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Zachary Lockman, *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories, Historiographies*



# Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East

Struggles, Histories, Historiographies

Edited by  
Zachary Lockman

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For Melinda

—ZL

## Contents

|                                                                                                                                           |     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgments                                                                                                                           | ix  |
| Introduction                                                                                                                              | xv  |
| Zachary Lockman                                                                                                                           |     |
| 1. Milling Journeys in Nineteenth-Century<br>Damascus: Implications for the Middle Eastern<br>Labor History Agenda                        | 1   |
| Sherry Viner                                                                                                                              |     |
| 2. Ottoman Workers and the State, 1826–1914                                                                                               | 21  |
| Donald Quenert                                                                                                                            |     |
| 3. Other Workers: A Critical Reading of Representations<br>of Egyptian Petty Commodity Production<br>at the Turn of the Twentieth Century | 41  |
| Kenneth Kippenich                                                                                                                         |     |
| 4. "Worker" and "Working Class" in pre-1914 Egypt:<br>A Rereading                                                                         | 71  |
| Zachary Lockman                                                                                                                           |     |
| 5. Worker's Voice and Labor Productivity in Egypt                                                                                         | 111 |
| Ellis Gidberg                                                                                                                             |     |
| 6. The Development of Working-Class<br>Consciousness in Turkey                                                                            | 133 |
| Rene Altman                                                                                                                               |     |
| 7. Historiography, Class, and Islamic Modernism                                                                                           | 165 |
| Asaf Dagnan                                                                                                                               |     |

## Contents

|                                                                                                                                           |     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgments                                                                                                                           | ix  |
| Introduction                                                                                                                              | xi  |
| <i>Zachary Lockman</i>                                                                                                                    |     |
| 1. Militant Journeymen in Nineteenth-Century<br>Damascus: Implications for the Middle Eastern<br>Labor History Agenda                     | 1   |
| <i>Sherry Vatter</i>                                                                                                                      |     |
| 2. Ottoman Workers and the State, 1826-1914                                                                                               | 21  |
| <i>Donald Quataert</i>                                                                                                                    |     |
| 3. Other Workers: A Critical Reading of Representations<br>of Egyptian Petty Commodity Production<br>at the Turn of the Twentieth Century | 41  |
| <i>Kristin Koptiuch</i>                                                                                                                   |     |
| 4. "Worker" and "Working Class" in pre-1914 Egypt:<br>A Rereading                                                                         | 71  |
| <i>Zachary Lockman</i>                                                                                                                    |     |
| 5. Worker's Voice and Labor Productivity in Egypt                                                                                         | 111 |
| <i>Ellis Goldberg</i>                                                                                                                     |     |
| 6. The Development of Working-Class<br>Consciousness in Turkey                                                                            | 133 |
| <i>Feroz Ahmad</i>                                                                                                                        |     |
| 7. Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers                                                                                             | 165 |
| <i>Assef Bayat</i>                                                                                                                        |     |

|                                                                                                                             |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 8. Collective Action and Workers' Consciousness in<br>Contemporary Egypt<br><i>Marsha Pripstein Posusney</i>                | 211 |
| 9. Will the Real Egyptian Working Class<br>Please Stand Up?<br><i>Joel Beinin</i>                                           | 247 |
| 10. History for the Many or History for the Few?<br>The Historiography of the Iraqi Working Class<br><i>Eric Davis</i>      | 271 |
| 11. The History of the Working Classes in the<br>Middle East: Some Methodological Considerations<br><i>Edmund Burke III</i> | 303 |
| 12. Labor History and the Politics of Theory:<br>An Indian Angle on the Middle East<br><i>Dipesh Chakrabarty</i>            | 321 |
| About the Contributors                                                                                                      | 335 |
| Index                                                                                                                       | 339 |

7

*Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers*

This responsibility still rests on the working class to organize itself and the people and by the complete elimination of the exploiters, carry out its task of rebuilding the world. This is the decree of history, and the working class will inevitably accomplish this task.

(*Workers' News*, issue 1, p. 3, 1980)<sup>1</sup>

A worker is one who, obeying the command of God, endeavors to develop the earth and its materials. . . . Thus, the workers are of divine value; and obeying that command is a divine and Islamic duty. . . . The differences in expectations and trades must not divide the various layers of population, must not damage the Islamic brotherhood. The atheist (*ilbadi*) ideologies attempt to use these means to define the workers as a class, so separating them from the Islamic *ummat* (people) and crushing its unity.

(President Khamenei of the Islamic Republic, May Day 1981)

There does not exist, as such, a history of the Iranian working class. There is neither a complete life history of the working class at the national level nor one that covers a short period of it in a particular region. Writings on labor history consist overwhelmingly of accounts of the trade unions with particular focus on the period between 1941–1953, rather than a history of laboring men and women, their work, community, culture, and politics. Labor history, however, is not solely the domain of labor researchers; social historians, political scientists, leftist activists, and religious (Islamic) authorities have also commented on the history and the behavior of the working classes. These less conventional commentators tend to use written histories, political speeches, statements in the publications of left-wing activists, and the various writings of Islamic leaders in Iran as their vehicles of commentaries about labor.

In the first section, I look very closely at a sample of all these types of literature to illustrate how the "working class" has been conceptualized

by the commentators: the political scientists, historians, activists, and the state ideologues. The major theoretical assumptions and conceptual schema through which the working class is portrayed will be examined, as will practical implications of the theoretical conceptualization of working class. In general, I identify four historiographical currents represented by the orientalist and modernizationists, labor historians, the left-wing activists, and the Islamic theoreticians, who, on the whole, exhibit an elitist, structuralist, essentialist, and moralist approach to working-class history and behavior.

In the second section, I shall present my own perception of the way the "working class" must be conceptualized in general. In this connection, I will argue that an alternative perspective must transcend the inadequacies of the preceding approaches, in particular the one that defines a worker only in terms of his or her objective position in the class structure (structuralism), and rest instead on the consciousness, culture, and action of workers. Yet, at the same time, problems of "culturalism" and the inadequacy of the portrayal of language as the sole criterion of class expression will also be examined.

The final section is an attempt to present my understanding of the "reality" of the working class in Iran by examining its representation in social and political discourse; that is, by showing the way in which workers were perceived both by the public, especially by the state authorities and the employers, and by themselves. In this regard, the issue of language, in particular Islamic language, is explored. Through a discourse analysis, I will discuss how workers expressed their sense of "classness" and what role Islam, as an ideology, cultural form, and discourse, played in this process.

#### *Four Historiographical Currents*

##### *Orientalist and Modernizationist Historiography: Workers Dismissed*

Until very recently, Iranian historiography, in general, had been reduced to the history of personalities, institutions, and individual events; it consisted of a narrative and empiricist methodology, highly politicist and individualistic in nature, with a parochial perspective. The political and social developments and conflicts were hardly seen in class terms, nor were they explained according to any historical logic. Instead, they

read as a broad historical survey focusing on the impact of international affairs on domestic politics. Many Western writers on Iran seemed to look at the historical developments in Iran from an explicit or implicit orientalist perspective. By emphasizing the "uniqueness" of Middle Eastern societies in general, this perspective tended to focus on such issues as culture and religion as the context of historical continuity and the individuals or elites as the source of change.

Marvin Zonis's *The Political Elite of Iran*, for instance, represents an elitist approach to political history of Iran, in which there is little room for social groups, especially social classes, to play a role. Such an approach is based on the theoretical assumption that "the attitudes and behavior of powerful individuals in societies whose political processes are less institutionalized within the formal structures of government are valid guides to political change."<sup>2</sup> Although one cannot deny the role of individuals in political change, and that may occur as well in Western countries whose political processes are institutionalized, one must acknowledge the impact of social forces that may affect or even shape the behavior of individuals. In the elitist historiography, the working class along with other subaltern groups are simply dismissed.

Donald Wilber's historical survey, *Iran*, on the other hand, represents an "orientalist" approach with a blend of apologism. Wilber's study is broadly concerned with a "proud heritage, respected traditions, religious conformity, and the cement of a graduated society [that] all served to foster continuity and preserve the country's integrity."<sup>3</sup> What is central to his narrative is not conflict but "public consensus" with "the enlightened goals of authority" that guarantee stability. In his *Iran: Past and Present*, which went into its eighth edition in 1979, Wilber does devote some three pages<sup>4</sup> to "industrial labor" but only to say that the Shah broke "Soviet and Communist domination of the unions" by disbanding them. He continues to claim that the working conditions in the postcoup era improved, as strikes were rare. Wilber fails, however, to mention the coup itself, which brought the workplaces under secret police scrutiny and outlawed strikes.

Joseph Upton's broad survey, *The History of Modern Iran: An Interpretation*, surpasses the shortfalls of elitism and apologism. It attempts to focus on the history of the people. The people, according to him, consists of three broad social categories: the peasants, the townsmen, and the tribesmen. The middle class is later added to the list. The category "worker" rarely appears in the text; and when it does, it is devoid of any analytical value or social significance.<sup>5</sup>

Quite a similar approach is adopted by Ann Lambton, a prominent British orientalist. For Lambton, "Persian society under the Qajars" consisted primarily of the "tribal leaders," "landowners," "the high officials of the bureaucracy," "religious classes," and the "merchant classes." Beyond these were the "masses," both rural and urban, whose main function is described as the payment of "taxes to the government, the local leaders, or both," and whose social state is seen as burdened by disaster and disease while being steeped in religiosity.<sup>6</sup> Again the category "worker" is either dismissed from the book or is enmeshed into the category of "urban masses."

The absence of the category "workers" or "working class" in these historical accounts may indicate an ontological or social absence of the working class in the society. However, it is more likely that orientalist literature, *a priori*, assumes that the working class lacks any social and political significance. In short, in the elitist and orientalist narrative, the category "worker," as distinct from *isnaf*, or the guild employees, has rarely had an independent existence, but is merged into the broad category of urban masses, which is depicted as destitute, ignorant, and deeply religious.

In recent years, some scholars have also examined modern Iranian history from a "nonclass perspective," but unlike their predecessors, their history is informed by a combination of sophisticated theory and analysis. For this reason we should examine them in some detail. Homa Katouzian provides a serious critique of the historians and social scientists who characterize Iranian history by categories such as "feudalist" and "capitalist."<sup>7</sup> In Katouzian's theoretical assumptions, "class" is simply not applicable to Iranian society in the twentieth century. Briefly, his argument is as follows: the Iranian social formation before the land reform of 1962 cannot be characterized as feudalist, but as a "despotic social formation" defined by arbitrary rule. For Katouzian, "despotism" seems to define not merely pre-nineteenth century Iran, but all of Iranian history up to the present time. The despotism of the twentieth century was, however, further blended with "pseudo-modernism," which refers to the political and economic changes made during the reign of Reza Shah and his son.

Despotism, by definition, dismisses the concepts of legal and political security and certainty in favor of the accumulation of wealth, property, and physical capital. But the inherent weakness of a system of private accumulation of capital, together with an absence of individual

autonomy owing to despotism, made for different socioeconomic developments in Iran from those that prevailed in Europe—such as the developments that engendered the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, industrial capitalism, and the subsequent rise of the bourgeois and the proletarian classes. Therefore, Katouzian argues, it is erroneous to characterize twentieth century Iran as capitalist with its attendant class structure and conflict.

Although Katouzian asserts that "Iranian society is not classless,"<sup>8</sup> the term *class* in the book refers simply to the multitude of people and occupations, but carries no social or political weight. And class conflict, according to him, does not play any role in the political development in Iran. Instead, owing to the prevailing despotism, "[d]own to the present day, the clearest line of social demarcation (even stratification) has been that which divides the state (*dawlat*) from the people (*mellat*)."<sup>9</sup> Thus, "working class," in his schema, signifies no more than an aggregate of the individual wage workers employed in industry. Sociopolitically, the workers may assume significance only as part of the *mellat* as opposed to the *dawlat*.

Katouzian's criticism of the wholesale application of Western Marxist concepts to Iran is well taken and shall be further dealt with later (in the third section). However, Katouzian's own model, although hardly original, is not free from conceptual and factual shortcomings. To begin with, he implies that Iran under the Shah cannot be characterized as capitalist because not feudalism but despotism preceded it. Contrary to his assumption, however, capitalism, as a social formation, does not have to originate from feudalism. Anthropologists now record the emergence of capitalist relations from simple egalitarian-communal societies. The prevalence of capitalist socioeconomic systems in a number of postcolonial African countries exemplify this possibility. Yet, capitalism in these societies assumes a particular form, in that it tends to be undermined by the traditional values and precapitalist cultures while simultaneously incorporating them to its advantage. Depending on the cultural traits of each society these values might be different, but perhaps the most common of them include a lack of the liberal values, such as freedom and equality before law (e.g., contract), the prevalence of paternalistic authoritarianism, the desire for rapid turnover, application of trade norms to industrial activities, short-term planning, and the like.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the concept of "despotism," as a *social* formation and not as a political one, implies an unrealistic cycle of continuity in Iranian

history, likening, for instance, tenth century socioeconomic conditions to those of the twentieth century. Even if there were a plausible reason for employing the concept "despotism" as merely a *political* form, that is arbitrary rule with or without a constitution, still the despotism of the Shah in the twentieth century was very different from previous forms of it, simply because the Shah's autocracy was constrained by new internal and international forces. Indeed, and that is the third point, this modern type of despotism can coexist with a capitalist economy and social structure. As a matter of fact, and as in many Third World countries, it was largely the state itself that fostered capitalist (pseudo?) modernization, encouraging private accumulation.<sup>11</sup> Arbitrary political interference by the state in economic activities certainly did trouble the capitalists and private business. These restraints, however, were largely *situational*, rather than strategic.

Indeed, the crucial question is not whether or not the Iranian economy under Muhammad Reza Shah, and to some extent under his father, Reza Shah, was characterized by capitalism. One can hardly deny that the economy at this period was essentially capitalistic, although it had incorporated, and at the same time was undermined by, precapitalist culture and traditional values as well as the despotic political form. The crucial question, rather, is whether the prevalence of a capitalistic economy, of the Iranian kind, was sufficient for the making of a working class. It must also be asked how these nonliberal values and "traditional" cultures in the society, such as primordial (religious, kinship, communal) loyalties and identities, affect the development of a working class. A significant historiographical school, that of the Left/Marxist activists in Iran, has, *a priori*, assumed that the prevalence of a capitalist structure necessarily leads to the development of a working class. It is to this historiographical school that we now turn to discuss its theoretical assumptions.

*Marxist Historiography: The Working Class as a Special Class*

Although "nonclass," elitist, and orientalist approaches dominate Iranian historiography, the left-wing historians and activists take "class" as a fundamental concept in their historical analyses. These historians have overwhelmingly been either Soviet scholars or Iranians heavily influenced by Soviet Marxist historiography. Their accounts still constitute the main source of historical reference and theoretical approach for most left-wing political organizations in Iran today.

An early major work that deals with the emergence of the working class in Iran is Abdullaev's study (*Iranian Industry and the Creation of a Working Class in the Late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries*, 1963) of which only Chapter 3 has been translated into English. Abdullaev, a Russian historian, discusses the qualitative and quantitative features of the working class, its conditions of work, and political activities. Another Russian historian, M. Ivanov, also devotes sections of his book to a broad survey of the working class up to the early 1960s.<sup>12</sup> This work was translated by the Iranian Tudeh (Communist) party in 1977. After the Revolution, an ideologue of the Tudeh party, Mehdi Kayhan, published segments of his doctoral dissertation written in the former Soviet Union in 1954.<sup>13</sup> The study covers a period between 1941 and 1953, a period of extensive trade union activism. But by far the most influential work within this tradition is *A Survey of the Workers' and Communist Movement in Iran* by Abdossamad Kambakhsh, one of the leaders of the Tudeh party.<sup>14</sup> This work, too, is a survey of the trade union and communist movements in the 1920s and especially the 1940s.

Most of today's left-wing organizations in Iran, especially the ones originating from the left-wing guerrilla groups, have adhered to a similar kind of Marxism. They differ from the Tudeh in terms of their political tactics rather than their theoretical base. These groups have also relied heavily on the historical works supplied by the preceding historians, and although they do not set out to write their own histories of the Iranian working class, they have commented extensively on workers' behavior. Noticeable among such writings are four main texts, which have served as the basis for guerrilla strategy in Iran: *On the Necessity of Armed Struggle and a Refutation of the Theory of "Survival"* (written in 1970), by Amir Parviz Pouyan; *Armed Struggle: A Strategy and Tactic* (1970), by Masoud Ahmadzadeh; *What a Revolutionary Must Know* (1970), by Ali Akbar Safa'i Farahani; and *Armed Struggle: A Road to the Mobilization of the Masses* (1973), by Bijan Jazani.<sup>15</sup>

*The General Features of Marxist Historiography.* Both the historical surveys and contemporary political writings, each written in a Marxist vein, appear to have four general features. First, they seem to be highly ideological and politically biased. For Tudeh historians, for instance, "the leadership of the Tudeh party" is usually depicted as one "of the most fundamental factors of the economic victories and political achievements of the Iranian working class."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand,

Kambakhsh's book combines the history of Tudeh and the workers' movement, stressing the history of the Tudeh party, thereby implying a unity between workers and the party.

Second, the writings derive their theoretical schema and conceptual frameworks from the mechanical Marxism of the Second International, features of which include gross generalizations, simplistic models, and economic reductionism. It is perhaps worth noting that during the 1960s and 1970s, two main Persian texts served as the theoretical education of the young Iranian Marxists. These were Nooshin's *Principles of the Economy* [Usoul-i Ilm-i Iqtisad] and George Politzser's *An Introduction to the Principles of Philosophy*, both notorious for their simplification, economic reductionism, and mechanistic approach to political economy and historical materialism.

Third, despite the use of grand theoretical models, their historiography forces a narrow outlook: institutional, politicist, and structuralist. Members of the working class are viewed primarily at their places of work, whereas their leisure activities, place in the family, community, overall cultural settings, and informal politics are invariably ignored. Ehsan Tabari, the leading theoretician of the Tudeh, attributes the formation of the "working class or the industrial proletariat" to the emergence of capitalism, which occurred with the establishment of factories in the late nineteenth century, during the reign of Naser Eddin Shah, a Qajar king (1840–1890). During this period, a number of workers, such as apprentices of craftsmen, had a "preproletarian and guild character," but the real workers were "those who, by dint of their social position [e.g., their concentration] and the sale of their labor power for a wage, had the greatest resemblance to the industrial proletariat."<sup>17</sup> In addition, he goes on to suggest that, "due to the abnormality of capitalist development in Iran," neither the industrial bourgeoisie nor the industrial proletariat was able to experience full-fledged development.<sup>18</sup> So, for Tabari, the form and the character of social classes are deduced directly from the character, "normality," or "abnormality" of the capitalist structure.

Even in this narrow framework, we are at times confronted with a *reified* history of working people; that is, we are presented with the history of the institutions rather than of the people involved in them. The major assumption is that the working class exists only as a formal grouping in conventional organizations such as trade unions or political parties. In short, these works are not the history of the *working class as*

such; that is, the history of working men and women, their life, culture, traditions, ideas, politics, *their* activities in the labor organizations, at the labor process, and in the labor market. Instead, they are histories of their formal *organizations* and the communist movement.

Finally, the historiographies seem to have, albeit in varying degrees, a teleological and essentialist conception of the working class. By analyzing the struggles for wages and conditions of the workers in the 1940s, Mehdi Kayhan wrote in 1954 that, "In an anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist revolution in Iran, the working class is the most consistent fighter against imperialism, and one which is able to resolve the problem of bourgeois-democratic, i.e. anti-feudalist, revolution."<sup>19</sup> There is no historical-empirical evidence to prove this assertion in the context of Iran. Again, over twenty-five years later, a left-wing journal, *Workers' News*, with reference to the struggle of the Iranian workers in the 1979 Revolution, asserted: "This responsibility still rests on the working class to organize itself and the people, and by the complete elimination of the exploiters, carry out its task of rebuilding the world. *This is the decree of history, and the working class will inevitably accomplish this task*" (emphasis added).<sup>20</sup> History in the past twelve years has shown that this expectation from the working class has not been realized. The preceding statement is derived not from a historical-empirical analysis of the *concrete* social forces (classes, groups, etc.) in Iran but rather represents a "logical" argument based on an evaluation of the *general* structure of the political economy, the position of the classes, the role of the state, and so on.<sup>21</sup>

*Theoretical Assumptions.* The "working class" of the Iranian Left represents a highly abstract (rather than a specific) reality, resulting from an abstract analysis of the general sociohistorical conditions of Iran. For the Iranian Left, the "working class" is omnipotent, without defect, sacred, just, and with a historical role. Irrespective of its will, desire, and ability, the working class is depicted as possessing the "responsibility for rebuilding the world," which history has assigned to it. The conceptualization seems to find justification in Marx.

For Marx and Engels, as is well known, "the question is not what this or that proletariat, or even the whole of the proletariat, at the moment considers its aim. The question is what the proletariat is and what, consequent upon that being, it will be compelled to do."<sup>22</sup> Marx's sociohistorical concept and indeed his Hegelian "abstract proletariat"

is later amended by his detailed *historical* analysis of the *real* classes in France<sup>23</sup> and his practical involvement in the international working-class movement. Although Marx seemed later to advocate a *contingent* theory of proletarian revolution, his early formulation of an "abstract proletariat" left a powerful impact on later followers. It underlay Lenin's dichotomy of trade union consciousness *vs.* social democratic/class consciousness. Lenin's pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?*, which carried the most systematic formulation of these concepts, was reconsidered by Lenin himself during the revolutionary episodes of 1905 and, especially, 1917. But perhaps it was Lukacs, more than Lenin, who seemed to take Marx's concept to construct his own dichotomy: "actual ideas," which people form about their class, *vs.* "ascribed class consciousness," referring to the ideas, sentiments, and so on, which the agents of class would have if they had grasped their class position in society and the real interests that it engenders.<sup>24</sup> By the notion of "ascribed class consciousness," Lukacs tends to rationalize the behavior of the working class: the proletariat would have developed if it had acted "rationally." This, of course, is a teleology. However, Lukacs, too, who started with the "essentialist" position of Marx in *The Holy Family*, concluded that "the objective theory of class consciousness is the theory of its objective possibility"<sup>25</sup> and that the conditions of this possibility has to be explored by the Marxists.

The traditional Iranian Left, although hardly familiar with Lukacs, is informed by Lenin's *What Is to Be Done* and shares quite a similar essentialist conceptualization of the working class. For instance, Bijan Jazani, a leading Marxist guerrilla theoretician in the early 1970s, grants not only a "specific historical interest" to the Iranian working class, but also a specifically "proletarian ideology." Marxism, according to Jazani, is the ideology of the working class. The fact is that Marxism has never been the ideology of the Iranian *workers*—not in the 1970s, nor at present, nor even during the 1940s when the Tudeh party had a great deal of political influence among them. Instead of the working class, as Jazani admits, it was a segment of the "rising petty-bourgeoisie," the intellectuals, who adhered to Marxism.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the Tudeh historians and the contemporary Left activists depict the working class in two contradictory fashions. On the one hand, the working class is depicted as omnipotent, perfect, special, with a historical "responsibility for rebuilding the world." And, on the other hand, it is portrayed as "wretched, deprived, with no rights, down at the lowest social scale, just like the slaves at the time of slavery,

deprived of education and literacy, under the devastating burden of labor."<sup>27</sup> How will such a working class "abolish" itself and liberate all of humanity? How are these discrepancies explained in Iranian Marxist literature?

At least four explanations are provided. The first views the growth of the working class in terms of the Marxian concepts of "class in itself" *vs.* "class for itself," as well as "actual power" *vs.* "potential power." The working class, according to this perspective, develops from a premature phase ("class in itself") to the stage of maturity ("class for itself"). Thus, in an evolutionary process, the "potential power" of the working class becomes actualized. To explain the reasons behind the failure of the Iranian workers to achieve their "potential power," Marxist historians such as Ehsan Tabari point to the "abnormality" of capitalist development in Iran.<sup>28</sup> Most commentators, however, focus on the political factors.

Political repression under the Shah, and this is the second explanation, prevented the working class from initiating even "economic" struggles, let alone "political" ones. The Shah's political control served as the major justification for Marxist guerrilla leaders to resort to armed struggles as opposed to "political work among the working class."<sup>29</sup> Pouyan, a leading guerrilla theoretician, wrote in 1970 that the workers "presume the power of their enemy to be absolute and their inability to emancipate themselves as absolute."<sup>30</sup> As we saw in the previous section, other labor historians have also stressed the factor of political control. Although political repression was crucial to the suppression of workers' organization and struggle after the 1953 coup that ousted the nationalist government of Dr. Musadeq, this factor *alone* cannot explain why the working class failed to reorganize. Such an explanation is simply political reductionism, a thesis that will be dealt with critically in the next section.

Third, the working class has not had "true" leadership. The guerrilla organizations blamed the Tudeh party for "betraying" the working class by its "opportunism," quietism, and compromise; and the Tudeh party in turn accused them of "voluntarism" and "terrorism." The Iranian "new Left" accused both of similar charges. Although extremely significant, a theoretical discussion of working-class leadership (*i.e.*, the issues of a vanguard party, spontaneity and the role of the trade unions) goes beyond the scope of this chapter. This absence of "true" leadership (a socialist party?) resulted, according to Iranian Marxist literature, in the working class embracing "religious," "petit bourgeoisie," and "populist" leadership especially during and after the Revolution of 1979. This

process is believed to have hampered the development of class consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, the Left has invariably made reference to the lack of class consciousness, or "proletarian culture," and an absence of a "true consciousness." Bijan Jazani acknowledged that, "without a proletarian culture, without a class consciousness and without an experience of struggle, a definition of the proletariat as the most revolutionary class in our society is simply incorrect."<sup>32</sup> A serious historical and contemporary analysis, by the traditional Left, of consciousness and culture among the Iranian working class is indeed rare. One reason, perhaps, relates to the way in which the Left perceives working-class consciousness and culture. A consciousness is presumed to be truly proletarian when it is *secular* and even *socialist*,<sup>33</sup> and the working class is considered to be conscious when it is organized in a "working-class party." This represents a fixed, definite, and a priori assumption of working-class consciousness. By presuming the universality of such consciousness, the commentators and historians of the Left overlook the fact that working-class consciousness and actions can take different and specific forms in different cultures. Such a postulation, therefore, would make unnecessary any historical or sociological enquiries about working-class subjectivity and culture: what is necessary instead, it would seem, are attempts to make the workers secular and "socialist," perhaps by recruiting them into "the working-class parties." In short, the Left wished to have the working class speak their (Left) language, use their terminology, and think along their lines.

An obvious elitism and Eurocentrism shades this understanding of class consciousness and culture. Rather than address the real experiences of life for Iranian workers, this school focuses on the unproblematic extension of the way in which class consciousness was understood (in terms of the organization of the workers in the social democratic parties) in Russia before the 1917 Revolution. The Russian experience had itself been influenced by concepts deriving from the English labor movement.<sup>34</sup>

This approach to understanding working-class consciousness led to the Left's dismissal of Islamic workers after the Revolution as simply *Hezbollahi* (generally pro-regime) and Islamic organizations as "pro-capitalist" and "reactionary."<sup>35</sup> Thus, the Islamic *Shuras* (councils)<sup>36</sup> and Islamic Associations, which played a significant role in working-class organization in the post-Revolution periods albeit along an exclusivist

and divisive line,<sup>37</sup> while they waged battles against the "liberal-professional" managements, remained uninvestigated.

In summary, Marxist activists in Iran have conceptualized the working class primarily in terms of its location in the class structure (structuralism), and its essential revolutionary role (essentialism), and by assuming a fixed and abstract "perfect" consciousness expressed in a universal form. By such a conceptualization, they tend to divorce workers from their true selves, their empirical reality.

*Social Democratic Historiography: The Working Class as the Labor Movement*

A new group of historians, with Marxist and social democratic orientations, has come to the fore by offering serious works of scholarship in labor history. In comparison with the works inspired by Soviet Marxism, the new contributors seem to transcend the simplistic models, economic reductionism, and the political bias of the former historiography. Because the works of these scholars focus overwhelmingly on the "labor movement" aspect of working class history, they may loosely fall under the rubric of the "social democratic" school of labor historiography.

The studies by Willem Floor (*Labour Unions, Laws and Conditions in Iran: 1900-41*), Ervand Abrahamian ("The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Labor Movement in Iran, 1941-53" and *Iran Between Two Revolutions*) and Habib Lajevardi (*Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*) constitute a significant shift in labor historiography. As the titles illustrate, these works put together, and especially Lajevardi's, cover almost the entire history of the labor movement in Iran, from its genesis in 1906 to the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

According to these sources, although some sort of labor organizations existed after 1906, "it was not until 1921 that a significant labor movement appeared in Iran."<sup>38</sup> The newly formed Communist and Social Democratic parties brought together the existing unions and established a Federation of Trade Unions with branches in the main cities and the oil fields. The "golden age" of unionism, 1918-1925 according to Floor, was brought to an end with the accession to power of Reza Shah, a move to which the pro-Soviet elements of the labor movement themselves contributed.<sup>39</sup> The unions in general at this time organized employees of small-scale workshops, trade clerks, construction workers, postmen, teachers, and the like. These constituted some 20 percent of

the industrial labor force in 1920. The unions published several regular papers, established clubs, organized strikes, celebrated May Day, and were involved in national political activities. In fact, according to Floor, the "primary aim of the labour movement [...] was the destruction of imperialism and capitalism."<sup>40</sup>

The new phase of the labor movement began with the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in August 1941, which destroyed Reza Shah's dictatorship. In this relatively free political climate, the labor movement, with the strong influence of the Tudeh party, was revived and developed to become the largest and most militant in the Middle East,<sup>41</sup> as well as the strongest in Asia and Africa.<sup>52</sup> The 1953 coup that toppled the nationalist government of Dr. Muhammed Musadeq and reinstated the Shah brought the organized activities of the Iranian labor movement to an almost complete halt. Thus, the history of labor in the post-coup era, until the revolutionary crisis of 1978, became the history of state suppression, working-class passivity and state-run or corporatist unions.

These studies provide the most systematic and detailed narratives on Iranian workers. My intention here is not so much to examine the factual accuracy of the narratives as to discuss how the authors have viewed and portrayed their subject matter and what implicit or explicit theoretical assumptions inform their stories. Broadly speaking, the studies provide an overwhelmingly *institutional* and *politicianist* approach to the study of the labor movement. The working class is depicted as those working *men* who have come together in the labor unions, primarily to pursue the political aim of opposing the government. Yet most of these studies avoid giving the predominant role to the "workers," who are largely ignored, and instead place the emphasis on the labor unions and the leadership or the "elites" of these organizations. This in itself assumes a concept of "labor movement" that implies an inherent unity and harmony between its various segments; that is, the leader, activists, and the rank and file members. We are, therefore, presented with little historical evidence with regard to the possible *conflicts* (of interest and vision) between the rank and file and the leadership of the movement.

Theoretical work on formal and bureaucratic organizations (defined by specialized functions, fixed rules, and hierarchy of authority) emphasizes an "essential" lack of harmony between the masses and officialdom. Michels's theory of the "iron law of oligarchy" explains oligarchical control *vs.* mass apathy in terms of "the technical competence

which definitely elevates the leaders above the mass and subjects the mass to the leaders."<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, the historian of the trade union movement must look at the *internal structure* of unions and the division of labor, highlighting union democracy or bureaucracy. Because, as Richard Hyman has suggested, the union is "first and foremost, an agency and a medium of power," it is involved not merely in an *external* relationship of control (i.e., in relation to the employers) but also in an *internal* one, with regard to the ordinary members, lay activists, local officials, and national leaders.<sup>44</sup>

In reality, then, complete harmony and unity do not result from a given labor movement; rather tension and conflict exists between top and bottom and among different segments of the rank and file. But how do the historians under investigation treat the issue of unity/conflict in the Iranian context? Floor does point out the conflict of interests between officialdom and mass of the workers, but finds the rank and file to be *subordinated* to the political whims of the "middle-class" leadership. The Marxist leadership, according to Floor, was "more interested in political matters than in bread and butter issues" or other concerns of the rank and file.<sup>45</sup> The appalling working conditions indicate that the unions did not pay much attention to these economic issues. Did the members of rank and file resist or reject those of their leaders who turned the trade unions into their own political apparatus? They did not. Their lack of experience, combined with their isolation, illiteracy, and expectation of paternalism were all contributing reasons why workers accepted the authority of their leaders. "The workers in general had neither the time and energy, nor the understanding and capacity to organise labour activities, let alone a labour movement."<sup>46</sup> In other words, the labor movement hardly represented a movement of the workers themselves. It was rather a movement of a movement of a handful of elites, the leadership, which had harnessed the masses. This explains, for Floor, why the labor movement failed when Reza Shah's autocracy took over.

On the other hand, both Lajevardi and Abrahamian seem to be adamant that the workers were not "like sheep who can be swayed in any direction by the demagogue of the day."<sup>47</sup> In fact, Lajevardi asserts that "Iranian workers frequently followed to the end those leaders in whom they believed—suffering hardship, imprisonment, and some cases, loss of life."<sup>48</sup> This conclusion presumes an essential unity of interests, internal cohesion, and strength in the labor movement. What, therefore,

caused the demise of the labor movement was not an internal factor, but an external one: political repression.<sup>49</sup> In fact, for many Left and liberal historians and activists, political repression during periods of autocratic rule solely accounts for the defeat and consistent nonorganization of labor, and this is considered especially true of the period 1965–1975.<sup>50</sup> The “political repression” thesis, however, is fueled by questionable theoretical premises, thus rendering it inadequate for an explanation for the failure of the labor movement during the reign of the Shah.

First, this prevailing argument assumes that a labor movement is merely the *formal* and *open* organization of labor, a view that limits its scope to official procedures on a national scale, thus reducing the forms of labor resistance to the conventional forms of stoppages or public demonstrations. This approach obviously ignores the *informal*, unofficial, and (especially) clandestine forms of resistance by workers at the level of the *labor process*. “At least as important, if not more so, [are],” according to van Onselen when describing the workers’ consciousness under an African labor-coercive economy, “the less dramatic, silent and often unorganized responses, and it is this latter set of responses which occurred on a day-to-day basis that reveal most about the functioning of the system and formed the warp and woof of worker consciousness.”<sup>51</sup>

Under repressive conditions, labor resistance may take the form of absenteeism, sabotage, disturbances, theft, religious practice, and poor quality production. Labor activism of this nature is not necessarily unplanned or purely “spontaneous,” as some historians and Marxist revolutionaries tend to suggest.<sup>52</sup> For instance, my interviews with factory workers in Tehran in 1980 suggest that stoppages and strikes in the early 1970s, under the Shah’s police state, were carefully thought out and planned.<sup>53</sup>

Second, political reductionism implies a zero-sum relation between the power of the state and the organization of political activities in general and labor in particular: when the state is strong, the opposition to it (including labor organization) is weak or nonexistent; and when the state is weak the opposition to it strong. Goran Therborn has satisfactorily argued that such a conclusion is unjustifiable.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, political reductionism rests on an assumption that establishes a *necessary* link between political conditions (freedom/restriction) and labor activities (organization/nonorganization). Thus, it is taken for granted that in the absence of political restrictions, the

labor force will automatically organize itself independently. I have argued that the link between political conditions and labor activities is only contingent.<sup>55</sup> The relationship is mediated by the form of workers' consciousness, the degree of organizational tradition, leadership quality, and the extent of corporate ideology. For instance, where the unions are dominated by the corporatist and paternalist ideology of the workers and the leaders alike, a labor movement can hardly be considered as truly independent, even if it may operate openly. Some corporatist labor movements in Latin America, in Mexico, for example, illustrate the point.<sup>56</sup>

In summary, the new breed of labor historians on Iran has made a significant contribution to Iranian labor studies, in that they have rescued the workers and their movements from the dismissive treatments of the elitist, orientalist, and modernizationist schools of historiography. Also, the studies have transcended the teleological approach and highly abstract generalization, by the Marxist activists, of workers' behavior. The narratives, however, have stopped short of examining the working class beyond the class structure, institutions of the unions, and workers' and workers' links with the formal political parties. The position of workers in the community, family, cultural, and ideological settings has consequently been overlooked. In short, the social democratic current of labor historiography in Iran is informed by structuralist, politicist (an exclusive focus on conventional politics), and institutional perspectives, in which the status of workers' *subjectivity* is, consequently, missing.<sup>57</sup>

*An Islamic Historiography: The Working Class as the "Mustaz'afin"*

The ideologues and the leaders of the Islamic regime in Iran have advocated two concepts of work and the working class. The first is an *instrumentalist* or pragmatic view. This has been developed in response to the politicoeconomic exigencies of postrevolutionary Iran. The second is one based on the *ideological* (Islamic) orientation of the ruling clergy.

The crisis of productivity in industry, along with ideological control by the state of the working class during the war with Iraq, was combined with the government's Islamic ideology to advocate work as a religious duty. "The hours of work," declared President Khamaneii, on May Day 1981, "are the moments of worshiping of God (*ibadat*), paying debt to martyrs, the deprived people, and the downtrodden of society. Wasting

even one moment is equivalent to violating the rights of the deprived and to disrespecting the blood of the martyrs."

Based upon a *badith* (saying) of the Prophet Mohammed that says that "to work is like jihad in the service of God," the instrumentalist religious conception of work was widely employed by the ruling clergy to secure the cooperation of the workers in raising production. It advocated that the performance of work brings rewards that are not material but spiritual, granted not in this world but in the next. However, the penalty for misconduct is a matter for worldly punishment, as well as God's wrath in the world to come. This view was widely propagated by the special factory clergy, who were dispatched by the ruling Islamic Republican party in the early 1980s to spread the government's brand of Islam in the workplaces.<sup>58</sup>

Accompanying their instrumentalist (tactical) application of work ideology, the ruling clergy also instilled *ideological* conceptions of work. One version shares a great similarity with the work ideology of early Christianity; that is, work serves primarily as a means of promoting the health of the body and soul, guarding against evil, idleness, and decadence. It is in this context that the Ayatollah Khomeini addressed the workers: "One day of your life is worth all the lives of the capitalists and feudalists put together."<sup>59</sup> Also, primarily as a reaction to socialist and radical views on labor, the regime granted great dignity and religious piety to labor and the laborer. The case is exemplified in the widely expressed *badith* that the "Prophet Muhammed kisses the hands of a laborer" and Khomeini's saying that "Labor is the manifestation of God."

The Islamic ideologues, in addition, have offered two images of the "working class": universal and particular. On the one hand, the *universal image* (the "human dimension" of workers) postulates that "all human beings are the *bande*h (slave) of God; all are *kargars* [workers]; and every one works for the other. In this way, they set in motion the machinery of life and human evolution. In short, this is the divine conception."<sup>60</sup> This concept is spelt out more clearly by ex-President Khamaneii: "the value of work and the worker in Islam is higher than in any other materialist ideology. Following the Islamic world-view, we view work and worker to hold divine value, not merely material value. A worker is one who, obeying the command of God, endeavors to develop the earth and its materials."<sup>61</sup>

On the other hand, the *particular image* presents the worker as one involved in a wage-labor relationship.<sup>62</sup> But the worker, in this sense,

is essentially a mere commodity the procedures for whose exchange, according to the labour minister in 1981, Ahmad Tavakkoli, are to be found in the section on *ijareh* in the Islamic *fiqh*. The term refers to hiring or renting objects and animals. As opposed to *ijareh*, the Perso-Arabic word *istikhdam* (literally asking to do a service, and equivalent to employment) was normally used, in prerevolutionary Iran, to refer to hiring *free* labor.

Although in legal terminology the term *worker* was understood in its *particular* meaning, as an object to be hired for a wage, its *universal* conception tended to be highlighted in public discourse. In the universal conception, the "working class" is stripped of its "classness" and is depicted as an integral segment of the broad category of *mustaz'afin* (downtrodden), the oppressed segment of the Islamic *ummat*. This view of "worker" relates to the model used by the Islamic ideologues to conceptualize social stratification.

As has been mentioned, according to the regime's Islamic thinkers every person in society is a *kargar*, a worker, in one form or another: they are all the "slaves" of God. What distinguishes among them is not the fact of property ownership, prestige, or market capacity, but the degree to which each has incorporated "justice" in his or her work and life; that is, the extent to which one is close to God. According to this view, class distinction, in any system, emerges when those who hold power and property get involved in an "unjust" accumulation of wealth (or *ifraat* and *takathor*). Capitalism, as such, is not an un-Islamic and illegitimate economic system. It becomes so only when accumulation is carried out through such un-Islamic methods as "*riba* [usury], lying, betraying, fraud" and reluctance to pay a fair wage.<sup>63</sup> Once these evils are removed from the society and when everyone, in whatever "useful" occupation, works justly, then "the conflict between the worker and employer would wither away from the world."<sup>64</sup>

For the ideologues of the Islamic regime, therefore, "justice" is the basis for social demarcation and stratification. The relations of injustice divide society into two broad social groupings: *mustakbarin* and *mustaz'afin*. In the Quran, the term *mustakbarin* refers to the "advantaged" group such as Haroun, and *mustaz'afin* describes the "disadvantaged" groups, such as the people of *Bani-Israel*. The dichotomy, therefore, signifies social status determined by the relations of justice/injustice. In Iran, after the revolution, the term *mustakbarin* was used by the Islamic leaders to refer to all those who have acquired power and property through "illegitimate" and "unjust" channels. They are the enemies of Islam and the Islamic

*ummat*. The *mustaz'afin*, on the other hand, included all those who were "oppressed" by the injustice of the *mustakbarin*. These may include the rural and urban poor, the unemployed, shantytown dwellers, and the like, who make up the backbone of the Islamic *ummat*.

In this concept of social stratification, the "working class" is dissolved within, and represented by, the broader category of *mustaz'afin*, the downtrodden. As *mustaz'afin*, the working class would share the same status and significance as the other "oppressed" Islamic masses. In this image, not only did the working class lose its position as a "special" class and its "revolutionary potential," as understood by the Marxists, it also lost its "classness" in terms of its position in relation to the means of production. On May Day 1981, President Khamenei declared in an address to the workers: "The workers must approach the labour questions through the Islamic view. The differences in interests and trades must not divide the various layers of population, must not damage the Islamic brotherhood. The *ilbadi* [atheist] ideologies attempt to use these means to define the workers as a class, so separating them from the Islamic *ummat* (people) and crushing its unity."

The denial of the working class as a class was accompanied by the removal from official discourse of those manifestations and symbols that express it: by changing its name from the word *kargar* (worker) to *karpazir* (one who agrees to do work). This seemed, at the same time, a strategy through which the Labor Ministry attempted to end the idea of *kargar* so widely associated with the term *socialism*, the Left, and *inqelab-i kargari*, "workers' revolution."

In short, the ideologues of the Islamic Republic of Iran advocate a populist-moralistic definition of the working class. The working class is depicted not on the basis of relations of property, income, or prestige, nor in terms of consciousness, but in terms of its relation to "justice." The theoretical implication of this assumption is that the working class is subsumed and incorporated into the broad category of the "oppressed or disadvantaged Islamic mass," the *mustaz'afin*.

Identifying the working class as *mustaz'afin* displays an interesting model that seems to allow for a conceptual resolution of the problem of the *alliance* of the "popular classes," because the concept of *mustaz'afin* includes all those classes (the working class, the peasantry, the urban poor, and the petit bourgeoisie, etc.) that are considered to be in a "disadvantaged" position vis-à-vis the *mustakbarin*, the "upper classes." Such an alliance therefore exhibits an ideal social basis for the Islamic state in Iran today.

The model, however, raises a number of problems. The major problem has to do with the fact that the concept of "injustice" remains vague and undefined. Unlike the concept of exploitation, which has a definite meaning, "injustice" or "unfairness" remains cloudy, unspecified, its meaning changing with time, place, and culture. On the other hand, classifying a large group of people (workers, peasants, the destitute, etc.) on the basis of their shared experience vis-à-vis social "injustice" may certainly differentiate them collectively from other people who lack that experience. But the identity and consciousness that these "disadvantaged" groups may share does not represent a *class* consciousness, but rather some form of social identity similar to that which corresponds to identification of gender, race, or nation. As we will discuss later, the notion of *class* identity is necessarily linked to "class position," or the relationship to the means and conditions of production, although this element alone cannot determine a class.

#### *Conceptualizing the Working Class: Some Theoretical Remarks*

None of the preceding historiographical accounts exhibits a sound conceptual ground for a complete history of the Iranian working class. Some tend to ignore its existence by, a priori, denying it as a socially meaningful category (the elitist and orientalist writers). Others assume a predetermined historical character, a political ideology and cultural traits for the working class (the Marxists). They, in fact, tell us what the working class ought to be, rather than what it really is. Still other texts, those of the labor historians, depict only part of its reality. And finally, the Islamic ideologues incorporate it into and identify it with a larger social category, the "oppressed," which comprises not only workers but also other social classes and groups: the peasantry, urban poor, the petit bourgeoisie, and so on.

The perspectives of the overall historical and political writings put together are, thus, shaded by elitism, essentialism, political-institutional reductionism, and moralism. Within these theoretical frameworks, the working class is invariably conceptualized in terms of its position in the social and economic structure: sometimes in terms of its relation to the means of production (among the Left activists and the labor historians), or employment in industry (among the elitist and orientalist writers), or in terms of its position vis-à-vis "justice" (the Islamic

theoreticians). Alternatively, a sound historiography would be one that would transcend the inadequacies primarily of structuralism and essentialism by portraying the working class in its totality. To this end, I want to propose that "class" is more than simply class position, the relationship of the agents to the means of production or their market capacity. Rather, it must be seen as a historically specific form of consciousness expressed, within the context of a certain (class) structure, in a complex of discursive fields and practices. In this perspective, class and class consciousness are viewed to be identical.

A structuralist perspective views class as a "thing," the existence of which presumes or is reflected in class consciousness. Thus, the objective position of class, and "objective interests" deriving from that class position, predetermines the class consciousness. The fact, however, is that the notion of "interests," which is meaningful only when it is perceived and articulated, is part and parcel of consciousness. And, in addition, as Stedman Jones has argued, interests do not pre-exist their expression.<sup>65</sup> In other words, class is the same as class consciousness, and class consciousness can be manifested only through language, "since there is no social reality outside or prior to language."<sup>66</sup> Therefore, to make sense of the working class we must start not from the structure and "objective interests" to arrive at a class consciousness, but from the language of the class to characterize its political movement. Similarly, to make sense of the character of a labor struggle, the historian should look at what the participants say or write, instead of assuming that their very class position predetermines the nature of their movement.

One problem with Stedman Jones's concept of language in his historical analysis is the implication that symbols represent definite meanings. This conclusion is problematic, because it is possible to assume that people may deduce *different* meanings from the expression of the same symbols. This is especially true in socially fluid periods in the history of a given society. This problem in Stedman Jones has to do, as Joan Scott notes, with his *literal* perception of language. Stedman Jones "reads 'language' only literally with no sense of how facts are constructed."<sup>67</sup> Attempting to rescue the role of "language" in historiography, Scott redefines *language* not simply as "words in their literal usage but [as] creation of meaning through differentiation."<sup>68</sup> In other words, historians should not simply take the words at their face value, but should see what, in fact, the words actually mean. In this sense, class is perceived as an identity resting on a set of differentiations

expressed in language defined as a complex process of the construction of meaning.

The conceptualization of class suggested by Stedman Jones and amended by Scott overcomes a great many of the problems attached to a structuralist conception. However, it does not escape a number of difficulties of its own. First, the status of "structure" in the analysis is either totally missing (as in Scott) or treated very cursorily (in Stedman Jones). I would like to emphasize that the element of "class position" is essential for a conceptualization of class, although, as we have shown so far, it is by no means sufficient on its own. If this element is removed from the definition, and class is perceived *only* in terms of an identity resting on a set of differentiations, then "class" can easily be confused with and subsumed into other forms of identity, such as gender, nation, ethnicity, and so on.

Second, Scott's insistence on the role of language, perceived as the creation of meaning, in historiography seems well justified. However, this notion does have certain shortcomings as there can be more than one interpretation of a "text", be it spoken or written. Which interpretation is correct? What criteria can we employ to decode the "language" to arrive at the "true" meaning of text? Here, I believe, the role of the "objective position"—the social background or material conditions—becomes prominent. What is needed, I would suggest, is a conceptualization of class that rests primarily on the notion of consciousness, culture, and identity (expressed in language in action), but also incorporates the element of the "class position." We do not yet possess such a comprehensive model.

E. P. Thompson's notion of "experience" represents an attempt to bridge the gap between the class position and consciousness. According to Thompson, members of a class come to feel and articulate the identity of their interests as a result of their common (class) *experiences*, which are determined largely by *class position*. *Class consciousness* is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: in traditions, value systems, ideas, and so on.<sup>69</sup>

But how do we identify this consciousness? In other words, at what point can we claim that Iranian workers hold a "class consciousness" and, therefore, constitute a class? This is a no less controversial issue than others we have discussed so far. We noted that the Iranian Marxists, following Lenin, tend to equate class consciousness with secular socialist ideology. Eric Hobsbawm, for his part, subjects a (working) class

formation to a set of definite conditions. For him a working class may be recognizable by "the physical environment in which they lived, by a *style of life* and leisure, by a certain class consciousness increasingly expressed in a secular tendency to *join unions* and to identify with a *class party of labour*" (emphasis added).<sup>70</sup> And, as we saw earlier, E. P. Thompson formulates class consciousness in terms of a set of cultural practices.

Are the factors suggested by these historians—that is, secular ideology, organization in the unions and the party of labor, identical styles of life and leisure, secular ideology, and cultural self-activity—*necessary* conditions by which to identify and study the Iranian working class? I contend that they represent *sufficient* but not necessary conditions. Hobsbawm and Thompson (and to some extent Lenin) in fact formulate the particular experience and character of the *English* working class (see note 4). This working class developed in a particular cultural setting characterized by the "freeborn Englishman," liberalism, the traditions of self-help, and so on.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, a generalization of the previous conceptualizations represent either Euro- or, even more precisely, Anglocentrism. The consciousness of the working class, as such, cannot be presumed to be as necessarily secular, or socialist, or manifested in the organization of a party of labor. Workers' consciousness is historically specific and can assume different forms in different historical conditions. Religion, such as Islam, may well be a means to articulate class consciousness among certain Muslim workers.

So what we need is a conceptualization of class and class consciousness that can accommodate the cultural peculiarities of the societies in which workers are studied. To this end, we may speak of a working *class* when the workers come to perceive, and be perceived by others, as having a common and distinctive position and interests among themselves, which differ from (and are even opposed to) those of other people: and when this perception, among the workers and other people, is expressed in social, political, and cultural discourses or practices. A class understood in this way, then, becomes a socially meaningful category and, therefore, an effective social force. Such a perception of class (consciousness) would not be concerned with whether the workers are secular, socialist, or religious, "progressive" or "reactionary." The ideological traits it may uphold—its "reactionary" or "progressive" character, secular or religious tendencies—become a function not of "structural determination" but, simply and significantly, of struggle.

### "Workers" and the "Working Class" in Iranian History

In this section, an attempt to depict the Iranian working class in terms of the preceding theoretical understanding is made by trying to show the way in which workers were perceived both by themselves and in the public and official discourse. I do realize that my analysis is bound to be cursory in view of the fact that the original data needed for this purpose is, at present, inadequate.

#### *The "Workers" in Ancient Iran*

Some accounts speak about "workers" as if they have existed continuously throughout Iranian history. In such accounts, the working class ceases to be a historical phenomenon. For example, a publication in 1971 by the Ministry of Labor, *The History and the Conditions of Work in Iran: From Antiquity up to the Present* (Tehran), portrays a "class of workers" which had originated during the Sassanian dynasty (A.D. 224-641). This "class of workers" include all those casual laborers (*agir*) involved in nonagricultural production, ranging from handicrafts, construction, and services through "wage work" or "nonwage" labor. Even independent writers, such as Farhang Qasemi, have also extended the concept of the working class to include a social group whose existence dates back to pre-Islamic Iran.<sup>72</sup> The same is also true of Gholamreza Insafpour who speaks of different categories of "workers": "agricultural workers," "free workers," "craft workers," and so on.<sup>73</sup>

It is not totally arbitrary to apply the term *workers* to the pre-Islamic era as well as to other periods that preceded the emergence of capitalism in Iran. In fact, neither the term *kargar* (worker) nor the reality of "wage labor" (*kargar-i mozdour*) is new, as the origins of both can be traced right back to the era of Achaemenids (500 B.C.).

The term *kargar*, the equivalent of "worker" that we use today in Iran to refer to the class of wage workers, originates in the Avesta, the holy book of the Zoroastrians. The Avesta appears to refer to *kargar* as a manual-physical laborer who works on the land. Incidentally, the agricultural laborer and indeed agricultural work in general possess a high status in this holy book.<sup>74</sup>

At the same time, in ancient Iran, some sort of "wage work" also existed.<sup>75</sup> Olmstead, a historian of ancient Iran, describes the agricultural labor force during the Achaemenid dynasty in terms of intermediate

landlords, the smallholders who might or might not own a few slaves or "free workers," the farmers tied to the land, and finally the vast group of the *kbushnashins*. These last constituted a segment of the rural population who were not tied to land, and so enjoyed a certain degree of mobility. It was, by and large, the destitute *kbushnashins* who, for the sake of sheer survival, would eventually resort to "wage labor."<sup>76</sup> There were, in addition, other categories of *kargars*: (a) the craft workers (*kargar-i pishivar*) who were involved in the production of armory, clay cups, rugs, linen, and wooden goods;<sup>77</sup> (b) seasonal laborers: (c) the "free workers" who, in reality, were "owned" by the rural smallholders;<sup>78</sup> and finally (d) the laborers of public works, such as roads, mines, and so on who, in fact, were unfree.

A more recent authoritative work on ancient Iran by Dandamaev and Lukonin offers an exceptional insight into the life of the plebians in Achaemenid period.<sup>79</sup> On the whole, these authors also identify three types of "workers": "free," "semifree," and "unfree." "Certain numbers of skilled craftsmen (weavers, shoemakers, architects, etc.) were also slaves;<sup>80</sup> and some slaves were also used as houseworkers, although they worked mostly in agriculture. Nor were all laborers slaves, however. Temples and private slave owners were frequently forced to employ skilled and free laborers to perform difficult types of work, for instance, in agriculture, handicrafts, and construction.<sup>81</sup> Large numbers of these workers were not exactly "free," because they would be "subject to punishment by the king" if they refused to work for such "employers" (as, for instance, the temple of Eanna). Some laborers worked specifically in the royal household and the households of Persian nobles.<sup>82</sup> These were called *kurtash*, and were, by and large, free.

As for the concept "wage" it seems that it was overwhelmingly in kind, in the form of goods such as wine, sheep, grain, flour, and beer.<sup>83</sup> But as money per se developed in the economy, the reward for labor could also be in terms of a money wage, especially silver.<sup>84</sup> In fact, Olmstead reports that some evidence from Persepolis suggests that the wages of each class of workers—children, women, wage workers, or craftsman—were precisely specified by the authorities.<sup>85</sup>

So far, it is clear that the term *kargar*, "worker," had emerged long before, and that some sort of wage labor also existed in ancient Iran. Yet it seems equally clear that the meaning of the word *kargar* and the nature of wage work in ancient Iran were quite different from those in Iran today. And therefore the continuity that some historians have implied

for the prevalence of the category of wage labor throughout Iranian history simply does not hold. In the Avesta, the term *kargar* referred simply to manual-physical work, primarily in agriculture. And the kinds of work relations in ancient Iran that are described by historians as *kar-i mozdouri* (literally, wage labor) or *kar-i azad* (literally, free laborer) can hardly be compared to today's free-wage labor. In ancient Iran, "wage labor" represented some kind of physical labor carried out by those who did not control the conditions and outcome of their work, but whose relationship to the "employer" varied a great deal: from being "free," semi-free (debt bondage, indentured labor), to partly or fully a slave. In addition, a free market with the principle of free contract between two free individuals, normal today, hardly existed then.

*The Turn of the Century: From Amalajaat to Kargars*

Following the Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century a vast number of Persian terms were replaced by Arabic words. Therefore from the beginning of the Islamic era up to the end of the Qajar dynasty, in the first decade of the twentieth century the word *kargar* was almost absent from the public and official languages. The prevalence of Islam in Iran changed fundamentally the rigid "class structure" of the Sassanid period. After a few centuries of instability and chaos, the Irano-Islamic class structure established itself with the emergence of the Safavid dynasty. The main elements of this class structure, which continued until the end of the nineteenth century, included the ruling class, the bureaucratic middle class, the merchants and industrialists, the clergy, laborers, peasants, and nomadic people.<sup>86</sup>

Toward the end of the Qajar dynasty, the elements of the social hierarchy, in the language of the First Majlis after the Constitutional Revolution, comprised the Qajar royal family; *ulama* (the clergy); *ashraf* (the nobles) and *a'ayan* (the notables), including the *ummal* of the government; *tojjar* (the merchants); *mallakin* (the landlords); *sallabin* (the peasants); and *isnaf* (the "guilds").<sup>87</sup> It appears from this that the *kargars*, as a coherent social category, did not exist or at least was not recognized officially. We know, however, that certain "economic classes," according to Abrahamian, "objectively" existed in the Qajar period; and these included (a) "the landed upper class," which comprised the Qajar dynasty and local elites, (b) the "propertied middle classes" (merchants, craftsmen, and the clergy); (c) "urban wage earners"; and (d) the rural population, that is, the peasantry, and the tribal masses.<sup>88</sup>

In this list, the category of "urban wage earners" refers to the casual, seasonal, and unskilled construction laborers. At this time, this kind of labour force was widely referred to as *amalajaat*, not *kargars*.<sup>89</sup> *Al-Maathir Va Al-Athar* (1886/1984), by M. H. Itimad Al-Saltaneh, represents perhaps the best available source on the economy of the period, as it contains a detailed classification of occupational categories of employees in the ministries and the Royal Court. This official document describes, for instance, the janitors, mule and camel attendants, carriage drivers, warehouse employees, and so on as *amalajaat*.<sup>90</sup> The term, therefore, was used to identify the general category of urban laborers, but particularly a category of low-status, unskilled manual workers. Nowhere in these documents, memoirs, and official writings does one encounter the word *kargar*. It remained in the background, most notably in the *Shahname*, the epic work of the Persian poet, Ferdowsi.<sup>91</sup>

The term reappeared in public discourse only with the development of the "modern" manufacturing industry, toward the end of the Qajar period. The term specifically referred to the wage workers of the newly established factories. The first wave of industrialization began in the 1890s through the initiative of indigenous merchants such as Haj Amin Al-Zarb and foreign, especially Russian and German, capital. These industries concentrated on silk, textile, oil, wood, sugar, soap, oil, and the like. By the turn of the century, some sixty-one factories had been established, in which 1,700 workers were employed.<sup>92</sup> The labor force engaged in "modern industry," including oil and railways, reached some 6,700 by 1910, but this number still could not match the labor force of over 100,000 in the handicraft workshops.<sup>93</sup> "Modern industry," however, continued to grow rapidly in subsequent periods, particularly the 1930s, 1950s, and, at an accelerating rate, the 1970s.

The reappearance in general usage of the concept *kargar* as a social category seems to have been initiated by the Social Democrats, the left-wing intellectuals of the Constitutional Revolution (1905), people like Mirza Aghakhan Kirmani. These intellectuals were influenced by nineteenth-century European socialist thought, in which the "working class" was a main element.<sup>94</sup> Other protagonists of Social Democratic thought included Mirza Malkum Khan and Abdul-Rahim Talebov, both of whom, advocated "land to the tiller."<sup>95</sup> Thus, their interest in the "workers" derived not from the presence of a strong working class, but from the theoretical significance attached to the "workers" in the European socialist literature that these intellectuals had adopted. Yet

most of these intellectuals focused their attention and advocacy on the conditions of the peasantry, which given the predominantly agricultural nature of the economy in Iran in the 1900s was perhaps logical.

According to Adamyyat, the historian of the Mashruti, "it was in *The Principles of the Science of the Wealth of the Nations*, written by Mirza Muhammad Ali Khan Foroughi (1323 A.H.L. or 1900), that a reference was first made to the *kargaran* (plural form of *kargar*) as a new social class."<sup>96</sup> The focus on "workers" as a social force came later, especially in the 1920s, primarily through communist activists such as Soltanzade who spoke of the *kargaran* as a significant social class, which existed along with "the peasantry, petit bourgeoisie (industrial and small landholders), feudal lords [landowners], the intermediate bourgeoisie, the big bourgeoisie, and the industrial bourgeoisie, which, quantitatively, is still small."<sup>97</sup>

For these intellectuals and activists, "classness" was a function of economic structure. The left-wing thinkers of the Mashruti had learned from the experience of the European socialist movement that the "working class," especially those members of it in modern manufacturing industry, were the prime agents of socioeconomic change. Applied to the social framework of Iran, the term *working class* could include only a tiny fraction of the population. Yet its emergence into the vocabulary of the people of Iran indicated an historically novel social group.

#### 1940s: The Development of a Class Consciousness?

But did this group of workers constitute a social class? The truth is that although the left-wing writers referred to *kargaran* as a class, they really imported this concept from Europe. The nonideological writings on workers, such as an unpublished piece by Man Khanan (*Risala-i Siasi*, manuscript, 1314 A.H.L. [1893]) still described the "workers" in terms of *amala* and *fa'ala*;<sup>98</sup> and terminologies like *taa'ifa* (kin), not *tabaqa* (class), still were used to describe the workers in their collectivity.

During the following years, especially the 1940s, however, certain indications of a development of a class consciousness among the Iranian workers were evident. The decade of the 1940s followed a new wave of industrialization under Reza Shah, which increased the physical number of modern factory workers. In the period between 1930 and 1941, Reza Shah had set in motion a \$260 million industrial program, and a similar amount had been invested in the railways.<sup>99</sup> So the number

of modern industrial workers also increased during the same period, reaching, in 1940, an estimated total of 263,000, compared with 250,000 laborers in the traditional craft industry.<sup>100</sup>

Three developments represented a sense of classness among the workers of modern sector at this conjuncture: trade union organization, affiliation to a "party of labor," and voting behavior. These served as the institutional mechanisms through which the workers would articulate the identity of their economic interests. The first sign of trade unionism dates back to 1906, but it was not until 1921 that a significant labor movement appeared in Iran.<sup>101</sup> The period between 1918-1925 is described, by Willem Floor, as the "golden age" of unionism.<sup>102</sup> After over a decade of inactivity due to Reza Shah's repression, trade union organizations reemerged vigorously. Following the collapse of Reza Shah's regime after the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941, a new free political climate was created, and the labor movement, under the banner of the United Central Council of the Unified Trade Unions of Iranian Workers (C.C.F.T.U.), with the strong influence of the Tudeh party, was revived and developed to become the largest and most militant in the Middle East. This state of affairs lasted until the coup of 1953 that toppled the nationalist government of Musadeq, after which an era of repression prevailed in the country until the 1979 revolution.

The workers were also organized as a political unit, in the Tudeh (Communist) party. The Tudeh, which claimed to represent the interests of the working class and other masses of the people, became the strongest opposition party in the 1940s. It was able to send its own representatives to the *Majlis*, the Iranian Parliament; secured a great deal of influence in the army; had prominent sympathizers among the intellectuals, artists, and writers; and, perhaps most important, exerted an effective power in the streets and the factories.<sup>103</sup>

Finally, the political differentiation and conflict between the workers and their employers (as a social group) manifested itself also at the electoral level. Ervand Abrahamian reports how, in the early 1950s, the class division within the bazaar (considered to be dominated by paternalistic labor relations) was manifestly revealed during the elections when employees consistently voted for the Tudeh party and the employers in general supported the conservative and liberal politicians.

[A]n electoral survey submitted to the prime minister in 1951 showed class lines divided almost all the craft and trade guilds of the Tehran bazaar. For example, the shoe manufacturers backed a pro-British

politician, but their 5,000 workers sympathized with the Tudeh: the owners of barber shops supported Mosaddeq and Kashani, whereas their employees leaned towards the Tudeh; the 400 bathhouse owners favored the Imam Jom'eh, while many of the 4,000 bath attendants were affiliated with C.C.F.T.U.; the 250 clothes manufacturers helped conservative candidates, but their 8,000 tailors backed the Tudeh; and the 1,914 coffeehouse keepers endorsed Mosaddeq, Kashani, and the Imam Jom'eh, whereas their 4,500 assistants and waiters favored the C.C.F.T.U.<sup>104</sup>

These three developments—organization in the labor unions (C.C.F.T.U.) and in the party of labor (Tudeh party), as well as political partisanship (voting behavior)—seem to fulfill some of the conditions that Eric Hobsbawm attaches to the development of a working-class consciousness in England between 1880–1914. However, an additional condition, uniformity in life-styles or cultural practices, remains. This factor seems to be a major indicator of class consciousness in Hobsbawm's scheme. As for Iran the labor historians do not provide us with any evidence of this sort. We do not know to what extent, if any, the workers shared a common way of life, traditions, institutions, and value systems as the cultural manifestation of their shared experiences. In addition, one must ask to what extent the traditional forms of identity such as communalism, ethnicity, regionalism, age, and gender hindered the development of a common identity among the workers during this period. Although a seemingly strong trade union movement certainly existed, we do not know whether the C.C.F.T.U. was a union of the workers, reflecting the economic desire of the masses of the rank and file, or whether it was simply an instrument in the hands of the official leaders. The same set of questions can be posed with reference to the Tudeh party, if it is seen to represent the Iranian workers in the 1940s and the early 1950s. One should perhaps hesitate to consider voting behavior as a historical document if, for example, the voters are bussed to the polling stations by the promise of a free meal or the fear of losing jobs. I am in no way intending to suggest that the Tudeh voters were so persuaded, but simply insisting that these issues have to be clear for the historian. In short, a record of exactly what the masses of the workers themselves felt about their leaders and their organizations, about themselves and the other social classes, would be significant and best discovered by examining their discursive expressions in the political, social and cultural fields. Only through such sources may an understanding of working-class consciousness be possible.

*The Postcoup Era: Growth, Suppression, and a Sense of Classness*

The coup of 1953 totally eliminated those material-"institutional" indicators (in Hobsbawm's formulation) of working class consciousness; that is, the trade unions and the Tudeh Communist party. The postcoup regime in Iran forbade the workers to join independent unions and to join their own chosen political organizations. Instead, the state launched its own corporatist and factory-based workers' syndicates, which were infiltrated by the secret police, or SAVAK, agents.<sup>105</sup> The role of "language" as a tool of historical study of class (consciousness) becomes evident especially in conditions prevailing at times such as those during postcoup Iran, where the institutional manifestations of classness were forcefully eliminated by repression. That said, a discussion of the particular features of working-class consciousness under the Muhammad Reza Shah's dictatorship follows.

Writers such as Homa Katouzian have argued that notions of class (as consciousness) and class conflict are totally irrelevant to the Iranian situation. Class conflict, according to Katouzian, played no role in the political development of Iran. Instead, for him, owing to despotism, "Down to the present day, the clearest line of social demarcation (even stratification) has been that which divides the state (*dawlat*) from the people (*mellat*)."<sup>106</sup>

Katouzian's reference to the *mellat/dawlat* dichotomy as a language of stratification and conflict in contemporary Iran is significant, because he goes beyond a simple structuralist deduction of conflict from class position. However, some evidence in the realm of social discourse points to the prevalence of some form of class demarcation and conflict among the *mellat*, the "people" themselves, notably between workers, on the one hand, and employers and the state, on the other.

During the twentieth century the definition of the words *kargar* and *karfarma* (boss or capitalist) has been the cause of a long struggle. During Reza Shah's rule, and as a reaction to the activity of the newborn labor movement, a Majlis deputy totally denied the existence of workers (*kargaran*) in Iran. "We do not yet have workers in Iran," he declared. "Every one is an employer."<sup>107</sup> In the early 1940s, during the reemergence of a militant trade union movement under the Tudeh party, the use of the term *kargar*, "worker," was banned.<sup>108</sup> It continued, however, to be used. Later, in the 1970s, during the heyday of economic development as well as the anti-Shah armed struggles, the state ideologues declared

that the term *proletariat* (then used widely in Iranian Marxist literature) was no longer appropriate to Iranian workers; only the Western working class had launched a "class war." Similarly, it was suggested that, the "boss" was no longer a "*karfarma* which is reminiscent of class privileges," but a "*karamaa* which is appropriate to the hearty cooperation of all groups in the new system of production . . . in the era of [White] Revolution."<sup>109</sup> The postrevolutionary Islamic ideologues were no exception. In fact, even more than their predecessors, they attempted to obscure the identity of the workers by giving the latter a new name, *karpazir* (one who agrees to do work) instead of *kargar*, and incorporating it into the broad category of the *mustaz'afin* (the downtrodden).

In addition, workers came to be viewed by other social groups, especially the state authorities, as a *tabaqeh-i ijtimaii*, a social class, in the sense of a group of people with a common identity. Historically, the term *tabaqeh* (class) was used loosely, and perhaps for the first time, during the first Majlis (1906–7), to describe any social category (such as a religious minority) and social orders such as *ashraf* (the nobles), *a'ayan* (notables), *ulama* (the clergy), *tojjar* (the merchants), and so on.<sup>110</sup> It was not until the late 1940s and 1950s that the term *tabaqeh* came into general public (not merely the left-wing intellectual) usage, indicating socioeconomic differentiation and conflict. Abrahamian reports that in the sixteenth Majlis (1948–1958), some twenty two deputies described their society as divided into conflicting classes.<sup>111</sup> Perhaps the impact of the Tudeh party and the militancy of the industrial workers who seemed to be struggling through the language of *tabaqeh* (class) and conflict, should be emphasized.

During the 1960s and the 1970s, notwithstanding the suppression of independent labor unions and political parties, the working class experienced such "unprecedented growth" that, in the words of Asadulla Alam, minister for the imperial court in 1976, it became "one of the [socially] effective classes in our society."<sup>112</sup> The development of the working class as the major "economic force" in society was invariably acknowledged publicly by the state officials. The pages of *The White Revolution*, authored by the late Shah, contains a recognition of this economic power in various forms. The government funded research and publications to deal with this new economic force. One such publication, *Kargar-i Irani dar Iran-i Imrouz* [The Iranian Worker in Today's Iran] by Fereydoun Kavousi, was recommended by the royal court. Acknowledging the economic and social significance of the working class

and that it "will soon constitute the largest social group" in Iran (p. 125), the book advocates the adoption of appropriate policies to recognize the status of workers.<sup>113</sup>

An important aspect of these publications is a tacit recognition by them of the danger of "class conflict" in Iranian society. Therefore, in his writings and speeches, the Shah frequently referred to "class conflict" and "class privileges" in Iranian society, when addressing the issues relating to "social justice" and the "White Revolution."<sup>114</sup> Discussing the principle of "workers participation in the ownership of the industrial establishment," the Shah, in his late years, attacked the Tudeh party for its "opposition to this principle," because this decree of the White Revolution, he argued, would "resolve the class conflict" in Iran.<sup>115</sup>

Finally, Iranian workers themselves also came to perceive themselves as a group of individuals with a common and distinct position in the economy and society. However, the manifestation of this (class) consciousness has by no means been straightforward, nor has its historical development been cumulative and evolutionary. Rather, both the process of its development and the forms of its expression have been complex.

The industrialization of the 1930s created a class of "modern" manufacturing workers who, in the decade that followed, launched a flurry of industrial actions and refined their skills of organization (in the labor unions and the Tudeh party). However, during the postcoup years, not only were these experiences rendered futile due to stringent state suppression, but the working class itself was also "diluted." In other words, the extensive policy of industrialization in the late 1960s and 1970s further diversified the industrial labor force in terms of its regional and cultural backgrounds. As new industrial units were established, they fostered a new wave of rural-urban migration. Between 1967 and 1976 some 330,000 people migrated to the cities each year. Rural laborers from different parts of the country poured into the newly established factories. From the late 1960s until 1977, the average annual growth rate of manufacturing labor was 8 percent. This figure was higher in the industrially concentrated cities. Thus, the number of workers in mining and manufacturing, including the small-scale workshops, increased from 816,000 in 1956 to 2.5 million in 1977. Coming largely from the Turkish-speaking areas of Azerbaijan, Hamadan and Zanzan, the Gilani-speaking regions of the Caspian Sea, and from the central provinces, this immigrant labor force lacked almost any experience of industrial and (modern) organisational activities. In short, in the two decades prior to the 1979

revolution, the manufacturing workers came to be characterized by a hierarchy of experience and age, ethnic diversity, and relatively high labor turnover.<sup>116</sup> These features certainly constituted some aspects of workers' self-consciousness, although we do not know how central they were to it.

Yet from the mid-1970s things started to change. By this time, the new workers of the 1960s had acquired a fair amount of experience in industrial work and urbanism. Therefore, by the eve of the revolution, the industrial working class shared a common experience in at least one arena: industry. The result was the development of an "industrial consciousness" that derived its elements from an industrial setting, an urban life-style, and industrial work. This industrial consciousness manifested itself in a series of demands and covert strikes in the mid-1970s—a development lacking during the 1960s.<sup>117</sup>

Beyond industrial awareness, the workers also developed a more general form of class consciousness in terms of the expression of identity and differentiation. A survey of workers in an industrial settlement in Tehran, carried out by Ahmad Ashraf in 1969, pointed to the rise of such an awareness among the workers. In this settlement, a member of the industrial working class "identifies himself as a worker, and makes a sharp distinction between his class and the traditional working class [artisans] and the lumpen proletariat. To make this distinction clear, instead of a three-class terminology use by the upper classes, they usually use a four-class terminology, and thus identify themselves with the members of the *third class* while identifying the lumpen proletariat with the *fourth class*."<sup>118</sup>

As I understand it, the way in which the Iranian workers expressed their understanding of classness in "language" was, in general, through identifying themselves with the *singular* word *kargar*, or "worker." Notice the following statements made by different workers about different issues in a conversation with me during 1980 and 1981 in Iran:

**Worker A.** The syndicate normally takes care of the *kargar's* economic interests; it does not care about the country's social and political interests. . . . The syndicate would defend the *kargar* in money terms. . . . The *kargar* would say: "I only want this [wages and conditions], and that's it."

**Worker B.** The employer attempted to divide the *kargar* into three parts. . . . He would keep one group at the top [economically], one group at the middle, and the rest were destitute and under his thumb.

**Worker C.** The *shuras* [workers' councils] must try to see what's wrong with the *kargar*...

**Worker D.** [Before the Revolution], as soon as the *kargar* reacted [to the employers' pressure], they would be fired; [they] *did not have* unity among themselves, because, [the employers] would not allow them to. But when this revolution occurred, the *kargar* came to develop some unity... We, all the *kargar*, demand a *shura*, in order to work resolutely for us, the *kargar*.

In all of these statements (except the last sentence), not the plural form (*kargar*), but the singular one, *kargar*, is used to refer to the plurality of workers. Worker D even uses a plural pronoun ("they") with its corresponding verb with a singular subject (the "*kargar*"). This inconsistency is not a grammatical issue but an epistemological one.

The fact is that the singular noun, *kargar*, in the language of these workers has a connotation of collective identity and wholeness: whereas the plural form carries a meaning of diversity and particularity. The concept of *kargar*, as a singular noun, connotes totality, generality, and abstraction. Those whom I interviewed considered the individual workers as being so identical with one another that the name and characteristics of one represented those of all. By contrast, the use of the plural form (*kargar*), as in the last sentence of Worker D, signifies a *numerical ensemble of different, diversified, and concrete* workers. In this sentence, Worker D, by using the plural form (*kargar*), refers to the *specific* workers of his own factory and not the working class in general. In short, the singular noun *kargar*, for the Iranian workers, signifies a totality of workers who share a common identity among themselves and, thus, represents the Iranian working class.

#### *Conclusion: An Islamic Class Consciousness?*

The preceding discussion suggests that Iranian workers by the 1970s and the early 1980s had developed a sense of "classness"—a feeling of identity of position among themselves and differentiation from (and conflict with) other classes. But what were the constituent elements of such a consciousness? On what shared experiences was such an awareness based? Was it in the workplace, the political institutions, or in cultural settings?

We noted earlier that the organization of workers in both independent labor unions and political associations was prohibited.

Although it can be asserted that workers did share a common experience at work, one product of which was the development of an "industrial consciousness," knowledge of their experience outside of work remains relatively unknown. In fact, the sphere of nonwork has not attracted much attention from social scientists in Iran. Only a few cursory works such as those of Javadi Najjar<sup>119</sup> and Ershad<sup>120</sup> have touched on some aspects of workers' lives outside their workplaces. Yet study of the way of life of workers outside work is immensely important for a crucial reason: capitalistic and authoritarian workplaces by nature nurture conflict and friction; it is, largely in the, sphere of nonwork that the hegemony over the working class of bourgeois culture, as well as that of the precapitalist values, are achieved.

Even simple data would indicate that the diversity of ethnic backgrounds, regional origins, communal affiliations, gender relations, and leisure activities of workers well may not lead to common nonwork experiences among them. There is, however, one exception. Iranian workers, whatever their differences, do share a common religion: Islam.

Islam, by its very nature, represents not simply a set of personal ideas, but also plays a significant part in the cultural and day-to-day practices of the majority of the Iranian people. In Iran, the three Arabic months of Muharram, Ramazan, and Safar are months full of religious activities. Shite Muslims in the working-class neighborhoods attend mosques, *bay'ats*, and *nazries*<sup>121</sup> almost every evening. On these occasions, not only are religious duties performed, but socializing with fellow Muslims also plays an important role. Islam thus constitutes a significant part of the workers' subjectivity and consciousness, which is expressed in their social and political discourses. And Islamic ideology and language play a vital part in articulating a form of working-class consciousness. The following statement, for instance, illustrates how a factory worker in Tehran in 1980 perceived "exploitation of labor" in Islamic terms:

The Revolution that we made was an Islamic Revolution. We didn't make a Communist Revolution. Therefore [the members of factory councils] must act within the Islamic framework and ideology. The objective must be to implement an Islamic economy which is neither a capitalist economy nor a socialist one. It is an economy based on itself. . . and, that means "to each according to his labor." In a communist country people must work for the state. And in capitalist countries there is [a minority] of people in whose hands capital circulates. And in the communist system

capital belongs to the state that exploits people and pays them something. But Islam says: "No! the worker who works should get the fruits of his labor."<sup>122</sup>

Islam, in fact, was reinterpreted by the industrial workers to express their own immediate and class interests. This was so because in a historical situation when a secular modern political language has not become popular, the language, terms, and symbols of the predominant popular culture, in this case religion, becomes political. Political behavior is clothed in religious language, slogans, and even in sermons. Here religion is no longer simply an instrument of class domination, as some tend to see it, but rather an arena of social struggle.<sup>123</sup>

In sum, by the early 1980s, Islam had become a key element in workers' subjectivity. But its role in articulating class consciousness seemed rather complex and contradictory. Not only did Islam serve as an ideology and discourse to express common needs, at the same time it contributed both to exclusivism and blurring of class lines.

Religious ideology among the working class, as Eric Hobsbawm has noted,<sup>124</sup> is by nature exclusivist. For it represents, more than anything else, a belief system that tends to differentiate and divide its holders from nonbelievers or followers of other religions. This exclusivism and division undoubtedly act against class unity. The Islamic workers' associations in postrevolutionary Iran broadly exemplified this feature of religious ideology. The militant Muslim workers considered Jewish, Bahai,<sup>125</sup> and secular workers belonging to socialist organizations as their enemies.

Not only was Islamic consciousness divisive, it tended also to spread a "populistic" ideology among the working class. Populism, by emphasizing the concept of the "people," is an ideology that works against the development of a class consciousness and the idea of class division in society. How did Islam tend to spread populism among the workers in Iran? The ruling clergy shared an Islamic language with the workers, albeit with a populist content. According to this populist Islam, the working class was to be seen not as an independent class, but as a segment of the Islamic *ummat*, the "people," sharing similar characteristics with other members of this social category. The eight-year war with Iraq undoubtedly contributed to this process by developing intense patriotic sentiments among the population, including workers.

Islam serves as a central element in articulating working-class consciousness in Iran. It remains, however, to be seen what form of consciousness the Iranian workers will acquire when Islam ceases to be a state form and when the conjunctural ideological influences such as nationalism and populism give way to an "open-door" policy and economic austerity.

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## Notes

1. *Workers' News* was an ad hoc newsletter published by an exiled Left group in London during the Iranian revolution of 1979.
2. Marvin Zonis, *The Political Elite of Iran* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 5.
3. Donald Wilber, *Iran* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), p. 4.
4. Donald Wilber, *Iran: Past and Present* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 312-314.
5. Joseph Upton, *The History of Modern Iran: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).
6. Ann K. S. Lambton, *Qajar Persia* (London: Tauris, 1983), p. 106.
7. Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran, 1926-1979* (London: Macmillan, 1981).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 354.

9. Ibid., p. 16.

10. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), for an excellent discussion. See also Hisham Sharabi, *Neo-Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

11. Here, Katouzian seems to have in mind a rational and “real” model of modernization, according to which Iranian modernization becomes “pseudo.” This ideal type, however, is not spelled out in the text.

12. M. Ivanov, *Tarikh-i Novin-i Iran* [A Modern History of Iran] (Stockholm, 1977), trans. from Russian.

13. Mehdi Kayan, trans., *Barrasi-ye Elmi-ye Sharayet-i Kar va Zendegi-Ye Kargaran-i Nassaji dar Iran* [A Scientific Analysis of Working and Living Conditions of the Textile Workers in Iran] (Tehran, 1980).

14. Abdossamad Kambakhsh, *Nazari beh Jonbesh-i Kargari va Kommonisti dar Iran* [A Survey of the Workers’ and Communist Movement in Iran] (Stockholm, 1975), 2 vols.

15. There are other Marxist-oriented scholars that I have, intentionally, excluded from this category because as scholars, their perspective and methodology differ from the left-wing activists. Notable among them are Ervand Abrahamian and Khosrow Shakeri.

16. Kayhan, *Barrasi-ye Elmi*, pp. 198–199.

17. Ehsan Tabari, *Foroupasbi-ye Nizam-i Sonnati va Zayesh-i Sarmaye-dari dar Iran* [Disintegration of the Traditional Socio-Economic System and the Rise of Capitalism in Iran] (Stockholm: Tudeh Party, 1975).

18. Ibid.

19. Kayhan, *Barrasi-ye Elmi*, pp. 197–198.

20. *Workers’ News*, 1 (1980), p. 3. For similar remarks, see Masoud Ahmadzadeh, *Anche yek Enqilabi Bayad Bidanad* [What a Revolutionary Must Know] (London, 1974), p. 47.

21. My own contention that “We must draw a qualitative distinction between the nature and forms of the working class struggle and the struggle of the other masses” also represents a structuralist and essentialist understanding of the consciousness and politics of the working class. See Assef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1987), p. 79.

22. Karl Marx, *The Holy Family*. (Moscow: Progress, 1956), p. 53.

23. These analyses may be traced in Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress, 1962), and his *Class Struggle in France, 1848–1850* in *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress, 1962).

24. See George Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

25. Ibid., p. 79.
26. Bizhan Jazani, *Chegouneh Mobarize-ye Mosallabaneh Toudeti Mishavad* [Armed Struggle: A Road to the Mobilization of the Masses] (London, 1978), p. 31.
27. *Kargar-i Kommonist* (publication of a Marxist-Leninist organization in Iran), 2 (1981): 8.
28. Tabari, *Foroupani-ye Nizam*, p. 100.
29. See Amir P. Pouyan, *Zarurat-i Mobareze-ye Mosallabaneh va Radd-e Teory-e Baqa* [On the Necessity of Armed Struggle and the Refutation of the Theory of Survival] (London, 1975); Jazani, *Chegouneh Mobarize*; and Ahmadzadeh, *Mobarize-ye Mosallabaneh*.
30. Pouyan, *Zarurat-i Mobareze*, p. 52.
31. See, for instance, *Nazm-i Kargar* (publication of the Organization of Socialist Tendency) I (1980): pp. 16-17; and Pouyan, *Zarurat-i Mobareze*, p. 166.
32. Jazani, *Chegouneh Mobarize*, p. 29.
33. See, for instance, Val Moqaddam, "Industrial Policy, Culture and Working Class Politics: A Case Study of Tabriz Industrial Workers in the Iranian Revolution," *International Sociology* (June 1987): p. 169.
34. We know that the Bolsheviks, in particular Lenin, borrowed and used some major concepts (e.g., trade union consciousness, class consciousness, labor aristocracy, etc.) from the experience of the English labour movement through Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *The History of Trade Unionism* (London, and New York: Longmans Green and Co., 1894).
35. See, for instance, *Kar* (a publication of the Feda'in Organization), no. 164, p. 10; *Paykar* (a publication of the Marxist-Leninist Peykar organization), no. 58.
36. The *Shuras*, or *workers councils*, were the workplace organizations that sprang up immediately after the revolution of 1979 in Iran. As elected bodies, they aimed to exert control over management and democratize the work environment. The *Shuras* differed from each other in terms of the ideologies of their members and activists. For instance, the Islamic *Shuras* were distinguished from the "independent" ones in that the former adhered to Islam as their principal guideline and were supported by the ruling clergy. For a detailed study of the *Shuras* in Iran, see my *Workers and Revolution*.
37. Let us note that the craft unions, e.g., the powerful British Engineering Union, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, were clear manifestations of labour organizations. Yet, they were exclusivist and sectarian, refusing the entry of the unskilled workers and women into their unions; see James Hinton, *The First Shop-Stewards' Movement* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973).
38. Ervand Abrahamian, "Strengths and Weaknesses of the Labor Movement in Iran, 1941-1953," in M. E. Bonnie and N. Keddie, eds., *Continuity and Change in Modern Iran* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 182.

39. Willem Floor, *Labour Unions, Law and Conditions in Iran* (Durham, England: University of Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1985), pp. 22–23.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

41. Ali Ashtiani, "Sheklgiri-ye Tabaqe-ii Karger dar Iran" [The Formation of the Working Class in Iran], *Nazm-i Novin* 5 (Fall 1984).

42. Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (London: Penguin Books, 1979).

43. Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1958), p. 84.

44. Richard Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1975); see also Richard Hyman, "The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: Recent Tendencies and Some Problems for Theory," *Capital and Class* 8 (1979)

I am aware that these historians did not intend to write a complete history of the working class in Iran. Rather, they aimed to focus on certain aspects of labor history, e.g., trade union movement (Abrahamian, Floor), autocracy and the labor unions (Lajevardi). Throughout the present section, my critique is directed not against these historians' approach and focus, but rather against these existing historical texts and their conceptual underpinning.

45. Floor, *Labour Unions* p. 2.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Habib Lajevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1985), p. xvii.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Abrahamian, however, does point to some other factors (in addition to political repression) that contributed to the decline of the labor movement after 1946, such as the relative success of the rival state-sponsored unions in attracting a number of workers and a fall in the inflation rate and rise in the level of unemployment after the war; see Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, pp. 366–367.

These contentions are partially supported by Willem Floor in his review of Lajevardi's book (*Labor Unions and Autocracy*) in *Iranian Studies* 20 (1987). But he is particularly emphatic on the impact of political control.

50. See, for instance, Lajevardi, *Labor Unions*, p. xiv; Abrahamian, "Strengths and Weaknesses," pp. 192, 200–201; Ashtiani, "Shekigiri-e Tabaqe-ye Kargar," p. 84; and Pouyan, *Zarourat-i Mobareze*.

51. Charles van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), p. 227.

52. See, for instance, Lajevardi, *Labor Unions*, p. 206; Ahmadzadeh, *Mobareze-ye Mosallabaneh*; and Pouyan, *Zarourat-i Mobareze-ye Mosallabaneh*.

53. See Assef Bayat, "Capital Accumulation, Political Control and Labour Organization in Iran, 1965–1975," *Middle Eastern Studies* 25 (April, 1989).

54. Goran Therborn, "Why Some Classes Are More Successful Than Others," *New Left Review* 138 (1983).

55. Assef Bayat, "Capital Accumulation, Political Control and Non-Organization of Labour, 1965-1975," paper presented to the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), Boston, 1986.

56. Ian Roxborough, "The Analysis of Labor Movements in Latin America: Typologies and Theories," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 1 (1982).

57. It must be stated that Abrahamian does acknowledge the significance of an understanding of the working class according to culture and consciousness. A quotation from E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* points to the "culturalist" bias of Abrahamian. However, one is not sure to what extent his narrative in *Iran Between Two Revolutions* is informed by such a perspective.

58. Dipesh Chakrabarty, writing on the history of the jute mill workers in Bombay (in *Rethinking Working Class History*), has done valuable work in bringing the issue of "culture" into the discussion of industrial relations, an area conventionally argued to be determined both by the rationale of industry and the logic of capital, such as the productivity drive, and by the formal and informal organizations of employees. It is highly relevant to consider the influence of culture on the industrial policy in the postrevolutionary Iran. Yet I would still stress that industrial relations under the Islamic Republic were characterized not merely by the employee-employers culture, nor simply by the ideology of the Islamic state, but rather by a tension between these cultural and ideological factors, on the one hand, and the rationale of industrial organization, on the other.

59. Ayatollah Khomeini's speech on May Day, 1981.

60. Hojjat al-Islam Imami Kashani in *Jomburi-e Islami* 29 April, 1982, Appendix, p. 2.

61. Ex-President Khamenei, May Day, 1981.

62. Imami Kashani, *Jomburi-e Islami*, p. 3.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid. This model of social stratification appears to incorporate elements of functionalism (when the division of labor in society is assumed to be natural) and neoclassical economy (when "exploitation" is assumed to occur in the realm of exchange) into the Islamic notion of justice. The model, in addition, reflects the position of the Quran on social stratification; see the Quran 43:32; 16:71.

65. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 21.

66. In Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 56.

67. Ibid., p. 55.

68. Ibid.

69. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 9–10.
70. Eric Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labor* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 194.
71. I am indebted to Dipesh Chakrabarty who brought these points to my attention.
72. See *Sandikalism dar Iran, 1284–1320* [Syndicalism in Iran, 1905–1941] (Paris: publisher unknown, undated).
73. See his *Tarikh-i Zendegi-ye Iqtisadi-ye Roustaiian va Tabaqat-i Iltimaii-e Iran* [A History of Rural Economic Life and Social Classes in Iran] (Tehran: Shirkat-i Sahami-ye Intishar, 1974).
74. Zamyad-yasht, clause 45, in *ibid.*, p. 125.
75. A. T. Olmstead, *The History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1948), pp. 78–79, 81.
76. *Ibid.*, cited in Insaftpour, *Tarikh-i Zendegi*, p. 242–243.
77. Insaftpour, *Tarikh-i Zendegi*, p. 346.
78. *Ibid.*, pp. 242–243.
79. Muhammad Dandamaev and Vladimir Lukonin, *The Cultural and Social Institutions of Ancient Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
80. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
83. Olmstead, *History of Persian Empire*, p. 177.
84. Dandamaev and Lukonin, *Cultural and Social Institutions*. p. 158; and Insaftpour, *Tarikh-i Zendegi* p. 213.
85. Olmstead, *History of Persian Empire*. p. 177; Insaftpour, *Tarikh-i Zendegi*, p. 213.
86. James Bill, *The Politics of Iran: Groups, Classes, and Modernization*, (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Publishing, 1972), pp. 2–7.
87. See Ahmad Ashraf, "Maratib-i Ijtimaii dar Dawran-i Qajarieh" [Social Status in Qajar Period], *Kitab-i Agah* 1 (1981). The term *ummal* in the classification refers only to the officials of the state bureaucracy.
88. See Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. p. 33; also Ahmad Ashraf, "The Roots of Emerging Dual Class Structure in Nineteenth Century Iran," *Iranian Studies*, 14 (Winter–Spring 1981); Ashraf, "Maratib-i Ijtimaii."
89. See, for instance, Husseinqoli Khanshiqaqi, ed., *Khatirat-i Mumtahn al-Dawlah* [The Memoirs of Mumtahn al-Dawlah] (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1974), pp. 141–142.

90. Mohammad Hasan Khan I'timad al-Saltaneh, *Al-Maathbir va Al-Athar* (Tehran: Nashri Farhang, 1984), pp. 377, 391, 394-395.

91. The word *kargar* appears more than ten times in the *Shahname* by Ferdowsi, who strived to maintain and revive Persian culture and language against the Arab domination of Persia. See Fritz Wolff, *Glossar Zu Firdosis Shahname* (Berlin: Gedruckt in der Reichsdruckerei, 1935), p. 627.

92. Ahmad Ashraf, *Mavane'-i Tarikhi-ye Roshd-i Sarmayedari dar Iran: Doure-ye Qajar* [Historical Obstacles to the Development of Capitalism in Iran: The Qajar Period] (Tehran: Intisharat-i Zamineh, 1980), p. 97.

93. Willem Floor, *Industrialization in Iran: 1900-1944*, (Durham, England: Durham University, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1984), p. 5.

94. Fereydoun Adamyyat, *Ideologi-ye Nebzat-i Masbrutyat-i Iran* [The Ideology of the Constitutional Movement in Iran] (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1976), p. 270.

95. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

97. In Khosrow Shakeri, *Isnad-i Tarikhi-ye Ionbesh-i Kargari, Social Democracy va Komonisti-ye Iran* [Historical Documents About Workers', Social Democratic, and Communist Movement in Iran] (Tehran, undated), vol. 2, p. 190.

98. See Adamyyat, *Ideologi-ye Nebzat*, p. 282.

99. Floor, *Industrialization in Iran*, p. 35.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

101. Abrahamian, "Strengths and Weaknesses," p. 182.

102. Floor, *Labor Unions*, pp. 22-23.

103. Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*.

104. Abrahamian, "Strengths and Weaknesses," p. 191.

105. Bayat, *Workers and Revolution*, Chapter 3.

106. Katouzian, *Political Economy of Iran*, p. 16.

107. In Lajevardi, *Labor Unions*, p. 16.

108. Cited from Anwar Khameii, in Lajevardi, *Labor Unions*, p. 34.

109. Resolutions of the Eighteenth National Conference on Labor, May 1979, Clause 1, in Fereydoun Kavousi, *Kargaran-i Iran dar Iran-i Imrouz* [The Iranian Workers in Today's Iran] (Tehran 1976), p. 164.

110. Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 10.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

112. In Kavousi, *Kargaran-i Irani*, Preface.
113. Ibid., p. 125.
114. See Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Qanoun va Idalat az Nazar-i Shahanshah Arvamehr* [Law and Justice from the Viewpoint of Shahanshah Aryamehr] (Tehran: 1967).
115. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Pasokh beh Tarikh* [Answer to History] (unknown place, no date), p. 138.
116. Compared to the manufacturing sector, the oil industry had a relatively stable labor force for a long time due to the age of this sector.
117. Bayat, "Capital Accumulation," p. 202.
118. Ahmad Ashraf, "Iran: Imperialism, Class and Modernization from Above." (Ph.D. thesis, New School for Social Research, 1971), p. 345.
119. Zahra Javadi Najjar, "Barrasi-ye Nahve-ye Gozaran-i Awqat-i Faraqat-i Kargaran-i Karkhanejat-i Gharb-i Tehran" [A Survey on the Leisure Time of the Factory Workers of Eastern Tehran] (B. A. thesis, University of Tehran, 1974)
120. F. Ershad, "Migration and Life-Style: Work and Leisure in an Industrialized City (Arak)" (M.A. thesis, London, 1978).
121. A *hay'at* refers to a religious sermon. *Hay'ats* are normally organized on the basis of common ethnic or geographical origin of the members (e.g., the *hey'ats* of the Azeri Turks) in Ramazan, (the month of fasting), and Muharram (a holy month in which the *Shiite* Muslims commemorate the killing of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Hussein, in the early years of the emergence of Islam). A *nazri* refers to the ritual of giving charity in Iran.
122. My field notes collected in 1981 in Iran.
123. A number of empirical studies on the working class in the African context have also proven how political and class consciousness are historically specific and that it may well be expressed in religious language. Van Onselen's classic *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia* and Robin Cohen's study of black African workers have shown how different forms of protest ranging from adopting a religious belief to industrial sabotage and theft can be the manifestation of worker consciousness. See Robin Cohen, "Hidden Forms of Consciousness Amongst African Workers," *African Review of Political Economy* 18 (1980). More recently, Paul Lubeck's impressive study on "the making of a Muslim working class" in northern Nigeria emphasized the role of Islam in articulating the cultural-ideological traits of workers and their feeling of classness. See Paul Lubeck, *Islam and Urban Labor in Northern Nigeria: The Making of a Muslim Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
124. Hobsbawm, *Workers*, chapter 2.
125. *Bahaiis* are members of a religious sect who have gone through a series of persecutions by the Islamic government in Iran.