarters and peripheral residences continued primarily to house rural-urban migrants who could not afford to live in the more modern, uptown centers of the city.

The drive towards modernity and development in Iran today is not just encompassed in the country's continued rapid urban expansion and urban renewal, but also, more importantly, in the Islamic Republic's own transformation into what Abrahamian has termed a 'propertied middle-class republic' (Abrahamian, 1993: 133). In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, then president Rafsanjani declared the 'superiority of consumerism

over asceticism' (Harris, 2017: 156). He emphasized the critical importance of domestic economic restructuring through technocratic rule in order to ensure the 'material well-being of the people within the confines of Islamic teachings' (*ibid.*: 156). Economic restructuring ultimately gave rise to a 'new status order' in Iran, whereby the state's 'developmental push' (*ibid.*) worked to embolden the spread of middle-class aspirations among the poor (Ehsani, 1999). Over the years, infrastructural developments such as metro systems and inexpensive citywide taxi lines have facilitated travel from the far corners of cities to city centers. Infrastructural growth coupled with cultural developments such as cultural houses that provide free or low-cost English language, computer literacy, poetry and art classes have worked to normalize the 'norms of the modern middle class and convert such norms into actual needs and expectations' (*ibid.*: 2). Thus, the state's postwar push toward national development has led to the expansion of new social opportunities for upward mobility, opportunities that have become increasingly available to all segments of Iranian society.

The desires and aspirations among the urban poor in Sari to conform to admired, mainstream lifestyles should therefore be understood within this broader historical push for national development and modernization (Hashemi, 2018). For people who reside in Sari's stigmatized districts, translating these opportunities into reality means that they must display their cultural competence through visible, embodied practices. It is through their embodied cultural capital that they can make the claim that they too are 'urban', 'modern' citizens, thereby calling into question commonly heard rhetoric on the part of elite Saravi society of residents' 'unrefined' and 'backward' nature.

For the young men and women I came to know, their movement around central and uptown districts in Sari became one of the primary means by which they could access—and display—the latest admired fashions. For these residents, appropriation and emulation of elements of Saravi high culture enabled them to reduce the social distance between themselves and prestigious others. As I will demonstrate, however, increased opportunities to lay claim to the circulation of elite cultural resources and know-how stimulated an elite pushback, whereby the elite used increasingly refined codified symbols of privilege in an attempt to restore social separation. Thus, the everyday realities of some of Sari's urban subalterns reveal that attempts at social inclusion and belonging do not occur without a simultaneous process of othering—a process that reflects how broader national patterns of inequality and social structuring are reified from below at the provincial level.

Fitting in

De Certeau (1984) argues that it is through the physical routines of everyday life that people make themselves and inject meaning into their social worlds. Examining how individuals attempt to fit in within their social worlds becomes particularly salient for understanding how marginalized city residents in Sari attempt to integrate themselves into the broader socioeconomic fabric of the city and create a sense of worth. While marginalized residents in Sari become familiar with global cultural products and practices through satellite television and social media applications like Instagram and Telegram,⁷ moving around and exploring public streets and avenues in Sari's city core and the surrounding neighborhoods provides its own form of enjoyment and knowledge creation. Engaging with the city and learning first-hand the habits, manners and styles of the middle and upper classes enables the poor to adjust their own appearance accordingly. Strolling through the shops, parks and malls that dot the cityscape intensifies their knowledge about urban life and lifestyles. These young men and women then emulate these urban fashions in their attempts to 'not appear poor' (in the words of Nina, a 22-year-old homemaker and freelance artist).

7 For a detailed overview of social media and their influence in Iran, see Faris and Rahimi (2015).

Social scientists have long known that displays of good taste and style—in clothing (Veblen, [1899] 1953), in house design (Turner, 1968; Klaufus, 2012), and/or in one's habits and manners (Bourdieu, 1977; 1984) can function to increase a person's social standing. Among the poor, the emulation of accepted 'good' taste becomes a means by which they can influence others' perceptions of their station in life, thereby gaining status in the process. For the men and women I knew, knowing what fashion or trend was 'in' at any particular moment in time became an indispensable asset. In making it possible for these youth to adjust their external appearance and behavior, this knowledge served as a necessary first step for them to be able to fit in with moneyed others.

Being 'on point' encompassed a multitude of factors, including wearing foreign trends that had become fashionable in the capital city of Tehran, having the latest electronic accessories, and even speaking in a manner that reflected one's cosmopolitanism. A fashion-forward appearance coupled with an accent that gave no indication of one's rural background communicated to others that the individual was an urban resident, perhaps even one who resided in the more respected neighborhoods of the city.⁸ In this way, urban poor residents were able to hide their poverty—a weakness that, if revealed, would single them out from the mainstream as 'abnormal' (Nussbaum, 2005). Indeed, a commonly repeated phrase I would hear in conversation during my fieldwork was 'if you don't want to become disgraced, become one with the crowd'. To avoid disgrace and the loss of one's good standing, then, was to avoid having one's poverty exposed. Deviations from the crowd, from what was considered 'normal' were thus occasions for social shame and stigma (Goffman, 1963; Nussbaum, 2005).

Middle- and upper-class young men and women in Sari are the first to pick up the latest cosmopolitan styles in vogue in the national capital, which they then publicly display in Sari's city center and uptown neighborhoods. Easy and cheap accessibility to these very areas subsequently enables poor residents to mimic the same trends. By engaging in 'aesthetic labor' (Mears, 2011), their bodies are manipulated to become what the poor themselves refer to constantly as '*bā kelās*' (classy) and '*bā shakhsiyat*' (dignified) in order to conform to widely approved norms of taste and style. As 21-year-old Mehdi, a resident of Sari's periphery and restaurant waiter, put it:

When I go out and am in a crowd, there are a lot more *bā shakhsiyat* people than me. They're *bā shakhsiyat* because of their style of dressing, their way of talking. In society, what you wear is really important. They [the rich] wear *bā shakhsiyat* clothes. Their way of talking is *bā shakhsiyat*. When you sit and talk with them, you feel that you're completely different from them. I end up going into thought and then little by little, I change myself to be like them.

Knowledge regarding what is dignified and classy, as Mehdi's comments reveal, is mainly acquired through everyday movements in middle-/upper-class society. Residents like Mehdi, who live in the southern neighborhoods of Sari, behind the city's main railroad, do not confine themselves to their own neighborhoods. Like their counterparts in other regions of the global South, they circulate not simply for work or schooling, but also for leisure.⁹ Given Sari's small size, transportation is relatively quick as compared to major, metropolitan cities in the Middle East like Tehran and Cairo. For those who do not have their own vehicle—and there are many—Sari's inexpensive

8 The politics of accent and origin in Iran is very strong and complex. Not only is class and status inscribed onto the metaphors and idioms used in the Persian language (Elling and Rezakhani, 2015), but privilege and power is also inscribed onto dialect, with Persian dialects from the provinces of Iran considered less sophisticated and modern than the form of Persian spoken in Tehran, the national capital.

9 Numerous studies have shown that it is common for those from the periphery to circulate throughout the city for both work and leisure (see, for example, Bayat, 1997; Caldeira, 2012; Deeb and Harb, 2013; Olszewska, 2013; Ménoret, 2014).

public taxi line and bus system serve as viable alternatives to shuttle residents to Sari's uptown neighborhoods and commercial centers. Indeed, Sari's transport infrastructure facilitates the urban poor's feelings of belonging to Saravi society at large in much the same way as transport infrastructures such as cable-car systems improve city access for the urban poor in other parts of the world.¹⁰

Upon their arrival, Sari residents invest time and energy, according to seventeen-year-old Mohammad, to 'make the rounds' in various city neighborhoods. 'I like to go to Laleh Street on Friday nights', said Mohammad, who is an informal laborer and resident of Sari's peri-urban fringes. 'I do my hair and hang out with my friends there because Laleh Street is really good and really crowded'. By strolling in *bā kelās* neighborhoods like Laleh and participating in its leisure offerings, young rural-urban migrants like Mohammad learn the lifestyles and habits of those whom they consider to be higher on the social ladder than themselves. As Mohammad stated, 'I went with my brother to the jacuzzi once and it was a lot of fun. There were a lot of *bā kelās* people there'.

To afford to consume the 'cool' and '*ba kelās*' goods on display in the streets of Sari, many of these same young men and women work as hired hands on the farms located on the periphery of the city or as waiters, dishwashers and informal laborers in middle-class establishments (e.g. restaurants and offices) scattered across Sari. As Mehdi's mother, Sara, told me:

Last year, Mehdi worked for three months in the fire that was the summer and he spent everything he made—300 USD—on a mobile phone. He says to me, 'you don't buy it [mobile phone] for me; but am I less than those others [upper-class youth]?'.

Mehdi's smartphone not only enabled him to appear '*bā shakhsiyat*', but it also made it possible for him to be in the know about the latest trends 24/7. Continuous access to the internet and to images of what is 'in' has helped youth like Mehdi bypass the traditional linkages between the national capital and Sari's provincial core. Now, these young men and women can view the lifestyles, habits and tastes of the 'cool' and '*ba kelas*' kids at their convenience and bring this new knowledge to bear as they move around in the public streets of Sari.

The importance that youth like Mehdi attach to appearing dignified is reified not only in their purchase of the latest electronic devices, but also in the values that they desire to pass down to their children someday. As Mehdi noted, 'I want my children to have money, to have dignity, to protect their face'. For some urban poor like Mehdi, then, circulation in both city streets and the 'space of flows' (Castells, 2000) like the internet has facilitated their appropriation of 'modern', 'good', 'global' cultural products. This imitation of the aesthetic styles of more prestigious social groups in Saravi society enables them to perform their belonging to these groups, and to desire that their children become part of these groups. In mimicking the practices of Sari's successful social groups, poor residents are able to show more well-off, *ba kelās* others that they too are 'with it' and classy. Thus, through self-aestheticization, the urban subalterns perform class (Featherstone, 1991), even if this class does not correspond to their lived realities.

As several middle-class Saravi individuals told me, those who are lower in class 'live at least in appearance' like the wealthy, emulating the trends they see among the rich. In this way, as Klaufus (2012) has described in her own ethnography of informal settlements in Ecuador, the urban poor in Sari perform 'good', admired fashion in order to visibly demonstrate their dignity and lay claim to the symbols of globalization and the

10 See, for instance, Drummond et al.'s (2012) discussion of increased citywide accessibility as a result of the establishment of cable-car systems in Medellín, Colombia.

narrative of the modern nation-state. In acquiring these various forms of ‘subcultural capital’—reified in ‘particular “trendy” manners’ or ‘being “in the know” ’ (Thornton, 1995; Khosravi, 2008: 118)—poor residents feel they no longer need to be ‘embarrassed in front of anyone’ (in the words of Sara, a female domestic worker).

Lashing out

The aesthetic practices of some of Sari’s urban subalterns serve as visible forms of claim-making. In strolling, moving around, mimicking the tastes and styles of Sari’s middle and upper classes, these residents not only assert their agency but also their right to the city as citizens. However, as the poor come to emulate the styles and practices of the elite, the latter find new refined markers of social separation in order to bolster their own exclusivity. In this urban landscape, both symbolic boundaries and embedded enclaves become new modes of urban social distinction that bring to the fore the tensions and prejudices that are temporarily masked by the ‘spatiality of social life’ in Sari (Sheller and Urry, 2006).

Indeed, as Sari’s residential and commercial centers have become populated by the circulation of both rich and poor alike, the urban poor become increasingly subject to the gaze. Spatial proximity between classes in Sari poses a challenge to the authority and privilege of the middle and upper classes, which then leads to enhanced forms of boundary work. Numerous studies, including those conducted in Montevideo (Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2017), Jerusalem (Gazit, 2010) and London (Jackson and Benson, 2014) have shown that mixed residential spaces contribute to the intensified construction of symbolic differentiation in an effort to distinguish oneself from ‘backward’ others. As I will demonstrate below, in Sari, these widely shared symbolic boundaries have turned into material, social boundaries in the form of embedded enclaves.¹¹

– Symbolic boundaries

As interactions between residents from different parts of the city increase, middle- and upper-class residents are quick to critique *pāyīn-e-shahr* residents’ lack of understanding of the ‘meaning of things’ (Khosravi, 2008). The urban subalterns may wear the latest trends, for instance, but they go too far. As one young middle-class man commented upon seeing a well-dressed lower-class informant of mine:

He’s *javād* [i.e. unrefined] ... he’s a *dehāti* [peasant]. Those who are *javād* shave the sides of their hair, they wear sneakers in an attempt to copy these well-known singers. I have kids in my class who dress like him and they’re all *dehāti*.

Alternatively, the urban subalterns may be more discreet in their aesthetic choices, but they do not know how to act ‘properly’ in public, staring at others or not being modest in their interactions. According to Mr. Shuku, a prominent member of elite Saravi society:

These residents who live behind the railway tracks have no origins, no culture. They’re neither rural nor urban in their mentality. They don’t interact with city folk to learn what proper etiquette is. They just live with their own kind.

Thus, fashion *faux pas* or seemingly crude manners serve as the basis for claims that ‘the peasants come to Laleh Street these days’ (in the words of one middle-/upper-class young man). In another instance, at a newly renovated central park in Sari, Arash,

11 The work of Álvarez-Rivadulla (2017) and Corboz (2013) in Uruguay demonstrates how individuals attempt to translate symbolic boundaries into physical form. As Álvarez-Rivadulla has pointed out, the extent to which this translation is successful is contingent on whether the symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon.

also a well-off young man, described the families who had come to picnic in one area of the park like this:

The people over here are lower in class than those on the other side of the park [who are jogging or walking]. For them, this [having a picnic on the cement ground] is fun. It's about what you consider your recreation.

As these comments indicate, while the urban poor's movement and visibility in public spaces has contributed to the intermingling of various classes in Sari, it has simultaneously—in the eyes of the elite—brought into stark view the perceived social and cultural distance between the rich and the poor. Indeed, the middle and upper classes frequently rebuff the poor's active engagement in Iran's broadening consumer market, attributing their lack of involvement in modern lifestyles to their 'different' culture:

The poor [from the countryside] have a different mentality than we do. They don't care about sending their kids to private classes, for example. They have a different culture. They make their money off the land and alongside that they engage in things like crime or in petty jobs like selling cigarettes. The poor [who live in the city] still have a different culture than we do. In terms of ranking culture, it's the poor from the countryside, then the poor workers [who live in the city], then the worker, then the high-ranking employee like us' (Shahla, a retired schoolteacher in Sari).

Gaining access to admired trends and practices is not enough to cross the social divide, the narratives suggest. In the eyes of elite society, the poor have different embodied qualities and actions—a different habitus (Bourdieu, 1977)—than people like Shahla. Appearances are important, but a person's character evolves as a multidimensional marker of status. Sending one's child to private tutoring sessions or investing one's money in dollars rather than in rials are the domain of the cultured—the poor 'do not care' (in the words of an upper-class homemaker) about these modern consumerist practices. Rather, they are prone to shady—and many times, downright criminal—activities. Denigrations like these accentuate the social and cultural divide between the rich and the 'uncouth' poor. The latter, in the eyes of the former, lack the values of 'city folk' and consequently, as implied by Mr. Shuku's comment, are responsible for their own poverty. Such culture of poverty arguments (Lewis, 1959) enable the middle and upper classes to sustain class difference, underscoring their own high culture, modernity and right to the city.¹²

– Embedded enclaves

Collectively shared exclusionary tendencies in Sari are not limited to the domain of the symbolic. They are transformed into spatial boundaries through the construction of embedded enclaves. Private, monitored spaces used for residence and consumption, embedded enclaves are the physical manifestation of class difference and social status in Sari. Unlike the fortified enclaves Caldeira (2000) describes that are found in Latin American cities such as São Paulo, Sari's embedded enclaves are not inward-looking, physically isolated spaces demarcated from other public spaces by walls and fences. Rather, they are erected in Sari's central and uptown commercial neighborhoods and turn outward toward the street, displaying their opulence for all passersby to see. Like their fortified counterparts, however, embedded enclaves are monitored by security systems and/or guards that control movement inside the space. Unlike Sari's other

12 For a similar process of othering in a different context, see Caldeira (2000).

commercial and residential developments, they are also their own homogenous social worlds, mainly built for and used by middle- and upper-class residents like Mr. Shuku. In what follows, I examine the specific features of the enclaves that serve to reify, in urban form, the symbolic exclusion of Sari's urban subalterns.

At the time of my first unofficial fieldwork visit to Sari in 2008, luxury enclaves of which high-end cafés and restaurants were its newest variant were only starting to come into vogue in the city. The rise of these embedded urban spaces was facilitated by Iran's economic expansion, which had swept the country in the mid-2000s, opening Iran's entrance into the global marketplace and pushing Iran's middle and upper classes to invest in land, housing and other activities with which they could 'arbitrage social connections' (Harris, 2012: 438). This, in turn, led to a 'spiral of conspicuous consumption [of luxury goods] by the wealthy' (Olszewska, 2013: 10). Despite Iran's increasing economic woes since the mid-2000s, the country's transition to a consumer-focused society—characterized by the import and use of global luxury goods, speculative binging and the construction of embedded enclaves—has continued unabated as part of a move toward economic neoliberalization by the Iranian state. Embedded enclaves, in particular, are the ultimate manifestation in urban form of Iran's shift to a consumer-driven, globalized, developmental society. Indeed, these enclaves take as their point of departure both familiarity with and use of the latest foreign—especially Western—ideas and goods, echoing Iran's historical preference for equating modernity and progress with Westernization.¹³ This is then used as an exclusionary mechanism to mark as common, irrelevant or even regressive all other spaces meant for public consumption.

To create distinction and confer status, embedded enclaves—particularly those associated with commercial establishments (i.e. cafés and restaurants)—manipulate both the internal and external components. In particular, façades, lighting and furniture are used to achieve the enclave's exclusionary effects. Façades, which are the element most visible to passersby, send the formal message of the enclave's exclusivity. As such, they reflect and mimic—many times over—global trends in architectural design and confer more privacy to clients than the traditional consumer establishment. Knowledge of these design trends is picked up through the owners' travels abroad and/or through social media applications like Instagram and Pinterest and are then applied to the Iranian context. Often painted in white, gray and black tones, the façades are minimalist, but they use expensive design elements including intricately designed wood doors, wood window frames and industrial sconces and lanterns to signal knowledge of modern aesthetic principles. Lighting within the establishment itself is often recessed and dimmed, and stands in stark contrast to the stark fluorescent lighting that characterizes other, more 'common', commercial establishments in Sari.

The interiors of enclaves like The Café similarly echo global interior design trends, with the management adding Iranian design flourishes (e.g. tilework, kilim rugs, and local artwork) to better adapt the enclave to the local context. Parquet floors (unlike the white tiles of their more 'common' competitors), wooden chairs and tables (in lieu of plastic dining sets), leather couches, and modern art displayed skillfully on gallery-style walls are some of the most common design features of these enclaves. Framed by the exquisite windows of the façade, these internal elements of the embedded enclave are visible to pedestrians outside.

Even in Sari's most elite residential embedded enclave, Engineer's Hill (its name itself a nod to the class background of the enclave's residents), highly intricate and expensive house façades are visible from the street and offer passersby a glimpse into the private, leisurely world of the elite. In fact, embedded enclaves—unlike their fortified counterparts—require the freedom of circulation afforded by the city's accessibility

13 Of course, this is not unique to Iran. See, for instance, Deeb and Harb's (2013) discussion of the use of Western cultural forms as a marker of one's cosmopolitanism in Beirut.

to communicate superiority and mark out difference. Being in plain sight somehow renders these enclaves' difference more stark, as the poor have a clear view of what they cannot have. Embedded enclaves thus not only enable the elite to physically separate themselves from those whom they consider inferior, but they also operate to confer feelings of inferiority onto the urban subalterns who pass by them on a regular basis. They serve as a signal to *pāyin-e-shahr* residents like Mehdi that no matter how much they try to 'change' to be 'like them', they can never fit in.

Indeed, while the doors of commercial enclaves like The Café are seemingly open to all who can afford their high-priced menu items, unlike other commercial establishments in Sari, the enclaves' aesthetic elaboration coupled with the monitoring gaze of their managers and clientele function to 'other' those who do not possess the same habitus as the elite. Aesthetic and cultural practices within the enclaves—the officially banned Western rock music that plays within their walls, the foreign food items on the menu (e.g. fondue, penne and sushi instead of the traditional kabob or sandwich), men and women sitting together, and customers' donning of the latest and most expensive 'it' fashion trends that run perilously close to the red lines of the Islamic Republic (i.e. head scarves adjusted on the back of one's head to cover the minimal amount of hair and *mantos* left loose and unbuttoned to expose designer tops and ripped jeans)—work to signal how squarely the enclave is acculturated to foreign tastes and practices. Finally, the gaze of the establishment's clientele and/or managers on anyone who enters and who does not seem to conform or understand the enclave's practices serves to make uncomfortable and thereby implicitly restricts entrance to those who can afford its wares *and* are well-versed in its 'modern' tastes. Nilufar's hesitation and sense of uneasiness at entering The Café nine years ago allude to the success of the establishment in concretizing in built form the class boundaries that Nilufar was attempting to overcome through her own emulation of middle-class aesthetic standards. Nilufar was made painfully aware that one of the ultimate status symbols—spending one's leisure time in an establishment like The Café—was out of her reach.

As instruments of social inequality, then, embedded enclaves like The Café transform the nature of cross-class interactions in Sari, challenging the notion that the construction of literal physical barriers—fences, walls and surrounding empty space—is the primary means of social distancing in some contemporary cities (see, for instance, Caldeira, 1996). Embedded enclaves, rather, communicate their status through their appropriation of foreign, and thus 'modern', design ideas, goods and practices. Furthermore, unlike regular establishments that often rely on word of mouth, enclaves use modern communication technologies, particularly social media applications like Instagram, to convey the enclave's 'modernity'. Instagram posts by some of the more exclusive cafés and restaurants in Sari showcase curated images that mimic the style and tone of the latest trending global cafés and restaurants: images often depict still lifes of the establishment's foreign food offerings such as red velvet cake, with some food items strategically placed alongside brand-name goods such as iPhones—themselves a status symbol in Iran. In such a way, enclaves' social media advertisements articulate in pictorial form the desires and social position of the upper classes while simultaneously elaborating social difference by highlighting the type of worldly lifestyles that others cannot have.

Although Iranian society has always had an affinity for status recognition (Beeman, 1986; Olszewska, 2013; Hashemi, 2015), this type of boundary work—both symbolic and social—on display in Sari is a more recent creation and has intensified in recent years. In Iran's current economic climate, where the Iranian rial has lost 80% of its value against the dollar in the past year alone (Erdbrink, 2018a), staggering inflation has become the new norm and has led to social decline for many. Social decline, in turn, has led to increased feelings of pessimism and uncertainty. During my last visit to Sari in 2018, for example, many of my respondents—both rich and poor—expressed uncertainty

over the future (*cf.* Caldeira, 2000). Some lower-class respondents had given up hope altogether of being able to afford to buy a house and start a family, while their wealthy counterparts expressed disillusionment about being able to maintain the same standard of living they were previously accustomed to, as their ‘assets had halved in value’ (in the words of an elite Sari resident). As it has become harder for rich and poor alike to sustain the status quo, people have started increasingly to rely on boundary work to differentiate themselves from ‘lower’ others in an effort to reassert their own identity.

As Caldeira (2000) has noted, elaborating social difference and privilege—both symbolically and materially—is one way that individuals deal with uncertainty over their own social position. Indeed, as Sari—like much of Iran—continues to entrench itself in the global market economy, the elite have created new embedded spaces of exclusivity that require less and less contact with ‘backward’ others who attempt to come into their midst. For instance, until recently, traditional bakeries and convenience stores were considered public spaces, open to all. However, in the past few years, luxury bakeries and grocery stores that sell a variety of provisions and foreign breads marketed as healthier than the Iranian alternative have started to emerge in the city. Moreover, unlike their traditional counterparts, which are often small, obscure places, the characteristics of these new establishments mimic the design and façade engineering of enclaves like The Café in an effort to elaborate class difference. As these enclaves become increasingly frequented by the elite, more common institutions of leisure and consumption like the traditional bakery become the reserve of the lower classes. Social inequality thus intensifies as the elite increasingly find ways to reaffirm their own privilege.

Conclusion

In this article, I have described how the urban poor in Sari have implicitly designated physical circulation and the mimicry of consumption practices as valid strategies to cross the socioeconomic divide and claim their belonging to the city. They struggle to ‘change themselves’ in order to become *bā shakhsīyat* and fit into mainstream society. However, as cross-class interactions in Sari intensify as a result of these practices, the elite, sensing a threat to their status, lash out by engaging in boundary work to re-affirm their privilege and authority. Both symbolic boundaries and their material manifestation in urban form through the construction of embedded enclaves serve as new modes of urban social distinction in Sari today. For many of Sari’s urban poor, then, attempts to appear dignified and modern only concretize their marginalization and cultural distance from the upper classes.

While the case of Sari presents a pessimistic outlook of urban change in some parts of Iran today, there is cause for hope. The economic protests of December 2017 which occurred not only in Sari (Reuters Staff, 2017), but also in many similar small cities around the rest of the country, were spearheaded by the disillusionment of lower-class groups with Iran’s deteriorating economic environment. The continuation of protests to this day (Erdbrink, 2018b) suggests a new shift in citizen engagement in Iran, whereby it is those in the peripheries rather than those in positions of privilege who have become the most vocal critics of economic inequality (*cf.* Caldeira, 1996). Coupled with many of the urban poor’s ‘transgressive’, stylish presence in the city, the protests are testament to the poor’s ‘art of presence’—that is, their ‘stamina to assert collective will in spite of all odds by ... discovering new spaces within which to make themselves heard, seen, felt, and realized’ (Bayat, 2013: 313). Such active citizenry, as Bayat (*ibid.*) notes, has the capacity to change the sensibilities of society by disrupting the order of things: a large number of marginalized men and women who act as if they do not ‘know their place’ and as if class boundaries do not exist can serve as the matrix for a new and more inclusive economic social order.

While cities in the global South like Sari that are characterized by an emergent unequal urban form are traditionally considered the bedrock of social exclusion and

selective citizenship (see, for example, Davis, 1990; Caldeira, 1996; 2000), the recent mobilizations and protests of the urban poor in such cities for access to dignified livelihoods attest to their continued claim-making practices. Material boundaries, like their symbolic counterparts, then, can only go so far in imposing a sense of inferiority and shame onto marginalized urban residents. Indeed, emergent socio-spatial polarizations between Sari's haves and have nots over the past decade have paradoxically contributed to increasing attempts by Sari's poor to secure a 'dignified life' (Bayat, 1997: 12; cf. Caldeira, 1996). In the wake of Iran's recent economic downturn, it has become increasingly difficult for Sari's working poor to afford decent housing and a decent standard of living, much less to achieve the type of 'good life' that they envision for themselves and their children. In this context, the urban poor's relentless pursuit of social recognition through their active cultural mimicry becomes even more critical for understanding the various pathways used by the subalterns to challenge stigma and lay claim to their rights as modern citizens.

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