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Oil, labour and revolution in Iran: a social history of labour in the Iranian oil industry, 1973-83

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Summary

There are numerous narratives about the history of oil, though all of them share a common approach: they focus on the impact of revenues derived from oil export on politics, economic development, civil war and geopolitical conflicts. The dominant narratives ignore or marginalize an essential ingredient in the history of oil: labour. Without the interference of human labour, oil would remain a subterranean substance, rather than become a precious commodity that is extracted, transported, and refined before being consumed by households and companies.

This obvious, yet often overlooked fact inspired me to write this thesis. While taking into account the role of politics and economics, my research takes a novel approach to oil in Iran by exploring its *social history* between 1973–83. This is a new approach that demystifies the history of oil and contributes to the emergent energy humanities research program. Climate change has increased our awareness that our societies are embedded in the ways in which we produce and consume energy. If we want to change these ways and replace them with alternatives, we have to understand how they emerged in the first place. While the majority of the energy humanities literature focussed on the aspect of consumption, this thesis takes a relatively unique position, certainly within the historiography of Iran, by looking at the aspect of production. This is connected to another research program, labour history, which provides a bottom-up approach to social, political and economic transformations of the 20th century.

Labour is conceived of broadly, by including activities in the spheres of production and social reproduction. The latter involves the oil company, the state and the family, which provided housing, education, (health)care, and recreation. Accordingly, the category of oil workers – the protagonists of this thesis – are also defined broadly; the definition includes drillers, operators, welders and electricians, but also nurses, carpenters, bus drivers, guards,

teachers, and typists. The thesis focusses primarily on the workplace, but also urban space, the private sphere and the community.

The content of this thesis is organised around three main themes: (1) the working and living conditions of Iranian oil workers in the context of the social, economic and political transformations in the decade between 1973–83, (2) the oil workers' engagement in social and political struggles and their organisations, particularly during the Iranian Revolution (1978–82) and its immediate aftermath; and the impact of the start of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 on the oil industry and its workforce.

Theoretical approach

Three theoretical approaches have informed my historical research on these themes. First, labour is studied through the analytical lens of class, which is conceptualised as a social relationship that shapes the historical process of class formation, in which human agency and collective struggles play an important role. This approach rejects reductionist understandings and shows how class is co-constituted by gender and ethnic relations, while culture, religion and ideology act as mediators between class experience and class consciousness. Building on the writings of E.P. Thompson, I develop a Gramscian reading of experience and consciousness that emphasise the (sometimes contradictory) role of practical knowledge and ideological discourse.

This is related to a second theoretical approach, which concerns the role of politics and language in shaping class identity and struggle. In contrast to the claims of the proponents of the linguistic turn, my research contends that politics and language are not entirely autonomous; they themselves are terrains where class conflicts unfold and are expressed. The third theoretical approach is relevant to a more abstract level of analysis: the nature of capitalist development in which social, political, and economic processes are embedded and interconnected. Capitalist development is conceptualised as an uneven and combined process that takes place globally and creates, in “peripheral” countries, such as Iran, forms of class structure and consciousness, politics and economies that have both universal and particular characteristics and, therefore, give rise to hybrid phenomena (see below for a number of examples).

Methodology and sources

Any researcher who attempts to develop a bottom-up approach to history is confronted with a serious problem: the lack of sources that give a voice to the subaltern groups rather than the elites. This problem is even more salient when researching the history of Iran and the oil industry. In order to retrieve, contextualise and understand the social history of Iranian oil workers, I have searched for their voices and information that highlights their perspective in a large number of primary and secondary sources.

The primary sources include newspapers, magazines, memoirs and documents in a number of archives: the National Library and Archives of Iran, the Institute of Iranian Contemporary Studies, the Library, Museum and Document Centre of Iranian Parliament, the Islamic Revolution Documents Centre, part of the archives of the National Iranian Oil Company, the International Institute of Social History, and the archives of British Petroleum at Warwick. In addition, I have interviewed around twenty oil workers. These interviews provide unique and important insights into oil workers' living and working conditions and mentalities, as existing oral history projects mostly focus on the experiences of politicians and managers.

Findings and contributions

The findings of this thesis make a distinctive contribution to three historiographical fields: labour history, the social history of the Pahlavi era, and the history of the Iranian Revolution.

Labour history

The contribution to the field of labour history in Iran is of the utmost importance, as it has received scant academic attention, particularly when compared to the advances made in this field in some other countries in the Middle East, such as Turkey and Egypt. Even a group as prominent as oil workers has remained marginal to historical studies of modern Iran. Therefore, I have researched in some detail the history of the oil industry's workforce, discussing its size and internal distinctions in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, income, healthcare, housing, education and workplace related issues such as managerial techniques and collective action.

I argue that unlike common perceptions, oil workers did not constitute a "labour aristocracy" *tout court*, given the existence of large income disparities within the workforce. While some of the employees benefitted from high-

income levels, most of them earned wages and salaries that were not much higher than that of other industrial workers, especially given the arduous working conditions. Differences within the workforce were also visible in the pervasive inequality between white-collar and blue-collar workers, and its institutionalisation permeating through all levels of oil workers' professional and personal spaces. Another significant form of inequality existed between those workers with permanent contracts and those who had temporary contracts. Together, these inequalities created solidarities, but also grievances and conflicts.

Looking at the size of the workforce, I explain why 1973 was a crucial year that ushered in the expansion of the oil industry leading to a dramatic increase of its workforce. The nature and role of recruitment to the oil industry and education are discussed as well, showing their impact on social mobility, mentalities, networks, inequalities and identities among oil workers. This thesis argues that the way the oil industry recruited and trained its workforce greatly contributed to the relative continuity of oil workers' communities in a number of places, and helped to establish networks amongst oil workers.

Particular attention is given to the workplace, exploring a number of specific locations, most importantly the Abadan Refinery, in order to understand the labour processes in which oil workers were involved. These labour processes fell into two main organisations of the oil industry: its basic-operations, which included the production, refinement, transport and distribution of oil and its non-basic operations, which provided ancillary services, such as housing and healthcare. This analysis illustrates that some aspects of the labour process, such as the big maintenance procedures in the refineries, also referred to as "overhaul," contributed to the creation of networks among oil workers in different refineries, while others, such as the nature of work in the Process Departments, provide an explanation as to why its workers were less inclined to partake in collective action.

Looking into the workplace, the mechanisms through which the management created control and consent, and the ways in which workers resisted the management are discussed and explained in relation to the nature of the oil industry's factory regime and the wider state-society relations. This analysis highlights hybrid formations that result from the uneven and combined nature of development in Iran. On the one hand, the management attempted to create consent through the instalment of collective bargaining and a system of material rewards according to a strict hierarchy of grades that promoted an individualistic and competitive attitude amongst workers. This meritocratic logic was based on the notion of modern citizenship. However, this clashed with another aspect of the managerial strategy that viewed workers as obedient

and loyal subjects of the Shah. This strategy was based on authoritarian surveillance and repression via the presence of the secret service (SAVAK) in the workplace. The resistance strategies of oil workers varied from individual acts of “misbehaviour,” to collective forms of protest, such as signing petitions and organizing strikes.

This thesis also looks beyond the immediate workplace and delves into how labour power was reproduced by the unwaged labour of women in the family, by the oil company through its ancillary institutions and by the welfare policies of the state. This reproduction was material, cultural (socialisation) and ideological, which was reflected in the discourses and images used in the oil company’s official publications. This section of the thesis also discusses the ways in which oil workers spent their leisure time, often with the family.

The Pahlavi era and modernisation

The historiography of the Pahlavi period is the second field to which this thesis contributes. Contrary to the state-centric studies that dominate this field, this thesis, in the concrete context of the oil industry, studies the transformations of the late 1960s and the 1970s, which are often referred to as “modernisation.” Because oil and the oil industry have epitomised “modernisation” probably more than anything else in 20th century Iran, studying them provides a unique chance to explore the rapid social, cultural, political and economic transformations that have accompanied it. Although much of the literature on the Pahlavi era has referred to the contradictory and uneven nature of these transformations, my research demonstrates how they changed the lives and mentalities of oil workers and explains the ways in which they reacted to, coped with and resisted these changes. My thesis goes further than elaborating the social and political manifestations of unevenness; it demonstrates how unevenness led to the symbiosis of contradictions. I argue, for instance, that the contradictory way in which the oil workers were treated simultaneously as modern citizens and as traditional subjects was an expression of the modernisation process at large, and created the hybrid “citizen-subject” mentality.

In the part of the thesis that deals with the impact of social transformations, the synchronic approach of the previous parts is substituted by a diachronic one that examines the *longue durée* of class in the Iranian oil industry since its foundation in 1908, distinguishing three specific periods. While the period until the late 1940s marks the *formation* of the working class in the oil industry, the period between ca. 1950 and 1970 forms a period of *consolidation*. I argue that the 1970s should be seen as a crucial moment, as they are the years in which the working class in the oil industry went through a

process of *re-formation*: the composition of the workforce changed significantly as a large number of young oil workers entered the oil industry, marking the end of a decade-long recruitment. This created a generational gap among the workforce as the new recruits had different religious, cultural, educational and ideological backgrounds from the older workers.

These differences became spatially articulated as well, mainly due to the different periods in which migration shaped the urban centres in which oil workers resided. While migration to Tehran, for instance, accelerated in the late 1960s and 1970s, creating a pool of workers with a rural background from which the Tehran Refinery and the oil depots recruited their young workers, it declined significantly in Abadan, which had grown as a company town due to the high rate of migration in the first half of the 20th century. Here, as well as in other locations in the south-western oil region, workers were mainly recruited from the families of the elder generation of oil workers and the oil company's educational institutions. One consequence of this was that religious workers played a more prominent role in Tehran.

My emphasis on the role of migration makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on uneven and combined development, arguing that migration should be seen as one of the concrete mechanisms that lead to social and cultural hybridity. The thesis also demonstrates that a number of oil workers became influenced by new ideologies and oppositional groups that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s (Ali Shariati's Islamic liberation theology, Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamism, and the new left's radicalism), and uncovers the activist networks that emerged among oil workers. Collectively, the social-economic, ideological and political changes played a constitutive role in the re-formation of oil workers as a class, and created the "citizen-subject" subjectivity among them – yet another hybrid phenomenon.

A large part of the historiography of the Pahlavi era is not only state-centric, but it also treats the state as an abstract entity that hovers above society, a black box that somehow produced policies. In contrast, this thesis looks at the concrete state institutions and their interaction with oil workers, showing the importance of the local bureaucracy, policies and laws (most importantly the Labour Law). Looking at the oil industry, it shows that the state did not simply impose measures, but also played an important role in mobilising society through discourse, policies and institutions.

The political discourse centred on national progress, the positive status of workers, revolutionary change and meritocracy, all of which raised oil workers' expectations without fulfilling them. Policies such as literacy campaigns and the expansion of the oil industry also increased oil workers' participation and expectations. A number of institutional frameworks created

channels for increased participation in trade unions, collective bargaining and the Rastakhiz Party, which was the only official party and its membership was compulsory for all white-collar workers. Paradoxically, this social mobilisation brought oil workers in collision with the authoritarian structures, and paved the way for oil workers' participation in the Iranian Revolution.

The Iranian Revolution and war

This brings us to the third historiographical field to which this thesis contributes: the Iranian Revolution. My study demonstrates that labour activism among oil workers was on the rise from the early 1970s, expressing the existence of a number of grievances that were radically transformed during the revolutionary events of 1978, and became framed as part of an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggle. Oil workers participated in large numbers in the oil strikes that emerged in September 1978 and then developed into a general strike in early December 1978. I analyse the demands, the language, the ideological influences (nationalism, communism and Islamism), the networks and the organisations that propelled the oil strikes. Although many publications acknowledge the role of these strikes in the downfall of the monarchy in February 1979, my research demonstrates that the role of the oil workers was decisive.

Most analyses of the Iranian Revolution have remained on the macro-level, concentrating on the causes of the revolution. My analysis of the revolution looks at the micro-level and discusses the role played by (the absence of) leadership, political strategy, and ideological discourse. I analyse the ideological and strategic conflicts between leftist, liberal-nationalist and Islamist groups during the oil strikes and argue that the outcome of these conflicts was not predetermined, but that there were different turning points and possibilities that were shaped by the agency of these groups. Hence, my research underlines the importance of contingency. Moreover, the existing literature on the Iranian Revolution does not provide a clear explanation of the way in which a situation of “dual power” emerged in December 1978, lasting until February 1979. I argue that the oil strikes made an essential contribution to the emergence of the revolutionary organisations that led to the emergence of “dual power.”

My analysis of the role of the oil workers in the Iranian Revolution makes an important intervention in the debate about the relationship between oil and politics. As the oil strikes in Iran contradict the claim that the material characteristics of oil prevent the mass mobilisation of oil workers, I explain why and how the oil strikes developed not *despite*, but *because* of the characteristics of the Iranian oil industry. I emphasise the importance of oil

workers' positional power, and their increasing awareness of this power during the revolution.

The thesis also explains the paradoxical outcome of the revolution, in which oil workers played a crucial role and developed their own organisations, but were subjugated by a repressive post-revolutionary state in which the Islamist currents monopolised power. I argue that political factors, rather than economic or religious ones determined this outcome. Looking at the intense conflicts that accompanied this outcome, the thesis discloses one of the most understudied aspects of the post-revolutionary period: the continued mobilisation of workers after the fall of the monarchy and the emergence of *showras* (councils), through which oil workers engaged in democratic decision making and exerted some control over the management of the oil industry.

I examine how the *showras* functioned in the oil industry by looking at the complex ways in which various groups of oil workers, with Islamist and leftist affiliations, collaborated with or opposed the new state. The thesis also discusses the various forms of collective action, political organisation and ideological disputes involved in the relations between the state and the oil workers' *showras*. It is argued that next to communist ideologies, certain versions of political Islam gave expression to oil workers' interests and desires to exert collective control over oil production.

The *showras* in the oil industry, however, were gradually stripped of their autonomy, repressed and finally banned in early 1982. Their demise was caused by a number of factors, including the lack of technical and administrative knowledge among oil workers, the increased social mobility for those who aligned with the state, material and ideological incorporation, repression, workplace surveillance by Islamic Associations, the absence of political organisation on a national level, and most importantly, the destruction and dislocation caused by the Iran-Iraq war. The thesis demonstrates the impact of the war in Abadan, and discusses the reactions of oil workers to the war, many of whom migrated to other cities.

To conclude, this thesis makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the history of one of Iran's most important social groups: oil workers. By looking at the oil industry as a specific setting, this thesis also contributes to a more detailed and complex understanding of the social transformations of the 1970s, the dynamics and outcome of the Iranian Revolution, and the effects of the Iran-Iraq war. As the Iran-Iraq war opened a new chapter in the history of the oil workers, it will be the subject of a future study.