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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Social History of Labor and Oil as an Urban History:

This dissertation is a social history of the establishment of the Iranian oil industry and the formation of an oil working class in the southwest province of Khuzestan during the first decades of the 20th century. My approach to and perspective on the topic are essentially inter-disciplinary; although for reasons that will be explained below and further elaborate in the subsequent chapters, my entry point will be spatial and geographic. I will investigate the processes that contributed to the taking shape of the built environment of oil in the refinery city of Abadan, an industrial city that was assembled quite rapidly in a short but monumental burst of effort in early 20th century, and played a key part in making possible the establishment of a new and fast growing oil complex that went on to contribute to the reconfiguration of not only local conditions, but also national relations of power, the economy, regional geopolitics, and global industrial capitalism.

This urban and geographic entry-point into the social history of oil offers a unique perspective: The built environment of Abadan was the material and physical place produced by the actions and interactions of the myriad social actors involved in the making of this history, the focal point where they were brought together, often violently; and it was from there that the extractive political economy of petro-capitalism took hold of the existing natural and social environment of the region in order to transform it into an economic resource of global significance. This process involved oil workers, drillers, engineers, and corporate managers, but also spouses, extended families, urban landlords, bureaucrats, political activists, smugglers, prostitutes, beggars, indigenous farmers, merchants, policemen, and migrants who had flooded to the city and worked for and lived on the margins of the oil complex.

The built environment of the city was produced by these oil encounters, but it also created the physical frame that gave them structure. In Abadan, the urban space itself and how it was assembled and re-designed through interminable efforts, violent frictions, and unpredictable events, has been a reflection of the “great

transformation”¹ brought about by oil capitalism. In other words, the social history of oil and of labor formation in the oil industry in Khuzestan is also its urban history.

This urban historical and geographic perspective will serve as my entry point in analyzing the interactions of the myriad social actors who were integral to this story. In this introduction I will elaborate my theoretical framework, and explain a number of concepts and terms that I will be using throughout the text, such as the oil complex, oil habitus, oil encounter, urban process, built environment, Global Labor History, and assemblage. I will then discuss my methodology, and how I see this work as part of a larger project on the relationship between oil, politics, and society, that I intend to continue later on. The introduction will conclude with a plan of the chapters.

Theoretical Concepts:

1. The Oil Encounter

“If the spice trade had a twentieth century equivalent it would be the oil industry. Yet, while that earlier violent encounter generated a voluminous literature the oil encounter has scarcely produced an equivalent. Not much is known about the human experiences that surround the production of oil, while a great deal is invested in insuring the muteness of the oil encounter, all wrapped in regimes of strict corporate secrecy, and encased in enclaves... keeping especially the labor experience irrelevant and insignificant”²

The “oil encounter” is how the novelist Amitav Ghosh calls the transformative coming together of local, national, and transnational social agents around petroleum portrayed in Abdelrahman Munif’s disturbing masterpiece *Cities of Salt*. Munif, a Saudi oilman exiled to Syria for his political views, published a trilogy of novels in the 1970’s about the rise of the oil complex in a fictional state in the Arabian Peninsula that captures all too well the underside of a story that is often missing from

¹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 2nd ed. (Beacon Press, 2001).

² See “Petrofiction”, in Amitav Ghosh, *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times*, Reprint (Mariner Books, 2007), 138–151.

the social analysis and the historiographies of oil³. Thus, the oil encounter refers to the historical interactions, frictions, conflicts, negotiations, and cooperation among the plethora of people whose lives were deeply and permanently affected by the construction of the oil complex in southern Iran and became integral to its subsequent development. These included not only those working directly for the oil complex in various capacities, but also indigenous agrarian populations as well as migrants, many of whom were not directly employed by the oil industry but, as we shall see in the following chapters, were affected by the advent of the oil industry and became an extension of it.

2. The Social and Political Order of Oil as ‘Assemblage’:

Perhaps more than any other internationally traded commodity in history - such as salt, sugar, tobacco, or cotton - oil has had a transformative and unifying impact on the globe, to the extent that it is not an exaggeration to claim we now live in an ‘oil civilization’. The process of oil becoming the cornerstone of the contemporary global political economy and lifestyle was neither inevitable nor the end result of a natural progression of industrial capitalist modernization. Instead, I will argue that we need to think about and discuss the history of oil as one of an ‘assemblage’⁴ – intentional and sometimes accidental acts of human construction, riddled with friction, uncertainty, and based on praxis - rather than one of ‘emergence’ – an expression suggesting an almost biological and natural progression. The first expression, ‘assemblage’, frames the history of oil as the outcome of social and historical ‘encounters’ between the material world and the actions of different and unequal social actors, making calculated decisions that cannot be necessarily categorized as ‘rational’ or predictable, nor can their success or failure be taken as a

³ Abdelrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt* (New York: Vintage, 1989); idem. *The Trench* (New York: Vintage, 1993); idem. *Variations on Night and Day* (New York: Vintage, 1994)

⁴ On relevant actor-network thinkers and social analysts whose work has influenced my approach see Timothy Mitchell, “The Properties of Markets,” in *Do Economists Make Markets?*, ed. Donald MacKenzie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 244–75; Timothy Mitchell, “Carbon Democracy,” *Economy and Society* 38, no. 3 (2009): 399–432; Timothy Mitchell, “Society, Economy, and the State Effect,” in *State/Culture*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 76–97; Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 19–53; Donald MacKenzie, *Material Markets: How Economic Agents are Constructed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: A Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Gabrielle Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Michel Callon, ed., *Laws of the Markets* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

sign of anything but the outcome of the balance of power relations under the circumstances.

The term assemblage as a social analytic concept was first used by Deleuze and Guatari, and later on adopted by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, Donald McKenzie, and other actor network theorists, to highlight the often overlooked but central role of technopolitics, of the praxis of scientific and technical professional experts, in shaping contemporary social and political economic order. As in its common usage, here also the term assemblage refers to a group of objects brought together in close association with one another, usually for a purpose that is different from the individual characteristics of each object. While there are other dialectical social science concepts that view social change as active production of difference and heterogeneity, what I find valuable here is the equal emphasis on the material rather than discursive assemblages, without neglecting either or separating them. Thus, the material world, whether human manufactured or natural, is also considered as a social actor in human - non human relations. Tim Mitchell's work, especially his essays *Can the mosquito speak?* and *Carbon democracy*, are examples of how the material world should be conceptualized not simply as a passive object, but an active agent (if not a conscious subject) in the making of the contemporary social and political order.

The commodification of nature, in this case subterranean fossil carbon deposits, is not only a technical and scientific endeavor, but above all it is a social and political process that requires relentless effort to overcome and repress any resistance against it. It involves the continuous creative destruction of existing social and natural configurations through the dispossession of rival and competing claims to land and resources. Extractive industries also create a backlash by the natural world, resulting in a growing number of critical social scientists re-conceptualizing nature as possessing its own forms of agency. Although the relation of nature and society has been at the center of philosophical and social science inquiry since the 18th century, the validity of a clear-cut dichotomy between the two has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. This has been in part as reaction to the environmental crises brought about in large measure by the hegemony of market society of mass production and consumption, and its carbon based sources of energy⁵.

⁵ See Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*; Noel Castree, "Commodifying What Nature?," *Progress in Human Geography* 27, no. 3 (2003): 273–97; Karen Bakker and Gavin Bridge, "Material Worlds? Resource Geographies and the 'Matter of Nature,'" *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 1 (2006): 5–27.

A point of clarification regarding the relation of nature and society may be necessary here. Critical social theorists have strived to challenge and decolonize the dichotomies of nature/object versus culture/subject at least from the advent of the industrial revolution. For Marx, the alienation of the laborer occurs as the time discipline and the division of labor of industrial work take hold of the very body of the laborer, turning her into an extension of the machine, and making the product of her creative and collective labor appear as the fruit of technology, private property, professional knowledge, or market exchange. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), Ch.1, section 4. A more explicit rethinking of the consequences of positing nature and society as two mutually exclusive realms was articulated in the work Karl Polanyi Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, which focused on the social consequences of the commodification of land, labor, and money; with the subsequent disembedding the economic institution of the market from the wider modifying constraints imposed by society and nature (which he appears to consider as mutually exclusive, but symbiotically interconnected). The critique of the instrumentalization of nature by positivist scientific rationality, and market criteria was also taken up by Frankfurt School theorists who argued in different ways that the quest for the domination of nature in fact leads to the domination of “man”. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991). Instead, Marxist critiques of the liberal and utilitarian theories that framed nature and culture as two separate and distinct realms introduced the notion of “the social construction of nature”, arguing that the natural world was effectively being continuously transformed by social intervention, and that the idea of a pristine and autonomous nature was an illusion Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, 3rd ed. (Atens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

It was the third wave of feminist thinkers, as well as post-structuralist theories of Foucault (inspired by the work of Nietzsche), who highlighted the gendered human body (the natural body) as the site of exercise of disciplinary power. See Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body*, Revised (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); Donna Haraway, *Simians Cyborgs and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1996). These theorists critiqued the earlier Marxist notion of the “social construction of nature” as another way of objectifying nature as inanimate, passive, and ‘out there, lacking any agency or subjectivity’. They objected that this dichotomy would still limit agency to conscious subjective human interests, rendering ‘nature’ as the passive ‘other’. For example, Emily Martin’s discussion of the discursive effects of medical science in objectifying the female body was an important intervention in this debate, by demonstrating that the objectification of nature is effectively an exercise of power over the natural as well as the human subjects.

This critique stirred a response from Marxist geographers, who have begun to reconsider more explicitly the consequences of thinking of the physical world as simply inanimate ‘resources’ to be exploited for economic benefits. Harvey, in particular, has clarified and highlighted Marx’ insights into capitalist exploitation as a corporeal experience through which the human body becomes an extension of socially invented machines. David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Smith, *Uneven Development*. In addition, Harvey has engaged and expanded on Marx’ original critique of the Malthusian legacy within classical political economy and its present version in neo-classical economics, with its objectification of the natural world as scarce resources, and the reification of subaltern populations as either a reserve army of the labor market, or as the ‘undeserving poor’ who pose a menace to limited resources. His target of analysis has been the highly influential neo Malthusian work of Gareth Hardin’s “tragedy of the commons” and its continuing legacy in development studies, welfare reform, and environmental policy-making. See for example David Harvey, “Population, Resources, and the Ideology of Science,” in *Spaces of Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 38–67.

Other critical scholars have continued the attempt to synthesize the insights of post-structuralist and Marxist approaches to overcoming the discursive dichotomy between society and nature, emphasizing the fact that these two positions are not as mutually exclusive as some protagonists have claimed. See for example Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts, eds., *Violent Environments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Richard Peet, Paul Robbins, and Michael Watts, eds., *Global Political Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Richard Peet and Michael Watts, eds., *Liberation Ecologies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004); Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (Verso, 2002); William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis:*

Especially in chapter 4 I follow this line of inquiry to explain how the nature of the chemical substance petroleum as a new source of energy played an integral part in the formulation of *the social question*, contributed to paving the way for the transition to Fordism and the era of mass politics, and affected the assemblage of the oil complex in Iran. In particular, my spatial focus on the built environment of oil and the material landscapes created for and destroyed by it, will reveal that the new social and political order of petroleum was the end product of intentional but contested acts of assemblage, and not the natural progression of the evolutionary history of the capitalist industrial order. However, while I borrow from the actor network theory and use some of its theoretical insights, I find its overall neglect of labor, value theory, and the historical and political agency of subaltern agents in favor of a structuralist emphasis on technopolitics, rather problematic. Tim Mitchell's implicit work of synthesis with Marx, and especially his focus on and inclusion of the role of regimes of property in assembling the contemporary socio-technical systems of political economy is a compromise approach that is closer to my own interpretation.

The Anglo Persian Oil Company (APOC) maintained that the territory it was claiming for the extraction and processing of oil was a 'natural setting', virtually empty of population. Repeatedly the region was portrayed as misused by its sparse population, who were ignorant of its resources, and wasted its potential commercial productivity by failing to exploit it properly. In addition, throughout the relentless propaganda generated by the Oil Company (chapter 5), the local peoples populating the Zagros range were presented as part of that natural world, virtually lawless bandits who would benefit from the civilizing effects of the industrial capitalist order (see below, as well as chapters 3, 6). This framing of the region as an empty frontier to be

Chicago and the Great West (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water, Revised Edition*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993); Robert Gottlieb and Margaret Fitzsimmons, *Thirst for Growth: Water Agencies as Hidden Government in California* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994); Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

The central concern of this new environmental scholarship is to rethink the notion of "social construction of nature" so that it is not about finding a more "sustainable" solution to the same practice of instrumentalization and subjugation of "the natural" by the "social". Instead, the aim is to recognize that this dichotomy is an exercise of power, and conceptualizing a material world where these abstractions hold sway only as a way to facilitate interested actions, rather than explain a complex and overlapping reality (See the aforementioned Timothy Mitchell's *Can the mosquito speak?*)

conquered for the universal benefit of all was a vision that was by and large shared by many Iranian modernist nationalists in the early 20th century, and even today⁶. As I will argue in a later section of this introduction as well as in the following chapters, these discursive geographic presentations of southwest Iran as a wild frontier, an empty land populated by noble savages or rogue bandits (pending on the normative preferences of the observers) who were simply an extension of its rugged and unclaimed natural setting, were integral to the exercise of power that made the assemblage of this extractive global industry possible.

3. The Oil Complex

The term ‘oil complex’ refers to the web of extraction, processing, production, distribution, and consumption that underline the global system of oil provision, and the oil encounters that accompanied its protracted historical assemblage. I use the term as distinct from “the oil industry”, and “the oil sector”, both of which are more frequently used but loaded terms that distort the frame of analysis in such a way that the wider social, spatial, and cultural relationships that surrounded the rise to prominence of oil are excluded from view. The first term, *the oil industry*, refers to the institutions and firms directly involved in the linked production processes in procuring oil and its byproducts as a final commodity for consumption; while the second term, *the oil sector*, analyzes oil as part of the economy, a financial and natural resource, and a source of employment and revenue. The term *oil complex*, is an alternative formulation to allow us to include in the analysis not only the people and institutions that were directly involved in the business of oil – such as oil companies, states, oil workers, technical experts – but also the plethora of other social actors whose lives were directly altered by being drawn into the global and local dynamics of the oil regime, and were integral to its continuance and eventual consolidation.

These included the range of social actors I have investigated in this dissertation, including rural populations, urban migrants, and others who were not directly employed by the oil industry or did not participate directly in the economics

⁶ Kaveh Ehsani, “Sweet Dreams; Sugarcane and the Politics of Development in Pre and Post-Revolution Iran” (Conference presented at the Development After Development, New York University, 2003); Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Grace Goodell, *Elementary Structures of Political Life: Rural Development in Pahlavi Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

of the oil sector, but were organically connected to its everyday reproduction. The concept also allows us to incorporate the material and spatial transformations that paved the way for the consolidation of the oil industry, including the urban built environment of oil; the new property relations that were introduced to provide a legal framework for the operations of the new industry; as well as the ecological as well as architectural transformations that accompanied its new forms of land use.

Harriet Friedmann first coined the term “complex” to differentiate between networks of social and political economic relations that surrounded the provision of specific and highly strategic food commodities that had become essential to the operation of the world system; namely the “wheat complex”, the “durable food complex”, and the “meat complex”:

“The post war food regime consisted of different complexes, each defined as a chain or web of production and consumption relations linking farm workers to consuming individuals, households, and communities. Within each web are private and state institutions, which buy, sell, provide inputs, process, transport, distribute, and finance each link. Each complex involves many gender, class, and cultural relations within a specific (changing) international division of labor. Although each country or region inherits a specific legacy of incorporation and marginalization, each of the three complexes created general conditions for the third world”⁷

Friedmann’s agenda was ambitious, and her own work did not incorporate and fully analyze all the linkages, commodity chains, and scales that had been outlined in her essay. But other scholars working on food and agriculture under the general umbrella of world system theory have been gradually addressing this agenda in exiting ways and gradually filling the blanks⁸. Nor am I claiming to be able to fulfill

⁷ Harriet Friedmann, “Distance and Durability: Shaky Foundations of the World Food Economy.,” *Third World Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1992): 371.

⁸ See for example Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael, “Agriculture and the State System.,” *Sociologia Ruralis* 29, no. 2 (1989); Philip McMichael, ed., *Food and Agrarian Orders in the World-Economy* (Westport: CT: Praeger, 1995); Ben Fine, Michael Heasman, and Judith Wright, *Consumption in the Age of Affluence: The World of Food* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Alessandro Bonanno et al., eds., *From Columbus to ConAgra: The Globalization of Agriculture and Food* (Lawrence, KA: University Press Of Kansas, 1994); David Goodman and Michael Watts, eds., *Globalizing Food: Agrarian Questions and Global Restructuring*, (New York: Routledge, 1997); Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

such an ambitious project in this dissertation, which is much more focused on producing a solid micro history and linking it to the larger national and global trends, than analyzing oil in a worldwide context. However, as it will become clear in the following chapters, I do attempt to analyze the social history of oil commodity as an ‘open history’, situated within a larger social and geographic framework than its immediate institutional and geographic surroundings.

While Friedmann did mention in passing an “oil complex” among the strategic commodity chains that knitted together the post WW2 world system, it was not her object of study. Michael Watts has used the concept of “oil complex” in his insightful review of the literature on transnational oil corporations, predatory national states, and dispossessed local populations⁹. While Watts’ copious work on oil, environmental degradation, state corruption and violence, and the trammeling of indigenous rights in Nigeria is very important and close to my own interests, it is interesting that neither he, nor many other authors who pursue similar critical investigations into the local impact of global oil consider *labor* to be an integral part of their analysis¹⁰. Indeed, for Watts and most of these authors oil seems to be a substance that simply emerges out of ground without any work. For example, Tim Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy*, by and large excludes the role of oil workers from consideration of the historical dynamics of oil in shaping modern Middle East politics¹¹. Mitchell compares the dynamics of labor process in coal mining against that of the oil industry, and concludes that the resulting political agency of coal

Timothy Mitchell’s analysis of the transformations of Egyptian food consumption within the larger framework of American geopolitics and foreign aid regime, and the shifting patterns of landownership, labor regimes, and elite formations in post Sadat era is an important model of analyzing a commodity complex within its larger social and political context. See “The Object of Development” in Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 209-243.

⁹ Michael Watts, “Righteous Oil? Human Rights, the Oil Complex, and Corporate Social Responsibility,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 30 (2005): 373–407.

¹⁰ Suzana Sawyer, *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Suzana Sawyer and Edmund Terence Gomez, eds., *The Politics of Resource Extraction: Indigenous Peoples, Multinational Corporations and the State* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Tom Perreault and Gabriela Valdivia, “Hydrocarbons, Popular Protest and National Imaginaries: Ecuador and Bolivia in Comparative Context,” *Geoforum* 41, no. 5 (September 2010): 689–99; Andrea Behrends, Stephen P. Reyna, and Gunther Schlee, eds., *Crude Domination: An Anthropology of Oil* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011); Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal, *Oil Is Not a Curse: Ownership Structure and Institutions in Soviet Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹¹ To be fair, Mitchell’s book (versus the earlier essay) is focused on the relation of oil, economics, and politics in general, although Middle East is his main study case.

miners weighed much heavier than oil workers in shaping popular politics¹². This odd observation is based on Mitchell's case study of the Haifa pipeline that carried Iraqi oil for export. Thus, oil is analyzed essentially as a mining and transport enterprise, and not as chemical manufacturing and processing.

Mitchell's analysis by and large excludes the Iranian oil workers, who have had a substantial continuous presence throughout the 20th century as political actors. In addition, workers in the Iranian oil complex have not been producing petroleum simply for export, but formed the backbone of further industrial developments in refining, petrochemicals, gas, and other related enterprises¹³. Their erasure as significant political actors has been the product of intentional political decisions and discursive maneuvers backed by administrative policies, such as the casualization of the labor market from the 1990s, rather than a reflection of their actual social and political irrelevance¹⁴. Similarly, Fernando Coronil's classic study of oil and politics in Venezuela, *The Magical State*, intentionally excludes the role of labor almost completely, and chooses instead to focus instead on the formation of elite nationalism and the establishment of other industries in Venezuela with the economic proceeds from oil, such as car and tractor manufacturing¹⁵.

¹² The argument is that coal miners worked in large numbers underground, away from the direct supervision of employers. Their overseers shared similar high risk working conditions with rank and file workers, and therefore were not solely acting as enforcers safeguarding the interests of employers. Furthermore, the underground workspace allowed room for relatively unsupervised networks of workers solidarity and coordination to take shape away from the relentless surveillance of employers and their agents. By contrast, oil extraction and work on pipelines and transport employ large numbers of temporary workers, many for relatively unskilled construction work, who are dismissed as soon as the infrastructure is in place. The spatially scattered and isolated locals are easier to supervise, and more visible to disciplinary managerial gaze. Empirical studies of the petroleum industry's operations in Iran, for example those presented in the following chapters, reveal a different and more diverse dynamic from this portrait.

¹³ Fathollah Sa'adat, *Jughrafiya-ye Eqtesadi-e Naft-e Iran*, vol. 1 & 2, 2 vols. (Tehran: Pars Publishers, 1967); Alexander Melamid, "Petroleum Product Distribution and the Evolution of Economic Regions in Iran," *Geographical Review* 65, no. 4 (October 1, 1975): 510–25

¹⁴ Kaveh Ehsani, "Crude Power: Rethinking Oil and Politics," in *Lecture Series: Fueling Societies: Energy Resources and Politics from Below* (presented at the Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, 2014); Mohammad Maljoo, "Eqtesad-e Siasi-ye Nirou-ye Kar-e San'at-e Naft da Iran-e Pas az Jang [The Political Economy of the Labor Force in Post-War Iran]," *Kanoun-e Modafe'an-e Hoquq-e Kargar*, September 4, 2012, <http://kanoonmodafean1.blogspot.nl/2012/09/blog-post.html>.

¹⁵ Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011); Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1997).

Of course there are noted exceptions to this de-socialization of oil. For example, both Bob Vitalis and Miguel Tinker Salas situate the role of labor at the center of their historical analyses of the oil complex in Venezuela and Saudi Arabia. See Miguel Tinker Salas, *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2009).

Part of the reason for this glaring neglect may be the technical aspects of the oil extraction process itself. As an extractive enterprise the early phases of oil exploration and extraction involve large initial inputs of labor, which tends to fall off in the latter phases once the fixed capital investments have been put in place and a technical infrastructure of transportation and export has been consolidated. Offshore oil explorations have taken the isolation of oil installations from wider social settings and established centers of population to another level¹⁶. The often remote locations of oil fields, and the proclivity of oil companies to create protected enclaves around installations further add to their occlusion from outside view and hide the social relations around the oil-works behind protective walls, guarded fences, and barbed wires.

However, as I will argue in a later section, this blindness to the integral role of labor is a symptom of a larger phenomenon that prevents oil from being analyzed *as a social relationship*. To quote Amitav Ghosh again, “A great deal is invested in insuring the muteness of the oil encounter, all wrapped in regimes of strict corporate secrecy, and encased in enclaves... keeping especially the labor experience irrelevant and insignificant”. The systematic and glaring erasure of the role of labor in oil is an issue that I have addressed elsewhere¹⁷, and intend to take up in later publications. In this dissertation I provide a detailed micro history of how this regime of secrecy encased in enclaves became integral to the operations of the oil complex from its early inception in Khuzestan (chapter 6). Meanwhile, using the term “oil complex” is intended to frame the social history of oil within the larger spatial and social processes and relationships in which it is embedded.

4. The Oil Habitus

The last theoretical concept I have found useful and necessary for this work is that of the *oil habitus*. Habitus is a concept coined by Pierre Bourdieu to explain how aspects of culture and socialized norms and tendencies that shape and guide actions, thinking, behavior, and practice, are not solely articulated explicitly at the level of ideology or conscious thought, or enshrined in codified institutional rules or customary norms. Rather, they are embodied (internalized) by societies, nations, and

¹⁶ Hannah Appel, “Offshore Work: Oil, Modularity, and the How of Capitalism in Equatorial Guinea,” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 4 (2012): 692–709.

¹⁷ Ehsani, “Crude Power: Rethinking Oil and Politics.”

individuals as non-verbal and transposable dispositions, or as “the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and non-discursive knowledges that go without saying. [Habitus] operates beneath the level of self-conscious rational ideology”¹⁸.

Trying to explain how agents make sense of the world beyond the simple object-subject dichotomy, Bourdieu’s defines the notion of habitus as produced over time and in concrete places -- a spatial and historical “structuring structure” that shapes individuals and their collective practices. Habitus shapes how agents think and perceive the world, but it exists only through the practices of actors and the way in which they interact with each other and their environment. Bourdieu also emphasized that habitus is produced collectively: “to speak of habitus is to assert that the individual, and even the personal, the objective, is *social, collective. Habitus is socialized subjectivity*”¹⁹.

The *oil habitus* - how the range of social agents involved in the oil complex understood their world and behaved in it and with each other, and reproduced it through their practice - was shaped collectively, historically, and geographically. It was shaped not only by the actions of all-powerful macro-agents, like the Oil Company shareholders, their management, British policymakers, or Iranian state functionaries and politicians, but also by the collective and conflictual practices of all the other social actors there. These included workers, migrants, and their families (and by extension their extended kinship networks in their mostly rural places of origin), and expatriates coming primarily from Britain, India, the Caucasus, and Mesopotamia. It then contributed to molding the perceptions and practices of individuals, institutions, and collectives.

Thus, as the following chapters will show, the historical encounters and the practices of various social actors involved in assembling the oil complex in Khuzestan created a new oil habitus that shaped and structured their subsequent actions and interactions in a manner that was substantially different from before, as well as from those of the adjoining and neighboring social settings.

¹⁸ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 66–67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126; Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 81. (My added emphasis).

Entry Points: Theoretical, Empirical, and Historical

1. The Urban Life of Oil: The Urban Process, the Built Environment, and Everyday Life in Abadan

The human experiences surrounding the production of oil in Khuzestan took place in numerous distinct but interconnected spaces: There were the extractive places of oil wells and fields as in Masjed Soleyman; the link nodes of transportation routes and security zones surrounding them; the administrative centers that coordinated operations in Ahvaz and Mohammareh (later renamed Khorramshahr); and the industrial processing, storage, and shipping center that was the heart of the operations in Abadan. During the period under study there were other strategic nodes influencing local events in Tehran, London, Delhi, Basra, and Baghdad. Thus, the oil complex in Khuzestan was always part of a larger national and transnational web of interests and decision-making, while at the same time it began to take on a complicated dynamic of its own.

In Khuzestan, these different oil centers did not operate in a spatial and social vacuum. They spread out into the countryside to appropriate territory from existing local populations and land users, and to siphon off human labor power to carry out the work of mining, the industrial production of petroleum products, and their export. Thus, the landscape of oil connected together as never before the urban and the rural; and the local with the provincial, the national, and global spaces, to make possible the supply of petroleum to its expanding markets and the accumulation of capital in the oil business. The everyday experiences that were essential to making the contemporary “oil civilization” occurred in these material places, the oil boomtowns and company towns where the encounter between the heterogeneous populations occupying many social roles made the production of oil and its reliable, cheap, and expanding provision to the market, in a growing variety of forms, a reality.

The following chapters will investigate the successive spatial reconfigurations produced by the advent of oil capitalism in Khuzestan, and analyze how they affected the oil encounters and shaped its new habitus. Conventional social histories of labor in the oil industry tend to focus on the workplace relations, wages and compensations structures, corporate management relations; or highlight workers struggles for collective bargaining, self-organization, and improvements in living conditions. This focus on the workplace can occlude what takes place outside and around the places of

production; and thus only partially reveal the dynamics of the new oil habitus. It leaves unanswered equally important questions such as how workers maintained and negotiated ties to their places of origin, how those places of origin were transformed as they became tangled in these new sets of long distance relations, whether the social and geographic background played a role in helping, hindering, and shaping the manners of oil workers interactions with their neighbors in their new urban settings, and reveal the range of novel alliances and hybrid and cosmopolitan new collective cultures that shaped their outlook and informed their subsequent practices in the workplace and outside²⁰.

My intellectual influences will become evident in the course of the text, but for the spatial entry point followed here I must highlight the influence of critical urban geography on my work, in particular the framework for the urban analysis of capitalism provided by Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Frederick Cooper²¹; as well as what I would generally label as the post-structuralist spatial analysis of colonial and industrial urban history and modes of governance²².

My primary focus of investigation will be the refinery city of Abadan, initially a rural and sparsely populated river island in 1909, before multiple social actors converged there and transformed it by late 1920s into an oil and shipping boomtown

²⁰ For valuable, but partial social histories of labor in the oil industry see Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Touraj Atabaki, "Sandicalizm dar Jombesh-e Kargari-e Iran dar Faseleh-e Salha-ye 1320-25," *Alefba* Second Series, Paris, no. 6 (1985): 39–60; Habib Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985); Willem M. Floor, *Labor and Industry in Iran, 1850-1941* (Mage Publishers, 2009); Cosroe Chakeri, *Origins of Social Democracy in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Asef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1987); Sa'id Taeb, *Az E'tesab-e Karkonan-e San'at-e Naft ta Pirouzi-e Enqelab-e Eslami* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 2003); Peyman Jafari, "Reasons to Revolt: Iranian Oil Workers in the 1970s," *International Labor and Working Class History* 84, no. 1 (2013): 195–217

²¹ David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); David Harvey, *Limits to Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Frederick Cooper, "Urban Space, Industrial Time, and Wage Labor in Africa," in *Struggle for the City: Migrant Labor, Capital, and the State in Urban Africa*, ed. Frederick Cooper (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983), 7–50; Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'Espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1983).

²² Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982); Robert Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities* (London: E & FN Spon, 1997); Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Paul Rabinow, *The French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Anthony D. King, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Brenda Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); Janet Abu-Lughod, *Rabat, Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

with a rapidly growing population of over 60 thousand and the site of the largest refinery in the world. As a city built by and for oil, Abadan became the home of people in multiple roles – managers, workers, bureaucrats, merchants, servants, smugglers, indigenous date farmers, prostitutes, soldiers, etc. It was a polarized “quartered city”²³, a city shaped by conflicting and competing claims to space that did not harmonize or succumb to the hegemony of a single urban form, but left their imprint on the urban geography and social relations within. Thus, while the Anglo Persian Oil Company (APOC) attempted to carve out exclusive enclaves on the island to build living and working spaces that would fit its stringent criteria and be organized under its monopoly control, other residents fought to shape space according to their own needs and priorities. The indigenous population struggled to keep hold of its agrarian spaces, groves, pastures, fields, villages, and modes of tribal life. The huge inflow of migrants lived under appalling conditions in precarious shelters and slums, which they attempted to defend against evictions and speculative commodification by creating new networks of neighborly solidarities. And state agents, newly arrived in the city after the gradual consolidation of a military, authoritarian, and centralizing state worked hard to impose the new legal and administrative order of the nation-state over the Oil Company, the strategic national border region, the restless local population, and the expanding oil boomtown. Thus, the urban process in Abadan was hardly harmonious, even though it became increasingly channeled toward the social transformation of the population and the urban space for the purposes of the refinery and the oil industry.

Adam Przeworski argued in his essay *Proletariat into a class*, that the story of working class formation was the story of resistance to becoming wage laborers²⁴, an observation certainly true in the case of the population of southern Iran who eventually formed the core of the oil industry’s labor force. Thus, a main challenge is to find an explanation for why people came to work in the oil industry when

²³ The term “quartered city” is coined by Peter Marcuse as a critique of Janet Abu Lughod’s notion of a “Dual City”, as in colonial Rabat divided between a European sector and a native Qasba. Marcuse argues that neither the “traditional city” is ahistorical and unchanged, nor the European city is shaped exclusively and definitely by the will of colonial planners. He outlines multiple social and spatial dynamics that constantly muddy the urban and spatial boundaries, even in seemingly segregated and subdivided urban settings. See Peter Marcuse, “‘Dual City’: A Muddy Metaphor for a Quartered City,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 13, no. 4 (1989): 697–708; Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Rabat, Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

²⁴ Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 47–97.

alternative modes of social and political life were not a nostalgic and distant memory, but a living reality in the province: Why did people consent to becoming an extension of the industrial order and accepted its time discipline, its harsh regime of corporate management and punishing physical labor, and allowed their social relations and aspirations to be defined by what Polanyi calls the “Satanic Mill”²⁵? The built environment of Abadan, its refinery, and the oil habitus that framed people’s viewpoints and practices there was a product of these frictions and the interactions of all these heterogeneous social actors. Its micro social history provides an answer (although not the only one) to the larger questions of how this consent was obtained, and how oil capitalism and the nation state were consolidated.

Urbanization is a process that is celebrated normatively by a range of modernization theories as inherently progressive, modern, and inevitable ²⁶. The critical approach I adopt here sees the urban history of Abadan not as a celebrated byproduct of the forward movement of history toward an ideal type modernity, but as a site of ongoing political and social tensions, struggles, and negotiations, over how alternative modes of life and heterogeneous populations are first fragmented, before being integrated into the new social order of capitalism and the nation state. Thus the questions I pose here are not only about employment, municipal services, food, housing, sanitation, property laws, and police; but also about culture, ideology, and new forms of solidarity and resistance, in forming a new spatial order. These issues form the basis of the production and reproduction of the social and political economic order; they are not abstract and discursive, but concern the concrete experiences that are framed by and rooted in material space²⁷.

The Oil industry produced many urban spaces in Khuzestan, the largest of which were Masjed Soleyman and Abadan, with significant differences between them. The first was a strictly mining town, built around oil wells and designed

²⁵ Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*. Of course, the issue of proletarianization under capitalism and the place of labor in the transition to capitalism is of general concern to radical social history; a topic that I will address in the next section.

²⁶ W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), is one of the classic articulations of this teleological approach in the post WW2 development literature. In the case of Iran see the example of Eckhart Ehlers and Willem Floor, “Urban Change in Iran, 1920-1941,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 3-4 (1993): 251-76; Jamshid Behnam, “Population,” in *Cambridge History of Iran; the Land of Iran*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 468-88. My critical analysis of modernization theories and practices is sketched out in Kaveh Ehsani, “A Critique of Planning, Development and Progress” (MA Thesis in Regional Planning, University of Massachusetts- Amherst, 1986).

²⁷ Harvey, *The Urban Experience*, 17-89.

functionally and under the strict coercive control of APOC to extract crude oil. Its location was dictated by geology. It remained an enclave with the typical characteristics of a company town. Once oil began to run out, the city and its residents were discarded unceremoniously, gradually turning into a de-industrialized shell²⁸. While I do discuss the urban and regional history of Masjed Soleyman, my focus is on the much more variegated and cosmopolitan Abadan.

By contrast, Abadan's choice of location was down to a political decision and not dictated by geology (chapters 2, 3, 5). It was a river port city, a border town, a major chemical industrial center that became the converging ground for tens of thousands of deracinated rural populations of diverse origin who formed the core of the oil working class and a new urban citizenry. The Oil Company never managed to cast a monopoly control over its development, and nor did the central government. Its vast slums and condensed neighborhoods were home to heterogeneous populations of different kinds of oil workers, ranging from temporary and casual to more skilled workers and artisans, as well as many others who were not directly employed by the Oil Company, but made a living there on its margins. Its urban space became a combination of organized company enclaves, industrial spaces, indigenous settlements, and a frontier boomtown, making it an ideal case study for analyzing the web of relationships that created this unique oil habitus and became the heart of the oil complex.

Marx argued that the basic reality of capitalism boiled down to the circulation and flow of capital requiring the simultaneous separation and concentration of capital and labor in one place. This dual movement becomes possible through the initial moment of the primitive accumulation of capital and the dispossession of existing communities whose economy and society are not based on money relations, commodity exchange, and private property²⁹ (see chapter 3). David Harvey adds that this transition is essentially an urban phenomenon, which involves a revolutionary *urban process* to dissolve community by money, state coercion, and wage labor, “A

²⁸ Kaveh Ehsani, “Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan's Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman,” *International Review of Social History* 48, no. 3 (2003): 361–99; Kamal Athari, “Masjed Soleyman; Sherkat Shahri Madaniyat Yafteh,” *Ettela'at-e Siasi-Eqtisadi*, no. 47/48 (1991); Danesh Abbasi-Shahni, *Tarikh-e Masjed Soleyman*, (Tehran: Hirmand, 1995).

²⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 1:873–941.

built environment has to be created before capital accumulation can start. The urban process is all about how this new landscape is produced and used”³⁰.

In an industrial oil city like Abadan, this urban process meant that casual workers and migrants had to be controlled and co-opted, before being absorbed and integrated. Markets for land, labor, and living necessities had to be created where they did not exist at all, or did so on a limited scale. Customary relations of work had to be transformed, and the impact of social, technical, and political change had to be managed. As a result, from the 1920s onward, the Oil Company had to engage into a set of social policies, which I have called “reluctant paternalism” (chapter 5), that involved propaganda and public relations, educational and vocational training, municipal improvement, sanitary and public health measures, organized leisure activities (chapters 5 and 6). These social measures were in part a response to existing conditions in southern Iran, and partly a byproduct of the momentous changes taking place in the wider global habitus of industrial capitalism in the inter war era when welfare social policies promoted by professional experts, under pressure by working people, were being considered as credible alternatives to placate the rise of mass politics and class strife in the revolutionary circumstances following the end of WWI (chapter 4).

2. Social History of Oil as a Global Labor History

The approach I have adopted in this work falls within the field of research of the *Global Labor History* (GLH). Without being a grand narrative, GLH lays out the possibility of critically rethinking key concepts of social, historical, and geographic analysis in a manner that will be further outlined below³¹. In the first instance, GLH mounts a challenge to both nationalist and diffusionist historiography, by emphasizing relations and connections between various scales of analysis – for example, transnational, national, local - rather than privileging one over the others as more significant

“Global history is primarily concerned with the description and explanation of the intensifying or weakening connections (interactions, influences, transfers)

³⁰ Harvey, *The Urban Experience*, 59-89

³¹ Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 6–14.

between different world regions, as well as of economic political, social, and cultural networks, institutions, and media that played a role in it”³².

In this sense ‘global’ does not refer to large scale, or ‘the world’, with local dynamics reduced to mere case studies proving the universal rule. Rather, global history can be a local history, so long as the micro scale is understood as relational and an integral part of a global network of connections and interactions. Thus, I construct the story of urban change in Abadan in chapters 5 and 6 around the controversial history of the building of a small, modern, ‘sanitary’ market place by APOC in 1924-1927, where a seemingly micro event captured and reflected the revolutionary transformations taking place at national and transnational scales.

Likewise, GLH allows the reconceptualization of the working class on the basis of inclusion rather than exclusion³³. Thus, rather than focusing on a narrow definition of oil working class as only those directly employed for wages by the Oil Company, I will include the extended network of all those whose purposive activities contributed directly or indirectly to the continued functioning of the oil complex. These include soldiers, casual workers, landlords, extended family members in rural areas who shared economic ties with urban migrants, and well as professional company experts and staff. In the following sections I will further elaborate on this approach and my reliance on GLH as a framework of analysis.

Concepts, Linkages, and Scales of Analysis:

By and large, the historiography of oil in Iran has been dominated by works of geopolitical, corporate, economic, political, and nationalist history that focus on the role of formal institutions, elites, and states, framed within various meta-narratives of modernization³⁴. While of great empirical value, this copious literature neglects or

³² Marcel van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 82 (October 1, 2012): 62.

³³ *Ibid.*, 66–69. On widening the category of working classes see van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, 17–37, 366–377.

³⁴ Prominent examples include Ronald Ferrier, *History of the British Petroleum Company*, vol. 1, of 3 vols. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982); James Bamberg, *History of the British Petroleum Company*, vol. 2, 3 vols. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994); L.P. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil: A Study in Power Politics* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955); Laurence Lockhart, *The Record of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, Ltd.* (London: Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), 1938); Lawrence Lockhart and Rose Greaves, *The Record of the British Petroleum Limited (1918-1946) Relations with the Persian (Iranian) Government* (London: British Petroleum Company, 1968); Chamseddine Amiralaii, *Khal’e Yad az Sherkat-e Sabeq-e Naft-e Iran va Engelis*

even tends to erase the lived experiences surrounding the oil complex as it was being assembled in Khuzestan. Even local provincial histories tend to narrate *what happened* there once the oil industry and the central government were established instead of unpacking the mechanisms of *how it happened*. Furthermore, the equally central question of *why it happened* seems to be taken as self evident, inevitable, and not particularly in need of further inquiry³⁵.

The same can be said of the existing histories of labor in the oil industry, where “the making of” or “the emergence of” a wage laboring class in the oil industry is presented as a passage from a state of particularistic primordialism (tribal, ethnic, local) to one of a universal modernity of wage earning in the labor market and of eventual inclusion in the nation state. To some extent this approach seems to characterize the labor historiography of the Middle East and not only Iran. In a critical review of an important collection of essays titled *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East*, Dipesh Chakrabarty took issue with this tendency of accepting important analytical categories -- such as citizenship, the state, modernity, nation state, and class -- as universal and self evident, and not particularly open to contestation³⁶. Chakrabarty notes that in this literature the state tends to be framed as external to class and society, and as an adversary and a repressive organ serving its own interests or those of a ruling class by hindering the development of self-consciousness among

(Dispossession of the Former Anglo Iranian Oil Company) (Tehran: Dekhoda, 1978); Mostafa Fateh, *Panjah Sal Naft-e Iran* (Tehran: Sherkat-e Sahami-e Chehr, 1956); Ministry of Petroleum of the Islamic Republic of Iran, “San’at Naft-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran dar Yek Negah,” accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.mop.ir/>; Mohammad ‘Ali Movahed, *Naft-e Ma va Masa’el-e Hoquqi-e An (Our Oil and Its Legal Issues)* (Tehran: Kharazmi, 1978); Foad Rohani, *Tarikh-e Melli Shodan-e San’at-e Naft-e Iran* (Tehran: Jibi, 1973); Sa’adat, *Jughrafiya-ye Eqtesadi-e Naft-e Iran*; Fathollah Sa’adat, *Pajouheshi dar Masa’el-e Nafti-e Iran (An Investigation into Iran’s Petroleum Issues)* (Tehran: AmirKabir, 1976); Iraj Zoghi, *Masa’el-e Siasi-Eqtesadi-e Naft-e Iran* (Tehran: Pazhang, 1991); Geoffrey Jones, *The State and the Emergence of the British Oil Industry* (London: Mac Millan, 1981); Nasrollah Fatemi, *Oil Diplomacy; Powderkeg in Iran* (New York: Whittier Books, 1954); Fereydu Fesharaki, *Development of the Iranian Oil Industry* (New York: Praeger, 1976).

³⁵ Danesh Abbasi-Shahni, *Tarikh-e Masjed Soleyman* (Tehran: Hirmand, 1995); Ali Ya’qubinejad, *Raiis-e Naft* (Tehran: Yadvareh Ketab, 1994); Mohammadi Yousefi, *Tarikh-e Khorramshahr* (Tehran: Nil, 1971); Eshaq Shakiba, *Negahi beh Tarikh-e Mahshahr* (Shiraz: Navid-e Shiraz, 2007); Abdolali Lahsaeizadeh, *Jame’eh Shenasi-e Abadan* (NP: Kianmehr, 2004). There are of course notable exceptions to this trend, where the social history of the local society is taken seriously and not subsumed under the larger political and economic histories of the nation or the oil industry, for example Mostafa Ansari, “The History of Khuzistan, 1878-1925: A Study in Provincial Autonomy and Change” (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1974); Arash Khazeni, *Tribes and Empire on the Margins of 19th Century Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009); Stephanie Cronin, *Tribal Politics in Iran: Rural Conflict and the New State 1921-41* (London: Routledge, 2007). However, these local histories are not primarily focused on the oil industry.

³⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Labor History and the Politics of Theory; an Indian Angle on the Middle East,” in *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East*, ed. Zachary Lockman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 321–34.

the working classes. Likewise, workers become agents and subjects only when they fight the employers or go on strike, but if they fight amongst themselves or resist their subsumption to wage labor and various forms of state citizenship they are seen as still mired in a traditional and pre-modern state, or as victims of external manipulation by elites, employers, and government agents³⁷.

The second issue that Chakrabarty has raised in his reflexive work on the historiography of labor in non-western settings is to ask how these histories can be written as if they were not a mere extension of ‘the real history’ taking place in the metropole:

“There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe’...Only ‘Europe’...is ‘theoretically’ knowable (i.e. at the level of the fundamental categories that stage historical thinking). All other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton that is substantially ‘Europe’...The paradox is that third world social scientists find these theories eminently useful to understanding their societies”³⁸

The problem to engage in this literature on the histories of oil in Iran is the recurring tendency toward Whig historiography, or the presentation of the social history of working people of the global south as a relentless forward march that is sometimes regrettable and costly in human terms, but ultimately moves toward inevitable industrial progress and modernization³⁹. This narrative of transition frames the histories of local subaltern people prior to the advent of modernization in terms of incompleteness, inadequacy, and a series of,

“Absences – [and a] ‘failure’ of history to keep an appointment with its destiny...This is a picture shared by colonialists and Indian [and I would add

³⁷ Ibid., 321–327. See also footnote 15

³⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?,” in *A Subaltern Studies Reader (1986-1995)*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 263–266.

³⁹ There now exists a substantial literature that frames oil as a curse, both economic and political. I have discussed and analyzed this literature briefly and critically, and I intend to return to the topic later on. The common theme between both trends - framing oil as a boon or alternatively as a curse – is the reification of “oil” as an abstract historical agent that shapes politics and economics on its own, without being connected to any concrete history or social dynamics. See Ehsani, “Crude Power: Rethinking Oil and Politics”; Kaveh Ehsani, “Naft na estebdad misazad, na democracy (Oil is neither the cause of authoritarianism nor democracy.,” *Tarikh Irani*, 2012, <http://www.tarikhirani.ir/fa/files/13/bodyView/131/>.

Iranian] nationalists alike, as the diversity of ‘Indian pasts was conquered and represented through a homogenizing narrative of transition from ‘medieval’ period to ‘modernity’...of ‘despotism’ versus ‘constitutions’ presented as the rule of law and private property.”⁴⁰

The approach I have adopted in this work challenges the narratives of transition (to modernity) and diffusion (of a western model of development and progress) by questioning their underlying assumptions, and by subjecting some of their key units of analysis - such as the state, oil, citizenship, class, and national identity - to critical historical inquiry. Specifically, I will make the following arguments:

First, state formation is inseparable from the formation of class and other social identities. Rather than being a self-contained monad, confronting another free-standing entity called society by imposing its political will, the state is as shaped by class frictions and social dynamics as the other way around. As Tim Mitchell argues, the state is an ‘effect’ rather than ‘a thing’; its boundaries with civil society are fuzzy at best, but the state effect is nonetheless an important presence and a material force in shaping the political arena⁴¹. Like class and ethnicity, the state has a history, and its development is intertwined with those of the former.

As the following chapters will demonstrate, the micro history of the oil complex in Khuzestan shows the state, class, ethnicities, and other institutions and social identities were formed through relational processes that were inseparable from one another. Chapter 2 shows how state institutions and governmental practices in Iran, as well as British government positions toward Iran and the Persian Gulf, underwent constant reconfigurations in an attempt to keep up with and to adapt to turbulent and novel circumstances. In Khuzestan, these shifts led to the emergence of

⁴⁰ Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History,” 267–268. For a brilliant deconstruction of the concepts of modernity, identity, and globalization see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 59–151.

⁴¹ Mitchell asks, for example, whether financial institutions of Wall Street, multinationals such as Aramco or General Dynamics, or educational and social welfare institutions, such as universities and so on should be considered as extensions of the American state, as they are integral to its policy decisions, despite being formally private or semi private. He also questions the reductive Marxist argument that reduces the state to a mere instrument of the ruling class. His point is that ‘state theory’ is a construct that functions in various forms to present the state as a separate entity to a similar construct, the civil society, rather than a relational process. See Mitchell, “Society, Economy, and the State Effect.”

a new oil habitus in the 1920s. Chapter 3 shows that supposedly primordial and traditional categories, such as tribal identity, were never stable, permanent, or hermetic, but were constantly adapting to the flows and demands of the larger world, as well as contending with their own internal frictions, that in the end proved insurmountable. Chapter 4 shows the manners in which the British state underwent profound transformation in the course of WWI in response to the rise of mass politics, the newfound prominence of the professional middle class, the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, and the advent of Fordism. The subsequent result of this was the rise of *the social question* as a central concern of the modes and institutions of governance. By *the social* I refer to the field between the economy and political institutions that began to be perceived by nation state builders and nationalists everywhere as the field where collective expectations, grievances, and demands needed to be addressed in order to avoid radical challenges to the political and economic order, and to increase the efficiency of the nation state⁴².

The ‘social question’ also affected the modes of regulation of private corporations like APOC, and how their management and directors viewed labor relations and dealt with class frictions in their operations in Khuzestan. Chapter 6, in particular, reveals that new state agents in Iran had to invent novel notions of governmental responsibility and were pushed to define the fields of their sovereignty and administrative practices in response to ongoing barrages of local popular demands for new entitlements, as well as strategic calculations regarding their relations to transnational capitalism. As for class formation and acquiring the identity of “worker”, this history reveals that it was not a straightforward process of accepting wage labor as the new basis of economic existence, but a highly contested and politicized process that was entangled with the formation of the state, the violent dispossession of local economies, global oil capitalism, and modern citizenship.

Second, the notions of citizenship, social rights, and the production of identity and difference within a nation state are equally relational, and highly contested. The nation state is now taken as the normative and natural unit of analysis, but modern nation states are more often that not the result of nationalist and imperialist projects in

⁴² George Steinmetz, *Regulating the Social: The Welfare State and Local Politics in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Jacques Donzelot, *L’Invention du Social: Essai sur le Declin des Passions Politiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1994).

establishing imagined communities through invented traditions, social engineering, and mythologized histories. This does not negate their ‘authenticity’, but accepting these notions as ‘natural’ ignores the historical fact that the projects of building nation states and citizenship are also coercive projects of power that displace alternative and competing categories of collective solidarity. While citizenship bestows certain democratic and coercive rights on individuals, and demands certain responsibilities in the name of universal belonging to a national community, it also eradicates other rival claims. For example, newly registered property rights for some dispossess the customary rights of others in the name of private property (chapters 3, 6, 7). Universal military conscription in service of the nation demands great sacrifice from working people (chapter 4) and dismantles labor regimes in agrarian and pastoralist communities (chapter 7). Individual identity registration and the census are the foundations of social welfare measures, yet they also subjugate everyone to the disciplinary gaze of the market and state institutions (chapters 5, 6, 7), which gain unprecedented power in determining what category of citizen each person belongs to, evaluate their relative usefulness or potential threat, and decide what rights they are entitled to enjoy or ought to be denied⁴³.

The question of citizenship is about the distribution of power - political, symbolic, and economic - within the nation state⁴⁴. It is also “a universality that is always contested on the ground, as subalterns in whose name liberal democratic narratives are written can both embrace and reject [the liberal and nationalist imagination...whose project it is]”⁴⁵. As Hannah Arendt argued, citizenship is not simply bestowed by the state (the liberal formulation), it is also enacted by people

⁴³ Michel Foucault et al., *The Foucault Effect : Studies in Governmentality : With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Sharon Lee, “Racial Classifications in the US Census: 1890-1990,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16, no. 1 (1993): 75–94; R. J. P Kain and Elizabeth Baigent, *The Cadastral Map in the Service of the State: A History of Property Mapping* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Donzelot, *L’Invention du Social: Essai sur le Declin des Passions Politiques*; Jane Caplan and John Torpey, eds., *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴⁴ Margaret R. Somers and Christopher N.J. Roberts, “Toward a New Sociology of Rights: A Genealogy of ‘Buried Bodies’ of Citizenship and Human Rights,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 4, no. 1 (2008): 385–425; Margaret R. Somers, *Genealogies of Citizenship: Markets, Statelessness, and the Right to Have Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison*.

⁴⁵ Chakrabarty, “Labor History and the Politics of Theory; an Indian Angle on the Middle East,” 331–332.

who stake their own claims to the political distribution of rights⁴⁶, making the development of citizenship and social identity an “open history”, which is then scripted by democratic (and sometimes anti democratic) collective movements claiming equality and citizenship rights for labor, women, civil rights, and so on.

Chapter 4 reviews the rise of mass politics and social welfare measures in the wake of WWI as partial response to subaltern demands for a range of rights that fell under the category of political and economic citizenship⁴⁷. It argues that these social welfare measures became part of the repertoire of corporate responses to similar subaltern and working class challenges that faced the APOC in Khuzestan. Chapter 6 investigates a range of new urban solidarities that emerged in Abadan in the interwar years to resist further dispossession by oil capitalism, and to demand the ‘right to the city’. These subaltern counter movements were by a heterogeneous and deracinated population, including oil workers but not exclusive to them, who were adopting the language of national identity as a collective strategy of negotiating their relations with oil capitalism and the authoritarian and nationalist central government.

Third, the histories of local, national, and global development are also inseparable from each other. The following chapters show that the development of the oil complex in Khuzestan was not the outcome of ready-made diffusion of technical and scientific knowledge, capital investment, and labor practices from Britain to Iran, but was a clear case of tangled developments (i.e. a GLH) that linked together the different spaces, institutions, people, and social arrangements that were party to the assemblage of the oil complex. To be sure this was a highly unequal process: Its story is one of ruthless dispossession and of authoritarian social engineering on the one hand, and on the other the emergence of a new regime of vast accumulation of capital that took at its raw material the existing local social and material resources. However, it is not a story of diffusion, and without the entanglements and contributions of ordinary people and their material world in Khuzestan there would have been no oil complex to speak of.

⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958); Norma Claire Moruzzi, *Speaking through the Mask: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Social Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). I have discussed the urban dimension of citizenship claims in Kaveh Ehsani, “The Politics of Public Space in Tehran,” *City and Society*, under review 2015.

⁴⁷ The categorization of stages of citizenship into political, economic, and social is from the classic essay by Marshall. See, T.H. Marshall and Tom Bottomore, *Citizenship and Social Class* (London: Pluto, 1992).

For one thing, oil was not a ready-made industry to be simply introduced to Khuzestan in 1908 (chapter 4). At the turn of the 20th Century oil was still a relatively novel and emerging extractive business not yet assured of its eventual role as the most significant commodity of the modern era⁴⁸. As chapter 4 will elaborate, WWI and the advent of Fordism played a major part in the rise to global prominence of oil, and the oil complex in Khuzestan was very much part of this trend. This new paradigm was not simply economic and technical, but also social and political.

At a quick glance, the scale of change can be seen in some important numbers: At the onset of WWI British forces in France had less than a thousand motorized military vehicles, by 1918 they had more than fifty thousand, in addition to tanks and an air force. Abadan's contribution to this war effort was crucial in providing fuel to the navy and army, especially in the Middle East and Indian Ocean (chapters 2, 4, 5)⁴⁹. Between 1914 and 1918 APOC's production increased tenfold, to nearly 900 thousand tons of fuel products. By the end of the War the British government was not only the major shareholder of APOC, it was its most important customer, with the Admiralty alone taking two thirds of Abadan's output⁵⁰. This was a symbiotic relationship, for without the British governmental investment the Company, which had been seriously overstretched and found itself in dire financial state, may well not have survived (chapter 2)⁵¹. The strategic and economic benefits of Khuzestan's oil for the British war effort was often acknowledged in a self-congratulatory language, for example by Winston Churchill who reminisced:

“We may not unreasonably expect to claim that the mighty fleets laid down in 1912-1914, the greatest ever built by any power in an equal period, were

⁴⁸ See for example Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*, 2nd ed. (New York: Free Press, 2008); Ida M. Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company: Briefer Version*, ed. David M. Chalmers (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003); Ferrier, *History of the British Petroleum Company*, 1:235–294.

⁴⁹ For these figures and for Abadan fuel supplied to military during WWI, see Ferrier, *History of the British Petroleum Company*, 1:213, 235, 243–244, 262, 278, 282.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 288-293. It is important to emphasize the commercial nature of the Company. APOC never was simply a patriotic majority government owned company. When given the opportunity it acted like any commercial agent out to maximize profits, even at the cost of becoming a war profiteer, for example at the expense of British troops fighting in Mesopotamia. For example, see the complaint by Arnold Wilson, who was by then the chief of police in Basra, to APOC general manager in Mohammareh, about the Company selling petrol to the army at higher rates than petrol imported from Burma via Bombay (28 October, 1915); and of being overcharged by the Company for mules and transport (12 December, 1915), [BP 68779](#).

⁵¹ See detailed discussion of the Company's financial situation in Marian (Kent) Jack, “The Purchase of the British Government's Shares in the British Petroleum Company 1912-1914,” *Past and Present*, no. 39 (April 1968): 139–68; Ferrier, *History of the British Petroleum Company*, 1:97–113, 160–200.

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added to the British navy without costing a single penny to the tax payer ...Fortune brought us a prize [Khuzestan's oil] from fairyland far beyond our brightest hopes"⁵²

What Churchill portrayed as a piece of crafty business was perceived as outright plunder by successive generations of Iranian nationalists at the time and since, and contributed to the nationalist movement that finally saw the monopoly of APOC (renamed Anglo Iranian Oil Company after 1936 (AIOC)) over Iranian oil come to end in 1951. From the onset, the dispute between the Iranian government, APOC, and the British state, was over several intertwined issues: First, the Oil Company's accounting practices in calculating the Iranian share of royalties⁵³ (see

⁵² Quoted in Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 17.

⁵³ The **question of oil royalties and shares of profits** received by Iran were seen at the time of their signings and after, by Iranian critiques and even by the British agents and experts who overtime finalized various contracts with various Qajar monarchs, the Bakhtiyari Khans, and Reza Shah and his statesmen, as lopsided bargains benefiting the British side. While many in the Iranian press and among political commentators portrayed the concession as little better than thievery, the formal Iranian objections overtime were framed in legalistic terms against the arbitrary nature of the initial grant in 1901 by Muzaffar al-Din Shah to William D'Arcy, a private individual, and not to the British Government, which had become the majority shareholder of a private concern by purchasing its shares and investing in its future. The Concession had been bestowed prior to the Constitutional Revolution, which had ushered in parliamentary jurisdiction and elected representation as the new basis of law making, thus nullifying previous royal decrees and concessions bestowed on foreign nationals by the arbitrary whim of the Monarch. The outrageously generous terms of the D'Arcy Oil Concession made in exchange for personal payment to the Shah, with little regard for what were now considered as 'national interests', only added to the grievance. Furthermore, the separate agreements between APOC and the Bakhtiyari Khans, and the formation of the Bakhtiyari Oil Company with a 35 share for a few of their senior Khans who had signed the agreement, was perceived by Iranian nationalists as a direct challenge to the national sovereignty, and a violation of the government's interest, which owned no shares of the enterprise.

Through the D'Arcy Concession Iran was supposed to receive 16% of net profits as royalties, but the Company itself was in sole charge of accounting and of carrying out all details and methods of calculation of operations. Its accounting excluded highly profitable and rapidly expanding subsidiary activities, like tanker shipping, retail marketing etc. which ought to have been added to the balance sheet. Soon APOC came to own and operate considerable shares in other oil and commercial operations in Iraq (Mesopotamia), the Persian Gulf (Bahrain, Kuwait), Mexico, and Britain (Llandarcy). The D'Arcy Concession had defined the share in net profits of APOC as the source of royalties, yet the Company refused to include any offshore operations as integral to the Concession. It paid taxes and duties in Britain, which were then deducted from the gross profits, but not in Iran, and it provided guaranteed quotas of various refined oil products to the British military at highly subsidized rates, regardless of their current market valuation. All of these political arrangements reduced the royalties' share of the Iranian party and caused resentment and ongoing friction with the central government in Tehran. Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle*; M Nakhai, *Le Pétrole en Iran* (Bruxelle: Editions J. Felix, 1938); Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*; Movahed, *Naft-e Ma va Masa'el-e Hoquqi-e An (Our Oil and Its Issues)*; Abolfazl Lesani, *Tala-ye Siah ya Bala-ye Iran* (Tehran: AmirKabir, 1978); Fateh, *Panjah Sal Naft-e Iran*; Fatemi, *Oil Diplomacy*.

Eventually, these frictions led to the revised agreement of 1933, but that agreement was itself dissatisfactory to the Iranian nationalists. Reza Shah signed the 1933 agreement personally in the midst of a critical period of economic and political crises. The global impact of the Great Depression, the subsequent drastic reduction of royalties from oil, the major tribal uprisings of 1929, the

chapter 7); second, the legitimacy of the British Government as a majority shareholder in APOC and its obtaining preferential rates and influencing Company policy, when the terms of the initial D'Arcy Oil Concession were with a private company, and not an imperial state that was consistently and brazenly interfering in domestic Iranian affairs as an de-facto colonial overlord (chapter 2). Third, Iranian government demands for the Company to adhere to the letter of the Concession and hire Iranian workers only and to train managers and skilled workers to replace the Indian and Europeans who staffed the middle ranks and technical positions throughout the operations (what I will refer to as *Iranianization*. See chapter 5). Fourth, the recurring objections of the central government in Tehran against the Oil Company acting like a sovereign state in southern Iran, by drawing separate land lease and labor recruitment agreements with local magnates and tribal leaders in Khuzestan, and implicitly supporting their political and military autonomy and their flirtation with territorial separatism (chapters 2, 3, 6).

In other words, the establishment of the oil complex in Khuzestan was not a straightforward act of capital and technology transfer by a ready-made industry from Britain to Khuzestan. Rather, it was a highly contested enterprise, intertwined from the onset with the internal political, social, and geographic dynamics of an Iranian society in throes of crisis and transition, and caught in the midst of international great

monopolization of foreign trade and key commodities by the state, and the rise of the Shah's ever more personal tyranny which led to the physical elimination of some of his closest statesmen and erstwhile allies, undermined the legitimacy of the new deal and effectively meant that the 1933 agreement was never widely accepted as a fair deal by the majority of Iranians, as became evident in the rise of post-WW2 Oil Nationalization Movement. The long simmering and accumulated political, legal, and economic discontent discussed above were at the heart of the eventual nationalization.

However, the general account provided here, which is the standard narrative of Iranian nationalist grievances, does not include the most decisive aspect of these frictions, which is the local-provincial dimension. The standard accounts of oil royalties cited above focus on questions related to royalties, contracts between national governments, and defining a fair division of proceeds: It is a dispute about distribution. But, as Marx notes correctly, capitalism is not assembled only in the open realm of exchange, contracts, and the market, where all parties are supposed to be equal and participate of their free will. Producing the wealth that circulates and is distributed in the realm of exchange takes place behind enclaves, in factories, mines, and refineries, which are shielded and highly controlled spaces, such as company towns like Abadan.

Regarding the oil agreements, the focus of our discussion is not about what was obviously a crooked and shady relationship between unequal partners, but about why and how the manner in which the oil complex was constructed in Abadan depended so fundamentally on presenting the illusion of an equal and transparent contractual relationship. On APOC's mode of calculation of royalties, and how this was integral to the oil complex see Katayoun Shafiee, "A Petro-Formula and Its World: Calculating Profits, Labour and Production in the Assembling of Anglo-Iranian Oil," *Economy & Society* 41, no. 4 (2012): 1–30.

powers rivalries that were beyond its abilities to maneuver (chapters 2, 5), as well as a changing Britain itself (chapter 4) during a historical period of revolutionary change.

The oil complex was constructed out of a multiplicity of intertwined relationships across various scales. For simplicity and practicality's purpose the scales of analysis that I have focused on in this work are global, national, and local. This argument requires that we clarify the notion of *scale* itself. But before proceeding to engage the topic theoretically, I will lay out the case study of the Bazaar of Abadan that serves as a convenient empirical entry point in the following chapters.

The New Bazaar of Abadan: Small Case, Big Story?

In 1925-27 APOC decided to build a “properly planned, efficient, and sanitary” market place in a small area sandwiched between the refinery, the European residential quarters, and the indigenous Town. It was to be roofed, made of modern materials, concrete floors, with properly ventilated and well-lit stalls, to be leased out until Company investment had been repaid. As always, there were additional motives involved: the Company was interested in socializing the locals in what it considered reliable ways of money accounting and unambiguous legal contracts. Equally important were considerations over sanitary issues and food security. As Abadan had grown exponentially so had the threats of food shortages and epidemics during the tumultuous years of war, drought, and conflict, with each crisis threatening the fragile but vitally important oil export operations at critical times. With regard to the bazaar, APOC argued that a modern and sanitary commercial space designed and regulated by the Company would go some way in reducing potential food crises stemming from the risks of contamination or the panic caused by hoarded supplies and predatory price inflations.

APOC claimed it the initiative to take over the area and build a bazaar had come at the behest of local notables and it was only acting as a responsible corporate citizen and not a self-interested party. By the time it began preparations in 1925 the provincial ruler and British ally Sheikh Khaz'al had been deposed by the emergent central government under Reza Khan, and the position of the local elite associated with him had become shaky. Implementation of the bazaar scheme required the removal of area residents who had settled there in recent years – shopkeepers, peddlers, coffee shop owners, oil workers, company employees, and others who had made the place their home. However, in this case most of the residents refused to

move and demanded proper compensation. Unexpectedly the affair dragged on, when earlier the evictions would have been considered a rather minor routine, and handled forcefully and without hesitation. Only a few years back, Company experts had characterized the small island of Abadan as “unpopulated” and “desolate” (see further below and chapter 3), but by now (1925) it was home to an estimated population of more than sixty thousand, coming from quite diverse backgrounds. After the eruption of initial protests in the neighborhood, local Iranian officials and company managers got involved. As protests and petitions escalated and resistance continued, senior managers in London, Cabinet Ministers, the Prime Minister, newspapers, and even the Royal Court in Tehran got tangled in an affair that was becoming surprisingly messy. Eventually, after two years of wrangling, a compromise was reached and the bazaar was built. In the process a new form of urban politics had begun to take shape that affected all the social actors involved and shaped their future actions, but also signaled a significant reconfiguration of the oil complex itself, and changed the oil habitus.

Why did APOC entangle itself with a controversial project that had little to do with oil? What prompted neighborhood residents who by all counts were poor if not destitute, had few resources, and shared little in terms of ethnic or communal ties except their common claim to a patch of (what had become urban) land, to band together and resist a giant corporation? How did the neophyte state bureaucrats see the situation and react once Sheikh Khaz'al's rule was at an end and a new form of politics and administration was being assembled⁵⁴ around the oil complex and at the national level? How did the eruption of this new form of urban protest in the long run affect the oil encounter between workers, the Company, urban dwellers, and state

⁵⁴ The new state institutions that began to be assembled from the mid-1920s, either from scratch or in radically reconfigured administrative form, included municipalities, property and legal documents' registration, birth certifications, notary publics, mass education at various levels, including the first university, standardized taxation, public health, civil laws, etc. See Amin Banani, *The Modernization of Iran, 1921-1941*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), 52–111; Hossein Mahboubi Ardakani, *Tarikh-e Moassasat-e Tamadoni-e Jadid dar Iran*, 3 Vols. (Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 1975), especially volume 2; Stephanie Cronin, *The Army and the Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1910-1926* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1997); David Menashri, *Education and the Making of Modern Iran* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 91–161; Jalil (Seyyed) Mohammadi, “Seyr-e Malekiyat dar Iran va Chegounegi-ye Sabt-e Asnad va Amlak (The patterns of property in Iran and the manners of registration of documents and properties),” *Kanoun (Nashriyeh-ye Kanoun-e Sar-Daftardaran va Daftaryaran)* 41–45, no. 1–31 (1997- 2002); Cyrus Schayegh, *Who is Knowledgeable is Strong: Science, Class, and the Formation of Modern Iranian Society, 1900-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009)

officials? These much larger questions lie at the center of the deceptively minor tale of the bazaar of Abadan.

The New Oil Habitus in Post-War Abadan:

Small and local as this episode may appear, it encapsulated the emergence of a new habitus around the oil complex in Khuzestan. WWI was generally acknowledged to have marked the end of an era, and the following decade and the interwar period were experienced globally as a period of transition, uncertainty, and experimentation. This was true in Europe, the primary instigator and the main theater of the total war, but also in West Asia, which the main protagonists had turned into a major center of conflict and contention.

The struggle over the construction of the bazaar of Abadan caused major *frictions*⁵⁵ between the Oil Company, the upstart provincial bureaucracy, and the local residents, which included oil workers and their dependents living in the neighborhood. It is ironic that a small patch of land and ongoing disputation over its control, ownership, and land use, became a major “ frontier of awkward engagement” between the key actors in the oil complex and played an important part in shaping the new oil habitus.

As we shall see, the frictions caused by this protracted struggle over controlling and shaping physical space forced all the main actors involved to redefine their strategies, to re-conceptualize their practices, and to re-organize their actions and dispositions in relation to each other and to the built environment and the social space they inhabited: Local bureaucrats and administrators of the fledgling new centralizing state began to define their institutional responsibilities as the protectors of national citizens and providers of general welfare in the form of municipal services and public health. In the aftermath of the war the Oil Company officials were in the midst of a

⁵⁵ The concept of ‘friction’ is borrowed from Anna Tsing, whose ethnography of extractive capitalism in Indonesian rainforest highlands sheds light on the mechanisms through which globalized capitalism is shaped not in a single privileged location, but through the awkward engagement between a diverse cast of characters ranging from speculative investors, adventurer and crony capitalists, environmentalists, eco-tourists, and indigenous activists. As in Tsing’s case studies, the friction over Abadan’s bazaar in the 1920’s demonstrates that the Oil Company was not merely introducing a set of actions intended to flatten out local differences and shape Abadan according to some existing universals of global urban modernity. Rather, the demand for this bazaar project emerged out of the frictions between various actors involved, and the eventual outcome was the result of these awkward engagements. See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4, 21, 33.

major strategic rethinking of their long-term goals in Iran, and of understanding and managing their internal re-organization and external transition into a global giant corporation (chapter 2). Like the local state bureaucrats, the Oil Company experts and strategists had to scramble to fill the political and social vacuum left from the elimination of Sheikh Khaz'al and the old social order. Last, the local residents were forging new networks and links of solidarity and resistance that were based not only on the so-called "primordial loyalties" of language, kinship ties, and ethnicity⁵⁶; but on the novel, effectively coerced, and shared experiences of urban living, participation in a wage labor market, dependence on an increasingly monetized economy. These new place-based ties were being forged amidst new and unfamiliar forms of destitution that resulted not only from natural calamities, familiar material scarcities, or local conflicts, but by the newly imposed regimes of property and legal exclusion⁵⁷.

Khaz'al had ruled over a relatively homogeneous tribal-agrarian region. But by the middle of 1920s when he was removed from power, Abadan had become a sprawling industrial boomtown of global importance. The refinery, shipping docks, and storage facilities soon came to be surrounded by European enclaves on the one hand, and on the other by slums and shantytowns housing migrant workers, a town center called *Shahr* (the City), and some remaining indigenous villages. Its governance required new skills and resources that were altogether different from anything that either upstart provincial Iranian bureaucrats or the Oil Company managers had previously experienced or possessed. Under the circumstances, the political and social vacuum left by the removal of Sheikh Khaz'al and the end of his British-dependent patrimonial rule had to be filled by the embryonic Iranian bureaucracy and/or the Oil Company itself.

There were major challenges facing the oilmen and bureaucrats. These ranged from the growing urban militancy among the new city dwellers, mounting class tensions in the workplace amongst skilled Indian workers who were angry at the

⁵⁶ Essentializing notions, always open to internal challenge and re-interpretation, yet held dear by orientalist and modernization theorists. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Boston: Basic Books, 1977). For a pivotal critique of the notion of primordial identities see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

⁵⁷ For an incisive social and cultural differentiation of poverty caused by material scarcity versus the very modern forms of destitution imposed by the social and cultural norms of the market see Ashis Nandy, "The Beautiful, Expanding Future of Poverty: Popular Economics as a Psychological Defence," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 3, 2004, 94–99.

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repression of nationalist sentiments in India and against their own working and living conditions in Abadan, as well as among the unskilled Iranian workers demanding better treatment and decent work. There was the simmering discontent of indigenous populations that kept breaking out in bad tempered small skirmishes and confrontations, or on occasion into full-scale tribal revolts, as in 1925 and 1929 (see chapters 3, 6, 7). The anxiety of rising Soviet influence among oil workers, as well as the perceived threat of American competition for the oil business preoccupied Company managers and directors, and affected their policies; as did the ever present fear of deadly epidemics decimating the city, Europeans and ‘natives’ alike, scaring away valuable recruits, and harming production. There were cross border threats from Mesopotamia and an Arabian Peninsula that were in throes of nationalist upheaval under British occupation⁵⁸, while regional centrifugal forces on the Iranian side of the highly porous borders were equally challenging⁵⁹.

For APOC as well as the Iranian bureaucracy developing new techniques of managing these challenges were partly shaped by trial and error, through dealing relentlessly with protracted and controversial events like the newly proposed bazaar; or by reaching out to global innovations in professional techniques of social and spatial governance and industrial management. But these new mechanisms of governing the oil complex (what Foucault calls *governmentality*, or the art of governing populations, territories, and mentalities⁶⁰) were not forged in isolation.

⁵⁸ On post-WWI Iraq and British occupation there see Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 30–73. The vital importance of oil in Mesopotamia and British calculations in their subsequent military forays and occupation there see Helmut Mejcher, *Imperial Quest for Oil: Iraq 1910-1928* (London: Ithaca Press, 1976). For a closer look at the range of political activism in Iraq, especially communists, see Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movement in Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). although the great value of Batatu's analysis is his analysis of post WWII Iraq. The British imperial experience is well discussed from the first hand perspective of Arnold T. Wilson, *Loyalties; Mesopotamia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931). And critically evaluated by Marion Kent, *Oil and Empire; British Policy and Mesopotamian Oil* (London: McMillan, 1976). On Arnold Wilson's stint as de facto governor of British occupied Iraq, prior to his becoming the managing APOC director in Mohammareh/Khorramshahr, see John Marlowe, *Late Victorian: The Life of Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson* (London: Cresset, 1967).

⁵⁹ See the fascinating memoirs of the British diplomat in Dezful C. J. Edmonds, *East and West of Zagros Travel, War and Politics in Persia and Iraq 1913-1921* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

⁶⁰ Foucault defines *governmentality* as follows:

1. The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means [the] apparatuses of security.
2. The tendency which, over a long period and throughout the West, has steadily led towards the pre-

They emerged during WWI and its aftermath in multiple but interconnected places, in Abadan as well as in London, Tehran, and other global nodes. They were the result of new parameters in social and political life that were tied to regulating the social domain.

Abadan and the World: Conceptualizing a Relational Scalar Politics

The story of the Abadan bazaar opens a window into the interplay of the local-national-global forces that produced a new configuration of the oil complex in this formative period. Each of these geographic scales is conceptualized as networks of relations, connections, and transfers of goods, ideas, policies, and people across space and scales⁶¹. Consequently, in order to provide a thick description of the multiple layers of the local story of the bazaar, I will begin by exploring a number of interconnected and formative processes that were taking place at the larger global and national scales, before proceeding back to explore in more detail what transpired at a micro scale in Abadan during the pivotal decade of 1920s. This shifting back and forth between different geographic scales allows us to unpack the relational processes

eminence over all other forms (sovereignty, discipline, etc) of this type of power which may be termed government, resulting, on the one hand, in formation of a whole series of specific governmental apparatuses, and, on the other, in the development of a whole complex of savoirs.

3. The process, or rather the result of the process, through which the state of justice of the Middle Ages, transformed into the administrative state during the 15th and 16th centuries, gradually becomes *governmentalized*.” Foucault et al., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality: With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, 102–103.

Foucault argues that the art of modern government under the contemporary welfare state has made a distinct shift from previous notions of statecraft that he calls pastoral power (government as a shepherd tending its individualized flock) and sovereignty (princely power imposing its hegemonic will over territory), to a notion of governance which combines disciplinary power (notions of productivity and self-improvement anchored within the individual body) with an even more absolute claim of sovereignty over territory and the individual, but not in the name of a prince, rather in the name of the universal welfare of all members of society. Foucault presents this shift as a defuse process, a “technology of power” embodied in individuals as well as in institutions, shaping ‘the soul’, and regulating the individual from inside. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

As I will argue later, the modern professional middle class and the institutions it helped create, and by which it is reproduced, ought to be assigned a defining role in shaping this hegemony. I do not think assigning significant agency to particular social groups is contradictory to Foucault’s argument, even though Foucault saw modern power as a widespread, discursive exercise, rather than the exercise of particular groups seeking domination over others. I concur with Tania Li’s view that various forms of power – sovereignty, disciplinary, governmentality – are not historically superseded, but act simultaneously in shaping modern political economies, especially in the domain of ‘development’. See Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–30.

⁶¹ Christian DeVito, “New Perspectives on Global Labour History, Introduction,” *Workers of the World* 1, no. 3 (2013): 17.

that informed each geographic scale of the story historically, and the manner in which these scales overlapped and mutually shaped each other.

Some critical geographers use the term “scalar politics”⁶² to capture this relational and formative power play between different geographic scales of analysis. *Scale* is an important analytical category in geography that has been highly contested in recent times as the discipline has become more engaged with the insights of critical social theory. Whereas conventional geography tends to view scale as naturally given, self-evident, and unambiguously bounded (the nation, the city, the countryside), critical Marxist geographers in the 1980’s and 1990’s began to challenge fixed notions of scale as pre-existing and external to social processes⁶³. Instead, they argued that spatial scales - such as the local, the urban, the national, the regional, the global – are interconnected and actively produced by historical political-economic processes⁶⁴.

However, this still left open the question of determinacy and agency: Are there privileged scales that determine the eventual outcome of these interconnected layers? Post-structuralist critiques have raised objections that the Marxian approach to scale tends to privilege macro processes, such as global capitalism, as ultimately determining the micro scales, such as the local, the household, or the individual body. There was also the added question of how the boundaries of each scale are defined, and understanding how these boundaries are produced and partitioned⁶⁵.

Most notably, Doreen Massey objected against conceptualizing places as rigidly bounded and defined (what she calls the Heideggerian sense of place, see pp.64-65). Citing the example of Kilbourn, Massey pointed out that this London neighborhood was populated by migrants, artists, refugees, workers, etc. and did not really have a rigid boundary, as its varied population were linked and integrated to the world beyond through complex and quite uneven economic, emotional, legal, and social ties. Just as residents of Kilbourn have multiple identities, the same can be said

⁶² See Danny MacKinnon, “Reconstructing Scale: Towards a New Scalar Politics,” *Progress in Human Geography* 35, no. 1 (February 1, 2011): 21–36..

⁶³ Eric Swingedouw, “Neither Global nor Local: ‘Glocalization’ and the Politics of Scale,” in *Spaces of Globalization*, ed. Kevin Cox (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 137–66.

⁶⁴ See Neil Smith, “Scale,” *Dictionary of Human Geography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); David Harvey, “From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity,” in *Mapping the Futures*, ed. Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, and et.al. (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁶⁵ See Doreen Massey’s critique of what she considers to be David Harvey’s economic reductionist sense of place. Doreen Massey, “Power-Geometry, and a Progressive Sense of Place,” in *Mapping the Futures*, ed. Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, and et.al. (London: Routledge, 1993), 59–70; Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005) 130-194.

for the physical place itself. This multiplicity of connections to larger geographic scales demonstrates three important points: First, that defining a place like Kilbourn (or Abadan) does not require drawing of definitive boundaries; second, that the multiplicities of connections and identities is a source of constant conflict, but also of richness of collective life; and third, that the relational flows that shape a place are uneven, and so is the scalar politics that shapes a place. The flow of resources and people to a place does not happen in the same way, for everyone involved. To paraphrase Massey “some people are in charge and initiate the movements and flows, some are more on the receiving end, [others] are effectively imprisoned by it”. Refugees, disposed pastoralists, impoverished migrants moved to Abadan, just as English accountants and Punjabi skilled machinists. But they did so under very different circumstances, and as a result of very uneven distribution of power.

In applying these insights to our case study, the issue becomes the manner in which we conceptualize and frame the processes and agencies that shaped Abadan and produced its variegated spaces. Do we frame Abadan as a small locality whose built environment was ultimately produced by the global forces of oil capitalism, British imperial policies, and Iranian state actions? In other words, as just one more example of the same story repeated everywhere?⁶⁶ Or do we develop what Doreen Massey has called a progressive *global sense of place*, based on conceptualizing scale not as a determined by exogenous and abstract meta-processes, but a relational understanding of scale where locality itself is pro-active and a key vehicle for social mobilization, political intervention, and ultimately shaping larger macro scales, such as the nation and the global?⁶⁷ And, ultimately, the question of scale is also determined by how boundaries are defined. In the case of Abadan, do we understand the refinery city as a self-contained physical entity? Or as a changing urban space embedded within a complex and relational web of cultural and political economic ties to the larger region and the world?

My approach in this dissertation will be the latter. By mid 1920's Abadan had become an important component in the global political economic transition to oil as

⁶⁶ As stated by one of Marx' more questionable and seemingly teleological statements “the country that is more developed industrially shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future”. Marx, *Capital*.

⁶⁷ See Philip Cook, “The Contested Terrain of Locality Studies,” in *Human Geography: An Essential Anthology*, ed. John Agnew and et.al. (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 487–488.

the new primary source of energy replacing coal (and steam power) and the most sought after strategic resource. The change to oil from coal was part of a larger paradigmatic shift where nearly all spheres of collective life -- from the forms of governance, to the contours of relations between nature-state-society, popular culture, class and gender relations, and the role of middle class technical experts -- were being challenged and revolutionized. In Iran a new nationalist central government was being assembled that questioned long established relations with Britain and was intent to forge a homogeneous nation state out of the fragmented territory and the heterogeneous population. In Abadan itself, the local population, mostly displaced migrants from different social and geographic backgrounds, now working for the oil industry or scraping a living on its margins, had to forge new forms of urban solidarity and militancy to resist their further dispossession, and to stake a claim to the city. The urban struggles to resist evictions to clear the path for the proposed bazaar of Abadan, and the expansion of exclusive Oil Company enclaves at the expense of the local population, affected the governmental practices of the new bureaucracy and the social, labor, and urban policies of APOC itself. Thus, what appears in the first glance as local and a micro scale, is shaped by global events and currents, but also affects these and contributes to their modification.

This multi scalar historical and geographic approach allows us to avoid the pitfall of conceptualizing the development of the oil complex as determined by the agency of all powerful macro agents such as APOC or the Iranian state. The bazaar affair and other similar struggles over the built environment in Abadan and other enclaves of the oil industry were the product of larger global forces at work but, in a real sense, they also contributed to shaping the global.

A Land Without People, and a People Without History? Making the Local Visible Again

The privileging of macro scales and meta-narratives of modernization and the nation state in the historiography of oil have tended to silence the lived experiences of subalterns, local populations, and the working people in the oil complex, or has reduced them to mere footnotes of 'the real history' of modernization, diffusion, nation state, and industrial development. This discursive maneuver has been a common feature of the modernization narrative in its many guises, with rendering the landscape and the people living on it as irrelevant.

Eric Wolf showed that the recurring theme of “land without people, and a people without history” had been essential to the maintenance and justification of western colonial domination from the end of 15th century, as well as of settler colonization of the so called frontiers in the Americas, Asia, and Africa⁶⁸. In Iran, this recurring theme of an exotic and empty land lying wasteful and unused by unproductive natives was a regular feature of the vast and informative literature produced by successive European (mostly British) adventurers, explorers, missionaries, spies, soldiers, scholars, diplomats, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists from 19th century onward (chapters 3, 6)⁶⁹. It was also a theme readily adopted by Iranian nationalists, and later on by policymakers and development planners, to pave the way for the modernization of the country and especially of Khuzestan, by imposing a succession of vast development projects, including railroads, dams, agribusinesses, petrochemical complexes, sugar cane plantations, and so on, with enormous social and environmental consequences⁷⁰.

⁶⁸ Eric Wolf, *Europe and People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). For the recurring theme in various reincarnations in frontier settler colonialism, such as Israel or the French in Morocco and Algeria, or the American West see Norman Finkelstein, *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (New York: Verso, 2003), 21–50; Maxime Rodinson, *Israel, a Colonial-Settler State?* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2001); Will Swearingen, *Moroccan Mirages: Agrarian Dreams and Deceptions, 1912-1986* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayyad, *Le Déracinement: La Crise de l'Agriculture Traditionnelle en Algérie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1964); Worster, *Rivers of Empire*; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*; *ibid.* On the fortified geography created as a consequence of this coercive colonial framing see Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007). The adoption of the theme of empty land by Iranian nationalism is discussed by Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*.

⁶⁹ Prominent and selective examples of this orientalist literature covering Khuzestan include George Nathaniel Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question* (London: Elibron, 2005 [1892]), Vol.2, 268–396; Ella Sykes, *Through Persia on a Side Saddle* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Georgias Press, 2008 [1903]); Percy Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia: Or, Eight Years in Iran* (London: John Murray, 1902), 239–260; Baron Clement Augustus Gregory Peter Louis de Bode, *Travels in Luristan and Arabistan*, 2 vols. (London: J.Madden & Co., 1845); Austen Henry Layard, *Early Adventures in Persia, Susiana, and Babylonia, Including a Residence among the Bakhtiyari and Other Wild Tribes Before the Discovery of Nineveh*, 2 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1887); Vita Sackville-West, *Twelve Days in Persia: Across the Mountains with the Bakhtiyari Tribe* (London: Tauris Parke, 2009 [1928]); Merian C Cooper, *Grass* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1925); Arnold Talbot Wilson, *Persian Gulf* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954); Arnold T Wilson, *SW Persia; A Political Officer's Diary 1907-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941); Edmonds, *East and West of Zagros; Travel, War and Politics in Persia and Iraq 1913-1921*.

⁷⁰ See Kaveh Ehsani, “Bohran-e Ab, Bohran-e Abadan [Water crisis/Abadan in Crisis],” no. 27 (2000): 162–72; Kaveh Ehsani, “Tabar Shenasi-e Tarh-haye Bozorg-e Tose'eh dar Iran-e Mo'aser (Genealogy of large scale development projects in contemporary Iran),” *Goftogu*, no. 54 (2009): 113–32; Kaveh Ehsani, “Tajaddod va Mohandesi-ye Ejtema'ei; Negahi beh Tajrobeh Abadan va Masjed Soleyman,” *Goftogu*, no. 25 (1998): 9–45; Kaveh Ehsani, “Rural Society and Agricultural Development in Post-Revolution Iran: The First Two Decades.,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006); Ehsani, “Sweet Dreams; Sugarcane and the Politics of Development in Pre and Post- Revolution Iran”; Kaveh Ehsani, “Review essay: ‘Omran-e Khouzeestan’; edited by Gholamreza Afkhami.,” *Iran Nameh* 13 (1999): 403–10; Goodell, *The Elementary Structures of Political Life*.

The theme of ‘land without people’ resonated in Khuzestan with its ample river water resources, fertile soil, rich petroleum deposits, agrarian and mobile pastoralist populations, and proximity to open sea routes, especially when these economic potentials were juxtaposed to the supposed paucity of the history of its current ‘inferior’ inhabitants. These were themes that were constantly stressed in the European scholarly and travelling literatures of the 19th and early 20 centuries, even as the authors steeped in the romanticism of the Victorian era, and reinforced with the positive knowledge of the new scientific field of archeology, waxed lyrical about the ancient imperial legacy of the region and its surviving monuments: “The Bakhtiyaris are entirely ignorant of their own history, they are devoid of legends and traditions of any kind, lacking the romance and folklore of other mountain people” wrote Elizabeth McBean Ross, a “lady doctor” who spent a year among the Bakhtiyari in Dehkord, which she called “a dreary little townlet in the midst of a desolate district”, before succumbing to typhoid while serving in a hospital in Serbia during WWI⁷¹.

However, the story was a bit more complicated than presented in this narrative, as Khuzestan’s history had never developed in isolation from the larger world, and its current state was the result continued entanglement with it. Likewise, the notion of ‘an empty land’ is an ideational construct of the observer, rather than an objective reflection of an existing reality (chapters 3, 6)⁷². Thus, the relevant question becomes not so much *whether the land was without people*, but more pertinently, *who constructed the image of the empty land, and for what purpose?* Here I will first provide a brief long-term history of the province’s landscape and population, as one of entanglement with the larger world beyond its provincial borders⁷³. I will then analyze the role and motivations of the technical professional experts who authored this narrative and reproduced it as a discourse, especially as it related to the establishment of the oil complex in Khuzestan.

When oil was discovered in 1908 the river island of Abadan was populated by date farmers, fisherman, and shepherders who lived in several villages across the flat

⁷¹ Elizabeth Ness MacBean Ross, *A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiyari Land* (London: L. Parsons, 1921), 22, 32.

⁷² Harvey, “Population, Resources, and the Ideology of Science.”

⁷³ I should emphasize that a geographic history is meant to be different from a political or social history. Here I am merely sketching out the *longue durée* of the material landscape and dynamics of demographic change as a result of long-term regional and global connections.

and sandy stretch of silt land below the confluence of the major Mesopotamian rivers Tigris, Euphratus, Karun, and Bahmanshir. The latter initially had been a large canal excavated in pre-Islamic period to open an alternative channel to the Persian Gulf. Thus Abadan is an artificial island, similar to the ancient city of Shushtar, whose geography was shaped by the great irrigation engineering and water works carried out mostly under the Sasanids (224-651 CE) for whom Khuzestan was a major source of irrigated food crop production. By the early 20th century the Province's ecology and demography had changed drastically, and was even renamed as *Arabestan*. Although it now lied at the periphery of Iranian political and economic life, nevertheless Khuzestan was always considered by whichever central government was in power as integral to its national territory, especially given its strategic importance as a border region to the Persian Gulf and Ottoman Mesopotamia.

Sasanians (224- 651 CE) had built great irrigation works across Mesopotamia and Khuzestan, primarily for grain production. But these vast networks of canals and dykes lacked a proper drainage system that would have been too costly to build, and probably were beyond the era's technical abilities. Soil drainage was not as critical for agricultural productivity further upland, around Dezful and Shushtar where the land had a higher gradient and better natural drainage. But further south below Ahvaz, where the slope decreased and the silty flatlands stretched toward the Persian Gulf, poor drainage significantly affected soil quality. Overtime the problem reached a critical scale, as a result of large-scale irrigation schemes, especially around the major rivers and their tributaries.

Political upheavals and warfare made labor mobilization and maintenance work increasingly difficult. These problems were exacerbated by the failure to maintain a proper crop rotation and fallow schedule, and led to further land degradation. By the 9th century the lower reaches of the river networks were waterlogged and the topsoil had turned too saline for the shallow roots of many grain crops, and consequently lost its former productivity⁷⁴. The Abbasids (750-1258 CE)

⁷⁴ See Robert McC Adams, "Agriculture and Urban Life in Early Southwestern Iran," *Science* 136, no. 3511 (1962): 109–22; Robert McC Adams, Theodore E. Downing, and McGuire Gibson, eds., *Irrigation's Impact on Society*, Anthropological Papers of the University of Arizona, no. 25 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974); Peter Christensen, *The Decline of Iranshahr: Irrigation and Environments in the History of the Middle East, 500 B.C. to A.D. 1500* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press : University of Copenhagen, 1993); Gholamreza Kouross, ed., *Ab va Fann-e Abyari dar Iran-e Bastan*, 1971; Andrew M. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World: The*

resorted to indentured labor from the region, supplemented by imported slave labor from East Africa, to manually remove surface salt sediments. The cruel forced labor led to the great slave revolt of the Zanj (from Zanzibar) that was eventually repressed savagely⁷⁵.

Despite Baghdad's eventual bloody victory the long lasting civil war led to the destruction of the intricate network of dykes, levies, and canals that depended on constant maintenance and manual dredging. As a result, the once prosperous region fell into a long agricultural decline, and with it the Abbasid state itself. The Mongol invasion in the 13th century sealed the fate of the region's large-scale irrigation works. By the late Safavid period (1501-1736 CE), an area that had once been a center of prospering cities and vast agricultural estates often operated on coerced labor, had become a distant periphery, only nominally controlled by the capital Isfahan. Dezful, Shushtar, Ahvaz, Askar Mokram, and Basra, declined to small towns and villages or disappeared altogether as viable urban centers. The broken irrigation network led to the permanent flooding of the lowlands and the formation of the great swamps and marshes of southern Iran and Iraq, where many of the slaves and refugees from the great repressions of the 9th and 10th centuries and subsequent incessant warfare took permanent refuge. As a consequence of these historical changes other modes of economic subsistence and social organization had taken hold in the province's changed demographic and ecological landscape⁷⁶.

By the 16th century when the Safavids encouraged the large scale migration of Shi'a tribes from the Arabian Peninsula to settle the plains of Khuzestan as a bulwark against their rivals the Sunni Ottomans, the ecology and agrarian patterns of the entire region had been altered, along with the historic name of the province that had changed to Arabistan. In southwestern Khuzestan, the large-scale irrigated grain production estates disappeared, replaced by small-scale rain-fed subsistence agriculture along with limited irrigated rice, legumes, and vegetable productions as

Diffusion of Crops and Farming Techniques, 700-1100 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁷⁵ Alexandre Popović, *The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq in the 3rd/9th Century* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999).

⁷⁶ See the remarkable orientalist travelogue of Wilfred Thesiger, *Marsh Arabs: Seven Years with the Primitive Tribesmen of a Watery World* (London: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1964); admittedly a guilty pleasure!

cash crops in the proximity of rivers⁷⁷. Reeds from the expanding marshlands became raw material for housing construction, fuel, and winter fodder for the water buffalos, probably an import from India. Seasonal pastoralism and date farming along the rivers became more significant in the economy, especially in the lower reaches of Karun and Shatt al-Arab, relying on the sea tides of the Persian Gulf to raise the river water levels in the shallow and highly silted delta⁷⁸.

Thus, although to European observers thinking in terms of commercial agriculture production for consumption through the market, the land may have appeared as unused, unchanged, uncultivated and empty; the reality was socially and historically far more complicated. The region's landscape and population had changed constantly as a result of its entanglement with larger global as well as internal currents, but it could not be categorized as "an empty land and a people without history", until required so by the demands of oil capitalism and nation state development. Once oil had been discovered and petroleum became a global strategic resource that required the assemblage of a vast complex of social, technical, and human infrastructure, it became negligent to allow such abundant resources as oil, water, pasture, and fertile fallow land to go to 'waste' by ignorant and lazy natives. As a result, the development of these resources became a matter of historical responsibility to the grand and abstract ideas of scientific progress and welfare for all⁷⁹. These are the themes that underlay the development of the oil habitus in

⁷⁷ Haj Mirza Abd-al Ghaffar Najm-al Molk, *Safarnameh Khuzestan beh Zamimeh Ketabcheh Dastour-e Ma'muriat-e Khuzestan va Gozaresh-e Barresiha-ye An Saman* (Tehran: Anjoman-e Asar va Mafakher-e Farhangi, 1962); Abd-al Ghaffar ibn-e Ali Mohammad Najm-al Dowleh, *Safarnameh Dovvom-e Najm-al Dowleh be Khuzestan; beh Peyvast-e Ketabcheh-ye Dastour-al Amal-e Nasser-al Din Shah dar Khosous-e Safar-e Aval beh Khuzestan* (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 2007); John Gordon Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, 6 vols. (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire, Eng.: Archive Editions, 1986); Ann K S Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia* (London: IB Tauris, 1991).

⁷⁸ See Mostafa Azkia and Kaveh Ehsani, "Abiyari dar Ramhormoz Part 1 (Social Aspects of Irrigation in Khuzestan)," *Ketab-e Tose'eh*, no. 2 (1990): 107–12; Mostafa Azkia and Kaveh Ehsani, "Abiyari dar Ramhormoz Part 2 (Social Aspects of Irrigation in Khuzestan)," *Ketab-e Tose'eh*, no. 3 (1992): 96–107. This analysis is based on my 18 months of fieldwork on agrarian society and rural change in Khuzestan between 1989-1992.

⁷⁹ An autobiographical note: This is not meant as a romantic or anti-modernist and anti-western critique. Working as a regional planner on post-war reconstruction of rural Khuzestan between 1989-1992, I found myself thinking and practicing within the same parameters and methodology I am subjecting to critical analysis here. As a development planner, seeing through the gaze of state priorities, I was evaluating local land use north of Ahvaz along the Karun River, to prepare the ground the country's largest agrarian project in history, a cluster of 7 giant sugar cane plantations to replace subsistence farming and seasonal pastoralism over 80 thousand hectares of what appeared to state planners such as myself and my colleagues, as wasted and negligently underused land. In fact, the land was constantly used, but not for commercial purposes, or mass production for the market. See Ehsani,

Khuzestan, and to which I will return to in chapters 3, 6, and 7. In the next section I will briefly discuss the role of the middle class professional experts who were the main authors of this narrative, and were instrumental in the consolidation of the oil complex.

The Role and Rule of Experts in Establishing the Oil Complex:

While the initial D'Arcy Concession of 1908 was the product of crafty and remarkably amoral negotiations and deals between British and Iranian statesmen and speculative investors (chapter 2), the actual work of discovery of oil and setting up the oil complex soon became the purview of professional experts. These ranged from geologists, engineers, surveyors, physicians, labor managers, accountants, corporate directors, security experts, urban planners, public health experts, chemists, and so on. As will become clear in the subsequent chapters, the boundaries between soldiers, diplomats, colonial officers, and technical experts in the employ of private oil business were rather fluid and ever shifting. However, the research in this dissertation reveals that they all played a defining role in assembling the oil complex in Khuzestan, and contributed significantly to shaping the oil habitus. Thus, rather than viewing the social history of oil and of labor in oil as defined primarily by frictions between labor, capital, and the state, I accord an equally important role to the mediation of middle class professional experts in this story. The role of experts was not limited to practical and technical affairs only. They were also instrumental in mediating political negotiations, contractual deals, and planning the long-term development of the oil complex by introducing 'the social question' (chapter 4) into the equation. This meant that in the defining interwar period, the question of social engineering, or of the active making of a permanent labor force in the oil industry and its cooptation through various strategies of coercion, as well as cooptation through class compromises and social policies, became a central tenet of APOC and the Iranian central government⁸⁰.

The following chapters will return to this theme and further expand on the role of technical experts. Here I would like to sketch out briefly the role of a few

"Sweet Dreams; Sugarcane and the Politics of Development in Pre and Post- Revolution Iran"; Kaveh Ehsani, "Rural Society and Agricultural Development in Post-Revolution Iran: The First Two Decades.," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006).

⁸⁰ Ehsani, "Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan's Company Towns."

individuals as an outline of the arguments to come. Arnold T. Wilson is a recurring character in this dissertation. As a young man from a middle class background (his father was a church minister), he went to a modest public school before joining colonial military service in India. Soon he was posted to Iran in 1907 as a young and inexperienced lieutenant heading of a force of 18 Indian Suwars (mounted cavalry) to guard oil explorers in Khuzestan who were under threat by local tribes. His intelligence, energy, and competence saw him rapidly elevated to act as British Consul in Mohammareh, to map and identify possible railroad routes in Iran as well as survey the possible location of the refinery in Abadan, before being appointed as acting head of the Boundary Commission charting the Iranian Ottoman border, once the actual Commission head was taken ill. During WWI he was posted to Basra as an administrative commander for the British military forces fighting the Ottoman army and local tribes. He was then rapidly elevated to the Acting Commissioner of British forces in Mesopotamia, serving as de-facto Viceroy of the new British protectorate of Iraq, an invented nation-state carved out by Britain, through a Mandate by the League of Nations, from three Ottoman provinces. Soon after the 1920 Arab Revolt in Iraq, for which he was partly blamed, Wilson left the military service and became the APOC Director in Mohammareh, in which capacity he was instrumental in the negotiations with the new Iranian central government that finalized the status of the oil complex in 1926.

Wilson was a prolific and talented author, and a remarkable individual. He wrote memoirs, and produced copious and detailed geographic, social, and political analyses of local populations, economies, and physical resources of southern Iran, that became the basis of British policymaking, as well as APOC operation⁸¹. Although an exceptional character, he was not unique but personified the growing trajectory of a new social class of technical experts who straddled the older world of Victorian and Edwardian colonialism, but now were becoming essential to the operations of modern corporate industrial capitalism in the era of Fordism, as well as the developmental institutions of the modern nation state.

⁸¹ Arnold T Wilson, *SW Persia; A Political Officer's Diary 1907-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941); Arnold T. Wilson, *Loyalties; Mesopotamia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931); Arnold Talbot Wilson, *Persian Gulf* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954); Arnold T Wilson, "The Bakhtiyaris," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* 13, no. 3 (1926): 205–23; Arnold T Wilson, *A Precis of the Relations of the British Government with the Tribes and Shaikhs of Arabistan*, 1911; Marlowe, *Late Victorian*.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The framing of Khuzestan as an “empty land and a people without history” in the period of oil explorations and the establishment of the oil industry during wartime (1908- 1921) was a discursive production of Wilson and other literary and technical experts like him, British, Europeans, as well as Iranians. In their writings, analyses, and policy proposals, Arnold Wilson and his colleagues emphasized the impending decline of the local social order in Khuzestan due to its many shortcomings. What they regularly failed to recognize or acknowledge was the historical and political context, and the connections between this state of affairs and the imperial policies of Britain and Russia, the political fallout from the upheavals of the Constitutional Revolution, the devastations of WWI, and the paradoxical impact of commercialization of southern Iran that had begun with the penetration of British merchant capital, and was about to expand into a whole new dimension with the establishment of the oil complex in Khuzestan (chapters 2, 3). They recognized that these momentous events were affecting local conditions, but they failed to acknowledge they were partially culprit in the current state of affairs.

Wilson was a representative of a generation of post-Victorian British colonial agents during a transitional period of paradigmatic global change. He went on to become part of the core of the technical experts that established the next, decisive phase of the oil complex in Khuzestan (see chapters 4 and 6). After its chaotic and haphazard beginnings, the consolidation of the oil complex began to demand an ever-greater degree of planning and coordination, technical as well political and social. The task of this coordination fell to professional experts: men (for they were all men) with certain credentials (formal education, maybe a university degree, military service, corporate experience, etc.) who began the task of planning for the successful operation of the oil complex amidst daunting difficulties.

The modern “rule of experts” relies on isolating and categorizing selected aspects of the world into systems of specialized knowledge, which are then correlated into technical practices that first define certain issues as problems that can be classified, measured, and understood as obstacles and anomalies, before being overcome and resolved through the formulation of scientific and technical solutions. Once these solutions are professionally implemented some form of productive

‘normality’ is expected to be attained, otherwise the cycle may resume⁸². Systems of implementing scientific and technical expertise, such as urban planning, public health, industrial management, or economic development, in turn become the basis of praxis to shape the world according to the criteria they have pre-established as scientific and objective.

Other equally significant figures of (more or less) Wilson’s generation who played a key role in establishing the oil complex in Khuzestan, and who will figure in the following chapter include Percy Cox (chief British diplomat and negotiator in the Persian Gulf, later Minister (Ambassador) to Tehran, C.J. Edmonds (who was acting consul and de-facto governor in northern Khuzestan in various periods between 1913-1921); Sir John Cadman (APOC chairman in the 1920s), and J.M. Wilson (the main architect and urban planner of the company areas of APOC, from late 1920s until the nationalization of 1951), and Sir Percy Lorraine (chief negotiator with Bakhtiari while a council in Isfahan, and later Minister (Ambassador) to Tehran), among others⁸³.

These individuals followed a more or less similar personal trajectory: Most came from middling classes and were products of public schools, had stints serving in some official capacity in the colonies (especially India) or had established their careers there. They seemed to circulate nearly seamlessly between government, military service, diplomatic responsibilities, colonial administration, and corporate professional occupations, across the Empire. This movement made the conventionally

⁸² Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*; Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men; Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

⁸³ I mention these individuals because of the aforementioned similarities, but also because there are published biographies and public records available that reveal personal details of their lives that would otherwise remain in the realm of guess work. John Townsend, *Proconsul to the Middle East: Sir Percy Cox and the End of Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010); C. J. Edmonds, *East and West of Zagros Travel, War and Politics in Persia and Iraq 1913-1921*, ed. Yann Richard (Leiden: Brill, 2010); C.H. Lindsey-Smith, *J.M. The Story of an Architect* (London: Privately Published, 1976); John Rowland, *Ambassador for Oil: The Life of John First Baron Cadman* (London: H.Jenkins, 1960); Gordon Waterfield, *Professional Diplomat; Sir Percy Lorraine of Kirkharle, Bt., 1880-1961*. (London: Murray, 1973); Roberta Pearce, “Cox, Sir Percy,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy2.lib.depaul.edu/view/printable/32604>; Elizabeth Monroe, “Lorraine, Sir Percy Lyham (1880-1961),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy2.lib.depaul.edu/view/article/34597>; T.A.B. Corley, “Greenway, Charles (1857-1934),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy2.lib.depaul.edu/view/article/40994>.

accepted boundaries of private/public domain rather murky. A surprising number were dilettante scholars who dabbled in history, poetry, linguistics, and archeology, published travelogues and memoirs, wrote political commentaries, and made public speeches aimed at shaping public opinion, or establishing scientific credentials and contributing to scholarly knowledge⁸⁴. Most combined some form of technical expertise with administrative management and political authority. Their trajectories often crossed as they ran into each other in professional capacities, somewhere in the expanse of the post-Victorian British Empire. Their convictions were often unshakable when it came to the prevailing conception of the world seen through the prism of national interests and the Empire, and their own place in it. They held fast to how they framed the world according to the universal criteria of modern science prevailing at the time, and what they regarded as objective knowledge irrespective of where they were geographically, the indisputable rightness of the market economy, the civilizing mission of the European, and more specifically the English white man⁸⁵.

These individuals did not stand out only because of their shared worldviews, social backgrounds, upbringings, and intellectual formations. It was also the geographic trajectories that made them move across the world, within the Empire's dominions, and amidst hardships that local people, whom they invariably thought of

⁸⁴ See for example Christopher N. B. Ross, "Lord Curzon and E. G. Brown Confront the 'Persian Question,'" *The Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (May 15, 2009): 385–411. One of the most remarkable figures and a rare female example was Ann Lambton who served as embassy staff in Iran, was an intelligence analyst and a spy, before becoming a major orientalist and academic, penning a standard manual of Persian language, and publishing groundbreaking historical studies of the agrarian property regimes in Iran, medieval political institutions, doctrines, and jurisprudence, and so on. See Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*; Ann K. S. Lambton, *The Persian Land Reform, 1962-1966* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Idem., *Theory and Practice in Medieval Persian Government* (London: Variorum, 1980); Idem., *Qājār Persia : Eleven Studies*, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1988); Idem., *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia: Aspects of Administrative, Economic and Social History, 11Th-14th Century* (Binghampton: State University of New York Press, 1988). As with many of these historical figures, detailed biographical information about Lambton are surprisingly rare to come by. For a slightly conspiratorial semi-official Iranian perspective and obituary see Fatemeh Safavi, "Doushizeh Lambton [Ms. Lambton]," *Tarikh-e Mo'aser* 5, no. 19 (2007): 85–129.

⁸⁵ This account follows Edward Said's approach to the study of orientalists as individuals as well as contributors to discursive exercise of power. Said, *Orientalism*.

I do not intend to exclude women from this account. There are important travel accounts during this period of European women travelers to Southwest Iran and the Bakhtiari country. In addition, there were remarkable women, such as Gertrude Bell, Elizabeth Ross, or Ann Lambton, who acted as experts and agents of political rule in the region at a time when very few women occupied such roles in Britain. See Safavi, "Doushizeh Lambton (Ms. Lambton)." Elizabeth Ness MacBean Ross, *A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiari Land* (London: L. Parsons, 1921). Unfortunately, there are very few published sources and biographical information about these women that I am aware of. The same can be said for the pivotal figure of the Scottish Dr Young, the Company physician in Masjed Soleyman.

as ‘backward natives’, had long ago found ways to negotiate or to avoid altogether⁸⁶. Most acted effectively as secular missionaries for the cause of European civilization, political influence, and economic enterprise, which they equated unquestionably with welfare for all. In the process they perceived their own role as one of selfless service to scientific progress (chapters 3, 5, 6), disregarding the coercive colonialism that underlay the whole edifice⁸⁷.

The shift to what I have called *the social question*, or the range of social reforms and interventionist projects that used non-market criteria to ensure the relative inclusion of selective segments of the local population within the sphere of technological and material modernity, was the strategy in part conceptualized by these men and others like them. These programs of social paternalism included urban planning, sanitary and public welfare measures, education, leisure programs and facilities, food provision, etc. that together constituted the extensive social engineering that began in Khuzestan from the 1920s, and were intended to facilitate the operation of the oil complex and allow for the smoother accumulation of capital in oil. Although these paternalistic programs were framed as strategies to deal with the political and social obstacles hindering the Company’s operations, they implied great changes in the lives of the people they affected. Some were welcomed; others felt coerced and alienating, and were resisted and fought.

As for the professional experts, the pragmatic and utilitarian nature of their formation within the new technical and political habitus meant that upon encountering resistance to implementing their tasks, they sought practical and technical solutions involving the population and the material landscape for overcoming obstacles and planning for long term success of their enterprise, instead of resorting to coercion or limited alliances with local elites, as in the old days. In the post WWI era, the emergence of the social question was a turning point that gave more power to these

⁸⁶ The shared quest for conquering uncharted landscapes, such as mountain peaks or vast deserts, and recording the endeavor as pioneering discoveries was a typical example. See the remarkable examples of Thesiger’s adventures in the Empty Quarter and Iraqi Marshlands, or Layard’s ‘discovery’ of Bakhtiyaris in the Zagros: Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (London: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1959); Thesiger, *Marsh Arabs: Seven Years with the Primitive Tribesmen of a Watery World*; Austen Henry Layard, *Early Adventures in Persia, Susiana, and Babylonia, Including a Residence among the Bakhtiyari and Other Wild Tribes Before the Discovery of Nineveh*, 2 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1887); Merian C Cooper, *Grass* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1925).

⁸⁷ Said, *Orientalism*; Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men; Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*; Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

professional men as versus corporate shareholders, financiers, and politicians. These changes were most clearly reflected not only in the form of the parliamentary compromise that emerged in Britain after the 1926 general strike (see chapter 4), but also abroad, and in the reformulation of the whole paradigm of *development*. With the *1929 Colonial Development Act* the notion of development, and the role of indigenous professional experts from the global south was recast, consolidating the belief that regulating and planning for coordinated and rational development to smooth the path for a more frictionless accumulation of capital was the professional task of technically trained experts⁸⁸. The posing of the social question opened the way for a different strategic approach to the development of the oil complex in the interwar years that allowed greater compromise with local society in the form of expanding social policies that were eventually materialized in the built environment of Abadan.

Tribes, Ashayer, Ilat, Qabael: A Question of Terminology

There are a number of questionable and problematic terms I have had to use extensively in this work that are loaded with troubling symbolism, but I have found hard to avoid. Foremost among these is *Tribe*, a problematic label that is accompanied by a heavy baggage from its extensive use in the English language in the colonial discourse and exercise of power, and its subsequent adaptation until the 1970s in various versions of post-colonial modernization theories and academic scholarship, especially anthropology. The colonial baggage comes from the period when the designation “tribe” was used as an instrument of British colonial governmental policy to categorize diverse and shifting populations as a-historical units, formed around fixed notions of hierarchic and segmentary chiefdom systems, putative kinship, and of economic systems based exclusively on subsistence and reciprocity.

In the colonial exercise of power these fixed notions of “primordial” identity were then used to fit “tribal” groups into specific places within state strategies. The Sikhs in India, for example, were designated as a martial race; the Lurs in Iran were repeatedly portrayed as bandits and brigands, and so on by British authors and

⁸⁸ George C. Abbott, “A Re-Examination of the 1929 Colonial Development Act,” *Economic History Review* 24, no. 1 (1971): 68–81; M. P. Cowen and R.W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Frederick Cooper, “Modernizing Bureaucrats, Backward Africans, and the Development Concept,” in *International Development and the Social Sciences*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 64–92.

diplomats. Mahmood Mamdani, for example, has provided a brilliant analysis of the operations of the administrative and discursive designations of certain groups as traditional tribes with fixed racial characteristics in Uganda and South Africa, and their subsequent incorporation and inclusion in the system of indirect rule under British colonial domination, but only according to those criteria⁸⁹.

More recently, Marshal Sahlins reiterated the essentializing and a-historical framing by presenting “tribesmen” as a third intermediate category of cultural development between the primitive and the civilized, “The state differentiates civilization from the tribal society...Tribal society is intermediate in complexity between mobile hunters and gatherers and early agrarian states...[Structurally, a tribe is a] segmentary hierarchy; i.e. a pyramid of social groups...[organized economically around] a familial mode of production”⁹⁰. For evolutionary anthropologists such as Sahlins, as well as for earlier colonial policymakers and scholars, tribes are defined as primordial groups who have failed to establish a proper state system, primarily because they live in geographic settings which force upon them a flexible ecological adaptation to nature and subsistence⁹¹.

Despite this troubling baggage that risks the association of ‘tribe’ with ‘the noble savage’ and a mere extension of nature, I have chosen to use the term throughout this text, but with the heavy qualifications discussed above. I have done this primarily for convenience, and because I don’t believe a keyword should be held hostage to a questionable part of its past. Persian (and other vernacular languages spoken in Iran) is quite rich in the lexicon referring to mobile pastoralists and other social groups organized around kinship, non-state chiefdoms, and economic systems based on reciprocity and mixtures of agriculture and animal husbandry. This rich vocabulary is understandable since at least until the 1930s an estimated quarter of the population belonged to various tribal and mobile pastoral groups. In Persian, the equivalent terms to “tribes” are “*Ashayer*” (plural of *ashireh*), an Arabic term referring to horizontal as well as hierarchic constellations of kinship-based groups; “*Ilat*” (Turkic word, *il* in singular, *ilat* in Arabicized plural), and “*Qabael*” (Arabic, singular *qabileh*).

⁸⁹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁹⁰ Marshall Sahlins, *Tribesmen*, Foundations of Modern Anthropology (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), vii, 5, 19, 75, Ch.3.

⁹¹ Cooper, *Grass*; Wilson, “The Bakhtiyaris”; Ross, *A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiyari Land*.

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These terms do not carry the potential ideological baggage burdening the term “tribe”; they are all still used by state agents as well as the *ilati*, *qabileh-yi*, and *ashayeri* populations, without being overly weighed by essentialist preconceptions or a negative hint of primitivism. However, they cannot be used interchangeably and without considerable awkwardness in English. *Ashayer*, for example, is used primarily to refer to Khuzestan Arabs. The various Lur groups, such as *Bakhtiyaris*, *Kuhkiluyeh*, *Bahmai*, etc.; as well as Turkic speaking groups such as the *Shahsavan* and *Qashqai* are referred to as *Ilat*. The same goes for a mixed confederacy such as the *Kahamseh*, who were made of an alliance of five groups of different ethnicity, including Arabs, Turkics, and Lurs.

There is no single mode of production and economic activity that uniformly defines all these groups; as they can variably rely on mobile livestock herding, village based agriculture, or multisource exploitation of land and ecological resources. In more recent times urban employment, including wage labor in the oil industry, has become a feature of these flexible social groupings. Most significantly, *Ilat* referred to confederacies of various clans, segments, and subgroups; not necessary claiming common parentage and blood ties, but forging contextual alliances that were consolidated by marriage and mutual political commitments, including in warfare and defense against external rivals, shared territories, and loyalty to common leadership.

Although I use these terms on occasion, I have chosen to stick with the shorthand convenience of ‘tribe’. Using the local terms, or indeed a combination of them as necessary, avoids the baggage that accompanies the keyword ‘tribe’; but on the other hand, it would only convolute the narrative and divert from the main theme, which is the formation of the oil complex. In chapter 3 I have clarified some the key issues regarding landownership and contractual relations of property among the *Bakhtiyaris* and *Khuzestan Arabs*’ collective claims to territory. For the rest, I have used the term “tribe” conditionally, throughout this text, with the caveats discussed here.

Plan of Chapters:

At first impression chapters 2 and 4 may appear incongruous to a work of social history of labor and oil industry in Khuzestan. However, their purpose should become self-evident after the theoretical explanations provided in the preceding

pages. They are intended to provide the global, historical, and national-political context for the local social history that is being discussed here.

At a global level, the period under study was an era of revolutionary transformations when oil was becoming the new predominant source of energy and the underlying chemical raw material for an emerging global industrial system of mass production and consumption that has been labeled Fordism. As I will argue in chapter 4, the First World War greatly precipitated this transition, which was accompanied by fundamental political, economic, intuitional, and ideational transformations.

Chapter 2 investigates the regional and national reconfiguration of the Persian Gulf and Iran for a global imperial politics that was led by Britain. It discusses the different perspectives of political actors in Iran, London, British India, and locally in Khuzestan, over the long 19th century (through WWI and until 1926). It discusses the changing geopolitics of the region, the consequences of political upheavals, including the Constitutional Revolution, WWI, the 1921 Coup D'état, and the rise of mass politics and nationalism. The establishment of the oil industry in Khuzetan and its impact on local politics and alliances is analyzed within this framework. The chapter shows that in the aftermath of WWI the British state may have appeared as a unitary and powerful political actor, but was in fact riven with tensions, rivalries, and practical limitations as it confronted the possibilities and dangers of Iranian political landscape and the oil complex there. Without a clear understanding of this larger global and regional geopolitical landscape, I will argue that the social history of oil remains curtailed and cannot be properly understood within the context of a Global Labor History

Chapter 3 investigates the local agrarian societies and pastoral landscapes as they were integrated into the global circuits of oil capitalism. The chapter focuses on the politics of property and legal contract as an entry point into understating how local societies were subjugated to oil capitalism. The chapter also links the rural populations, the geographic hinterland, and the physical landscape to the oil complex. The social history of oil and labor is thus not curtailed to the places of industrial production and mining extraction, but also involves the rural world that may appear at first glance as external and irrelevant, but was integral to the consolidation of the oil complex.

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Similarly, chapter 4 may first appear as an odd addition to this work. For readers who are more familiar with European and Western History this chapter may initially come across as redundant and perhaps even irrelevant to the central story. On the other hand, approaching this investigation from the perspective of a Global Labor History, my aim was to historicize economic, industrial, governmental, and social managerial practices in order to demonstrate how these were not ready made criteria and practices that were simply diffused and transplanted from Britain and Europe to Iran. WWI was a horrifying and revolutionary watershed, for Britain as for Iran. Most of the practices of social engineering, public policymaking, and industrial management, that became the hallmark of the oil industry in the post war period were being forged during wartime and out of experiences not only in Europe, but also in the colonies, as well as in non-colonial dominions such as Iran. Chapter 4 historicizes these shifts in governmentality, and provides a context for the emergence of what I call 'the social question'. The chapter zooms out of the local context of Khuzestan into the global landscape of the changing regime of accumulation of capital that was ushered in by Fordism, and the political transformations ushered in by the rise of mass politics, changing industrial labor relations, corporate re-organization, the rising power of professional managerial professionals, and the new prominence of social welfare measures that shaped the subsequent approach by APOC to its oil operations in Iran.

Chapters 5 and 6 integrate these insights into a micro-historical analysis of the urban transformation of Abadan in the revolutionary 1920s, when the oil complex was consolidated in Iran. Thus, while chapters 2 and 4 provide a wider global, regional, and national context, chapters 3, 5, and 6 provide detailed micro histories of the social encounters in interconnected rural and urban settings where oil operations were taking place. Chapters 3, 5, and 6, are 'the heart' of the dissertation, as they use primary archival materials to unearth a subaltern history of social change as a result of the consolidation of the oil complex. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are constructed around the micro story of the conflicts surround the construction of the bazaar of Abadan. In the spirit of GLH they aim to show how a seemingly minute and inconsequential event, fought over reshaping the built environment of an oil boomtown in a remote location, encapsulated larger trends on national and world scales.

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Chapter 7 provides a conclusion to the social history of Abadan, the province, the oil complex, and the laboring classes in oil through the interwar years, and outlines the direction that I intend to take the final book project on the subject.