



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The social history of labor in the Iranian oil industry : the built environment and the making of the industrial working class (1908-1941)
Ehsani, K.

Citation

Ehsani, K. (2014, October 2). *The social history of labor in the Iranian oil industry : the built environment and the making of the industrial working class (1908-1941)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/28983>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/28983>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/28983> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Ehsani, Kaveh

Title: The social history of labor in the Iranian oil industry : the built environment and the making of the industrial working class (1908-1941)

Issue Date: 2014-10-02

Propositions for the thesis “The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry: The Built Environment and the Making of the Industrial Working Class (1908-1941), by Kaveh Ehsani

In Iran, the work of extraction, refining, and exporting of oil to markets took place in the urban spaces created for the purpose, around oil wells, refineries, and shipping ports, making the social history of oil and oilworkers also an urban history.

The urban space and the population of the refinery city of Abadan became the site of contention between all the main agents involved in the oil complex over defining the social relations of power within the oil industry. These frictions shaped the built environment of Abadan, and were in turn shaped by it.

World War One was a turning point for the oil industry, both in Iran and worldwide. The dynamics of the oil industry in Iran and the Middle East, and the relations of labor, capital, and the state that helped shape it, were formed in the interwar period.

The formation of the oil working class in the oil rich province of Khuzestan was predicated on the dismantling of existing agrarian and pastoral social structures, and the dispossession of their collective properties and resources. Thus, the formation of the oil working class is studied as a linked process that involved the often-coercive transformation of the countryside and the rural and pastoral worlds, while an urban and industrial environment was being created for oil.

Legal contracts between the Oil Company and Bakhtiyari and Arab tribal leaders created private property for the former, and personally benefited the latter at the expense of ordinary tribesmen and farmers. When the Iranian central government re-established its authority customary rights were not restored, and the remaining tribal lands were declared state property. Thus legal contracts and new government property laws were acts of ‘enclosures of the commons’ that left local populations with few options aside from joining the market for wage labor in oil.

The advent of oil capitalism in Iran was not the result of a simple diffusion of existing corporate resources, industrial knowhow, and modes of governance from Europe. Rather, it was part of a tangled global process during a revolutionary period when petroleum was becoming the mainstay of Fordism, the new political economy of mass production and consumption; and the political domain was being transformed with the rise of mass politics and the imposition of new social obligations on the state, mediated by the professional class.

None of the main agents involved in the making of the oil complex were ready-made entities, but were shaped by and through their interactions and practices in the urban built environment of oil in Khuzestan. These included the Anglo Persian Oil Company (APOC), oilworkers, government agents, and the local population whose lives were altered by the advent of the oil industry.

The urban built environment of oil in Khuzestan was variegated: The oil-mining city of Masjed Soleyman was a classic company town enclave controlled by APOC,

whereas the much larger river port and refinery city of Abadan was beyond the control of any one powerful social actor due to its scale. These urban differences explain the variations in the powers of negotiations by oil workers and local populations, including migrants and expatriates, as well as the range of Oil Company and central government practices in shaping the oil complex during its formative period.

APOC strove to create exclusive company enclaves that would operate outside national laws and local customary rules. Within these enclaves APOC attempted to use a range of paternalistic social programs, such as urban planning, public health measures, municipal reforms, and educational programs to socially engineer a permanent and reliable working class, and to reduce political tensions with the state and local resistance.

The urban history of Abadan reveals the attempts by oil workers and new urban residents to form coalitions to resist and to mount actions aimed at negotiating and modifying the terms of their integration into the circuits of oil capitalism.

Labor resistance and attempts at negotiating improved terms with the Oil Company took place through classic labor actions such as strikes, but also through collective urban movements that included women and non-oil workers, claiming the right to the city.

State institutions and government actors during a formative period of modern nation-state building in the interwar years were formed by their fractious interactions with the Oil Company and their response to local conditions in southwest Iran. The micro social history of oil reveals how state institutions and government agents were shaped through these confrontations and the accompanying struggles over defining the boundaries of state sovereignty and the scale of its social responsibilities.