



Is the Tehran Bazaar Dead? Foucault, politics, and architecture

Farzaneh Haghighi Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing,
2018 ISBN: 9781527509238 £65.00, Hb, pp. 303

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To cite this article: Andrea Mubi Brighenti (2020) Is the Tehran Bazaar Dead? Foucault, politics, and architecture, The Journal of Architecture, 25:5, 647-650, DOI: [10.1080/13602365.2020.1785149](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2020.1785149)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2020.1785149>



Published online: 02 Sep 2020.



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Reviews

Book

Is the Tehran Bazaar Dead? Foucault, politics, and architecture

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Review by

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Is the Tehran Bazaar Dead explores a possible encounter between philosophy and the study of an urban-architectural formation. On the one hand, the book can be said to represent an exercise in 'applied territorialology', the detailed investigation of a locale to be unfolded and articulated into its constitutive dimensions and modes of being. In this vein, Farzaneh Haghighi's book dives into the subtleties of everyday micropolitics via a visual stroll through the atmosphere of the bazaar and the wealth of its ethnographic details. To do so, the book deploys the author's sensitivity in cultural anthropology. To cite just one example, there is an interesting section describing the pictures of the dead (whether personal ancestors or spiritual leaders) hanging in shops, usually just above the head of the shop keeper.

On the other hand, and at the same time, Haghighi engages at a more theoretical level with Foucauldian philosophy — and French philosophy more generally, including Barthes, Simondon, and others. This enables her to critique the ways in which the Tehran Grand Bazaar has been approached in previous scholarship. More specifically, the author focuses on what she calls 'socio-political' and 'architectural' approaches, which she regards as too static, incapable of conveying the actual life of the bazaar. In this sense, the *pars destruens* of Haghighi's argument, which fills the first half of the volume, mobilises Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine the ways in which the Tehran bazaar has been framed by an array of narratives ranging from late nineteenth-century colonial Orientalist descriptions to technical documents such as the Tehran master plans of the 1960s and the 1990s.

Having criticised the conception of architecture as simply 'a backdrop for activities', Haghighi moves on to contrast prevailing discourses of architecture and urban studies with a series of actual current uses that present themselves to the observer. Seen in this light, the bazaar appears as a much more fragmented and dynamic reality, shaped by a multiplicity of unfolding practices that generate tensions and contradictions, but also innovations and adaptations. Following Foucault's lead, Haghighi furthers an analysis of the bazaar that is

oriented towards capturing the events and the discontinuities in social and political action. Rather than a story of increasing marginalisation and decline vis-à-vis modernisation, along with the rise of new forms of retail such as suburban malls and new trade centres, Haghghi favours a non-evolutionary history where the bazaar's space is revealed as an adaptive system. This way, it appears as an institution capable of adjusting quickly to changes in both national political economy and local governance.

To cite just one example, the author attaches particular importance to the mobile stalls of the 'zeyd bazaar', the section where fabrics are traded. These mini stalls — about 6 feet long — are not shop units in a proper sense (which prompts the author to mobilise Simondon's work on individuation), but co-managed divisible working spaces. The visual presentation of goods at zeyd becomes an uninterrupted flow that conceals the architectural setting. Interestingly, the passageway where the mobile stalls are located appears asymmetric, given that more conventional shops with classic roller-doors are to be found opposite to the mini stalls. The author seems intrigued by the many small asymmetries that contradistinguish the Tehran bazaar at multiple levels. These are not only of visual nature, but include historical aspects, too. This becomes especially clear in a survey of the surroundings of the Kalantari building, whose status as a heritage site is controversial, and currently appears to be in a dilapidated state. The situation probably reflects a stand-off — or, a hidden complicity — between official conservatism and private real estate speculation. This also hints to an aspect Haghghi does not analyse extensively, but which certainly plays a role in the urban transformations of the bazaar: touristification, a process that could be meaningfully compared to many other street markets around the world.

Of course, the encounter between architectural studies and philosophy can take place in different ways. While a philosophy of the event is most usually associated with Deleuze rather than Foucault — especially since Deleuze reworked Spinoza's philosophy of affections and encounters — Haghghi suggests that Foucault's archaeologies and genealogies of power-knowledge can be used to unwrap the processes behind the obvious becoming obvious. In other words, the genesis of the taken-for-granted outlines the contours of an event-oriented analysis. Foucault's epistemology stresses discontinuities, novelty, and fractures over continuity, reproduction, and evolution. How this epistemology can be used in architectural research, however, remains open for debate. This is especially the case for a type of urban architecture such as the bazaar that is created more by use than by design. Although the Tehran trading site is ancient, the architecture is not, and except for a few key landmarks, it is not outstanding. Indeed, Haghghi attributes more importance to the many anonymous alleyways than to eye-catching spots such as the Saraye Roshan, for instance. Because of the role passageways play in Haghghi's spatial analysis, it is perhaps a pity that Walter Benjamin's work on the Parisian arcades has not been utilised.¹ Not only has Benjamin composed a non-totalising multifaceted exploration of the arcades, but notions and ideas of atmosphere were advanced by him furthering Georg Simmel's earlier insights into

the 'shop-window quality of things' (*Schaufensterqualität der Dinge*) in modern economy.² A Benjaminian archaeological gaze, as this was reconstructed by Susan Buck-Morss,³ could have usefully complemented the Foucauldian take.

In her analysis, Haghighi has also left aside Foucault's own encounter with Iran in 1978, when, for good or bad, Foucault had his 'populist' moment.⁴ The pathos of the image of a whole compact body of people 'revolting bare hands' against a corrupt and despotic *shah* resounds throughout Foucault's Iranian pages.⁵ Foucault himself repeated the famous thesis of the marginalisation of the bazaar that was 'suffocated' (*étouffé*) by the modernisation process. In his view, this modernisation was but a disguised imposed Westernisation and, in fact, 'an archaism'. Writing in the midst of 'the event', Foucault approached Iran by looking almost exclusively at the macroscale of politics, neglecting the possibilities of microanalysis. This is to some extent understandable, given that he was dispatched there only for two short *séjours* to write his reportage for *Corriere della Sera*. Foucault referred to the merchant class of bazaar workers (the *bazaaris*) both as a popular class ('*petites gens*') and a 'bourgeoisie' (since small dealers rent their stall next to big merchant families). But he failed to notice that this class represented a conservative force in Iranian society.⁶ The traditionalism of the *bazaaris* came with their long-standing alliance with the clergy (*ulama*). After the revolution, prominent military-political-economic figures have come from bazaari background. The bazaari guilds (*asnaf*) supported the Islamic revolution of 1979 and have since been rewarded with economic subsidies, tax levies, and toll exemptions by the Islamic regime.

Leaving aside Foucault's journalistic excursus, Haghighi has at least the advantage of applying perhaps more coherently Foucault's own analytical framework to her case study. Her work restores the potential of microanalysis, as it zooms in to the details of situated everyday interaction and its minute spatial unfolding. Among others, Haghighi observes for instance how carpet sellers manage and share their space, how the flowing crowd interacts with the environment, and how shop keepers narrate their personal and business stories.

In his tribute book to Foucault, Deleuze remarked how Foucault had succeeded in combining Kant (knowledge) and Nietzsche (power) to construct his own original philosophical project.⁷ In this sense, Deleuze hailed Foucault not so much as a philosopher of the event, but as a veritable event in the history of thought. Both philosophers believed in the possibility of human liberation, although Foucault devoted the largest part of his research (until about 1980) to describe mechanisms of subjection and disciplination.

It was Deleuze who warned that all revolutions historically end badly, but added that this never rules out the possibility of a genuine becoming-revolutionary. This is not measured by the large-scale historical (and usually catastrophic) consequences of revolutions, but by the invention of an inner movement that eschews history and confronts an unnamed coming event (a 'molecular' becoming). This invisible and often unnoticed trace, this singularity — rather than the state of things subsequently effectuated — is, for Deleuze, the veritable, 'incorporeal' event. From this perspective, Haghighi's

microanalytic territorialological book may ultimately be closer to a Deleuzian vitalist imagination than to Foucault's own governmental pages.

Notes and references

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3. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
4. Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault (1926–1984)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), Part III, para. 6.
5. Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), pp. 679–706; 780–82.
6. Nikkie Keddie, *Modern Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 226–27.
7. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1986).

Review by

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Books

Towards openness

Li Hu and Huang Wenjing

San Francisco, CA: Applied Research & Design, 2017

ISBN: 9781940743226

\$35.00, Pb, pp. 287

OPEN ReAction

Li Hu and Huang Wenjing

Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press, 2015

ISBN 9787112180646

RMB 128.00, Pb, pp. 245

A joint reading of two books by OPEN Architecture—their first Chinese monograph, *OPEN ReAction* (2015) and their first English monograph, *Towards Openness* (2017)—elucidates the living tradition of Modernism and its potentially larger, incomplete, and reinvented Chinese project.

Li Hu and Huang Wenjing, who co-authored these books and co-founded OPEN Architecture in Beijing in 2008, belong to a new wave of architects whose education and practice grew out of the Western system.¹ Similar to the generation of architects that preceded them,² upon starting their own architectural practice in their homeland, the two architects found themselves in a large professional knowledge gap. This had been formed in the space between their ten years of practice in the developed architectural industry in