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“If I deserve it, it should be paid to me”: a social history of labour in the Iranian oil industry 1951-1973

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Propositions for the thesis “*If I deserve it, it should be paid to me*”: A Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry 1951-1973, by Maral Jefroudi

Propositions relating to the subject of the dissertation

1. The dominant literature on oil, which is based on the assertion that oil is a natural resource and not a produced commodity, has contributed to mystify the social organization of labour in the oil production. The spotlight on oil as an economic asset to be captured by international actors has invisibilised the labour process involved.
2. Nationalisation did not represent a rupture in the social history of oil in Iran. Instead, it was the culmination of a web of processes involving the making and remaking of agreements in the legal realm and the concerted efforts of workers' struggle for better work and living conditions.
3. The nationalist discourse on nationalisation assumes a horizontal, across class fraternity. The actual experience contradicts this. Workers of the oil industry and the elites in the management did not share a common interest and were not affected by the process in the same way.
4. The codified stratification in the organisation of labour relations through grading and collar line extended beyond the workplace and was fundamental in the making of employees' social class position, by not only determining their material benefits but also establishing a scale for what different segments of employees need and are entitled to.
5. The discourse of the Company vis-à-vis the organisation of its labour relations since the beginning of the Consortium in 1954 up until late 1960s was marked with the problem of “redundant workers” or “surplus labour.” This established the context of Company’s stance in almost all negotiations with its workers and the Iranian State. The way the surplus labour problem was produced, communicated, and the solutions that were drafted in response, added to the precariousness of the workers that were at the lowest strata of the labour hierarchy.

Propositions relating to the field of the subject of the dissertation (Social History, Labour History, Iranian studies, Historiography)

6. New studies in labour have criticized the engagement with formal, industrial labour as the main subject of labour studies. Instead they argued that workers in standard employment relationship were never representative of the workers of the world. However, this argument needs to be taken further. Oil workers in Iran, seemingly fit the ideal type of formal industrial workers. Nevertheless, this study reveals that even when working in the same industry, in a standard employment relationship, and receiving similar payments, workers can engage in different types of work and thus they do not necessarily share similar experiences. The type of work people engage in is a determining factor of their social class.
7. An ethnographical study of workers' repertoires of actions at any moment is more explanatory for labour historians, than a search for pre-determined categories of labour activism.

8. Studies on Iran have focused on a binary approach between state and society. Incorporating a liberal approach of separating politics and economy, these studies tend to overlook the relationships between capital and state. To protect the long term interests of capital, states through their institutions of law, policing, and justice can periodically intervene in favor of workers' interests. At the same time, they can ally with capitalists to suppress labour activism. States shift pragmatically in their short-term alliances. This shifting of the state's alliances between capital and labour shows how the economy is embedded in social and political relations.

9. The literature on the contemporary history of Iran until now concludes that the years between the 1953 military coup and the 1979 revolution were dark ones for the working class, marked by a paucity of labour activism due to suppression and the rapid industrialisation wave that gave birth to a new working class, which did not engage in labour activism due to its subjective conditions. Contrary to the established argument, I document multiple instances of collective action under repressive conditions in the oil producing South and argue that given the costs of engaging in overt, militant collective actions, workers alternated overt conflictual actions with other forms of collective actions and at times appropriated the state's patronising discourse for their own means.

Additional Propositions

10. This study shows that work was seen as a right by workers while the oil company saw it as an entitlement. Moreover, for workers not only the income, but also fair distribution mattered. The Company's discourse of efficiency and redundancy was countered by workers' concerns for recognition, respect, and the right to work. These point to a necessity of epistemological engagement for historians and other social scientists.

11. Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil industry is a reach terrain that needs to be explored further. Topics such as generational differences between workers' experiences in the oil industry, the relations between the formal and informal sector in the oil producing South, and the experience of the people working in the grey zones, such as contract workers and domestic servants, need to be researched further.

12. Historical events do not take place in a vacuum. Future studies should explore the possibilities of expanding the spatial and temporal boundaries of a studied event or process further. Challenging the linear conceptualization of time by acknowledging the traces of past and future in the studied present and looking for transnational interactions at every level would help breaking those boundaries that limit grasping the social reality under study. An interdisciplinary approach would facilitate this.

13. Women are underrepresented in labour history. Their share in informal economy has fortified their underrepresentation in labour-related archival materials. Oral history and study of visual materials, such as photography would help social historians overcome this gender bias in sources. Moreover, an intersectional approach, not in terms of simply adding multiple oppressions, but studying the interactions among them, will help us understand both women's and other oppressed groups' role in the organization of labour relations.