



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **'Precarize' and divide: Iranian workers from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Green Movement**

Morgana, M.S.

### **Citation**

Morgana, M. S. (2021, March 31). *'Precarize' and divide: Iranian workers from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Green Movement*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3151771>

Version: 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/1887/3151771>

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

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/3151771> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Morgana, M.S.

**Title:** 'Precarize' and divide: Iranian workers from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Green Movement

**Issue date:** 2021-03-31

**“PRECARIZE” AND DIVIDE:**  
**Iranian Workers from the 1979 Revolution**  
**to the 2009 Green Movement**

Maria Stella Morgana

Cover photo by M. Stella Morgana (Tehran, 2017)

Printed by ProefschriftMaken – Leiden, The Netherlands

© 2021 M. Stella Morgana, Leiden, the Netherlands

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission from the copyright owner.



**“PRECARIZE” AND DIVIDE:  
Iranian Workers from the 1979 Revolution  
to the 2009 Green Movement**

**Proefschrift**

ter verkrijging van  
de graad van Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,  
op gezag van Rector Magnificus prof.dr.ir. H. Bijl,  
volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties  
te verdedigen op 31 maart 2021  
klokke 16.15 uur

Door  
Maria Stella Morgana

geboren te Catania, Italië  
in 1984

**Promotor**

Prof. dr. Marlou Schrover

**Co-promotor**

Dr. Maaïke Warnaar

**Promotiecommissie**

Prof. dr. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (SOAS University of London)

Prof. dr. Gabrielle van den Berg (Leiden University)

Prof. dr. Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Leiden University & Utrecht University)

Dr. Crystal Ennis (Leiden University)

Dr. Peyman Jafari (Princeton University)

## Table of Contents

<b>PREFACE .....</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION .....</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>IRANIAN LABOR AND WORKERS IN THE ACADEMIC DEBATE .....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS: LINKING HEGEMONY AND DISCOURSE .....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>WORKERS IN CONTEXT: DISCOURSES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE LEFT BEFORE THE REVOLUTION ....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>CHAPTERS' SYNOPSIS .....</i>	<i>26</i>
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
<b>THE POLITICS OF FIELDWORK:</b>	
<b>RESEARCH CHALLENGES AND RISKS IN IRAN .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<i>INTRODUCTION .....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>NAVIGATING THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF FIELD RESEARCH IN A "CLOSED" CONTEXT .....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES? IT IS A MATTER OF QUESTIONS .....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>DEALING WITH THE "CLIMATE OF SUSPICION," OBSTACLES AND FAILURES IN THE FIELD .....</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>SITUATING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION: REFLECTIONS ON POSITIONALITY AND ITS INFLUENCE .....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>SUBJECTIVITIES AND PEOPLE'S AGENCY AT THE CENTER .....</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>BEFORE AND DURING FIELDWORK: GAINING ACCESS, ENTERING TRUSTED NON-ELITE NETWORKS .....</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>AFTER AND BEYOND FIELD-RESEARCH: HOW I ANSWERED MY RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....</i>	<i>54</i>
<i>CONCLUSION .....</i>	<i>56</i>
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	
<b>PREPARING FOR THE '79 REVOLUTION FROM PARIS:</b>	
<b>KHOMEINI'S DISCOURSE ON THE IRANIAN LEFT AND WORKERS .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<i>INTRODUCTION .....</i>	<i>58</i>
<i>DISCLOSING KHOMEINI'S DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES: FROM RESPONSE TO ACTION .....</i>	<i>62</i>
<i>CONSTRUCTING THE ENEMY WHILE BUILDING A COMMUNITY: OCTOBER CHRONICLES .....</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>ENVISAGING THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC: WHAT WAS AT STAKE FOR THE LEFT? THE NOVEMBER SHIFT .....</i>	<i>74</i>
<i>WALKING TOWARDS VICTORY: KHOMEINI'S GOAL-ORIENTED STRATEGY IN DECEMBER .....</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>ORGANIZING THE IRI BEFORE GOING BACK: THE STRATEGIES OF OSTRACISM AND EXCLUSION .....</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>CONCLUSION .....</i>	<i>93</i>

## CHAPTER 3

### THE LANGUAGE OF RESISTANCE:

<b>THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION IN WORKERS' WORDS AND SLOGANS .....</b>	<b>97</b>
<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>97</i>
<i>CONSTRUCTING A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE.....</i>	<i>101</i>
<i>1978-1979 WORKERS' STRIKES: A TIMELINE THROUGH STATEMENTS.....</i>	<i>103</i>
<i>"UNITY," "FREEDOM FROM DICTATORSHIP" AND "FOREIGN INTERFERENCE": THE SLOGANS .....</i>	<i>116</i>
<i>SELF-DEFINITIONS AND MEMORIES FROM THE REVOLUTION.....</i>	<i>122</i>
<i>CONCLUSION.....</i>	<i>125</i>

## CHAPTER 4

### TALKING TO WORKERS: FROM KHOMEINI TO AHMADINEJAD, HOW THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S DISCOURSE ON LABOR CHANGED

<b>THROUGH MAY DAY SPEECHES (1979-2009) .....</b>	<b>128</b>
<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>128</i>
<i>DISCOURSE AS A TOOL OF POWER: LINKING LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE.....</i>	<i>130</i>
<i>LABOR AS A MANIFESTATION OF ALLAH, WORKERS AS "WARRIORS" IN THE ISLAMIC DOMAIN .....</i>	<i>132</i>
<i>WORK AS A WEAPON AGAINST CAPITALISM AND IMPERIALISM FOR THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS ....</i>	<i>138</i>
<i>MARGINALIZING WORKERS' DAY: THE PATH TO ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION .....</i>	<i>140</i>
<i>THE ISLAMIC-IRANIAN RHETORIC OF CULTURAL LIBERALIZATION ADDRESSING THE MIDDLE CLASS....</i>	<i>147</i>
<i>JUSTICE, THE ALLEGIANCE OF THE PEOPLE AND REPRESSION: AHMADINEJAD'S CONTRADICTIONS....</i>	<i>152</i>
<i>CONCLUSION.....</i>	<i>158</i>

## CHAPTER 5

### TRAJECTORIES OF RESISTANCE AND SHIFTING FORMS

<b>OF WORKERS' ACTIVISM (1979-2009).....</b>	<b>162</b>
<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>162</i>
<i>THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE .....</i>	<i>164</i>
<i>COLLECTIVE ACTIONS AND COUNTER-CONDUCT: PATHS OF DEFIANCE .....</i>	<i>166</i>
<i>HOW WORKERS EMERGED AS REVOLUTIONARIES IN 1978-79 AND CONSOLIDATED IN THE 1980s.....</i>	<i>168</i>
<i>NEGOTIATING SPACES FOR STRUGGLE AGAINST LIBERALIZATION POLICIES IN THE 1990s.....</i>	<i>175</i>
<i>RESISTING PRECARIETY AND ISOLATION IN THE REFORMIST ERA (1997-2005).....</i>	<i>181</i>
<i>COPING WITH AHMADINEJAD'S CRACKDOWN: STRUGGLE, INFORMAL ACTIVISM AND THE INTERNET ..</i>	<i>185</i>
<i>CONCLUSION.....</i>	<i>188</i>

## CHAPTER 6

### “PRODUCE” AND “CONSUME” IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC:

#### THE 90S’ MYTH OF THE WINNER AND ITS IMPACT ON WORKERS..... 191

<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	191
<i>ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATION: FRAMING CHANGE AND PROJECTING SUCCESS THROUGH DISCOURSE</i>	194
<i>“VEILED CAPITALISTS?” IN CONTEXT: THE “SECOND REPUBLIC” ON THE ROAD TO PRODUCTION</i> .....	197
<i>A CURE FOR PAIN IN DISCOURSE: ECONOMIC AND INDUSTRIAL “ACHIEVEMENTS”</i> .....	201
<i>MARGINALIZING WORKERS DISCURSIVELY AND LEGALLY</i> .....	203
<i>CONSTRUCTING THE “SUCCESSFUL” THROUGH A CULTURE OF COMPETITION</i> .....	206
<i>YOUTH AS AN ELEMENT FUNCTIONAL TO THE NEOLIBERAL PROJECT</i> .....	208
<i>CONNECTING SPACES: THE MODES OF MIDDLE CLASSES AND URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS</i> .....	211
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	212

## CHAPTER 7

### LAGGING BEHIND: LABOR PRECARIZATION, CIVIL SOCIETY AND

#### THE KHĀNEH-YE-KĀRGAR’S DISCOURSES IN THE REFORMIST ERA ..... 216

<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	216
<i>THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL ARENA OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN A GRAMSCIAN UNDERSTANDING</i> .....	218
<i>KHATAMI’S QUEST FOR THE RULE OF LAW AND CIVIL SOCIETY</i> .....	221
<i>UNPROTECTED ERGO INVISIBLE: CORNERING WORKERS, SEEKING TO REFORM THE LABOR LAW</i> .....	225
<i>THE WORKERS’ HOUSE UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS</i> .....	229
<i>RIGHTS AND PARTICIPATION IN KĀR-O-KĀRGAR</i> .....	232
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	238

## CHAPTER 8

### THE GREEN MOVEMENT VIS-À-VIS WORKERS: MISSING CONNECTIONS

#### AND BREAKING POINTS WITHIN THE 2009 UPRISING..... 241

<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	241
<i>NAVIGATING THE BREAKING POINTS: BETWEEN DISCOURSE AND COLLECTIVE AWARENESS</i> .....	244
<i>FROM THE ELECTIONS TO THE STREETS: CHRONOLOGY OF AN UPRISING</i> .....	247
<i>EVOLVING SLOGANS, FRAGILE IDENTITIES</i> .....	253
<i>WORKERS, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE GREENS</i> .....	262
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	268

<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>271</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>278</b>
<b>SAMENVATTING .....</b>	<b>301</b>
<b>CURRICULUM VITAE .....</b>	<b>305</b>

## PREFACE

Chapter 1 will appear in *Middle East Critique*, with minor editing changes.

Chapter 4's text is published in *Iranian Studies*, with minor editing changes.

Chapter 5's text is forthcoming in *International Labor and Working-Class History* journal, with minor editing changes.

Chapter 6's main corpus is a longer version of the article published in the *International Journal for Middle East Studies*.

Chapter 7's core sections will appear in a chapter in *The Rule of Law and the Politics of the Judiciary in Contemporary Iran*, edited by Hadi Enayat and Mirjam Künkler (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2021).

## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The transliteration of Persian words follows the scheme suggested by the Iranian Studies Association and Journal, with diacritical marks for long vowels.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In Persian they say *dast-o-del-baz*. Those who are generous have their hand and their heart open. This labor of research, which is primarily a labor of love, is dedicated to all the generous people who have accompanied me throughout these four years. I am thankful to my supervisor, Marlou Schrover, for guiding me through every single step of my PhD journey with patience, academic rigor, and sincere support. I cannot express sufficient gratitude to my co-supervisor, Maaïke Warnaar, who has always pushed me to ask inconvenient questions as a scholar, while making me a better human being. Her mentorship has been crucial to the development of this project.

I have to acknowledge an immense debt of gratitude to all those who dedicated their time to my research in various forms: by sharing their knowledge and their experience, but also by opening their homes, their lives, and their memories to me. Some of them need to remain anonymous, but they are the core and the essence of this work.

Without the support of Ebrahim Mahmoudi and Fatemeh Sadeghi I would not have been able to even start my research stay in Tehran as a visiting doctoral researcher at Tarbiat Modarres University. They helped me through the emotional and bureaucratic process, they pushed me to see the broader picture and taught me how to laugh at myself while persisting in my struggles. In particular, Ebi's sense of humour, along with countless cups of tea, laughs and discussions on Gramsci, Italian cinema, Iranian history and politics in the university courtyard helped me navigate four seasons of intense archival research and interviews in Tehran. Hashem Aghajari welcomed me at Tarbiat Modarres with courage and generosity, as he shared his memories with me throughout the period of my stay at university. I will never forget our hours of conversation in his office, and his immense kindness and knowledge. Mohammad Maljoo stimulated crucial reflections on the labor realm in Iran, and challenged my research questions when this dissertation was still a blurry outline, while nurturing my curiosity and pushing me to sharpen my critical enquiry. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam served as an inspiration and guide through the months I spent at SOAS University of



London. I profoundly benefited from his insights. My academic growth and progress would have been missing a fundamental component had I not met Paola Rivetti. She sharpened my critical approach to Iranian contemporary politics and inspired me to keep walking and studying, always standing on my own two feet. Shirin Saedi encouraged me to write and dream bigger. From Marina Calculli I learned how to toughen my academic stance, while following my own passions and never forgetting to help others in the process of learning. I was incredibly fortunate to participate in the conference “The Iranian Revolution as a world event” in Amsterdam in December 2018 organized by Peyman Jafari, whose work on labor in Iran has been an example and a trigger to begin trekking my own path as a researcher. During that event, I met Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, Negar Mottahedeh, and Naghmeh Sohrabi, who generously shared fundamental ideas and insights. Since then, Negar has represented special source of inspiration. Ghoncheh Tazmini graciously pushed me to believe in myself from the very first time I shared a panel with her in Turin. She always laid to rest my impostor syndrome whenever I felt stuck in the writing process and London’s winter seemed too difficult to bear after years spent between the warm chaos of Tehran and Palermo, the Italian city where I live. A big thanks goes to Judy Nagle who scoured every sentence of this dissertation with patience and efficiently enhanced my English.

I owe my entire research and my growth as a human being throughout the years spent on this research project to the insights, the smiles, the dinners, and the hours spent together with special friends in Tehran, Esfahan, Naples, Palermo, Rome, Leiden and London. Nassim Marashi and Hesam Eslami always made me feel at home, even when I felt lost. Saideh Ghavasi’s brilliant mind and special humour helped me through the process of learning a Persian that went beyond the daily needs of life. Mandana Afshari’s immense kindness prevented me from giving up on the Iranian sources I was reading when I felt overwhelmed. Her smile shed light on the darkest days of improving my Persian. Faeze Z. has simply been my sister in Iran since 2007. Narges K. and Morteza V. have generously provided help and support at any time. With Milad S., Nilufar N., Nazanin M., Hadiseh B., Mohammad M., Pooya A., Amin H., Soudeh B. and Fereshteh S. I shared

hours travelling and exploring Iran, off the beaten track. Without our long trekking trips, “bum gardi,” jokes, and games sleeping on the floor, my life in Iran would have missed the real sense of the expression *dast-o-del-baz*. Rassa Ghaffari has been the best partner in crime for sharing not only gaffes, jokes, and readings, but also the awkward experiences of being a young woman conducting research in Iran. Augusto D., Faraaz M., Hajir M., Anahita N. and Alessandro D. supported me to stay positive, strong and smiling even when I encountered hostile responses during my stays in Tehran. Soheil D., Mostafa A. and Mehdi B. represented the best friends I could wish for to navigate Iranian cultural life with, through art, poems and music. They trained me to join the dots and go beyond apparent certainties. Sara F., Alfonso B., Isa S., Nicola D.G, and Matteo M. made my London months unique. Astrid B., Inge S., Tanja K., Peppe C., Valentina V., and Meagan H. have been the source of my strength throughout my years in Leiden, especially in the first phase of this project. Marta B. and Chiara D. have been my angels in Palermo.

I have reached the finish line thanks to my big family of special friends who have been on my side for the last fifteen or twenty years: Assunta C., Valentina M., Romina D., Anna Michela G., Rossella I., Claudia S., Filippo B., and Giulia A.. No words can explain how much I owe to them. To my mum, Pinuccia and my dad, Ignazio, I will be eternally grateful. They instilled within me the seeds of curiosity, modesty and love for every human being. They worked so hard every day of their life to guarantee my education. To my brother, Simone, my sister, Valentina, and my nieces and nephews Matteo, Giorgia, Samuele, Niccolò and Emma: your smiles remind me every day how wildly capable and uniquely united we all are as a family. To my grandmother Gina, who never had the opportunity to study and could barely write her first name, I dedicate this dissertation. She has been the best mentor I have ever had, as I will never forget her teachings on street politics and rules in Sicily when I was just a little kid.

Last and not least, there is my rock, my love, my lover, my best friend, my biggest challenger and my greatest supporter: Antonio. Thanks for existing and for staying in my life.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a story of fragile connections and breaking points. It is a record of post-revolutionary Iran's labor politics in words, discourses, and slogans. Specifically, this dissertation seeks to uncover and explore the discursive spaces around struggle and the contending narratives that developed between the 1979 Revolution and the 2009 Green Movement. Focusing on the role of workers between these key events in the history of the Islamic Republic, it aims to tackle the continuities and discontinuities in the processes of knowledge production that ultimately triggered or prevented collective actions and solidarity-building mechanisms. Workers were vital to the success of the 1979 Revolution but they were absent as a collective force in 2009. What happened in between that caused workers to be absent from the scene is at the core of this study. The term "workers" is used here to identify wage-earners in a broad sense. Workers are not only those who simply shared a common workplace but those who perceived themselves and were perceived as having common interests. Thus, workers are understood as those who developed a distinct consciousness, expressed both in discourses and practices, or those who did have this consciousness but later seemed to have lost it. This understanding will allow this study to grasp the transformations that occurred in the labor realm in Iran, while comprehending the shifting conceptualization of workers (by themselves or others), who – due to the increasing flexibilization of labor over the years – became precarious subjects. Hence, the above-mentioned approach contends that discourses on workers were instrumental in the making of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices in post-revolutionary Iran.

Throughout, this research is guided by the following research questions: Did the agency of workers represent a driver for change between 1979 and 2009? On what terms? How did discourses around labor transform relations of power and domination during this period? Which processes shaped workers' subjectivity within Iranian society in terms of class, social justice, collective thinking and solidarity-building?

To answer these questions, *“Precarize” and Divide: Iranian Workers from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Green Movement* looks at how material factors generated discourses and unexpected consequences in grassroots politics. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and relying on Norman Fairclough’s methods, it shows that language is not detached *per se* from the dynamics of the economic structure. The two levels of superstructure (political society, such as the state apparatus, and civil society, such as the realm where consent is constructed),<sup>1</sup> mirror themselves in discourse and produces realities.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the term discourse is here understood as a bridge between texts and slogans on the one hand, and hegemonic relations on the other hand. This dissertation unpacks the processes by which workers intermittently turned from subjects into agents. It does so by navigating how they managed the organization of collective actions and why they seized or missed opportunities for building cross-class alliances.

Taking a twin-tracked approach, thus shifting between a top-down and a bottom-up perspective, this dissertation challenges two dominant approaches to labor in post-revolutionary Iran, in and beyond academia. The first portrays the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) as an almost omnipotent actor that consolidated mostly through repression. The second – implying a certain degree of political passivity and religious subordination – depicts workers as mere victims or angered individuals who react to oppression mainly for economic reasons.

The impetus for this research project stems from what I believe to be the necessity of reviewing the role of workers in post-revolutionary history and challenging the dominant narrative that tends to overlook discursive practices as utterly disconnected from structural changes. Therefore, this dissertation represents an attempt to join the dots through the lens of cultural hegemony in the context of evolving power relations. Within this framework, hegemony indicates both consent and

---

<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, ed. Valentino Gerratana, (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1975), Q 13, §18, 1590; Q 26, §6, 2302; and Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, (London and New York: Longman, 2001), 1-43.

<sup>2</sup> See also chapter 7 for further detail on discourses, the production of realities in the Iranian context, and the dialectics between the state apparatus and civil society.

coercion. It entails changes from within the structure itself, involving both the subjects and the socio-political environment.

Therefore, this is a journey into these hegemonic and counter-hegemonic balances, which traverses the history and the stories that have so far remained unwritten between the 1979 Revolution and the 2009 Green movement uprising. It aims to capture the development of the seeds of grassroots politics into fragile connections, disconnections and breaking points along the lines of labor as the lowest common denominator.

In 1979, when workers – as latecomers – joined the anti-Shah demonstrations, they gave a crucial boost to the revolutionary process, as will be described in the chapters that follow. First, led by oil workers, they had their particular demands and grievances which caused them to initially strike outside the factories and then to demonstrate in the streets.<sup>3</sup> Second, the workers' contribution to the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime was unique, because they were able to economically “paralyze the state apparatus.”<sup>4</sup> Third, they established links of solidarity with other groups in the revolutionary *corpus*: they were a distinguishable, yet integral, part of the collectivity. As Ervand Abrahamian wrote: “The entry of the working class made possible the eventual triumph of the Islamic Revolution.”<sup>5</sup> In 2009, when the Green Movement erupted in the aftermath of the contested Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election as president, there was however no distinct and organized group advancing labor or social justice-related demands protested alongside the Greens.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, analyzing the interconnections between discourse and political transformations spanning thirty years will shed light on the many *whys* and *hows* that can explain the absence of workers (as a united group) in 2009.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Peyman Jafari, “Reasons to Revolt: Iranian Oil Workers in the 1970s,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, No. 84 (2013): 195-217.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmad Ashraf and Ali Banuazizi, “The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution,” *State, Culture and Society*, Vol. 1. No. 3 (1985): 34.

<sup>5</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 510.

<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Maljoo, “Tabaqeh Kārgar pas az Entekhābāt Dahom: Enzevā ya E'telāf” [The Working Class after the Elections: Isolation or Coalition], *Goftogu*, No. 55 (1389-2010): 7-16.

This dissertation makes two major contributions to the fields of Iranian Studies and Labor Studies in the Middle East. First, it traces the multiple constructions of workers and labor in Iran by combining a perspective from above and below and over a period of time, elements that have been covered only in a fragmented fashion in the literature to date. Building on primary and secondary sources in Persian and English, such as official speeches, newspapers and magazines, it also draws on interviews with workers, activists, scholars and legal experts that I collected during my study and research stays in Iran between the beginning of 2017 and the end of 2019. Second, it uncovers the impact of the processes of *precarization*,<sup>7</sup> not only from an economic or legal perspective, but also connecting them to trend towards deradicalization that eventually affected grassroots politics in Iran.

Arguing that workers expressed their agency and found their own conscious paths of resistance not only in the Iranian Revolution, this study states that the IRI managed to defuse the workers' potential for collective actions and for solidifying cross-class alliances in two moves, beyond repression. First, it appropriated and sanitized the concept of social justice. Second, by making workers precarious, it divided them.

### ***Iranian labor and workers in the academic debate***

In "Historiography, Class and Iranian Workers," Asef Bayat argued that "class is more than simply class position, the relationship of the agents to the means of production or their market capacity. Rather, it must be seen as a historically specific form of consciousness expressed, within the context of a (certain) class structure, in a complex of discursive fields and practices. In this perspective, class and class consciousness are viewed to be identical."<sup>8</sup> Bayat's analysis speaks to the necessity of contextualizing the role of workers within a broader field than merely the economic structure. Following this suggested track, this dissertation chronicles the genesis and evolution of the agency

---

<sup>7</sup> The process of making workers' situations precarious in terms of labor contracts, as well as living conditions.

<sup>8</sup> Asef Bayat, "Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers" in Zachary Lockman eds. *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 186.

of labor in post-revolutionary Iran through discursive mechanisms. It is rooted in an extensive body of literature that has been consulted during the preparation phase preceding fieldwork. The current section – structured according to the publication dates of the main works reviewed – will linger over the main trends in the pre-revolutionary historiography of Iranian labor, before giving a critical overview of the main studies on revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran. On the one hand, after the late 1990s the academic debate on labor in Iran had dampened down until recent developments. On the other hand, most of the existing literature focuses on the 1979 Revolution and its immediate aftermath, drawing attention mainly to structural factors – as this section will explore.

Writing in the mid-1990s and examining the lenses through which workers have been conceptualized by scholars, Bayat identified four historiographical currents. These approaches mainly analyzed the labor realm in the pre-revolutionary years and, in a few cases, in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Revolution. The first was the “Orientalist and Modernizationist” corpus, which largely overlooked workers as a distinct social group. Trapping them in crystallized categories, this scholarship did not acknowledge any agency for workers. Mainly focusing on elites and institutions, it portrayed religion as rigid, while casting workers under the broader – yet undefined – umbrella of the masses. Second were the “Marxist” historical accounts, which were influenced by Soviet scholarship. These texts suggested a narrow definition of the working class as structuralist and “politician,”<sup>9</sup> while workers’ importance lay in their capacity to organize into trade unions or parties. Thus, they overlooked workers’ experiences, as well as their own understanding of consciousness. The third current was the “Social Democratic historiography”, which overlapped workers with the labor movement. These studies provided a more nuanced approach to workers, by tracing the evolution of their collective actions and strikes. Nevertheless, they focused on formal networks, while overlooking the informal trajectories of resistance. Fourthly, the “Islamist historiography” developed under the Islamic Republic, which identified workers as part of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

downtrodden, the *mostaz'afin*, and called for social justice in terms of oppression. This trend conceptualized labor as a manifestation of God, thus as a religious duty, as chapter 2 and 4 of this dissertation will show.

Following the abovementioned division, it is worth discussing in more depth two fundamental books that Bayat included in the third category. One is *Labor Unions and Autocracy* in Iran by Habib Ladjevardi.<sup>10</sup> Published in 1985, it reconstructs the emergence and development of the organized labor movement in Iran from 1906 until the 1979 Revolution. The author details the Soviet influence on the Iranian Communists in the 1920s and the Tudeh Party's impact on workers' participation between 1940 and 1946. He questions two assumptions. The first one assumed that the lack of leaders hinders the formation of labor unions. The second argued that "lower classes can be swamped in any direction by any ideologue." Hence, Ladjevardi explores the difficulties of Iranian workers in organizing into independent labor unions and documents the major role of repression in paralyzing political participation. He argues that there is no room for the existence of unions in an autocratic regime, because they represent a threat. In his words, "they can shake its pillars."

Although he mentions acts of passive resistance, such as not reading certain newspapers, and gives an account of sporadic strikes, which occurred after the 1953 coup, Ladjevardi does not elaborate substantially on these elements. Moreover, the author bases his analysis on US and British archives, but does not provide first-hand accounts coming directly from unions or non-affiliated workers.

While dedicating the epilogue of the book to the Iranian Revolution and the role of workers in determining its fate, he contends that it is clear why workers went against the Shah, the West and Western ideas regarding democracy. He asserts, "the fact that they did not all take refuge in Communism is the question to ponder and not why they rebelled." Nevertheless, this question remains unanswered and workers seem faceless in his analysis.

---

<sup>10</sup> Habib Ladjevardi, *Labor Union and Autocracy in Iran*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985).



Another fundamental work that is worth reviewing here is Ervand Abrahamian's *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, published in 1982. It focusses on the period between the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and the 1979 Revolution.<sup>11</sup> Abrahamian dedicates the first two parts of his study to the political and economic transformations of Iranian society, meticulously tracing the political confrontations, and social and ethnic frictions as well as struggles for the control of the state. He documents the ebb of the industrial working class activities starting from the 1920s and its political connections to the Tudeh Party (the Communist Party) in the 1940s. Underpinning his arguments with an extensive corpus of data and primary sources, Abrahamian argues that – while the party was concerned with supporting workers and addressing social justice grievances – the bulk of its leadership and members belonged to the intelligentsia and the salaried middle class. As Abrahamian shows, it was through the *Central Council of Federated Trade Unions* that Tudeh leaders consolidated their relationship with workers, as they actively contributed to organizing a series of strikes, despite state repression and surveillance by the state agency SAVAK (the secret police).<sup>12</sup> When it comes to the Iranian Revolution, Abrahamian argues that the triggers were mainly structural factors. He contends that the Shah's rapid industrialization and economic modernization were not accompanied by political development, so that growing inequalities fueled class and ethnic conflicts. Discussing the 1978-1979 workers' strikes, Abrahamian follows the chronology of the events, providing almost no details on the organizational dynamics, discourses or the participants' political affiliation.

A book that did successfully cast light on workers' collective actions in 1978-1979, although placing them in the broader context of the Revolution, is Misagh Parsa's *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*.<sup>13</sup> Beyond a detailed account of the strikes occurring across the country between fall 1978 and winter 1979, the author concentrates on the dialectic between the state's economic

---

<sup>11</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> SAVAK is abbreviation of Sāzeman-e Ettelā'āt Va Amniyat-e Keshvar (Organisation of Intelligence and National Security).

<sup>13</sup> Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, (London and New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

policies and its relation with oil workers in particular. He investigates solidarity networks putting them in relation to capital accumulation. While explaining how strikes spread in the southern oil-producing region, Parsa argues that workers generated a situation of “dual sovereignty.” In particular, he refers to their refusal to negotiate with the Shah’s emissaries, as they preferred the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who would eventually lead the Revolution and establish the IRI, as their main interlocutor. Following this line of reasoning, he demonstrates how oil workers consciously engaged in a process of politicization of their grievances and actions. Although the author contends that religion played a minor role in mobilizing workers, the book remains quite vague and general on this point, failing to provide further elaboration.

In this respect, Asef Bayat’s pioneering Ph.D. research, published as a book in 1987 and titled *Workers and Revolution in Iran: A Third World Experience of Workers’ Control*, is a valuable step forward.<sup>14</sup> Based on extensive fieldwork and interviews with workers, the author not only follows the progress of the anti-Shah demonstrations and strikes but also delves into the workers’ councils that developed in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, tracing their formation, as well as identifying their strengths and weaknesses. According to Bayat, post-revolutionary history can be divided in three different phases. Following an initial period of “power vacuum” in the factories and the illusion of “control from below” (1978-1979), Iran experienced a second stage of management from above (1979-1981), followed by the imposition of Islamist control over labor under the IRI. Another strength of Bayat’s book is that the author, relying on workers’ words, explores the progression of workers’ class consciousness and awareness of their role. Considering a broad spectrum of factors, such as religion, ethnicity and region of origin, he suggests that class consciousness did not have sharp contours for Iranian workers. Therefore, Bayat’s focus concentrates on the notion of control in industry and in the processes of production, relying on a rigid structuralist framework. On the one hand, this element renders the book effective in specifying

---

<sup>14</sup> Asef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran. A Third World Experience of Workers’ Control*, (Zed Books: London and New York, 1987).

the historical elements that eventually determined workers' leadership for a short period. On the other hand, it overlooks workers' subjectivities in collective mobilizations and struggles. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, and until the early 2000s the academic debate on labor remained fervent. Bayat was not the only scholar looking at workers' political engagement and control in the factories during the 1979 Revolution and its immediate aftermath. Academics such as Valentine Moghaddam, Haideh Moghissi and Saeed Rahnema contributed to the debate with important articles on the role of workers, the ideological legacies of the Left in particular, the formation and consolidation of the secular workers' councils, as well as on the role played by repression in preventing the further development of labor unions.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, their focus remained limited to firstly, the labor movement and secondly, workers' agency as opposed to that of the state (initially the Shah's regime and then the IRI), overlooking discursive fields. Valentine Moghaddam is among the few who draws special attention to two aspects that had often been dismissed until that time. First, she emphasized local stories in the broader study of history, focusing on Tabriz industrial workers as historical subjects and exploring the maturation of their agency within and beyond their workplace.<sup>16</sup> Second, she began to shed light on the labor history of Iranian women, with an article that detailed their shifting role and participation over time and different modes of production.<sup>17</sup> However, Moghaddam's study leaves space for further research on post-revolutionary Iran, as her research did not include female labor under the IRI.

In the last twenty years, the historiography of labor in Iran has greatly benefitted from the significant boost provided by Touraj Atabaki. His work recovers and explores workers' history from below. Mainly focusing on Iran in the twentieth century up to the 1979 Revolution, he gave impetus to a large project investigating local histories, and rethinking the oil industry through the

---

<sup>15</sup> See Val Moghaddam, "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran," *New Left Review*, No. 166 (Nov-Dec 1987): 5-28; Saeed Rahnema, "Work Council in Iran: Illusion of Worker Control," *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (February 1992): 69-94; Haideh Moghissi and Saeed Rahnema. "The Working Class and the Islamic State in Iran." *Socialist Register* 37 (2001): 207-208.

<sup>16</sup> Val Moghaddam, "Industrial Development, Culture, and Working-Class Politics: A Case Study of Tabriz Industrial Workers in the Iranian Revolution," *International Sociology*, Vol.2, No.2 (1987): 151-175.

<sup>17</sup> Valentine Moghaddam, "Hidden from history? Women workers in modern Iran," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3-4 (2000): 377-401.

lens of the subaltern classes.<sup>18</sup> Kaveh Ehsani and Peyman Jafari have contributed to this endeavor, respectively producing new nuanced analyses on labor and a “conditional modernity” in Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>19</sup> and on oil workers’ grievances, subjectivities and politicization in the 1979 Revolution.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, focusing still on how the agency of labor in the Revolution has been studied and interpreted, it is essential to mention an article published in Persian by Ahmad Ashraf in 2010. He crucially intervened in the academic debate, demonstrating a unique grasp of the complexities of the working class. Detailing demands and sectors, Ashraf contests “the exaggeration” of those scholars who overestimated workers’ “political weight” in the success of the Revolution. In his article, he does not deny that oil workers, in particular, had political demands. However, he draws attention to the internal weaknesses and divisions among them. Ashraf argues that the major contribution of workers’ strikes lay in paralyzing the economic apparatus, and not in the further political contestation and development that – in his opinion – has been overestimated.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, this dissertation will add new nuances to the developments.

So far this overview of the historiography of labor in Iran has focused on studies that have explored the role of workers either before the 1979 Revolution or in its immediate aftermath. Only a few scholars have concentrated their research on labor under the Islamic Republic and published since the end of the 1990s or early 2000s. Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad in *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?* represent one of the few exceptions that will be reviewed in the

---

<sup>18</sup> The project *One Hundred Years of Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry* is based at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. See Touraj Atabaki and Marcel van der Linden, “Twentieth Century Iran: History from Below,” Introduction, *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (2003): 353-359; Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini, Kaveh Ehsani eds. *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Touraj Atabaki, “From Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker): Recruitment, Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, No. 84 (2013):159-175.

<sup>19</sup> 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*, Vo. 48, No. 3 (2003): 361-399.

<sup>20</sup> Jafari, “Reasons to Revolt: Iranian Oil Workers in the 1970s,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, 197-217; Peyman Jafari, “Fluid History: Oil Workers and the Iranian Revolution,” in *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*, eds. Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini and Kaveh Ehsani, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 69-98.

<sup>21</sup> Ahmad Ashraf, in “Kalbod-shekāfi Enqelāb: Naqsh-e Kārgarān-e San’ati dar Enqelāb-e Irān [Autopsy of the Revolution: The Role of Industrial Workers in the Iranian Revolution], *Goftogu*, No. 55 (2010): 55-123.

following paragraphs. They question whether the 1979 Revolution brought significant change in terms of social gap and alleviated economic inequalities in Iran.<sup>22</sup> Their analysis, published in 2006, delves into class developments and socio-economic achievements in post-revolutionary Iran under the categories of employment, gender division, inclusion in the labor force, and population growth. It represents the first comprehensive work in English to trace the origins of the transformations that occurred in the social structure under the IRI. The authors support their research with demographic data, figures and tables only up until 1996, mainly collected through the Statistical Center of Iran. They aim to demonstrate how the politics of the IRI impacted the size and conditions of the working class, failing to deliver on one of the key promises of the Revolution: social justice for the oppressed. Through a process of structural involution, triggered by socio-political frictions and worsened by the war with Iraq (1980-1988) – they argue – the Iranian labor realm underwent a period of *deproletarianization*. The major strength of the book lies in the description of the *aqāzādehgān*, the new rich who belong to neither the salaried middle-class nor the traditional *bazaaris*. Nonetheless, the data presented by Nomani and Behdad in the book can only explain the transformations that occurred during the 1980s and up until the first years of the so-called *sāzandegi* (reconstruction) era, after eight years of war. Moreover, numbers and figures alone fail to grasp the complexities of how the Islamic Republic consolidated its power, grounding it in social and welfare policies.

The work of Mohammad Maljoo, an economist based in Tehran, has sought to fill this gap. In an article published in 2017, Maljoo explores what he terms “the vicious circle” that has trapped workers’ families since the 1990s. In addition to an analysis of state policies vis-à-vis the weakening of workers’ bargaining power, the author successfully explains how certain legal and economic measures marginalized workers both as individuals and as parts of a collective.<sup>23</sup> In

---

<sup>22</sup> Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad in *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Mohammad Maljoo, “The Vicious Circle Trapping Iranian Workers since the 1990s,” *Revue Internationale des Études du Développement*, No. 229 (2017): 137-162. See also Mohammad Maljoo, “The Unmaking of the Iranian

another article, Maljoo explores the complexities concerning the authoritarian nature of the IRI versus labor, and the shortcomings of the labor movement in terms of class consciousness and organization. This approach allows us to understand the reasons, other than repression, that led workers to pursue their demands through fragmented actions.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, living and working in Tehran, Maljoo's observations come from a vantage point of how welfare policies and neoliberal measures took a more hybrid form in Iran than elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, the author has not produced a more detailed and comprehensive analysis in a larger work.

Another interesting study that attempts to connect neoliberal policies to the weakening of workers' bargaining power is Alireza Kheirollahi's *Kārgarān bi Tabāqeh: Tavān-e Chānezani Kārgarān dar Irān pas az Enqelāb* [Workers Without Class: Bargaining Power in Iran after the Revolution], published in 2019. Kheirollahi concentrates, as stated in the introduction, on the "political aspect of the concept of class." He traces how the IRI has implemented its labor policies in two main directions. On the one hand, it has hindered the formation of trade unions; on the other hand, it has secured de facto the interests of employers, depriving workers of their fundamental political and economic rights. The book meticulously details the Labor Law and its application over the years. However, while critically mentioning the shortcomings of the only official labor organization in Iran (the Workers' House) as an institution protecting workers' rights, it does not provide sufficient elements and sources to substantiate this argument. Kheirollahi's work shows how Iranian scholars living in Iran are advancing their critique as much as possible with the production of knowledge, even within the boundaries of the IRI. Thus, it contributes to breaking the Orientalist bias that tends to describe Iran purely as a repressive monolith of censorship.

---

Working Class since 1990s," in *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*, Peyman Vahabzadeh eds., 47-64.

<sup>24</sup> Mohammad Maljoo, "Worker Protest in the Age of Ahmadinejad," *MERIP*, No. 241, <https://www.merip.org/mer/mer241/worker-protest-age-ahmadinejad>. Accessed 25 July 2018;

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Mohammad Maljoo and Parviz Sedaghat, "Neoliberalism dar Iran: Afsaneh yā vāqey'at?" *Akhbār Rooz*, December 14, 2019, <https://www.akhbar-rooz.com/%d9%86%d8%a6%d9%88%d9%84%db%8c%d8%a8%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%84%db%8c%d8%b3%d9%85-%d8%af%d8%b1-%d8%a7%db%8c%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%86%d8%8c-%d8%a7%d9%81%d8%b3%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%87-%db%8c%d8%a7-%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%82%d8%b9-2/?fbclid=IwAR2kNIEGRc77X-L7SjuCZjTjT2J0CqK5Sr-4BesdXwAiZDvmkklyScibFnE>

The lines of repression, authoritarianism and dictatorship are at the core of another book, published in 2007: in *Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers and Threats of War*, reporters Malm and Esmailian from the Swedish weekly *Arbetaren* (The Worker) examined the shifts in labor activism.<sup>26</sup> Their book is not strictly academic and suffers from a prejudice against the IRI which is not well argued, depicting the regime as a tyrannical Islamic power that hijacked the Revolution from the masses and the Leftists. Nonetheless, particularly in the first part of the book, Malm and Esmailian provide valuable first-hand accounts of ordinary workers' living conditions and of the daily politics of struggle until the mid-2000s.

This dissertation seeks to widen the focus, as it represents the first comprehensive scholarly work on labor in post-revolutionary Iran viewed through the lens of discursive shifts and transformations in hegemonic relations.<sup>27</sup> First, it will provide more understanding of the labor discourses and dynamics that unfolded between 1979 and 2009, which have been under-researched. Second, drawing from the current body of literature that gives direction to this work on how and why workers matter, this dissertation will provide a more nuanced understanding of the agency, words and role of workers beyond the structural factors. This does not mean that it will avoid inconvenient questions, legal aspects or overlook actual repression. However, this dissertation finds significance in the investigation of hegemonic relations through the lens of discourses that are understood as profoundly interconnected to the structure and context.

---

<sup>26</sup> Andreas Malm and Shora Esmailian, *Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers and Threats of War*, (London: Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Other works on discursive transformations have mainly focused on specific periods or actors, such as Khomeini's religious narrative or Khatami's reformist rhetoric. See Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent. The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, (New York: New York University Press, 1993); Hamid Dabashi, "By What Authority: The Formation of Khomeini's Revolutionary Discourse, 1964-1977," *Social Compass* 36, No. 4 (1989): 511-538; Farzin Vahdat, "Post-Revolutionary Islamic Discourses on Modernity in Iran: Expansion and Contraction of Human Subjectivity," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Nov. 2003): 599-631; Forough Jahanbakhsh, "Religious and Political Discourse in Iran: Moving Toward Post-Fundamentalism," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Winter/Spring 2003): 243-254; Arash Davari, *Indeterminate Governmentality: Neoliberal Politics in Revolutionary Iran, 1968-1979*, PhD Dissertation, University of California Los Angeles; Mahdi Mohammad Nia, "Discourse and Identity in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 2012): 29-64; Mahmood Sariolghalam, "Iran in Search of Itself," *Current History*, December 2008: 425-431.

**Theoretical reflections: linking hegemony and discourse**

As Perry Anderson pointed out, it is “striking the creativity with which Gramsci’s ideas were put to work, in ways he could not foresee or himself misjudged.”<sup>28</sup> Because of their fragmented nature, as scattered reflections in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci’s concepts have been instrumentally used as mere quote-making machines. This dissertation – although it cannot fully avoid the risks arising from any interpretation of his work, which would inevitably be personal – will try to think with Gramsci and advance the critique following his line of reasoning. Specifically, it will attempt to grasp what his notions of cultural hegemony, language, spontaneity, collective awareness and civil society can teach us about political actions and discourses in Iran between 1979 and 2009. For this reason, each of the following chapters will take the reader on an exploratory journey into an analysis grounded in different aspects of Gramsci’s theoretical tools of understanding, and will explain in greater depth how each of these concepts is used.

Moreover, comprehending the cultural and political processes unfolding in Iran through the lens of hegemonic relations will require Fairclough’s insights on discourse analysis, which were inspired by Gramsci. According to Fairclough, discourse analysis is three-dimensional: “a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the dynamics of language and discourse in the context of this dissertation connect – as opposed to detach – labor politics and workers’ experiences to political and class struggle. How? They situate them within the transformative process of hegemonic relations, functioning through the internalization of specific norms that balance coercion and consent. This theoretical framework helps this analysis to focus on workers’ role and agency in relation to structural developments. It allows us to tighten the focus on the hybrid and ever-changing, yet to some degree stable, hegemonic relations. Following this trajectory of transformation, the notion of class is understood throughout this work as the fruit of a historical process. Hence, it represents a shifting concept that evolves in line with experiences,

---

<sup>28</sup> Perry Anderson, “The Heirs of Gramsci,” *New Left Review*, No. 100 (2016): 71-98.

<sup>29</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social change*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 3-4.



shared values and what Gramsci calls “common sense,” instead of being a static monolith that determines workers’ destiny. Indeed, Gramsci explicitly associates the study of politics with that of language. He considers the latter crucial to bring into focus hegemony, as the relationship between coercion and consent.<sup>30</sup> In particular, this connection lies in the understanding of language as a process of metaphor, a specific “conception of the world, “a living thing and a museum of fossils of life.”<sup>31</sup> In notebook 10, Gramsci writes that “the fact of language is in reality a multiplicity of facts more or less organically coherent and coordinated.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, political relations as expressions of hegemony are to be examined as combining both discursive practices and economic mechanisms. Cultural hegemony, which in a Gramscian understanding does not belong only to the elites, forges alliances and constructs facts. As this work will show in the chapters that follows, the process of creating a hegemonic apparatus in the Iranian labor realm entailed a variety of different attempts to reform knowledge. On the one hand, power, which for Gramsci resided in ideology, arose in relation to structural events; and, on the other hand, was manifested through discourse. In this sense, a rigid structural understanding that does not take into account language as a tool to understand politics misses a fundamental dimension: workers’ own words revealed how their consciousness as a group developed. Expressions of defiance were an integral part of the processes of solidarity-building that fostered collective actions. Furthermore, from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives, discourses of contention constructed the Other, against whom the struggle was carried out, and constituted the primary response that – at a later time – fostered action. Accordingly, actions and discursive practices cannot be analyzed separately, because they stimulated each other. Within hegemonic relations, both practices have their roots in common sense and spontaneity, and gradually develop into more organized actions which come from below. As Gramsci noted, “the unity between ‘spontaneity’ and ‘conscious leadership’ or ‘discipline’ is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes, insofar as this is mass politics and not merely an adventure by

---

<sup>30</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q11, §12, 323.

<sup>31</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q3, §76, 353-356.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Q10, §44, 1330-1332.

groups claiming to represent the masses.”<sup>33</sup> This is not to say, as will be elaborated in more depth later, that spontaneity can generate a full transformation of the status quo. In fact, devoid of ideological and material tools, as well as incapable of producing consciousness, spontaneity does not imply *per se* the premises for the further achievement of a goal. Nonetheless, it constitutes the first phase in the development of trajectories of collective actions and trajectories of resistance. To challenge a relation of domination through political action, thus to develop collective objectives, requires long-term goals, rather than relying on short-term individualism.<sup>34</sup> Gramsci referred to this fundamental step as “awareness of duration”, which is to be “concrete and not abstract.”<sup>35</sup> This step involves a complex mix of evolving (class) consciousness, as well as discursive fields and practices. It is precisely in this direction that a Gramscian framework, combined with Fairclough’s analytical tools, guides the present analysis towards the new explorations suggested in the section above by Bayat. Furthermore, this approach allows us to understand the complexities of a changing context, where discourses have exposed how aspects of reality were represented and exploited by different actors in different ways over time. Therefore, linguistic practices are taken here as belonging fully to the structure, as they cannot be separated from the context. Interestingly, in certain political conjunctions that will be explained later in this dissertation, discourses and premises of the ruling elites took unexpected directions and were appropriated by actors that reframed them from a bottom-up perspective. To better explore these dynamics and navigate the agency of the subjects, the study of Gramsci’s thought has been combined with Michel Foucault’s reflections on power relations, subjectivity and resistance.<sup>36</sup> This complex convergence will be made clearer in the second part of this dissertation. Drawing on Gramsci, Foucault wrote that power

---

<sup>33</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 198.

<sup>34</sup> See Enrico Augelli and Craig N. Murphy, “Consciousness, myth and collective action: Gramsci, Sorel and the ethical state,” in *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies*, ed. Stephen Gill and James H. Mittelman, (London, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25-38.

<sup>35</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 146-7.

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, “Subject and Power” in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. James Faubion, (New York: The New Press, 2000), 336-339.

is exercised through meanings and signs, which produce knowledge.<sup>37</sup> The Foucauldian conception of power as a productive relation, hence not exclusively linked to the state or government, helps tackle the continuities and circulation of discourses within the social body.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, it allows us to grasp the connections between the top-down and bottom-up dimensions. However, connecting Gramsci to Foucault, while contemplating the Iranian context, does not imply overlooking the breaking points presented by effective coercion and repression. On the one hand, broadening the lens to interpret power can make the analysis more inclusive, as Foucault suggested that “power comes from everywhere” in the social body.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, applying the dictum “where there is power, there is resistance,”<sup>40</sup> to the analysis of power relations under the IRI can be misleading, as changing conditions hinder the possibilities of resistance. Foucault argued: “We’re never trapped by power: it’s always possible to modify its hold, in determined conditions and following a precise strategy.”<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the process of subjectivation is strictly linked to that of agency. At this point, the reasoning again needs Gramsci’s help. Navigating the evolution of collective actions intended to be paths of resistance, he investigated the tactics employed to find room for *manœuvre*. He argued that, even when subjected to severe disciplinary pressure, people may be able to perform acts of contestation together.<sup>42</sup> The extent and limits of these acts of contestation will be investigated in the following chapters.

To explain why the role of workers changed between 1979 and 2009, the following analysis will consider a series of elements crucial to this change. Firstly, there are structural factors. These are connected to the economic transformations occurred throughout the 1980s, the post-war period, the reconstruction of the country and the neoliberal turn, the inflation and oil prices fluctuations. The

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See Michel Foucault, “Subject and Power” in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. James Faubion, (New York: The New Press, 2000), 336-339.

<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 210.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Foucault, “The History of Sexuality: An Interview,” *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1980): 13.

<sup>42</sup> Marcus Schulzke, “Power and Resistance: Linking Gramsci and Foucault” in David Kreps eds., *Gramsci and Foucault: A Reassessment*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 71.

structural factors also encompass the political shifts occurring in the domestic and the international arena. In this sense, the role of workers was impacted by the revolution, and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in a global context where Iran became more isolated. Secondly, and crucially to the main argument of this dissertation, there are the discursive shifts taking place within the broader framework of the abovementioned structural factors. This study focuses on when, how and why these discursive transformations took place. It concentrates on the interactions between the different actors that – over time – played a fundamental role in making these changes happen: the workers, the political establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Left, and the Green Movement protesters, the media.

### **Workers in context: discourses of social justice and the Left before the Revolution**

In order to understand and contextualize the discursive shifts and the transformations in hegemonic relations which started with the revolutionary momentum (1978-1979) and evolved throughout the post-revolutionary years until 2009, this section provides the reader with a historical overview of the labor movement before the Revolution, as well as of the contending narratives that centered around workers. Contextualizing the expansion of the Iranian workforce as well as workers' discourses in the pre-revolutionary period is fundamental to introducing this dissertation, for two main reasons. Firstly, the nature of the socio-economic changes that occurred in the Iranian structure during the decades before the Revolution can help the reader appreciate the true extent of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary shifts and transitions. Secondly, the discourses and counter-discourses around labor, which emerged during the Revolution, cannot be detached from the historical legacies of trade unions and the Left in particular. Workers' collective actions in Iran's pre-revolutionary history, as well as discourses of social justice for wage-earners, were strongly influenced by Leftist ideas, albeit intermittently. To understand how and why this process worked, it is necessary to take a step back and start this overview by looking at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the early 1900s, Iran's economy was mainly dominated by pre-industrial relationships, with agriculture as the main occupation of 90 percent of the workforce.<sup>43</sup> The country, during the late Qajar era, was fragmented both geographically and socially.<sup>44</sup> Only a fifth of its territory was urbanized.<sup>45</sup> It was in Tehran that the first Iranian trade union was created in 1906, through the endeavors of the Koucheiki print shop workers.<sup>46</sup> Four years later these workers managed to organize a labor strike but over the course of the 1910s their activities ceased. In the late 1910s, the 1917 Russian revolution ideas and the Communist model of labor movement began to circulate in Iran through those Iranian workers who had left the country for Russia at the beginning of the century.<sup>47</sup> During the 1920s, the rights of the *ranjbarān*, the toilers, were at the center of the debate of the Persian Communist Party. According to Ladjevardi, in 1922 8,000 workers in Tehran were represented by a trade union, the *Ettehadieh-omumieh- kârgarān-e Tehran*. Other groups were also active in other cities, such as Tabriz, Rasht, and Anzali. Between 1925 and 1941, the authoritarian regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi, who had seized power in 1925 following the Persian coup of 1921, severely repressed Communist ideas, while at the same time frustrating the clerical opposition with controversial acts to secularize the state.<sup>48</sup> During Reza Shah's era, which is remembered for its expansion of bureaucratic state apparatus and the first nationalist project of industrialization,<sup>49</sup> the state apparatus arrested union leaders and suppressed May Day initiatives. Nonetheless, in May 1929, 9,000 workers from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company started to strike in Abadan, demanding workers' rights in addition to pay increases. Wages were extremely low and working conditions

---

<sup>43</sup> Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 128; and Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 14. See also Julian Bharier, *Economic Development in Iran 1900-1970*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3-6.

<sup>44</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8-33.

<sup>45</sup> Bharier, *Economic Development in Iran 1900-1970*, 3-5.

<sup>46</sup> Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 1-3.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>48</sup> See Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 60-95 and Houchang E. Chehabi, "Staging the emperor's new clothes: dress codes and nation-building under Reza Shah," Vol. 26, No. 3-4 (1993): 209-233.

<sup>49</sup> See Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 66-91; and Stephanie Cronin, "Introduction" in *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921-194*, (Routledge/BIPS Persian Studies Series, 2003), 1-11.

exploitative, almost resembling slavery, as the British Office records registered.<sup>50</sup> As Cronin argued, the demonstrations revealed that a combination of discourse and strategies were in play.<sup>51</sup> On the one hand, the organizational pattern could be ascribed to the tradition of the Leftist unions. On the other hand, the tactics of local politics and popular protests merged in a particular discourse that blended justice, a sense of community and gendered demands.<sup>52</sup> Two years later, the Iranian Parliament (the *Majles*) approved a bill to curtail the activities of Communist groups. However, this did not stop workers' unrest, as scattered protests continued to erupt throughout the 1930s, in spite of state repression.<sup>53</sup> In the meantime, the proportion of the workforce employed in agriculture had decreased to 75 percent while the industrial sector was expanding, and by the late 1930s the majority of factories were state-owned.<sup>54</sup> The state had built hundreds of new industrial plants for the production of sugar, tea, rice, and cigarettes, and, in order to stimulate industrial activity, had pledged to guarantee low interest rates for those interested in opening manufacturing companies.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the private sector remained small and very limited.

After 1941, with the deposition of Reza Shah, a new era of fragile political openness allowed workers' organizations to flourish. This followed the invasion of Iran by British and Soviet troops in August 1941, and the tripartite Treaty of Alliance between Iran, Britain and the Soviet Union. Reza Shah was forced to abdicate. His son Mohammad Reza became the new Shah. Less authoritarian than his father, under Mohammad Reza Shah the state continued on its path towards industrialization, while supporting foreign capital and investment in Iran.

In the same year, 1941, the Tudeh Party was founded. Communist ideas started to permeate the Iranian political environment that until then had been imbued with nationalist rhetoric. First, the

---

<sup>50</sup> See John Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*, (Westview Press, 1993), 237-57.

<sup>51</sup> Stephanie Cronin, "Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (2010): 699-732, DOI: 10.1080/00263206.2010.504555.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, "Social Bases of Iranian Politics. The Tudeh Party 1941-1953," PhD dissertation, Columbia University 1969, 1-12.

<sup>54</sup> Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, 173.

<sup>55</sup> Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 66-91 and Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 146.

party infiltrated the Iranian intelligentsia, and then the factories, after years of clandestine activity. Although its founders belonged to the upper echelons of society, the party – named after the “masses” – campaigned for social justice and made important efforts to include workers. In Abrahamian’s words, “as conscientious Marxists their duty was to hasten the wheel of history. They did not waste any precious time.”<sup>56</sup> At the first congress of Tudeh, Iraj Eskandari declared that the party was “an organization of toilers.” Workers were considered a priority, as the party aimed to unite different segments of society against colonialism and exploitation.<sup>57</sup> During the 1940s, under the Communist umbrella, workers collectively established the Central Council of the Unified Trade Unions (*Showrā-ye Mottahedi Markazi*), that reached 400,000 members in 1946. In particular, those affiliated to the CCUTU were oil workers of Khuzestan, manufacturing workers of Tehran and Tabriz, textile workers of Isfahan, Shiraz and Yazd, and – in smaller numbers – miners and railways workers from the Gilan province areas.<sup>58</sup> The number of demonstrations and strikes increased: in 1945, 25 work stoppages occurred in different sectors. These activities, supported by the Tudeh Party, continued in 1946 with the oil workers’ series of strikes over wages and working conditions. Beginning in March at the port of Bandar Mansur, they culminated in the massacre of Abadan refinery workers. Involving more than 50,000 employees, it is remembered as the biggest strike in Iran’s history.<sup>59</sup> Workers were violently repressed after a confrontation between the crowd and the army that had tried to arrest labor leaders.<sup>60</sup> The Tudeh Party’s reformist attitude took on a more militant stance, while the newspaper *Zafar* – affiliated to the CCUTU – played a major role in mobilizing workers.<sup>61</sup> The Tudeh supported demands for the redistribution of wealth, job security, higher pay, and significantly contributed to the cause of social justice.<sup>62</sup> By then, the Communists

---

<sup>56</sup> Abrahamian, “Social Bases of Iranian Politics. The Tudeh Party 1941-1953,” 223-224.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 220-221.

<sup>58</sup> Fred Halliday, “Trade Unions and the Working Class’ Opposition,” *MERIP Reports*, No. 71 (1978): 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 22.

<sup>60</sup> See Touraj Atabaki, “Chronicles of a Calamitous Strike Foretold: Abadan, July 1946,” in Karl Heinz Roth eds. *On the Road to Global Labour History*, (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 93-128

<sup>61</sup> Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 51-53.

<sup>62</sup> Afshin Matin-Asgari, “The Left’s Contribution to Social Justice in Iran: A Brief Historical Overview” in Peyman Vahabzadeh eds., *Iran’s Struggles for Social Justice*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 262-263.

and trade unions had demonstrated their potential to challenge the state and, thus, were seen as a threat. The Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, through his prime minister Ahmad Qavam, began a campaign of delegitimization and suppression of the Tudeh Party. The newly organized Tudeh workers' federation, the Central United Council, was first hindered and then dissolved.<sup>63</sup> Workers' leaders were beaten and arrested. In 1949 the Tudeh Party and the CCUTU were banned. Nevertheless, Communist groups continued their clandestine activities. After the Mossadeq government came to power in 1951, strikes over economic grievances continued to erupt. The Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951-1953) pushed for the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry and domestic control over oil production, sale and revenues, which were de facto under the control of the British. He campaigned against the "capitulations" of Iran to the "great powers," gaining the consensus of the middle classes. He created the National Front (*Jebe'eh-e Melli*). As his role was considered a threat to foreign interests in Iran, the US and British organized a coup to overthrow Mossadeq and thereby strengthen the Shah's rule over the country.<sup>64</sup> The 1953 coup, along with the nationalization of oil, created the conditions for a political shift in terms of foreign influence in Iran, with the US interested – within the framework of the Cold War – in containing the Soviet-Communist influence over Iranian political affairs. As documented by Abrahamian, the roots of contemporary US-Iran relations are to be found in that event, which also marked a turning point in the Iranian state's attitudes towards Communist ideas. In fact, the Shah feared communist ideas taking hold in the country, perceiving them as a threat to his legitimacy and to the stability of the state. After the 1953 coup, along with the suppression of trade unions and the Communist party, the Shah attempted to implement a policy oriented towards co-opting workers. The regime, while removing any chance of independent activities and spreading secret police surveillance in the

---

<sup>63</sup> Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 132.

<sup>64</sup> Ali Rahnema, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). See also Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: New Press, 2012).



factories,<sup>65</sup> launched a program of de facto state-run trade unions. The 1959 Labor Law recognized this form of institution, leaving workers politically unorganized, as unions were forbidden to engage in any political activities, and stripped of the official right to strike.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, in some cases, SAVAK officials ran the unions, as Bayat documented.<sup>67</sup> As the official workers' paper *Rastakhiz-e Kārgarān* reported, these organizations undertook pro-regime demonstrations, and provided welfare services and benefits.<sup>68</sup> For almost fifteen years, the Shah's industrialization campaign – which greatly expanded the labor force beyond agriculture to more than 6 million, doubling the manufacturing and construction sector in particular –<sup>69</sup> was accompanied by a corporatist rhetoric that championed cooperation between employers and workers. Within this framework, the Shah promoted the Land Reform in 1963, with a dual goal: first, to reduce the role of the notables and their political weight; and second, to contain potential sources of discontent and revolt among the lower strata of the population.<sup>70</sup> However, the Land Reform failed to improve economic conditions in the countryside. In the meantime, the state supported direct foreign investments and encouraged imports, while oil revenues registered significant growth.<sup>71</sup>

Within this context of social inequalities, state-centered policies supported by the US and a perceived threat from Communist circles, there was no real scope for wage demands, social justice narratives and Leftist ideas to flourish or even circulate freely, without being monitored and repressed. According to Bayat, in 1973 only 22.3 percent of industrial workers belonged to a union.<sup>72</sup> It was towards the end of this period of state repression oriented towards workers' demobilization that Leftist guerilla groups emerged. They moved to armed struggle against the

---

<sup>65</sup> The SAVAK, the National Security Police was created in 1957 with the help of American and Israeli intelligence. See Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 213.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 204.

<sup>68</sup> Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, 203.

<sup>69</sup> See Halliday, 7 and Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions. A Comparative Analysis of Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 162-173.

<sup>70</sup> Ahmad Ashraf, "From the White Revolution to the Islamic Revolution," in *Iran after the Revolution: Crisis in an Islamic State*, eds. Saeed Rahnema and Sohrab Behdad (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 22.

<sup>71</sup> See Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo Modernism 1926-1979*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1981), 252.

<sup>72</sup> Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 62.

regime and the imperialist system, while spreading social justice discourses. In 1971 the Sāzman-e Cherikha-ye Fada'i-ye Khalq-e Iran (Organization of Iranian People's Fada'i Guerrillas) was established. One of this Marxist group's activists, Bizhan Jazani, called for violent resistance. In his view, the absence of armed struggle was one of the weaknesses of the Tudeh Party, along with a preference for unionism instead of militancy.<sup>73</sup> Already in the early 1970s, he acknowledged the Ayatollah Khomeini's popularity among the masses and his "chances for success."<sup>74</sup> The Sāzman-e Mojāhedīn-e Khalq-e Iran channelled their guerrilla warfare into an Islamist framework. Established in mid-1965, they largely studied Marxism and borrowed from it. Although, as Abrahamian pointed out, they never defined themselves as a socialist, Communist or Marxist group, they championed a classless society and the Pahlavi regime referred to them as a "Marxist conspiracy under the veil of Islam."<sup>75</sup> Their membership rapidly increased. According to Behrooz, the Muslim Mojāhedīn tried to approach Khomeini between 1970 and 1973, but the Ayatollah refused any support, as he was not interested in their strategies of armed struggle.<sup>76</sup> In 1975 the Marxist Mojāhedīn faction established, from the Muslim Mojāhedīn, the Peykār organization.<sup>77</sup> Both the Fedayān and the Marxist Mojāhedīn attempted to establish connections with workers and spread their ideas in the factories, but the conditions of surveillance and repression made it difficult to infiltrate these settings. This was not the only reason. As Val Moghaddam noted with regard to the Fedayān, on the one hand, they considered themselves a "working-class movement". But on the other hand, when the revolutionary movement was taking shape in 1978, they lacked strong links and a strong base among workers.<sup>78</sup> In analyzing Jazani's thought, Vahabzadeh argued that he effectively fostered the idea of working-class politics as emancipatory, and not as a demographic or

---

<sup>73</sup> Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*, (I. B. Tauris: London and New York, 1999), 57. See also Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 481-487.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 53

<sup>75</sup> See Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojāhedīn* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 1-40.

<sup>76</sup> Behrooz, *Rebel with a Cause*, 70.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 70-73.

<sup>78</sup> Val Moghaddam, "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran," *New Left Review*, 1988, Vol. 166, 1-28.

cultural factor per se.<sup>79</sup> Through revolutionary action, an alliance with the working-class was considered possible. As for the Marxist Mojāhedīn, most of its members' backgrounds were middle class, with many students in particular among them.<sup>80</sup> Their vision of Marxism – too close to radical Maoism according to the Fedayān's critics – had less appeal in the factories, although in their manifesto they envisaged the liberation of the “exploited working class.”<sup>81</sup> When they did succeed in gaining a foothold in factories, it was mostly through family connections or a relative who had access to forbidden books and managed to sneak some flyers in among workers.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, it should be added that many activists from both organizations were in jail in the summer of 1978, when workers began to organize a series of strikes. Furthermore, by then, the Tudeh Party – which had expelled its Maoist faction in 1964 and was seen as directly connected to the Soviet Union and its interests – had lost most of its connections among workers.

However, the abovementioned elements of weakness did not prevent Marxist ideas from influencing the Iranian popular consciousness – and workers' consciousness in particular – through ideals of anti-imperialism, social justice, and class struggle woven together with anti-Shah sentiment, in particular during the second half of the 1970s, when the industrial labor force had increased by 100 percent compared to the two previous decades.<sup>83</sup> In the meantime, as mentioned above, another crucial figure had started to galvanize the masses with similar sentiments, but from a religious perspective: Khomeini, who would eventually lead the revolutionaries.

This research arises directly from the encounter between Khomeini's and Leftist discourses, on the eve of the Revolution.

---

<sup>79</sup> Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Guerrilla Odyssey. Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fadai Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971–1979*, (Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, 2010), 97.

<sup>80</sup> Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: the Iranian Mojāhedīn*, 163–169.

<sup>81</sup> Behrooz, *Rebel with a Cause*, 72.

<sup>82</sup> Former Mojāhedīn and then Peykār activist, interview with the author, April 30, 2019.

<sup>83</sup> From 773,566 workers in 1956–1957 to 1,661,734 in 1976–1977. See *Iran Data Portal* – “Labor Force, Employment by Industry Sector (1956–2011)” <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/labor-force>. Accessed 29 February 2019.

**Chapters' synopsis**

This dissertation is organized into eight chapters. Chapter 1 is devoted entirely to the politics of fieldwork, because this work would never have been written as it is without my study and research stays in Iran, where Iranian workers, scholars, and activists provided me with invaluable input, contributions and food for thought. It discusses the methodological choices that guided this research, which were crucial to the development of this work, leading it to focus on the agency of labor. As the focus of this dissertation is not merely on top-down projections of power, and structural factors, but also on their interaction with bottom-up developments, agency and resistance, the theoretical reflections discussed above directly connect to the research methodology I have employed. Whilst structure and agency are two sides of the same coin, theory has given direction to my research and led to the use of discourse analysis and ethnographic fieldwork as the main methods employed. In fact, in addition to official speeches, statements, documents and legislation, this dissertation is founded on counter-discourses and personal experiences collected during an extensive period of research in Iran.

First, the chapter reflects on the challenges, opportunities and risks of researching labor in Iran and elaborates on the coping strategies I employed. Second, exposing the implications of my own positionality as a researcher, it shows how the processes of knowledge production have been constantly shared with the people involved in this project and why this inclusive methodology matters to the final outcome.

Chapter 2 provides the first actual step of the journey into discourses on labor. It takes the reader through the five months that lead to the Iranian Revolution through the interviews to foreign journalists and messages to Iranians that Khomeini gave between October 1978 and February 1979. Titled “Preparing for the ‘79 Revolution from Paris: Khomeini’s discourse on the Iranian Left and workers,” it contextualizes the processes by which Khomeini attempted, through discourse, to become the hegemonic voice of the anti-Shah movement. Drawing on Fairclough’s methods of discourse analysis, the chapter traces the daily evolution of Khomeini’s discursive strategies to

discredit and marginalize his potential competitors among the factories. It also explores the shared values, myths and beliefs that underpinned Khomeini's quest for an Iran "free from dictatorship." Thus, it explains how the *Emam* – as Iranians refer to Khomeini – managed to embed the concepts of social justice, class and anti-imperialism into his Islamic-populist framework in the crucial months before the downfall of the Shah.

Chapter 3 chronicles the 1979 Revolution from workers' perspectives. It is guided by the following questions: How did workers find their own paths of defiance through discourse? What can their statements and slogans tell us about the evolution of the mass protests and strikes that culminated in the February 1979 Revolution? How did they reflect and react to Khomeini's messages? The chapter, which builds on Gramsci's concepts of *spontaneous struggle* and *awareness of duration* and is based on interviews conducted in Iran, reflects on the mechanisms through which processes of solidarity-building unfold and collective actions were organized. Drawing on statements, rallying-cries and memories, it tracks how protests first *spontaneously* erupted and then strikes took shape with a certain degree of consciousness and *awareness of duration*.

Chapter 4 captures the transformations of labor politics following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Drawing on Fairclough's theories, it examines official May Day speeches (1979-2009), looking at the connections between language and new meanings attributed to the labor realm. From a top-down perspective, it tackles the different lenses used over time by the different IRI presidents in framing labor and addressing workers. The chapter reveals the continuities and ruptures in the discursive modalities used to co-opt, galvanize and assimilate workers under the state umbrella, while at the same time constantly defusing any potential class conflict. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the process of the absorption of Leftist symbols and key concepts functioned and explains why May Day's importance was gradually minimized in the IRI's dominant narrative.

Chapter 5 retraces the same years but following workers' trajectories of resistance. In addition to navigating how labor activism emerged in the Islamic Republic, it also illustrates how it managed to survive. Using the concepts of resistance, *collective awareness* and counter-conduct as its

theoretical basis, the chapter details the changing strategies that workers adopted over time and space to cope with the absence of trade unions, monitoring activities, and repression in the workplace. It demonstrates that workers' agency was never fully blocked by the IRI. However, it tests the limits imposed by the social context to discourage activism, beyond state coercive measures and policies.

Chapter 6 narrows its focus to the IRI's turn towards neoliberalism since the 1990s, with the so-called "reconstruction cabinet" elected after the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Drawing on the analysis of two newspapers close to the government (*Iran* and *Hamshahri*) over two presidential terms, it shows how the economic context and political needs were projected into discourses. In particular, it focuses on the new values that gradually permeated from the top to the bottom, circulating within the social body, and eventually alienating workers. It contends that, despite never calling its policies "neoliberal," the IRI institutionalized the thirst for production and success, constructing the myth of the winner and glamorizing competition.

Chapter 7, titled "Lagging behind: labor *precarization*, civil society and the *Khāneh-ye-kārgar*'s discourses under Khatami," discusses the transformations that occurred during the reformist era (1997-2005) in terms of labor rights and legislation. Navigating the connections and disconnections between the top-down and bottom-up dimensions, it seeks to answer the following questions: To what extent can top-down discourses stimulate hegemonic projects? At the same time, how far can counter-hegemonic plans develop? The chapter looks at labor through the Gramscian prism of civil society and the reformist quest for the rule of law, devoting special attention to the complex ways in which the only legal labor organization allowed, the Worker's House, played an ambiguous game, on the one hand, acting in workers' interests and, on the other, working against them.

Chapter 8 sheds light on the missing connections and breaking points within the bottom-up realm. It chronicles the 2009 Green Movement, combining the discourse analysis of slogans and interviews with former activists. In particular, it pays special attention to the relationship between Green activists and the members of the informal labor movement, as well as ordinary workers. Moreover,

the chapter investigates the reasons behind the failure of cross-class alliances in the streets. It argues that both structural and discursive factors hindered the processes of solidarity-building between workers and the Greens, although *precarization* mechanisms could have created the potential spaces to make claims for social justice.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Politics of Fieldwork: Research Challenges and Risks in Iran

M. Stella Morgana, “The Politics of Fieldwork: Research Challenges and Risks in Iran, a Personal Experience,” *Middle East Critique*, (conditionally accepted).



Tehran, 2018. (photo: author provided)

#### **Introduction**

One does not simply go to Iran: one enters the Islamic Republic. From Iran, one does not come back. One goes out. This chapter explores the series of doors that needed to be opened and the gates one has to pass through once a researcher decides to conduct field research in Iran. It aims to broaden the current understandings of the value of fieldwork. It argues that there is an urgent need to take individual political action and non-elite subjects into account if one is to gain a deep understanding of both power dynamics and the voices coming from below in Iran. This task cannot be accomplished without accurate research in the places and with the subjects involved, usually referred to as “the field” in the relevant academic literature. Studying hegemonic power relations,



just by scrutinizing the post-revolutionary state's enactments only, allows researchers to contribute to a particular scholarship whose efforts aim to decipher politics without directly engaging its main actors. Particularly, I refer to Samuel Huntington's comments on the disvalue of fieldwork – considered as such because it mainly deals with individual cases – and also to other skeptics whose criticism attacks field research as being supposedly “unsystematic.”<sup>84</sup> Conversely, in my experience, *being there* has played a crucial role for several reasons, that I will explain further later in this chapter: 1) To observe a country from within and understand how strategies to cope with the *status quo* develop. 2) To experience daily life, as well as social perceptions and transformations not as an external element looking down on a situation, but as “one of us.”<sup>85</sup> 3) To dismantle pre-set narratives that either undermine the people of Iran's agency versus a perceived omnipotent state or portray them as utterly disconnected from the context of the Islamic Republic.<sup>86</sup> 4) To critically include the main actors of the history with which my project was concerned, in the process of knowledge production. This is not to say that setting foot in a country has an intrinsic value *per se* or that the researcher's role is to give voice to locals, but precisely the opposite.

Since the very beginning of my Ph.D., Iran has represented to me – as a European, non-Iranian, non-dual national researcher – a series of doors to open. Exploring the ruptures and transformations in the modes of conceptualizing labor and the discontinuities of workers' social participation – which my research examines – would not have been possible without navigating how the processes of exclusion and inclusion operate in the Iranian context, both for foreigners and for Iranian citizens. The concept of gaining access took on diverse meanings for this research project. If the first step was obtaining a visa, passing the scrutiny procedures of the Islamic Republic gatekeepers at the airport was the second. However, once physically inside the country, numerous other gates

---

<sup>84</sup> Diane Kapiszewski, Lauren MacLean and Benjamin Read, *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 12.

<sup>85</sup> Shahnaz Najmabadi, “From ‘Alien’ to ‘One of Us’ and Back: Field Experiences in Iran,” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2004): 1.

<sup>86</sup> See Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and Welfare State in Iran*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 2-3.

presented themselves on my way toward understanding how power circulated within the Iranian social body, as well as how the narratives around labor have been constructed by several actors over the years, through which new forms of resistances have taken form. Indeed, in order to gain answers to a central question in my research – such as “why were workers fundamental to the 1979 Revolution, but were almost absent as a collective entity in the 2009 Green movement?” – I started following two main directions, which led to new questions arising. How has top-down state discourse on the value of workers transformed over time? How do Iranians belonging to different generations experience, perceive, confront and formulate their class positions and their precarious lives? In what ways have labor state policies impacted Iranians’ daily lives? Every dimension of the issues, as mentioned earlier, manifested themselves to me as new entry/exit corridors, supplementary gates to pass through, unwritten rules to face and apparently closed social networks to access.

In this sense, living in Iran and penetrating the blurred lines of uncertainty and informality, through which political discourse has permeated the social body, rendered the practice of fieldwork both critical and decisive. While continuously reconsidering and reinventing my methodological approaches, in order to adjust them to unexpected daily challenges and transformations in the political context I had been living in for periods of several months in a row (over five extended stays between the beginning of 2017 and the end of 2019), I had to deal with shifting red lines – *khat-e qermez* in Persian –<sup>87</sup> and sensitive topics. Barriers to knowledge, a pervasive sense of suspicion, a well-functioning security apparatus and arbitrariness on the one hand intertwined with the deep kindness, *openness* and foreigner-friendly approach displayed by ordinary Iranians. Furthermore, I had to reflect deeply on the impact that certain decisions concerning my methodology might have on establishing better connections with people living in Iran, without

---

<sup>87</sup> In Persian the expression *khat-e qermez*, red lines, began to permeate the reformist-leaning intellectual environments particularly under Mohammad Khatami’s presidency. A debate on limits to expression and free speech started in those years. See Mehrangiz Kar, *Crossing the Red Line: The Struggle for Human Rights in Iran* (Costa Mesa: Blind Owl Press, 2007).

approaching them as mere “native informants.” I also encountered other crucial questions: in Shahshani’s words, “For whom are we writing, what is the use of anthropological research, how does our work help local people?” and “How to make the findings more comprehensible to the outside world?”.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, what does field research in a context such as that in Iran – where spaces of freedom intersect with spaces of repression – really mean to me as a researcher and above all to locals? Which assumptions present in the literature I had previously explored proved to be fallacious or needed to be reformulated? What categories of analysis did I need to reconsider, in order not to speak on others’ behalf and not to erase social and historical specificities and multiplicities of the Iranian context? In this chapter, I will navigate the main ethical, logistical and security challenges I had to overcome while conducting research in Iran as well as the difficulties in conceptualizing ethnographic work.<sup>89</sup> I will also explain why methodological choices I made have been crucial and how living in a “closed” – otherwise called authoritarian – reality affected the processes of knowledge production, in which I consciously involved my respondents. Moreover, my results have been influenced by my positionality, by how I was perceived by the Iranians I interviewed and by the conditions under which I conducted research. For all the reasons mentioned above, as extensively discussed by Edward Said in the field of Middle Eastern Studies,<sup>90</sup> I realized that a pretentious “objective” scholarly approach would have been only a fictitious though illogical goal within a context where, as Gramsci reminds us, “everything is politics.”<sup>91</sup>

### **Navigating the conceptualization of field research in a “closed” context**

“In today’s Iran, as you could see so now that you have been living here for a while, there is a certain degree of free speech. The problems might arrive later. Only in that moment, you will

---

<sup>88</sup> Soheila Shahshahani, “Reflections on My Research in Iran, 1976–2006,” *Anthropology of the Middle East*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2006): 67.

<sup>89</sup> See Richard Tapper, “What is this thing called “ethnography”?”, *Iranian Studies*, Vol.31, No. 3-4 (1998): 389-398.

<sup>90</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 19.

<sup>91</sup> See Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 244.

understand that something you said is not acceptable anymore.”<sup>92</sup> What M. told me with a hint of bitter irony and a smile explains the realm of uncertainty that dominates most Iranians’ lives. As there are “no easy answers”<sup>93</sup> when engaging in field research, one of the first dilemmas that – as a researcher – I became aware of almost immediately was not the existence of red lines *per se*, nor the authoritarian peculiarity of the Islamic Republic. It was, on the one hand, the shifting character of these unwritten *dos and don’ts*, in other words their potential to rapidly change; and on the other hand, the arbitrariness of some elements of the state apparatus, which could take advantage of a claimed state of exception or emergency due to a perceived threat to national security and, therefore, transform religious principles into new effective rules.<sup>94</sup>

Exposure to the mechanisms with which locals’ reactions evolved along these lines has guided my observation. It also enhanced my understanding of continuities and discontinuities in the processes of Iranians’ daily negotiation with different sources of power. A former labor activist labeled this ability to survive the Islamic Republic’s written and unwritten rules as the “*dor zadan*” strategy, a sort of *dancing around the issue* state of mind, a systematic method to overcome the obstacle.<sup>95</sup>

If field research, as Carapico states, “combines extended direct observation of special events and everyday happenings (...) usually complemented by the collection of documents and by lots of casual conversations,”<sup>96</sup> it was particularly ordinary dialogues and frequently shared individual experiences that gave me the chance to continuously move my focus back and forth between *the broader* and *the particular* and try to – in Marnia Lazreg’s words – “explode the constraining power of categories.”<sup>97</sup> Studying breaking points, social clashes and transformations within a context where doors open and close and red lines move, such as in Iran, meant also exploring how

---

<sup>92</sup> Conversation with the author. Scholar. Tehran, March 2018.

<sup>93</sup> Sheila Carapico, “No Easy Answers: The Ethics of Field Research in the Arab World,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2006): 429-431.

<sup>94</sup> On the origin of this authority see Paola Rivetti, “Methodology Matters in Iran: Researching Social Movements in Authoritarian Context,” *Anthropology of the Middle East*, Vol. 12, No.1 (2017): 71.

<sup>95</sup> Conversation with the author, former activist during the Green Movement. Tehran, July 2017.

<sup>96</sup> Carapico, “No Easy Answers,” 429-431.

<sup>97</sup> See Marnia Lazreg, “Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1988): 81-107.

the authoritarian rule affects people's reaction and counteractions. This is a process of understanding, metabolizing and then re-negotiating firstly what the "barriers of knowledge"<sup>98</sup> in an authoritarian regime firstly are, and then why they shift.

"Barriers to knowledge" occur in several ways and can reveal a mixture of fear, control, moral education, open resistance to research or repression. Twelve years before I started to conduct my research on the ground, Mary Elaine Hegland and Erika Friedl wrote: "Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the 2004 Iranian Studies special issue makes clear, fieldworkers hoping to conduct research in Iran have encountered great resistance."<sup>99</sup> To some extent, I encountered the same resistance. Yet, contrary to Christian Bromberger's assertion that "in Iran, and elsewhere, people think poorly of a university professor going off on his or her own for a long period of time and living a modest life,"<sup>100</sup> I found my way of life in Iran to be crucial in order to be accepted, respected and somehow recognized as "one of us."

Once in Iran, I realized that I needed to adapt and combine specific methodological tools I had studied, such as participant observation or oral history interviews, with the reality I was living in. This phase of adjustment entailed days of reflections on trust-building and several ethical discomforts. Why? For four main reasons. 1) There is a problem of definition: what is an authoritarian field? The conception of Iran as monolithic authoritarian state, thus a fully backward context in binary opposition to a democratic reality, does not fit the case. Koch's conception of "closed contexts" as "settings that are predominantly defined by the prevalence of such acts of closure" is a better expression of the inner and peculiar contradictions that exist in the Islamic Republic, particularly for the above-mentioned "certain degree of free speech" that is interwoven with arbitrary acts of coercion.<sup>101</sup> 2) A gap in the academic debate: the majority of sources on

---

<sup>98</sup> David Art, "Archivists and Adventurers: Research Strategies for Authoritarian Regimes of the Past and Present," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (2014): 979.

<sup>99</sup> Mary Elaine Hegland and Erika Friedl, "Methods Applied: Political Transformation and Recent Ethnographic Fieldwork in Iran," *Anthropology of the Middle East*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2006): 2.

<sup>100</sup> See Christian Bromberger, "On Anthropology and Ethnography of and in Iran," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 120, No. 1 (2018): 147-150.

<sup>101</sup> Natalie Koch, "Field Methods in "Closed Contexts": Undertaking Research in Authoritarian States and Places," *Area*, Vol. 45, No. 4, (2013): 390.

qualitative research methods do not concentrate on the so-called “authoritarian” spaces and particularly the Middle East.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, most of the existing literature on field research either seems to overlook difficulties of access and security or exaggerates them, leaving scholars undertaking political research to what Morgenbesser defined as “one size fits all recommendations”.<sup>103</sup> 3) University protocols often require signed consent or recorded interviews, but this can raise security concerns to the people involved in the research, as explored later in this chapter. 4) A “gray area” created by unwritten rules and a diversity of moral values. I decided to concentrate particularly on those gray areas, and give myself time just to observe, avoiding applying Western protocols that require you to obtain permission, authorizations or schedule interviews too quickly, bringing with them a two-fold risk. First, the raising of suspicion among the authorities, which – as Tapper noted – do not want “to expose undesirable features such as popular anti-government feeling.”<sup>104</sup> Second, making my research’s protagonists uncomfortable and reproducing dynamics of exploitation for my own goals. As a worker who participated in the revolution, whom I met several times in 2019, told me on our first meeting: “Hurry is Devil’s work. It can mislead you, particularly in Iran.”

By deciding to explore the nature of closure, I began to examine official and unofficial mechanisms, discourses and practices of control and coercion. While experiencing everyday life in a country where a peculiar “culture of fear” permeates activism,<sup>105</sup> I understood that I was actively participating in the process constructing this fear. In fact, as a foreign researcher willing to study labor issues and interview workers on their experiences and memories relating to the 1979 revolution and the 2009 Green Movement, unless I was aware of unwritten rules and everyday practices, I could put many people in danger. Therefore, my own perception of these open/closed

---

<sup>102</sup> Janine A. Clark, “Field research methods in the Middle East,” *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2006): 417.

<sup>103</sup> Lee Morgenbesser, “Survive and Thrive: Field Research in Authoritarian Southeast Asia,” *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2018): 485-403.

<sup>104</sup> Richard Tapper, “Personal Reflections on Anthropology of and in Iran,” in *Conceptualizing Iranian Anthropology. Past and Present Perspectives* eds. Shahnaz Najmabadi, (New York, Berghahn Books, 2009), 225-240.

<sup>105</sup> Koch, “Field Methods in “Closed Contexts”: 391.

spaces effectively influenced the modalities of the conceptualization of my fieldwork practices, as well as the way in which I – together with activists and ordinary respondents – re-framed my project. This meant that I adapted my research to the context along the following lines. First, as participant observation in workplaces was too risky and access to factories not allowed, I extensively used national archives (both the National Library and the Library of the Parliament) to track top-down discourses on labor through newspapers, documents, and letters. I approached these institutions only after obtaining a letter of presentation from the Tehran-based university to which I was affiliated. Second, through a process of snowballing, I slowly built a network of relations involving scholars, legal experts, ordinary workers and former, but not current, activists. Third, I overcame the obstacle of what Shahbazi refers to as “reluctant bureaucrats”<sup>106</sup> and their filibustering by seeking – where possible – official support from my Tehran-based university through reference letters, clarifying my research goals according to the shifting context and patiently re-submitting my requests as required.

**What are the challenges? It is a matter of questions**

How do you build intimate interactions with people on the ground without getting negatively influenced by the obsession with suspicion and control? How do you develop a non-elite and expat-oriented network of relations? How can a researcher’s positionality and identity shape findings and results? To what extent do Persian language skills help a non-Iranian scholar? Is Iran exceptional? Asking the wrong questions may lead to fallacious answers. Thus, while passing through the different phases of my Ph.D. process, particularly from research design to field research, the main challenge I was faced with was articulating doubts, formulating questions, and defining obstacles. Observing the Iranian context both through a Gramscian and a Foucauldian lens, it can be argued that the Islamic Republic remained in power within a complex mechanism where circulating power

---

<sup>106</sup> Mohammad Shahbazi, “Past Experiences and Future Perspectives of an Indigenous Anthropologist on Anthropological Work in Iran,” in *Conceptualizing Iranian Anthropology: Past and Present Perspectives*, ed. by Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 143-156.

relations found their legitimacy through forms of cultural hegemony as well as the creation of shared “rituals of truth.”<sup>107</sup> However, this is not to deny that power also relies on control and repression. Therefore, what element can draw together all the *positive*<sup>108</sup> and *negative* understandings of power within the Iranian context? This question proved to be crucial to my research. At the core of the answer there is the atmosphere of secrecy, which feeds the nature of the closure of the Islamic Republic, since 1) it allows the authorities to draw advantage from the opacity of what is permitted or forbidden; 2) it creates space for informality, which is fundamental for activism to find new ways of expression and survive; 3) by relying on *indirectness*, it shows the arbitrary aspect of power. In fact, as red lines move, restrictions are vague and punishments can be applied with no apparent criteria. Thus, and above all, asking the wrong questions may lead to dangerous consequences.

Therefore, assessing power dynamics in Iran means to start engaging in a process of comprehending and demystifying of modes of survival and daily tools of absorption/counter-reaction to this atmosphere of secrecy. Following this line of reasoning, Iran is not exceptional in the Middle East. However, undertaking research in Iran required a constant re-modulation of my approach, in terms of: first, deconstructing Orientalist biases and the tendency to analyze everything connected to Iran through the prism of Islam, as Adelkhah pointed out;<sup>109</sup> second, dismantling of stereotypical and binary views conveyed by both Western and Iranian media; third, avoiding the *hit and run* interview strategy, which stigmatizes respondents’ ideas, without truly breaking down the wall of fear and secrecy that often does not immediately allow people to feel free to speak. Moreover, even though a foreign researcher speaking Persian might create suspicion among the authorities – who are constantly scrutinizing the country for “foreigner enemies” or spies – language truly mattered to

---

<sup>107</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1975) 210.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. See also Michel Foucault, “Politics and the study of discourse” in *The Foucault Effect. Study in Governmentality*, 56-57.

<sup>109</sup> Fariba Adelkhah, “Islamophobia and Malaise in Anthropology,” in *Conceptualizing Iranian Anthropology. Past and Present Perspectives* eds. Shahnaz Najmabadi, (New York, Berghahn Books, 2009), 207-224.



my experience. Indeed, improving my understanding of what was going on around me and interacting in Persian opened many doors to me as a researcher – both in terms of access to a non-elite network and the trust-building process. In this sense, language activated another mechanism: the inclusion of local subjects in the process of re-formulating questions and re-negotiating meanings, woven together with my positionality.<sup>110</sup> In particular, I repeatedly shared and discussed my understanding and interpretation of historical and political developments with the trusted group of people I involved in my research, stimulating a process of collective knowledge production.

**Dealing with the “climate of suspicion,” obstacles and failures in the field**

Before starting my Ph.D., I often encountered brilliant academic books on Iran, showing interesting data and conclusions. However, there was little information on how scholars accessed the country and the analyzed materials and on the methodological decisions they had made to deal with the restrictions of the Iranian state apparatus. There was even less available on the practical and daily failures that effectively change the direction and the results of an in-depth investigation under the Islamic Republic. Here I particularly refer to the literature on labor. In fact, many Iranian experts writing in English cannot access the country or are afraid to travel to Iran because of the high risk of dual national researchers being arrested on charges of “spying.” Those scholars who live in Iran and write in Persian avoid publicly sharing their experiences of collecting data or addressing their methodology related to personal interviews.

Therefore, before starting my research in Iran, some of my concerns and questions remained unanswered. Moreover, I soon realized that directly asking to consult government documents or archives in Iran can raise suspicion or, at best, they might be inaccessible. Furthermore, the most relevant sources might not even have been recorded or printed and stored in a public archive. Interviewing officials could raise concerns within the security apparatus, being labeled as a journalistic activity and therefore forbidden. Surveys by local universities might be incomplete.

---

<sup>110</sup> See also Carapico. “No Easy Answers,” 429-431.

Participant observation, as previously mentioned, presents several difficulties, particularly when it comes to labor: access to factories is off-limits to external elements, official labor unionists have strong connections to the state apparatus and might identify a foreigner participating in meetings or asking formal questions as a potential spy. Contacting activists could have created significant problems, since the phone calls, messages and emails of people carrying out activities challenging the regime and the status quo are usually under surveillance. On the one hand, as a researcher, I could have risked arrest, facing an accusation of “conspiring against national security.” On the other hand, it might be dangerous for an Iranian citizen to be in contact with a foreigner interested in sensitive topics as it might be considered by the regime as an act of spying against the Islamic Republic.

Nevertheless, these experiences are not unique or peculiar to Iran. For instance, in a study conducted on field research methods in the Middle East, Clarks writes: “When questioned as to the greatest difficulties encountered in the field, respondents overwhelmingly reported issues that directly or indirectly were a result of the authoritarian political climate. While researchers’ experiences vary widely, 45% of the respondents noted what one researcher broadly speaking called “the looming smell of the *mukhabarat*”, internal security or secret police.”<sup>111</sup> Secret services and the so-called Ministry of Information have widespread access to laptops, phones and tablets in the country. Thinking that one can evade control – along with acting like a spy without being a spy, or hiding the main topic of one’s research – is silly, naive, and extremely dangerous. I always tried not to lie and to make my research goals transparent, by preferring to keep the balance between telling the truth and not adding potentially alarming or unnecessary detail to the descriptions of my work. In this sense, learning the language became truly relevant: I started paying attention to how locals refer to certain topics, which words they do or do not use, and what kinds of expressions they

---

<sup>111</sup> Clark, “Field research methods in the Middle East”: 417-424.

phrase to convey sensitive messages. This might constitute a slippery ground, in particular for Iranians or dual nationals, who can become an easier target for the security apparatus. Furthermore, intelligence services monitor the activities of foreigners in the country. Gatekeepers and police officers' behavior, as well as visa restrictions, may change and transform over time and according to the national and international situation. The climate of general suspicion always creates an atmosphere in which most individuals express mistrust or nervousness, because of their awareness of the potential political consequences they are aware of. What is a sensitive topic can vary according to the group of people under consideration (in terms of age, education, social status), the level of trust and the place where a specific conversation takes place (whether in a public or private space). The atmosphere of suspicion as mentioned above can appear – at a first sight – to be completely in contrast with the attitude and openness of ordinary people towards foreigners and researchers. However, a closer look and analysis reveal that these two elements may cohabitate at a bottom-up level in exactly the same way as in the functioning mechanisms of the state apparatus. These reflections are not meant to conclude that fieldwork in Iran is impossible or that a researcher should operate in utter secrecy and lie, thus acting as a spy, which would – as already underlined – be very risky. The goal is exactly the opposite. From what I learned from my research, fieldwork in the Islamic Republic is very much needed and is feasible. It is possible under specific conditions, such as extensive knowledge of the context, honesty, mutual exchange with people, and awareness of the red lines, sensitive issues and strategies for navigating informal *spatialities*. Nevertheless, this cannot guarantee immunity from the risk of getting trapped by the security apparatus' arbitrary responses, in particular for Iranians or dual nationality researchers. Taking the authoritarian nature of the Islamic Republic into account, a relatively safe space for research can be found. All the above-mentioned conditions are only possible with long term exposure and contact with the country, which implies what Suzuki terms “reciprocity”<sup>112</sup> with locals. Building relationships based

---

<sup>112</sup> Yuko Suzuki, “Negotiations, Concessions, and Adaptations during Fieldwork in a Tribal Society,” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2006): 632.

on trust takes time and entails an emotional involvement. Non-elite and non-official networks can emerge after a long series of casual conversations and, in my own experience, connected me to respondents I perceived as being completely willing to disclose to me their own thoughts, wishes and political grievances. I also found these steps to be crucial to me also in terms of personal safety. Establishing a network of trusted locals goes along with a process of understanding the unwritten rules for navigating an informal context. This element protected me as a researcher to some extent. Due to my modest way of living and the length of my stays, various participants involved in my research noted that I was “perceived” as being somehow local, “one of us,” more than the stereotypical researcher looking for interlocutors, or “informants.”<sup>113</sup> Yet, these impressions immediately gave rise to an ethical dilemma. I had to re-think my methodological approach again, as I could have compromised someone else’s life for my personal safety. As will be discussed further, being a foreigner – particularly a European, with an Italian passport – put me in a privileged position and the authorities could have treated me differently compared to an Iranian citizen. Moreover, another perceived obstacle according to some narratives on Iran, which turned out to be the opposite, is religion. Apart from veiling myself in public, religious restrictions did not represent a central problem to my research. The fundamental issue, as already mentioned, was the gray area in which authority can always decide on the correct interpretation of a rule, particularly using religion as their reference point. As underlined by Rivetti, “while such moral and behavioral codes are present in every country, what is specific to Iran is the fact that they are pivoted on the state agents’ right to interpret the religious principles and transform them into laws. The origin of this authority, which, however, is contested, goes back to two events. The first is the Islamic revolution, which codified and licensed the state authorities’ broad control over the population. The other event that consolidated this power is the Iran–Iraq war, which allowed a state of exception and strengthened the regime’s authority.”<sup>114</sup> During my fieldwork and since my very first contact with

---

<sup>113</sup> Najmabadi, “From ‘Alien’ to ‘One of Us’ and Back,” 1.

<sup>114</sup> Rivetti, “Methodology Matters,” 73.

Iran,<sup>115</sup> I have been regaled with countless stories about foreign researchers, diplomats and journalists who were kicked out of the country on the pretext of an alleged moral or religious violation, after falling into traps orchestrated by the authorities.

**Situating knowledge production: reflections on positionality and its influence**

Observing, never expressing opinions, being silent, neutral, objective: is this the perfect description of a researcher? Is it possible to be invisible while effectively engaging in a research activity on the ground? I have constantly questioned myself on this matter both before and during my fieldwork. Nevertheless, according to my direct experience in Iran, every choice I made has been a *political act* in a Gramscian sense. This is not to say that I openly took sides while conducting my research or publicly expressed my political views and asked my respondents aggressive questions. In fact, the objective of this section is to reflect on the act of recognizing where, as an observer, I was situated and how I operated with transparency instead of aiming at the impossible goal of being impartial, utterly fair, detached from the reality I was living in, and dispassionate. What did being a European white woman, who was not married, and who was perceived – as I was told several times by both men and women – as “looking Iranian” mean for my project?<sup>116</sup> How did age, sex, nationality, family origin and educational background influence my approach to locals and their perceptions of my presence?<sup>117</sup> What role did I assume in social interactions?

Before leaving for my second extended trip to Iran as a doctoral researcher, at the beginning of summer 2017, I came across the following words from Najmabadi: “Even for a native anthropologist, fieldwork does not necessarily imply being “at home” in the field.”<sup>118</sup> For months, I had been reflecting on this frustrating feeling of being a stranger, of being considered an outsider

---

<sup>115</sup> The first time I traveled to Iran was in 2007 after my BA in Islamic Studies. On that occasion, I lived in Tehran for almost four months continuously, working as an intern for the Italian embassy. After that experience and before starting my Ph.D research., I went back to the country many times, on both tourist and education visas, from a minimum of 20 days to a maximum of two months.

<sup>116</sup> See Julie Cupples, “The Field as a Landscape of Desire: Sex and Sexuality in Geographical Fieldwork,” *Area*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2002): 382-390.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Najmabadi, “From Alien to ‘One of Us’”, 1.

who “comes to study us for his/her own success and then leave,”<sup>119</sup> as an activist told me in late 2016 while I was gathering contacts and information as a pre-fieldwork activity. At the height of spring 2018, those thoughts evaporated once I realized that I had begun to be accepted as part of the local community, in other words as one who “feels the same pain”,<sup>120</sup> lives there, and “does not remain in the English-speaking bubble of north Tehran.”<sup>121</sup> From that moment onwards, my fundamental concern was how my fieldwork could affect my perceptions and my identity, and therefore my findings and conclusions. One of the dilemmas that persisted throughout my days in Iran was: “getting too close or remaining marginal”?<sup>122</sup> The problem of trying to find a balance between personal empathy and academic rigor was annulled once I began to directly involve in my reflections a small trusted network I had built, as my role was part of the complex and multidimensional set of relations I was studying.

Another deadlock almost impossible to avoid in Iran is thinking beyond categories. To what extent should a researcher accept the situation and therefore deal with authorities and officials? A consequent question immediately arises: who is truly outside of the system? How do you navigate the blurred lines and informal consent or denial to continue researching? Without making choices and taking decisions – thus by carrying on pretending to be neutral – no answers can be found. A first crucial step is observation, particularly as understood by Hegland and Friedl: “Observation by itself, without the aspiration to participate fully in the activities one wants to observe, is more easily done and used extensively. It opens the problem of the influence of the observer on the observed and of interpretation and of representation by the observer, but this self-reflexive stance seems to be more of a theoretical than a methodological consideration.”<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, observation is not enough. Building relations of trust and seeing the same people several times, along with engaging in long term friendships, added a valuable significance to my research. Deciding not to embrace what

---

<sup>119</sup> Conversation with the author. Former activist. Social media, November 2016.

<sup>120</sup> Conversation with the author. Artist and former Green Movement supporter. Tehran, March 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Conversation with the author. Informal labor activist, unemployed. Tehran, March 2018.

<sup>122</sup> Amanda Coffey, *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*, (London: Sage, 1999), 1-3.

<sup>123</sup> Hegland and Friedl, “Methods Applied Political Transformation and Recent Ethnographic Fieldwork in Iran,” 9-10.

Carapico defines as “the fly-on-the-wall model of the neutral, dispassionate recorder of apolitical information whose intent is to leave no impression on the subject of study”<sup>124</sup> proved to be rewarding both in terms of academic results and security concerns. On the one hand, I gained the trust of the participants involved in my research, by always being fully sincere about my research goals, and by engaging in open discussions if needed. On the other hand, I felt somehow protected by a multi-layered network of people close to activists, who were well aware of the shifting *dos and don'ts* in dealing with the security apparatus. Even though I never asked for any specific support, because I did not want to get anyone into trouble, I carefully listened to how (particularly informal) activists talked about sensitive topics and how they perceived the shifting red lines. I began to reflect on – and consequently to act on – the symbolic repercussions of my mundane and public decisions and behaviors. Being aware that in Iran the word “research” can be perceived as awkward and risky, in some circumstances and when it was not necessary to do so, I avoided presenting myself as a researcher. Conversely, I preferred more comfortable definitions, such as PhD candidate, junior scholar or a general academic. I tried to be open to questions about my university background, presenting my study as a historical perspective on labor, avoiding political terms in my queries and phrases that would evoke authoritarianism and negative perceptions of the regime. Aware that my phone and my email might have been put under surveillance, I avoided any contact with current activists and I rarely brought my smartphone during potentially sensitive meetings, while simultaneously continuing to use my social accounts, sharing details of a regular life in Tehran, not worthy of special attention. Hence, I found Carapico’s statement about the Arab world absolutely fitted the Iranian context: “The more theoretical and academic the inquiry, the more it may seem like a devious cover story (...) security agents, secret police, and ordinary snitches may indeed track a foreigner’s moves and conversations.”<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>124</sup> Carapico, “No Easy Answers,” 429-431.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, I tried not to exploit my privileged status and began to experience everyday life as an ordinary Iranian doctoral student does. This strategy was meant to first navigate and then dismantle the image of me being *the foreigner* against locals, thus avoiding the dichotomy of *the researcher* collecting data, exploiting other people's experiences, looking at and judging them from a superior position. Since it would have been impossible to erase or neglect my positionality, I had to constantly remind myself of a critical element connected to my passport: I could always leave the country, unlike many of my Iranian contacts. I chose to both observe and participate, avoiding fierce confrontations with people's points of view. Yet, I decided to let the conversation develop along the lines of critical analysis. Hence, after breaking through the barrier of the Iranian *ta'arof*,<sup>126</sup> respondents' biases started to emerge and began challenge my role. Getting through what the participants involved in my research truly thought was not an easy task, since I always had to keep in mind how *the particular* experience was related to *the broader* picture, such as that of people used to coping with a regime over the last thirty-nine years. Furthermore, several recurrent phrases used to define historical facts and actors emerged, mixed with a certain degree of desire to perform toward a foreigner researcher, often fitting a stereotypical and monolithic idea of the West. I interpreted these developments as a not-always conscious desire to seize the chance to talk to someone who lives abroad, in order to convey different and more complex messages about the country, beyond the Islamic Republic propaganda on the one hand, and the stereotypical portrayal of Iranians transmitted by Western mainstream media on the other. Particularly among informal young activists, the role of a researcher is conceived of as more than a lone voice or a mouthpiece, but as a potential supporter and assistant that can help or convey news for the general cause of freedom.

Gender represents another aspect to be explored while reflecting on positionality. How is it relevant while undertaking fieldwork in Iran? – I often asked myself.<sup>127</sup> Although the law of the Islamic

---

<sup>126</sup> The Persian complex social etiquette.

<sup>127</sup> Goli M. Rezai-Rashti, "Conducting Field Research On Gender Relations in a Gender Repressive State: a Case Study of Gender Research in Iran, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2013): 489-502.



Republic is “unbalanced” against women and veiling is compulsory,<sup>128</sup> for a female researcher, Iranian society is mostly welcoming. However, in a country where most of the spaces are *genderized*, being a woman matters and can make a difference. First, in my experience, both gatekeepers and most of my contacts, considered me – as a woman – to be less threatening than a man. Second, I could easily access most of the family environments and women-only meetings. Third, I had no direct way of approaching the private world of male workers, except through the filter of women or with workers whose age and interests were closer to mine. Therefore, the relevant point is that the problematization of ethical issues, particularly connected to the production of knowledge, had to be understood through my own positionality and my flexibility while traversing a research process that in the end revealed itself to be strongly *genderized*. I had to confront and manage how people reproduced this *genderization* in everyday life. Carapico calls these gender-charged issues as “dissonant complications of sexual mores,” which involve day-to-day life and choices, as pointed out by Goli M. Rezai-Rashti.<sup>129</sup> Taking careful notes and systematically scrutinizing my findings and methods, even asking for critical feedback from both within and outside Iran, truly helped me navigate these issues. Hence, methodology not only mattered to my project in terms of structure: it utterly influenced my findings and overall role as a scholar. As Rashti noted, “Western methodology and ethical concerns do not work in the same manner within the contours of a repressive state,” because “the repressive state pays little attention to ethics (repression itself is unethical).”<sup>130</sup> Conversely, adopting a more inclusive and collaborative approach with subjects in the field represented the only option I found possible to deal with ethical concerns and positionality, without speaking on others’ behalf.

---

<sup>128</sup> See Homa Hoodfar and Fatemeh Sadeghi, “Against All Odds: The Women’s Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Development*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (2009): 215–223.

<sup>129</sup> Rashti, “Conducting Field Research On Gender Relations in a Gender Repressive State,” 497–498.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

**Subjectivities and people's agency at the center**

A Foucauldian approach offers a valuable path to trek when focusing on tackling ruptures and tracing socio-historical transformations. As Michel Foucault suggested, instead of presupposing a set of individuals “naturally endowed”<sup>131</sup>, it is better to focus on “the power relation itself, with the actual or effective relation of domination (...) We should not, therefore, be asking how, why, and by what right they can agree to be subjugated, but showing how actual relations of subjugation manufacture subject.”<sup>132</sup> Hence, instead of “taking for granted the existence of a body called the governed”<sup>133</sup> – particularly in a “closed” context such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose dictum has endured since 1979 – this research’s stance challenges a top-down only formulation of power and subjectivity. It involves and assesses the productive and positive aspects of these elements, by directly involving subjects and, thus, situating subjectivities (and their reproductions) in time and place. Tracing the evolution of discourses and human agency contributes to understanding how individuals are simultaneously subjects and objects. In approaching fieldwork, I was extremely doubtful about the effective contribution I could bring to the academic debate with research that focused only on the state structure without critically embracing people’s memories, as well as explanations of their personal actions. For instance, part of my work dealt with the analysis of speeches, newspapers and state discourses on labor – as well as posters – that addressed the diverse levels of narratives used by the Islamic Republic to embrace workers’ support and their tools of struggle under the revolutionary umbrella.<sup>134</sup> However, the macro-structure alone was not sufficient for me to locate breaking points and problematize them according to the subjects’ understandings and experiences. For this reason, privileging a double channel of examination, which directly

---

<sup>131</sup> Michel Foucault. *Society must be defended: lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, (New York: Picado, 2003), 43.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>133</sup> Paul Veyne, “Foucault revolutionizes history” in *Foucault and his interlocutors*, ed. By A. Davidson, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 150.

<sup>134</sup> See M. Stella Morgana, “The Islamic Republican Party of Iran in the Factory: Control over Workers’ Discourse in Posters (1979–1987),” *Iran - Journal of the British Institute for Persian Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (2018): 237-249. See also Chapters 4 and 6.

includes ideas and practices of involved actors, facilitated my study and my understanding.<sup>135</sup>

While engaging in a social relation, first as a human being and then as a researcher, I had to find a way to experience and acknowledging the meaning – as well as the value – of people’s silences. As remembered by Mitchell in his work on Egypt, “those who live intolerable lives, coping with poverty, unemployment, hunger, and other more direct forms of coercion, must somehow express their condition and yet may be unable to find the opportunity, the courage, or the language to do so. These are conditions that may express themselves not in attitudes or accounts of observable events, but in silences, an unwillingness to response, or the sheer inability to narrate. None of this can be explored by the conventional methods of political analysis.”<sup>136</sup>

Particularly during the December 2017 protests and in the days following May Day 2019’s arrests, I experienced clearly that it was only by exploring their silences during our meetings that I could put people at the center of attention and of the research itself. In order to let involved subjects speak, without trapping them in the cages of crystallized categories, and to adjust my methodology to the challenges I encountered during fieldwork, I chose to conduct several informal conversations and not only semi-structured interviews. I took notes, but I never recorded any discussions, both to put my interlocutors at ease and to bypass any security troubles. As for the university ethics protocol, I completely anonymized all my notes and files on my laptop, in order to avoid any connections to the names, gender, political or religious affiliations of my respondents. Moreover, I saved all my sensitive contacts under nicknames.

Furthermore, in view of my concern to fully involve the locals who were actually the core and the heart of my research, I preferred to communicate with them as peers, not as mere sources. As Khan points out, “anthropologists’ identity the native informant as the person who translates her culture for the researcher, the outsider.” It is a process, Trinh T. Minhha reminds us, through which the

---

<sup>135</sup> For more on fieldwork and impact of people’s agency see Soraya Altorki eds, *A Companion Anthropology of the Middle East*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 42.

<sup>136</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 177.

natives as subjects of research become “the handicapped who cannot represent themselves and have to either be represented or learn how to represent themselves.”<sup>137</sup> This problem presupposes an effort to dismantle the relation of hierarchy between the researcher and the researched, as between the West and the Middle East, which often hides itself behind formalities and ethical issues.

Escaping even invisible instruments of objectification and exploitation, as in my experience of work in the field, has meant refusing the standard way of interviewing “down,” from a presumed position “above.” One of the most challenging aspects of this exchange has been the process of decoding subjects’ biases, their historical knowledge and social reference points. Hence, seeing the same contacts several times over two years proved to be essential and decisive to my project. In my discussions with the people involved, I decided to not always comment or to take every provocative quip seriously – as humor is an inner part of the Iranian way of interacting – for two main reasons.

1) At the beginning these behaviors might be acts of testing my integrity and sincerity. 2) I intended my immersion in the Iranian context not to be a case of “going native,” but of maintaining a critical distance,<sup>138</sup> which inevitably passes through an acknowledgment of the political training of respondents, who are living in a highly politicized environment where – ironically – almost everyone denies being “close to politics.” Although it took several months and various meetings to really establishing relations based on trust and mutual understanding, I eventually overcame two pivotal doubts I had encountered since the very beginning of my fieldwork: 1) how much to share about my research; 2) to what extent to make participants completely aware of my objectives, methods and ideas?

Once I was able to obtain longer visas (that is, longer than one-month tourist visa) and an official university affiliation in late 2018 for two terms in 2019, I had the opportunity to develop my investigation along two main paths: a dialogic/dialectic one, where people’s comments generated

---

<sup>137</sup> Shahnaz Khan, “Reconfiguring the Native Informant: Positionality in the Global Age,” *Signs*, Vol. 30, No. 4, (2005): 2022.

<sup>138</sup> See Matthew Engelke, *How to Think Like an Anthropologist*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 11.

more questions; and a reflective one, where assessing constraints and social constructions revealed altered answers or respondents' pressure to perform.

As already mentioned, I openly discussed political theory and Iranian history with a small circle of trusted contacts, always avoiding recording any conversations, since most of the time it would have created suspicion or discomfort. Another advantage of not excluding locals from the research process was escaping the prejudices associated with a so-called “foreign” researcher's perceived positionality.

**Before and during fieldwork: from gaining access to entering trusted non-elite networks**

Before leaving for Iran and actually entering the field as a researcher – and not as a mere visitor or observer as I have been in the previous ten years – ethical concerns and anxieties about security greatly occupied my thoughts. The questions I had to answer to and the doubts I was assailed with effectively constituted an integral part of my academic work. I had to deal with “multiple sites of fieldwork,”<sup>139</sup> such as interrogating myself about my role. Since I wanted to understand everyday spaces through the lens of a mixed methodology, I consulted an extensive body of literature focusing on post-revolutionary Iran, with historical, economic and sociological perspectives. A large, strong, and substantive theoretical framework has underpinned the structure of my research project from the beginning. Even though I was aware of the main legal and practical challenges of working under the dictum and practices of the Islamic Republic of Iran, I truly metabolized them once in the field. One central question drove my exploration: how to navigate the brink, between staying safe and avoiding paranoia?

The problems experienced by anyone who wants to conduct ethnographic work in Iran usually start with gaining access to the country. Obtaining a visa can entail a long process: filling out detailed forms, long waits, pending requests and sometimes no answers at all. For me, as an Italian citizen, thus a European passport holder, the frustrating months of waiting between submitting a request for

---

<sup>139</sup> Farhang Rouhani, “Multiple Sites of Fieldwork: A Personal Reflection,” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2004): 685-693.

an education visa and the actual issue of an authorization number usually ended up with good news and without any official refusal. Many colleagues with both British and American passports told me that their experiences were not the same, with their requests often being either denied or never processed. Since dealing with gatekeepers can also be draining and exhausting, many foreign researchers are *de facto* compelled to apply for tourist visas. This is risky because undertaking any research activity in Iran is officially forbidden and may be dangerous on a touristic visa, without an official affiliation to a local university. Nevertheless, frequently this is the only option available.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, there is a paradox: on the one hand, one cannot conduct any fieldwork on a tourist visa, but on the other hand, the Islamic Republic does not provide any specific research visas. As the Iranian Foreign Ministry's website shows, both in the English and the Persian sections, the following are the only options available for visas: entry, tourist, pilgrimage, diplomatic, student, work permit, transit, press, investment, family, and treatment.<sup>141</sup> Therefore, from the very first door, entering Iran might be a discouraging prospect and glimpsing the many nuances of restrictions and control is not always an easy task. I entered the country both with a student visa and a tourist visa, until I was able to officially establish an affiliation with a local university in Tehran. What truly helped me not be too dependent on gatekeepers were two main choices I made. 1) The first one refers to the nature of my research: I decided to assess state's narratives using written sources (newspapers, state speeches, official websites, workers declarations on the web). Therefore, I did not need to interview officials and then gain institutional support. 2) I had established a network of academics, both within and outside Iran, both Iranians and foreigners, who enabled me to trek this arduous path of entering the country, while staying safe and not having any personal problems or creating difficulties for my local contacts. Constant debate and confrontation with other scholars and researchers helped me develop a peculiar strategy to cope with security issues and ethical concerns. After all, how can research on power in a "closed"/authoritarian context bypass asking

---

<sup>140</sup> See Rivetti, "Methodology Matters," 80.

<sup>141</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, e-visa types. Accessed 21 May 2018: [https://evisatraveller.mfa.ir/en/request/visa\\_types/](https://evisatraveller.mfa.ir/en/request/visa_types/)

permission from the authorities? There are no easy answers to this question, because academic standards are concerned with transparency, safety and ethics. For instance, Rashti reflects on her experience with Iranian academics living in Iran: “When I started my research, some academics had advised me about not involving ‘gatekeepers’: ‘Don’t go through the official channels to obtain permission’; ‘You should re-consider and stay away from the gatekeepers’; ‘Don’t you think you will be arrested or interrogated?’; and ‘We think participants would be hesitant to sign the consent form’.”<sup>142</sup> However, it is possible to re-adjust fieldwork methods, while respecting ethics and security requests. This does not mean that a researcher should lie or he/she is obliged to seek government permission to conduct research in Iran. One obvious reason is avoiding arousing the authorities’ attention, suspicion and a predictable denial.<sup>143</sup> Another issue to consider is the political situation and constantly getting updates from other researchers and scholars in the field. In fact – as already mentioned in the previous sections – red lines may shift, rules are vague and often change without notification, and restrictions and punishments are very rarely applied to foreigners: it is in the inherent nature of a closed context to be arbitrary. Furthermore, security and authorization procedures may assume Kafkaesque contours.<sup>144</sup> Once the issue of gaining access to the country and to officials (if necessary), adapting methods conceived on paper before entering the field proved to be crucial. In my personal experience, getting too close to labor leaders involved in independent activism while in the country on a student visa and not with a local university affiliation (until 2019) was too dangerous, since their phones are usually under surveillance, and more than one of my local trusted contacts suggested not proceeding any further, especially after the December 2017-January 2018 protests which erupted in several towns and cities all over the country. What one can only appreciate once physically in Iran is that the research atmosphere is not completely predictable. Moreover, sensitive topics as well as political taboos, which can always be

---

<sup>142</sup> Rashti, “Conducting Field Research On Gender Relations in a Gender Repressive State,” 497-498.

<sup>143</sup> See Marlies Glasius, Meta de Lange, Jos Bartman, Emanuela Dalmaso, Aofei Lv, Adele Del Sordi, Marcus Michaelsen, Kris Ruijgrok, *Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field*, (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2018), 20.

<sup>144</sup> Suzuki, “Negotiations, Concessions, and Adaptations during Fieldwork in a Tribal Society,” 624-625.

explored in certain trusted environments, may become bigger in public places or in other social circles.

**After and beyond field-research: how I answered my research questions**

In order to answer my research questions and tackle the many *whys* and *hows* that explain workers' presence as a collectivity in 1979 and their absence as a distinguishable group in 2009, I looked at the transformations in hegemonic power relations through the lens of discourse. I combined, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, a Gramscian framework (using the concepts of hegemony, awareness of duration, resistance, and civil society, which will be defined and explored in more depth in a dedicated theory section at the beginning of the following chapters), with the methods of discourse analysis developed by Fairclough, which rely on the concept of hegemony. This approach allowed me to analyse how language reflected the social and political dynamics. Theory has given direction to my research and led to the combined use of discourse analysis and ethnographic fieldwork as my main methods, which were both supported by extensive archival and historical research. In term of historical and archival sources, beyond extensive secondary academic literature, this research relies on: 1) official speeches, statements, and slogans which were mainly retrieved from Iranian newspapers (*Ettelā'āt*, *Kayhān* – for the years 1979-2009; *Iran*, *Hamshahri* – for the years 1990-1997; and *Salam* for the years 1992-1999), and foreign news agencies, newspapers and TV – for Khomeini's interviews, the chronicles of the 1978 strikes, and the Green Movement's slogans in particular – (*Agence France Press*, *Le Monde*, *Associated Press*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Paese Sera*, *L'Unità*, *Reuters*, *The Guardian*, *BBC*, *al-Bayraq*, *al-Hadaf*, *al-Mustaqbal*, and Dutch and Austrian TV networks), as well as Khomeini's collection *Sahifeh-ye Nur*; 2) articles and statements from workers' publications (*Kār*, *Kār-o-Kārgar*, *Rāh-e Kārgar*, *IASWI*, *Ettehādechāp*); 3) economic documents (Five-Year Development Plans); 4) legislation (Iranian Labor Law, amendments and contracts, *Majles* materials); 5) video materials from websites and the personal archives of two participants (for flyers, posters and/or videos). Furthermore, as this



dissertation is also founded on counter-discourses and personal experiences collected during an extensive period of research in Iran, it draws on in-depth interviews with workers, former labor and Green Movement activists, scholars, and lawyers and legal experts for a total of 35 participants, in addition to countless informal conversations and meetings which have taken place over the years. I have met all the people involved in my research at least two or three times, each meeting consisting of a minimum of two to four hours of conversation and semi-structured interviews. With regard to the 1978-1979 events and in particular the workers' memories connected to them, as chapter 3 will further detail, I conducted multiple in-depth interviews with six workers (from the oil and car industry). In respect of the post-revolutionary era until the end of the reconstruction period (1989-1997), seven workers and labor activists were met and interviewed, using both un-structured and semi-structured interviews. Three scholars helped me navigate this period through multiple detailed meetings over the two years during which I conducted research in Iran. For the reformist era (1997-2005) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's first presidency, culminating in the Green Movement, the following participants were involved: ten Green Movement activists and precarious workers (only two of whom were employed in the industrial sector), eight workers (of whom three were labor activists, one still semi-active), one journalist and two scholars.

Unfortunately, I have to acknowledge the low number of female interviewees involved in this research. In fact, I was only able to interview six women, all of them – with one exception – connected to the Green Movement's events and precarity dynamics. Most of the female workers I tried to find through the snowballing system either directly or indirectly refused to meet. With regard to the wives of the workers I did interview, even when I met them, the topic of our conversations remained on ordinary or family issues, and I felt it was not appropriate to insist. When analyzing speeches, statements, and slogans I looked at the three-dimensions of discourse identified by Fairclough that I have already mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation. Firstly, I focused on the text, so the basic linguistic assessment of the text (words, verbs, pronouns, repetitions). Secondly, I concentrated my attention on the discursive practice and interaction

between the text and potential interpretations, assumptions, and metaphors. Thirdly, I tried to find and assess the connections between the first two dimensions and the social practice realm: the social, political and economic circumstances, as well as the effects on the audience. Moreover, my analysis sought to identify goals and discursive mechanisms to reach the intended objective through other means-goals.

The interviews discussed above represented an added value to my research. They have not been used as sources for retrieving data or verifying documents or historical facts, but to prompt me – as a researcher – to broaden the perspective so as to comprehend a greater complexity. Being aware of the fact that every participant would bring his/her own experience and personal viewpoint on a specific event, as well as a particular attitude towards my own positionality (as a researcher, as a woman, as a foreigner), memories in particular have been used to give personal nuances and add political complexities to settings and events. As an ethnographic commitment, this labor of research served the pursuit of knowledge and rigorous historical work, while incorporating the protagonists' perspectives, both from a top-down and bottom-up approach.

### **Conclusion**

My research has been constantly impacted by the political situation, because of its very nature. The risk of talking about sensitive political issues demanded specific attention before, during and after carrying out my activities in Iran. Nevertheless, beyond practical restrictions, I also had to deal with several other obstacles. Negotiating my own identity as a researcher in order to avoid what Carapico calls the “imperialism of knowledge” constituted an integral part of my research. Assuaging the authorities' and ordinary people's suspicions, as well as overcoming paranoia about censorship, occupied most of my time while I approached this new “door” of knowledge for the first time, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. Generating the snowballing system took time and emotional effort. Managing language learning and exploring the multiple layers of Iranian *ta'arof* and “cultural” nuances led me through a stimulating process of constantly re-defining, re-

thinking and re-visiting my project and my role as a researcher. I learned to involve subjects into the process of knowledge production re-discussing and dismantling any hierarchies based on roles, age, and gender.

Moreover, I understood how crucial language is to absorbing and decoding what occurs on a day-to-day basis and to grasping all the nuances of meaning. Within the process of producing knowledge and at the same time learning, I was forced to re-conceptualize my ideas and my approach several times, i.e. while confronting respondents with classist views or not fully aware of the potential dangers. Ultimately, I realized the limitations of a top-down application of “Western procedures” to “eastern protocols,”<sup>145</sup> in a context where informality constitutes a relevant and porous border between private and public lives, exactly on the brink between a space of repression and a space of freedom.

---

<sup>145</sup> Mitra Shavarini, “Western procedures, eastern protocols: Conducting research in the western-wary Islamic Republic of Iran,” in J. E. Larkley & V. B. Maynard eds., *Innovations in education*, (New York: Nova Science, 2008), 173-188.

## CHAPTER 2

### Preparing for the '79 Revolution from Paris:

#### Khomeini's Discourse on the Iranian Left and Workers



Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Neauphle-le-Château, 1978. (Photo: imam-khomeini.ir)

#### Introduction

Workers and labor *per se* played no role in the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's political discourse until late 1978. It would be impossible to grasp the narratives that developed under the Islamic Republic without first exploring the myths, imageries and linguistic tools employed by Khomeini to unify the polyphonic spectrum of Iranian society during the period when revolution was gaining momentum. Hence, in order to understand how discourses about labor transformed relations of power and domination in post-revolutionary Iran, the analysis of this dissertation ought to start from the words that were used so extensively in the process of creating the 1979 revolution. There were other voices emanating from the Iranian masses, but – because of Khomeini's central role in the future IRI – this chapter is devoted to the analysis of his language of revolt. In the eyes of the

world, the Ayatollah became the de facto spokesman of the movement that led to the overthrow of the Shah. In particular, this chapter examines the messages and interviews given to Iranians abroad and to foreign media during what Hamid Dabashi defined as the sixth phase of the Ayatollah's development and orchestration of revolutionary symbolics, that – by then – received substantial coverage.<sup>146</sup> On October 6, 1978, Khomeini arrived at Orly Airport in Paris.<sup>147</sup> Two days later, he started actively preparing the Revolution from the French village of Neauphle-le Château, outside Paris, where he stayed until his return to Iran on February 1, 1979, the day he landed at Tehran Mehrabad airport. From that location, where he was living in exile following his expulsion from Najaf (Iraq), where he had been developing his militant thoughts over a period of 13 years,<sup>148</sup> Khomeini attempted to define and influence the course of the Revolution in Iran. He launched a campaign of Islamization, which was meant to galvanize the masses against the Shah and draw them under the religious umbrella and his own peculiar ideology.<sup>149</sup> Moreover, he constructed a narrative directed toward the goal of minimizing, isolating, and eventually discrediting his political rivals. The Ayatollah gave daily interviews to foreign media and delivered messages to Iranians. In almost every meeting, the international reporters asked him about the other voices constituting the revolutionary opposition to the Shah. The journalists' questions systematically referred to "Marxists groups" and "the Communists." Khomeini's responses became sharper over the course of the months leading up to the Revolution.

---

<sup>146</sup> Dabashi divides the development of Khomeini's revolutionary discourse that challenged the Pahlavi regime into eight stages, starting from the pre-June 1963 uprising to the 1979 revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent. The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 414-415.

<sup>147</sup> Khomeini's links in France were Abdol Hassan Bani-Sadr and Sadeq Qotbzadeh. The Ayatollah spent his first days in the southern suburb of Cachan before moving to Neauphle-le-Château. Bani-Sadr, talking to *The Associated Press* about the revolution, declared: "For me, it was sure, but not for Khomeini and not for lots of others inside Iran." See *Associated Press*, February 1, 2019 and Emadeddin Baqi, *Tarikh-e Shafahi-e Enqelab-e Eslami-e Iran: Majmu'eh-ye Bamameh-ye Dāstān-e Enqelāb az Radio BBC*, (Tehran: Nashr-e Tafakkor, 1994).

<sup>148</sup> Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, "The Divine, the People, and the Faqih" in Arshin Adib-Moghaddam eds, *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 211-238.

<sup>149</sup> Khomeini's thought differed from the other understanding of Islam circulating in those years, such as the "red Islam" of Ali Shariati or the conservative Islamism of Ahmad Fardid. See Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

As this study is concerned with discourses relating to workers and power dynamics since the Iranian Revolution, this chapter puts the evolution of these discourses into a historical perspective. After the Revolution, as chapter 4 will show, Khomeini successfully appropriated the symbolics of class struggle and social justice, through the explicit delegitimization of the Left. Drawing on the corpus of his interviews and messages while in France, this chapter gives an account of Khomeini's discursive mechanisms, which made this appropriation possible. As the introduction of this dissertation has already explored, the Tudeh party and several Marxist groups, such as the Fedayān, the Mojāhedīn-e-Khalq, and Peykā, represented the immediate *point of connection* with those realms of class and social justice, as well as with labor and workers. Although from 1953 until the height of the Revolution, Iranian workers had remained mostly unorganized and were put under the strict surveillance of the Shah's secret police and intelligence services, towards the end of 1978, Leftist organizations were attempting to regain their influence within the factories.<sup>150</sup> Khomeini viewed them with suspicion, as they could pose potential threats to the Islamic Republic project. For this reason, he began to publicly distance himself from them, without ever specifying their peculiarities or naming individual groups. He initiated a process of denying their impact in mobilizing the other revolutionaries. Moreover, Khomeini triggered a mechanism to appropriate the Leftist symbols that would be at the core of the Islamic ideologues' program under the IRI and will be examined in more depth in chapter 4. During his exile in Neauphle-le-Château, Khomeini used foreign media interviews as an echo chamber for his Islamic and revolutionary project. When addressing foreign audiences, as well as the Iranians abroad, he portrayed the Iranian revolutionary movement as unique and somehow monolithic.

Three main questions guide this chapter. How did Khomeini's narrative of revolt evolve during the making of the Iranian Revolution in his last phase of exile in the suburbs of Paris? What discursive practices caused this to become the hegemonic voice not only of Iranian Shi'ism, but also of the

---

<sup>150</sup> See Introduction, and Haideh Moghissi and Saeed Rahnema, "The Working Class and the Islamic State in Iran," *Socialist Register*, 2001, 199-200; see also Touraj Atabaki, "Writing the Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 84 (2013): 154-158.

opposition to the Shah's regime? Why and how did Khomeini marginalize the Left, while appropriating the rhetoric of class and social justice? Tracing the modalities through which Khomeini emerged as a key figure among competing political ideologies, in particular the Left, enables a framing of the context within which the discourse about labor developed once the Islamic Republic was established. The explicit rejection of the Marxists and the discursive assimilation of some key themes of the Left is rooted in a process that started during the last months of 1978. By exploring Khomeini's voice of the Revolution in the making, this chapter shows how his project assimilated the issues of equality, class and social justice, while reducing the Left's potential to mobilize the masses over these core subjects. Nevertheless, throughout his speeches in Neauphle-le-Château, the Ayatollah avoided connecting any Leftist group directly to workers. By then, the appeal of these groups and their spread in the factories only potentially existed, as independent trade unionism – historically close to the Tudeh Party – had been eradicated.<sup>151</sup> When Khomeini moved to France, the Left's impact in the factories was weak for several reasons. As will be shown later through the analysis of Khomeini's words, the Ayatollah was more worried about the spread of Marxist ideas through universities.<sup>152</sup> However, he sought to leverage the religious sense of unity and belonging that was widespread among workers, who were mostly illiterate and were used to mosques as areas of public life.<sup>153</sup> To transcend the logic of Islam successfully silencing all voices to be absolute and determinant *tout-court*,<sup>154</sup> this chapter buttresses the argument that Khomeini's ability to neutralize the Left lay in his political stance rather than in a religious narrative. He was adroit in appealing to all classes through a populist and nationalist narrative. In particular, discrediting opponents was an integral part of the evolution of Khomeini's language: this transformed systematically as events were developing and a non-definitive exclusion of Marxists

---

<sup>151</sup> See Ladjevardi, *Labor Union and Autocracy in Iran*, 193-206 and 233-234; Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, 95-129; and Stephanie Cronin, "The Left in Iran: Illusion and Disillusion," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2000): 231-243.

<sup>152</sup> See Misagh Parsa, "Ideology and Political Action in the Iranian Revolution" *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2011): 53-68.

<sup>153</sup> See Bayat, *Workers and Revolution*, 48-49.

<sup>154</sup> See Val Moghadam, "The Revolution and the Regime: Populism, Islam and the State in Iran," *Social Compass* 36, No. 4 (1989): 415-450.

would serve the tactical goals. The strategy of denying the existence of the Leftists, and at other times portraying them as a threat, accompanied vague declarations on their freedom of expression under the future Islamic Republic. In fact, as this chapter argues, a categorical dismissal of the Left would have created an unnecessary rift in the movement that by then needed to be united in its pursuit of its main declared goal: the Revolution.

### **Disclosing Khomeini's discursive strategies: from response to action**

If one places discourse within a perspective of power relations seen as a struggle for hegemony, power invests language, and through discourse, a dialectic of ideology and structural events unfolds.<sup>155</sup> As Gramsci demonstrated, cultural hegemony forges alliances and constructs relations of domination and subordination. Furthermore, the creation of a hegemonic apparatus determines what Gramsci describes as “a reform of consciences and methods of knowledge.”<sup>156</sup> Hence, it is discourse that allows us to connect various domains and enhances language's role in the exercise of power as a tool of persuasion. Khomeini's interviews and messages, during his stay in the suburbs of Paris, are emblematic in this sense. Through his discourse, as will be explored in the next sections, he transmitted values and myths that invigorated the Iranian masses. His words spread new ideological meanings, drawing from collective practices, in order to achieve consent. This meaning comes into being through the interplay between the text and its form.<sup>157</sup> This is why the choice of vocabulary in Persian is particularly relevant to the study of the evolution of Khomeini's discourse. Moreover, a specific use of textual structures, as well as the switch between present and future tenses, fostered a precise agenda. In fact, these choices reflected Khomeini's relational values, knowledge, and way of judging, and thus, were – in Fairclough's words “ideologically significant.”<sup>158</sup>

---

<sup>155</sup> See Fairclough, *Discourse and Social change*, 86-96.

<sup>156</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q10, §12, 1249-1250.

<sup>157</sup> See Fairclough, *Discourse and Social change*, 95-98.

<sup>158</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 99.



Khomeini built his discourse on premises operating on several levels: context, goal, values and what Fairclough terms “means-goals” to achieve the final objective, such as the overthrow of the Shah regime.<sup>159</sup> Thus, the construction of Khomeini’s claims and counterclaims followed the above-mentioned pattern. The Ayatollah framed his responses and consequent calls to action on the basis of particular and shifting premises. He juxtaposed his claim with the construction of a counter claim, before envisaging a pattern for a solution. Hence, a situation was presented as a problem and was defined by a negative adjective in order to propose a revolutionary process of actions towards a positive and resolute outcome.

Therefore, discourse exposed the link between language and power, revealing the social practices of the revolution in the making. For this reason, this chapter will not only focus on the description of discursive tools put in place by Khomeini, but it will also engage with the interpretation of the modalities through which his ideology shaped the relations of power during the period of revolutionary momentum and eventually marginalized the Leftists in particular. Following Fairclough’s pattern, the discourse analysis of Khomeini’s interviews and speeches will try to 1) describe the linguistic level, 2) interpret the relation between the text and its discursive interactions, and 3) explain the discourses that were put in place and their connections to the social context.<sup>160</sup>

Khomeini’s language of revolt, which drew on his experience in exile first in Turkey and then in Iraq between 1964 and 1978, developed along militant, Islamist, populist trajectories, but was not purposely revolutionary from the beginning.<sup>161</sup> In fact, Khomeini’s political stance was grounded in the Shia tradition of religious quietism that had frustrated him in the seminaries.<sup>162</sup> The radical figure that emerged over the course of the 1970s matured from Khomeini the constitutionalist of the

<sup>159</sup> Isabela and Norman Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 35-78.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 110-112.

<sup>161</sup> See Hamid Dabashi, “By What Authority: The Formation of Khomeini’s Revolutionary Discourse, 1964-1977,” *Social Compass* 36, No. 4 (1989): 511-538.

<sup>162</sup> See Ghamari-Tabrizi, “The Divine, the People, and the Faqih” in Arshin Adib-Moghaddam eds, *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, 211-238.

earlier phases of his life.<sup>163</sup> Over the months spent in Neauphle-le-Château, he fueled the revolutionary fervor by promising radical changes. By then, there was no room for modest transformations.<sup>164</sup> His discourse, permeated by the concept of returning justice to those deprived (*mostaz'afin*), contained particular features as it was accessible to the masses, often repetitive in its use of words and clear in terms of grammar. It evoked shared values, building on the Iranian Shia tradition, such as martyrdom, and common historical or traumatic events. Dichotomies, such as good versus evil, a perceived threat versus the proposed defense strategy, salvation versus siege, served as persuasive tools to foment his followers and confound the more secular component of the Shah's opposition. Within this framework, Khomeini illuminated what he made out to be the path of God, demonstrating the "just" route to follow. In Khomeini's narrative, once the goal was reached, a future of freedom lay ahead, as the idea of happiness contrasted oppression. Pronouns, such as *we*, or epithets such as *children of Iran*, generated a sense of collective identity, whilst reinforcing national bonds, through the ideal of community. Indeed, metonymy, citing a part for the whole, was a recurrent expedient. Moreover, the transfer of meaning through metaphors, such as blood as a symbol of violence and death, made allusions to a constant situation of suffering. It stressed the suffering of the downtrodden.<sup>165</sup> The oppressed became an image designed to stimulate action, as they were invigorated to demonstrate strength instead of weakness.

By politicizing religion and casting it into a nationalist (antagonistic to that of the Pahlavi) and anti-imperialist framework (borrowed from the anticolonialism of the Left), Khomeini popularized the "Islamic ideology" as the one potentially able to bridge the gap between the various groups that made up the plethora of Iranian opposition to the Shah.<sup>166</sup> During his stay in Neauphle-le-Château,

---

<sup>163</sup> See Mojtaba Mahdavi, "The Rise of Khomeinism. Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran" in *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, eds. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 43-68.

<sup>164</sup> See Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, Introduction, in *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, eds. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1-18.

<sup>165</sup> On the evolution of pro-mostaz'afin discourses see Siavash Saffari, "Two Pro Mostaz'afin Discourses in the 1979 Iranian Revolution," *Contemporary Islam*, Vol.11 (2017), 287-301.

<sup>166</sup> See Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 409-419 and Ervand Abrahamian, "Khomeini: Fundamentalist or Populist," *New Left Review*, Vol. 186 (1991): 102-119.

he never asked for obedience and did not define himself as a leader of the movement. Rather than a leader over the community, he portrayed himself as a source of inspiration. Furthermore, he managed to embody the epitome of sacred sentiments, anti-imperialist desires and militant needs, jettisoning the Leftist symbolics of class and social justice. Benefitting from an uncensored channel of communication in foreign newspapers and television reports, along with the tapes of his speeches that were smuggled into Iran, Khomeini sharpened his discourse of antagonism against perceived enemies: the Shah, foreigners (*ajaneb*, who were always linked to conspiracies), and capital. In this process of Othering, he employed specific adjectives in order to construct their roles. From the very first week of his stay in Paris, the Marxist Left was not among the main targets, because their impact on the revolutionary process and potential threat was still considered weak. As events unfolded, while navigating a terrain of ambiguous definitions and vague phrasing, Khomeini's language revealed the existence of the seeds of discontent and hatred that would reach maturity with the establishment of the IRI and would bring misfortunes and repression to the Iranian Left.<sup>167</sup>

### **Constructing the enemy while building a community: October chronicles**

It was October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1978, when Khomeini delivered a message to university students for the start of the academic year in Iran.<sup>168</sup> In this message we see in play the discursive mechanisms that over the coming months would create a context in which the marginalization of the Iranian Left was made possible, indeed inevitable. By then, tens of thousands of university students had taken to the streets in Iran, and very soon, in response to martial law and the Shah's attempt at "national reconciliation," blue-collar and public employees would join the mass protests and strikes.<sup>169</sup> Addressing the students as the "children [*farzandān*] of Islam" and "children of Iran" to convey a sense of both Islamic community [*ommat*] and an extended national family, he warned them to denounce any "deviation" from the religious-nationalist path within which he framed the struggle

<sup>167</sup> In 1981 Khomeini called for the "purge of Leftist schoolchildren." *New York Times*, September 24, 1981.

<sup>168</sup> Khomeini's message to students, 8 October, 1978, (16 Mehr 1357) in *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, Vol. 3, (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1999), 383-388.

<sup>169</sup> Ashraf and Banuazizi, "The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution", 11-12.

against the Shah.<sup>170</sup> Khomeini talked about a shared cause under the Islamic umbrella, which was oriented toward the “establishment of the government of Islamic justice.”<sup>171</sup> Drawing on the language of martyrdom, so by using words such as “sacrifice/devotion” [*fedākār*] and “suffering [*ranj*],” “merciless killings [*koshtār-hā bi-rahmāneh*] and mourning,” he explicitly wanted to embrace the whole of Iranian society and “all classes [*tabaqāt*] of the dear nation.”<sup>172</sup> This strategy merged nationalist, religious, and social justice grievances into the same cause. In this first message from Neauphle-Le-Château, Khomeini sought to leverage the dichotomies such as good versus evil, that were constructing the enemy as a perceived threat, while proposing a strategy to fight it. Within this binary framework, he described Islam as the “guarantor of freedom, independence, happiness, as well as intellectual and practical growth [*roshd-e fekri va ‘amali*]” as being against the Shah and his army. The latter were labeled as “satanic” and “criminal” [*jenāyatkār*].<sup>173</sup> In Khomeini’s discourse, the Leftists represented a blurred entity. In fact, he never specified the different political elements that constituted the Left, such as the Tudeh Party, the Fedayān, the Mojāhedīn-e Khalq, and Peykār, among other groups. By not naming them, he perpetuated a tactic designed to undermine and dismiss the Left’s role and impact on the revolutionary movement that was taking shape at that time. In his words, the Leftists were complicit in the so-called “ploys” of the *ajaneb*, the foreigners. They were acting as “pawns” in the Shah’s hands.<sup>174</sup> Khomeini blamed them for “spread[ing] the foreign propaganda” from “Eastern and Western powers,” such as the Soviet Union, America, and Britain.<sup>175</sup> In Khomeini’s words, the Leftists were on the same level as “rightists.” Using the metaphor of siege, he accused them of “assailing” the country and perpetrating “daily massacres” of the Iranian people, who were described as victims of oppression.

---

<sup>170</sup> Khomeini’s message to students, 8 October, 1978, (16 Mehr 1357) in *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. 3, (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1999), 383-388.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, by casting the Left as part of the “domination” project against the “independence” of Iran, he attempted to diffuse the potential appeal of Leftist groups to students.<sup>176</sup>

Calling for unity against the perceived threats, both internal (the Shah) and external (foreign “conspiracy”), he began to sketch the “salvation” of Iran as a final goal, to galvanize the students into action and prompt the broader “nation” to keep struggling until victory was achieved. In peremptory tones – “you must” (*boyad*) – Khomeini urged the students to “end the chaos” in the name of the oppressed and deprived (*mostaz'afin*). Once again, he borrowed the language of siege. Although speaking of duties and giving instructions to “remove the obstacles” (the monarchy, the state apparatus, and links to foreign interference/powers) from the path to “freedom,” in this message he kept alternating the collective pronouns you/we, to construct and reinforce the idea of himself being part of the large community he was inspiring. Indeed, he announced: “Our duties and yours.” As a first moral obligation, he identified a potential Leftist threat within universities, asking students to follow a precise pattern: observe, report, denounce, protest, and ostracize.

If you see any deviation [*enherāf*] among professors and teachers from the national-religious aims, the most important of which is the downfall of the rotten regime, protest severely, and invite them to follow the path of the nation which is the path of God. If they do not accept it, restrain them [*ehterāz*] and report their deviationist intentions very clearly to the oppressed nation. They are traitors to the religion, nation, and country. They want the Shah.<sup>177</sup>

The construction of the enemy, seen as being a vague Leftist entity, passed through a sharp discursive paradigm. First, the Left was generically framed by Khomeini as a “deviation” from the path of the nation, implying a negative connotation. Second, it fitted the dichotomy “we versus them,” they (“the traitors”) “are against us” (“the oppressed nation”). Third, it was portrayed as

---

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

betraying Iran, conceived both as a nation and a religious community. Fourth, it was responsible for supporting the Shah and those blamed for the “robbery” of the country’s resources.

Furthermore, by the beginning of October 1978, exactly four months before the success of the Revolution, Khomeini did not in any circumstances explicitly connect the Left with the realm of labor or with the strikes. While announcing the roadmap of duties and main stages to follow, understood as means-goals to satisfy the initial demands, he admonished students to support workers’ strikes [you are “duty-bound”]. What is worth noticing in the context of this chapter is that Khomeini mentioned workers’ strikes:<sup>178</sup> first, as being part of the “Islamic movement”; and second, as activities carried out by both “deprived Muslim workers and employees [*kārgarān va kārmandān mahrum va mosalmān*]. Furthermore, no perceived threat within the factories arising from Leftist circles explicitly emerged in this first message of Khomeini’s from the small village 25 miles west of Paris. Workers’ grievances were not unique or specific within the broader movement, according to his narrative. Instead, Khomeini described workers’ unrest 1) as an act against the same enemy (the Shah) and, 2) as being for a common cause, so in solidarity with “their brothers.”

You, dear students, are duty-bound to support the rightful and valiant insurrection of the deprived Muslim workers and employees among whom the strikes are spreading. These are the deprived Muslims, who are aware of the Shah’s trampling on their rights. They have risen to uphold these in unison and sympathy with their brothers.<sup>179</sup>

Social justice epitomized a premise lacking in the Shah regime. At the same time, it constituted a goal that the revolutionaries could achieve through the strikes and the consequent establishment of

---

<sup>178</sup> For a more detailed account of workers’ strikes see chapter 3. See also Asef Bayat, “The Industrial Working Class and the Revolution,” in *Workers and Revolution*, (London: Zed Books, 1987), 77-80; and Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 126-188.

<sup>179</sup> Khomeini’s message to students, 8 October, 1978, (16 Mehr 1357) in *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, Vol. 3, (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1999), 383-388.

an Islamic government. The motif of oppression and plundering represented a tool of persuasion to encourage perseverance with the strikes. It was also a stimulus to attain justice and rights.

Everybody knows that as long as the regime lasts, social justice and redress of the plight of the deprived, hard-working people will never materialize. Tell them on my behalf not to be led astray by the deceitful establishment; tell them not to stop their strikes. Tell them to continue the Islamic movement, until the plunderers' hands will be away from what is yours and the nation's by right. With the help of the Islamic government, we will attain genuine justice and be blessed with God's bounties. Remind them to persevere with their strikes and make the Islamic slogans more widespread. Relying on God the Almighty, they can be sure of gaining their rights.<sup>180</sup>

Less than a week later, on October 14, Khomeini gave an interview to the French newspaper *Le Figaro*.<sup>181</sup> In response to questions concerning the existence of a religious movement and its connections to Leftist groups, Khomeini denied the importance and the political weight of the Left, to justify his distance from it. The discursive strategies to dismiss the Left through the process of Othering were three-fold: presenting it as being divided, as scarcely impactful, and as part of a conspiracy orchestrated by the Shah. Following his line of reasoning, which drew on the pattern of cause and effect, the disintegration of the Left represented a demonstration of the impossibility of it playing any role [“they cannot”] in the popular movement.<sup>182</sup> Khomeini was aware that the Left lacked the strength to act, because of the long shadow of SAVAK repression.<sup>183</sup> The use of the collective pronoun “we” – evoking one united group under the religious umbrella – against “they” reinforced this imagery.

---

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Le Figaro*, 14 October 1978 (22 Mehr 1357) in *Talieh-e Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 21-24.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> See Ashraf Dehqani. *Torture and Resistance in Iran*, (London: 1976).

We have always avoided unanimity with these parties; today, all Iranian oppositions have become one and demonstrated together under the banner of religion, and in the name of Islam's true meaning. There is a good reason for that. The Leftist or Communist groups have almost disintegrated. They cannot have a share of this ongoing popular movement; so, naturally, the regime is trying to attribute Marxist remarks to those fighting against the Shah's dictatorship, to mislead the public opinion, particularly across the border.<sup>184</sup>

Khomeini went even further by denying the existence and relevance of any Leftist slogans within the movement. The strategy of denial needs a broader interpretation in context: he knew his words would reach a more general audience in Iran and also Iranian Leftists abroad, who were campaigning against the Shah. His denial of reality served as a way of blocking both awareness and fear. Ignoring the presence of the Left constituted a tool to neutralize a threat, and remove a potential obstacle in Khomeini's path to the Islamization of the Revolution. To underpin his argument and make it look more robust, in addition to the negative overlap of Leftist equals extremist, Khomeini relied on two other discursive techniques: the binary comparison of good versus evil, and numbers:

Take a look at the recent major protests. Religious people [*mazhabi-ha*] mobilized one million people, and always, and in every case, used religious slogans. That very same religion has always brought them together and organized them; not even once has a Leftist or extremist slogan been heard or seen.

Moreover, the process of neutralizing the Left developed further through the appropriation of discourses of progress, social justice, and freedom.

---

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.



When we speak of Islam, it does not mean turning our backs on growth and progress; it is just the opposite. We believe that Islam is essentially a progressive religion. [...] An Islamic republic can naturally come into consideration as we think that a noble understanding of Islam will lead us toward the advancement of a society that is very talented, has a lot of manpower and social justice. Before anything, we have set our hopes on the social contents [...] Everyone will be free.<sup>185</sup>

On October 22, Leftist slogans spread in the streets of the Iranian capital. Tehran University's students chanted "communist slogans," as a journalist from the *Agence France Press* observed during an interview with Khomeini a few days later. The AFP reporter riled Khomeini arguing that "Communism is not a myth, it exists and is getting organized."<sup>186</sup> Hence, from the end of October 1978, as events were intensifying and protests kept erupting – with workers at Iran's largest oil refinery in Abadan going on strike on October 18<sup>187</sup> – Khomeini's revolutionary discourse began to develop accordingly. In this interview with AFP, he offered material and ideological tools to reject the rise of a Leftist momentum among the Iranian protestors. While continuing to make no distinction between Leftists, Marxists, and Communists, he took advantage of two factors: authenticity and the numbers of those involved. They were both meant to challenge the menace of Marxist slogans' penetration in the demonstrations:

If we suppose that all these fifteen hundred people, and even several times more, are real Marxists, they will not be considered as a power in comparison to the thirty million people who have risen in the name of Islam.<sup>188</sup>

---

<sup>185</sup> Ibid. For him, it became clear that being a Muslim in the future Islamic Republic was to "be free."

<sup>186</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Agence France Press*, 25 October 1978 (3 Aban 1357) in *Talieh-e Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 25-27.

<sup>187</sup> See Iranian Oil Worker, "How we organized strike that paralyzed shah's regime: First-hand account by Iranian oil worker," in P. Nore & T. Turner, Eds., *Oil and class struggle*, (London: Zed Books, 1980), 293-301.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

Thus, once the outright denial strategy proved impossible to apply, Khomeini emphasized the numerical proportions. He avoided mentioning the victimization or the repression of Leftists to explain their decrease in numbers.<sup>189</sup> Instead, he proclaimed the political and comprehensive dimension of Islam as capable of embracing “the people’s” longings and extending freedoms, using the sentimental metaphor of the embrace: “those seeking the truth and justice can be brought back into the arms of Islam.”<sup>190</sup>

Compared to the past, the Marxists have decreased dramatically in number. That is because Islam provides people with their needs in political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of life for real progress. [...] If an Islamic government gets established and freedoms become extended, and the facilities for the actual growth of people increase, those seeking the truth and justice can be brought back into the arms of Islam.<sup>191</sup>

Beyond denouncing the Shah regime’s so-called “ruthless” acts, Khomeini asseverated what was making his rhetoric work politically. He announced a more precise roadmap of hope and victory: “The victory of an Islamic nation is close,” a “transitional government shall be formed upon the fall of the Shah, and its terms will, of course, be announced.”<sup>192</sup> For the first time, he explicitly referred to his return to Iran, linking it to the overthrow of the Shah and his escape: “The Shah’s fall is announced [...] while he is in Iran I will not go back” to Iran.<sup>193</sup> Khomeini was assuming the burden of leading Iran towards a historical transition and showed himself well aware of the surge towards him becoming the leader. Furthermore, his refusal to see the Left as a distinctive political entity became clearer every day. Following the evolution of his thought through the interviews at Neauphle-Le-Château, it becomes evident that the Left’s room for manoeuvre would eventually be

---

<sup>189</sup> See Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 305-317 and Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, 34-94.

<sup>190</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Agence France Press*, 25 October 1978 (3 Aban 1357) in *Talieh-e Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 25-27.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

limited. Responding to a Reuters journalist on October 26, 1978, Khomeini issued a warning to all the “opposition groups,” which could be interpreted as a message to the Leftists as well.

Nonetheless, he kept his phrasing vague enough: “All groups are free to express their beliefs [*dar bayan-e eqāyad khod*]. However, we do not allow any betrayal [*khiyānat*].”<sup>194</sup> Two reasons may explain this choice: on the one hand, Khomeini wanted to appeal to the fragmented opposition; on the other, it was a tactic that allowed him not to sound too divisive during a phase when the revolutionary body was taking shape and getting organized. Unity was essential. Interestingly, the use of the present tense crystallized Khomeini’s formulation in a dimension of ambiguity and yet timeless certainty, meant to set the stage for a collective struggle for the “independence,” of the “Iranian nation from the West.”<sup>195</sup> Following the same line of verbal indefiniteness, Khomeini employed negative conditional sentences, such as: “If we were conservative [*mohāfezeh kār*], we should not want a free vote and equal economic and political opportunities.”<sup>196</sup> Through this discursive loophole, he overcame the obstacle of clarifying how freedoms and opportunities would be framed in the future. Likewise, he returned the accusations of Islamic backwardness to those making them: “Islam is a religion of progress [*taraqi*].”

If Khomeini’s discursive ambiguity created the impression that there was room for Leftist groups to be included in his movement, this was undone only a day later. He abandoned his vague tone and harshly lashed out at the Marxists: “Not at all, [the movement] has not been, it is not being, and it will not be guided [*hedāyat shodan*] by them. And their support is not accepted by anyone.”<sup>197</sup> As Khomeini’s use of verb tenses demonstrates, for the first time, in addressing Leftists’ role in the revolutionary movement that was emerging, he projected them on a timeline flowing from the past to the future. This approach eventually erased their whole story in Iranian politics. Khomeini closed

---

<sup>194</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Reuters*, 26 October 1978 (4 Aban 1357) in *Taliehye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 29.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> Khomeini, interview with *France Tv*, Channel 1, 27 October 1978 (5 Aban 1357) in *Taliehye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 31.

the door to any chance of collaboration with the Leftists in Iran, and any support from Russia.<sup>198</sup> By then, he was discursively insisting on a goal premise, which advocated following an alternative path to solve the crises that were looming. It is worth noting that he used the plural [*bohrān-hā*], putting the economy and politics on the same level as a tool for depicting the downfall of the Pahlavi regime. The recommended course of action entailed the Shah abandoning Iran. Therefore, Khomeini linked reasons with results, following a cause-effect pattern in which the broader category of the “nation” represented the core.<sup>199</sup>

The political and economic crises will continue along with the Shah’s presence because the nation has nothing to do with him [*hamkāri na dārad*]. And this is what’s causing the crises.

If the Shah leaves, the crises will be solved [*raf’ mishavad*].<sup>200</sup>

By then, a strike by 37,000 employees of the National Iranian Oil Company had started, reducing oil exports to 1.5 million barrels per day, and 1,126 political prisoners had been released.<sup>201</sup> The Revolution seemed to be closer. In fact, as will be explored in chapter 3, oil strikes accelerated the process, delivering the final blow to the Shah’s apparatus.<sup>202</sup>

### **Envisaging the Islamic Republic: what was at stake for the Left? The November shift**

In November, as events were rapidly evolving in Iran – the Shah’s troops fired on various demonstrations across the country, while some rioters burned government buildings in Tehran –<sup>203</sup> Khomeini’s language of revolt developed alongside a more definite (although still blurred) vision of

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> See Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*, (London and New York, Routledge, 2003), 8 and 121-134.

<sup>200</sup> Khomeini, interview with *France Tv*, Channel 1, 27 October 1978 (5 Aban 1357) in *Talieh-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmi. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 31.

<sup>201</sup> See *Ettelā’āt*, 23 Mehr 1357 (15 October 1978), and 30 Mehr 1357 (22 Oct 1978). See also Nicholas M. Nikazmerad, “A Chronological Survey of the Iranian Revolution,” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1/4, Iranian Revolution in Perspective (1980), 327-368.

<sup>202</sup> Ashraf and Banuazizi, “The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution,” 3-40.

<sup>203</sup> See *Ettelā’āt*, 23 Mehr 1357 (15 October 1978), and 30 Mehr 1357 (22 Oct 1978). See also Nicholas M. Nikazmerad, “A Chronological Survey of the Iranian Revolution,” 327-368.

the Islamic Republic. Almost a month after arriving in France, the spiritual guide of what would become known as the Iranian Revolution revealed the plan he had in mind. During an interview with ATV Austria, Khomeini asserted that the future would bring a “democratic system” to Iran, although in an interview with Dutch television only a few days later, he would specify that it would be “an Islamic democracy, not like a Western democracy.”<sup>204</sup> He added that “an Islamic republic” would have been established “through the insurrection [*qyām*] of the nation” that “will chase out the Shah.”<sup>205</sup> Continuing to stress the dichotomy between past and future, as well as good and evil, he used the metaphor of a new “real” [*vāqe ʿy*] and “true” [*haqiqi*] life after the times of “cruelty” [*zolm*] that would be the future in the Islamic Republic.<sup>206</sup>

Khomeini’s increased explicitness about how he envisioned the future of Iran after the Revolution also extended to his statements about the Left. What role would the supporters of the Left play? On the same day, Khomeini began to circumscribe the concept of “freedom” for all that he had mentioned in previous interviews. Interviewed by *The Guardian*, he referred to the existence of “talents inside and outside Iran” that would collaborate in chasing out the Shah. However, he did not specify who he was referring to. Nonetheless, replying to a question about young Communists in Tehran and the possibility that the Tudeh party would be declared illegal, he said:

In Islam, the criterion is God’s satisfaction, not the personalities [*shakhsiyat-hā*]. Righteousness [*haq*] and truth [*haqiqat*] are the standards. [...] Unlike Islam, the Communists make idols [*bat*] out of personalities and focus on power. Our Islamic government will rely on public votes. All parties who will work for the interests [*masāleh*] of the nation will be free.<sup>207</sup>

<sup>204</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Radio tv Holland*, 5 November 1978 (14 Aban 1357), in *Taliehye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 49.

<sup>205</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Radio-Tv Austria*, 1 November 1978 (10 Aban 1357) in *Taliehye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 35.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Khomeini, interview with *The Guardian*, 1 November 1978 (10 Aban 1357), in *Taliehye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 38.

Here, Khomeini's position on the Left becomes increasingly clear. First, Khomeini reiterated the use of Islam as a comprehensive framework to guide the uprising, under God auspices. If God equaled the truth and what is just, everything outside of this dimension would have fallen automatically into a realm of negativity and exclusion. Therefore, the Communists were following values that lay outside of God's morality. Hence, they inherently represented the Other. Second, the possessive pronoun "our" used in conjunction with the "Islamic government" in this excerpt represented an expedient to restrict this further and constrain the Communists and the Tudeh. Third, Khomeini's suspicions and distrust towards them was rising and becoming more explicit. Fourth, no other specificity, group or class – beyond the Islamic, nationalist and populist umbrella – could gain any ground, because it lay beyond God's protection: "Nothing can be done against the nation and the people [...] Islam is moving with the people."<sup>208</sup> Furthermore, making Iranians hope for a better future was also a strategy to keep them waiting as this would turn the crisis into a lighter burden to carry. This indefinite morrow, also overlapping with "the victory," constituted the main goal to fight for, as the "revolution is approaching, it is close, towards freedom"<sup>209</sup>. In Khomeini's imagery, the people and the nation wanted to "change" and re-write their "destiny."<sup>210</sup> Thus, in this project, the only circumstances in which Leftist groups, but also labor unions – as a journalist from the Leftist newspaper *Paese Sera* inquired on November 2 – could be "free" lay in walking a blurred line of "work in the interests of the nation."<sup>211</sup>

A few days later, responding to the Arab Magazine, *Al-Mustaqbal*, Khomeini eventually slammed the door of the Islamic Republic-to-be in the "Marxists'" face, but it seemed that there were still "our conditions" at stake. The journalist was inquiring about the formation of an opposition front to

---

<sup>208</sup> Ibid. 40-41.

<sup>209</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Radio tv Holland* 5 November 1978 (14 aban 1357), in *Talieh-e Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 49. See also Khomeini, interview with *Radio Luxembourg* 2 November 1978 (11 Aban 1357), 43.

<sup>210</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Paese Sera* 2 November 1978 (11 Aban 1357), 4.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. 46.

the Shah and asked Khomeini's opinion on the hypothesis of "Leftist groups" joining this potential alliance or coalition:

Iran's current Islamic movement has embraced the whole society, and it will carry on as it is. I should point out that we have not been and are not connected to any front or group. We will not accept anybody or any group that does not accept our conditions.<sup>212</sup>

Khomeini, always using the collective pronoun "we," was casting the Left as being under the Russian-Soviet influence, without making any distinctions between them and calling them interchangeably either Leftists, Marxists or Communists. In fact, by November the Soviet Union considered the situation in Iran perilous and warned the US against any interference.<sup>213</sup> During an interview with the *Associated Press*, the AP journalist asked Khomeini if he would endorse a pro-Russian Marxist government, as an outcome of a coup d'état.<sup>214</sup> His stratagem of dispersing Leftist sympathies in Iran within the conspiracy framework of the perceived enemy allowed him to neutralize them as a potential political threat. It also served the purpose of sending threatening messages not only to Iran, but also abroad:

The uprising of Iran's Islamic movement has not given any opportunity for this, and we will treat these conspiracies as we are addressing the Shah's current regime.<sup>215</sup>

Therefore, a determinant shift of narrative occurred by November. First, Khomeini openly acknowledged that there was no political space in the movement for the Leftists, and no discussions [*mozākereh*] between religious people [*mazhabi-ha*] and Marxists were ongoing, even though other

<sup>212</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Arab Magazine Al-Mustaqbal*, 6 November 1978 (15 Aban 1357), in *Talieh-e Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 57.

<sup>213</sup> See Behrooz, *The Failure of the Left in Iran*, 101.

<sup>214</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Associated Press*, 7 November 1978 (16 Aban 1357), in *Talieh-e Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 63-64.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.* 63-64.

sources reported negotiations: “There have been no talks.”<sup>216</sup> Although it was only later that Khomeini would say that Marxism was against Islam, the Ayatollah had already refused to engage in any talks with the Mojāhedīn-e Khalq, for instance throughout the 1970s.<sup>217</sup> Here it is worth clarifying that, according to Ervand Abrahamian, the Mojāhedīn never used the terms Marxist, Socialist or Communist to define themselves. Nevertheless their ideology was considered by the Khomeinists to be close to Marxist thought.

In his interview with the AP, Khomeini – when asked about the Tudeh Party’s potential illegality in the future Islamic Republic – added: “The Communists will be free to express their beliefs.”<sup>218</sup> Second, the populist dimension of his discursive strategy progressed, as he identified himself as embodying the people’s will: “I say people’s words. We are on the same level, and we pronounce the same words [...] we do not want the Shah.”<sup>219</sup> Third, a binary depiction with no escape route was expanded in this interview. Fourth, the concept of economic justice – as opposed to exploitation [*estesmār*] – replaced that of social justice:

The political system will be appointed through people’s votes. Now the country is in between two paths of life and death, freedom and slavery [*esārat*], independence and colonization [*este’mār*], economic justice and exploitation.<sup>220</sup>

Although Khomeini stressed a dichotomic understanding of poor versus rich, oppressed versus oppressors and domination versus independence, he was gradually re-framing justice. Indeed, he was absorbing the historical Left narratives on social justice by broadening the focus on Islamic and economic justice. Furthermore, when for the second time in his Neauphle-Le-Château sojourn, he mentioned workers during an interview with *The Financial Times*, he juxtaposed workers

---

<sup>216</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Der Spiegel*, 7 November 1978 (16 Aban 1357), in *Talīehye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangi, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 68.

<sup>217</sup> See Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam. The Iranian Mojāhedīn*, 1-7 and 81-100. On the meetings between the Mojāhedīn and Khomeini between 1970 and 1973 in particular, see Behrooz, *The Failure of the Left in Iran*, 70.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.* 71 See also Khomeini, interview with *de Volkskrant*, 7 November 1978 (16 Aban 1357).

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.* 65

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.* 66.



[*kārgarān*] and employees [*kārmandān*].<sup>221</sup> Although he underlined the “political nature” of their grievances, he did not frame the strike in terms of class, or explicitly focus on blue-collar workers. Furthermore, from the beginning of November, Khomeini no longer referred to any penetration of Leftist ideals in the factories. He did not have the same urge to deliver a warning against “deviation,” and a related call to action to contain (“ostracize”) the perceived threat, as he had in the universities a month before. Moreover, when referring to his request to people to support the strike, Khomeini interestingly kept using the word *mardom*, instead of *khalq*. The latter would have immediately linked to the Mojāhedīn-e-Khalq. Similarly, the word *tudeh* (masses), would have directly connected his message to the Communist party imagery. Furthermore, the question of the oil stoppage was looming, which would have been extremely costly to the economy of Western countries. Yet, this constituted Khomeini’s trump card.

The deprived [*mahrūm*]workers and employees of the Oil Company have gone on a strike for their legitimate political demands, and I have asked people to support their strike [...]  
The Muslim nation of Iran would do anything to achieve their legitimate rights, even at the price of destroying the interests of the West.<sup>222</sup>

From this moment onwards, Khomeini consolidated his role as the spiritual leader of the Revolution and tightened his focus on the means of fulfilling its stated aim. Hence, the metaphor of Kerbala and martyrdom, interwoven with nationalist rhetoric, boosted the discourse of resistance, where failure or defeat was not even an option. One again, the cause-effect pattern (a dictatorship that resulted in the oppression of the deprived) returned, overlapping with a problem-solution template (the Shah depicted as a “stubborn enemy” who had to be fought through Muslim resistance):

---

<sup>221</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Financial Times* 7 November 1978 (16 Aban 1357), in *Talīehye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 75-76.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

The nation of Iran has begun the holy Islamic movement to free itself from dictatorship and expansionism and to achieve an Islamic government. With God's help, it will continue until victory. Since the nation's enemies, the Shah and his supporters, do not want to step aside easily, therefore, the stubbornness of the nation's enemies, and the resistance of the courageous Muslim people against them, will cause damages [...] A Muslim knows that if he gets killed, he will join the martyrs of Karbala, and won't lose anything, this is why he will keep struggling until the ultimate victory.<sup>223</sup>

Within this framework, asked about future developments, Khomeini inserted the Leftist presence as a “solvable” problem. First, through a strategy of denial and exclusion, he disqualified them from the “unity of the opposition forces.”<sup>224</sup> Second, stating that all the slogans chanted in the streets were praising Islam, he refused to confirm reports of the use of Leftist slogans. Third, he minimized the Leftists' presence through quoting numbers. Fourth, Khomeini asserted that at an indefinite point in the future, there would be a solution. However, it was not clear when. Moreover, he used a double negation that kept an aura of mystery and uncertainty.

No, the number of Leftists is minimal [*qalili*]. There are thirty-five million Muslims in Iran who are all shouting Islam in the streets. Who can represent these thirty-five million conscious believers? In this regard, we don't have any problem that isn't solvable.<sup>225</sup>

---

<sup>223</sup> Ibid 77.

<sup>224</sup> This is how a reporter from the Japanese Radio-Tv introduced his/her question to Khomeini. Interview with Japanese Radio-Television, 8 November 1978 (17 Aban, 1357), in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 4 (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 381.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

He went even further by stating that there are “no different forces, only one Iranian nation,” because almost “all Iranians are Muslim”<sup>226</sup> and “Communists in Iran do not have any power.”<sup>227</sup> If a few weeks earlier Khomeini had given assurances that everyone would be free in the future Islamic Republic, talking to journalists from France, Germany, Italy, and Spain on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1978, he attacked the “Marxists.”<sup>228</sup> Once again, he did not specify which group he was referring to. Interestingly, in mentioning them, he always used the future tense, as in the current situation, the revolutionary (and polyphonic) movement was benefitting from the Leftists who were actively participating.

If their role is not harmful [*mozer*], they will be free [...] Marxists will be free but will not have any freedom of sabotage [*kharābkārī*].<sup>229</sup>

Provoked by a question from a *Reuters* journalist on November 16, inquiring if Khomeini was afraid of being a “cover” for “Marxists groups,” the Ayatollah seized this opportunity to finalize the process of isolating them.<sup>230</sup> He eventually discredited and delegitimized them for being: 1) small in number or non-existent; 2) not knowledgeable enough; and 3) supported by the Shah.

We do not know any Marxist groups or groups that have a base among people. There are no groups. [If you] leave aside a few guys [*nafar bacche*] that neither have any knowledge of

<sup>226</sup> In an interview with the Arab publication *al-Bayraq*, a few days later, Khomeini said that 90 percent of the Iranian population was Muslim. See in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 4 (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 481.

<sup>227</sup> Khomeini, interview with the Dutch Radio-Tv, 9 November 1978 (18 Aban 1357), in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 4 (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 415-416.

<sup>228</sup> Khomeini, interview with journalists from Germany, France, Italy, and Spain, 10 November 1978 (19 Aban 1357), in *Talīeh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 92-96 and *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 4, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 429-430.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Reuters*, 16 Nov 1978 (25 Aban 1357), in *Talīeh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 133-134.

the Iranian society nor have read more than two or three books, you will see that the Shah supports them.<sup>231</sup>

In the meantime, workers' strikes were spreading in different cities, from Abadan to Tehran, Ahvaz, and Aghajari. The effect was an oil stoppage, and the Shah sent the army to force workers to go back to work, accusing them of being "traitors" of the country. Some returned to their jobs, with about two hundred being arrested in mid-November.<sup>232</sup> Nevertheless, other workers continued their action. Until that moment, Khomeini had never linked labor and the Left, and in most of the interviews from Neauphle-le-Château did not particularly stress the issue of class allegiance in the factories. However, on November 20, during a speech to a group of Iranian residents abroad, he praised the workers' strikes. While explaining the reasons and goals of the uprising against the Shah, he urged everyone to keep the upheaval alive as a collective duty: "Keep this uprising, gentlemen. It is the duty of us all to do so."<sup>233</sup> Moreover, he turned workers' strikes into a discursive tool to attack the army violence in the factories.<sup>234</sup>

Oil workers have stopped their work as they do not want to give away their oil. Who is pushing them to go back to work? Why? Why is the violence used to try to force them back to work? The army is doing this. Why? Should these workers return to work so that this oil, this black gold, will flow again for other countries, for America? This is why the army is not our army! The army is not independent.<sup>235</sup>

The image of blood and suffering permeated his rhetoric:

---

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> See Nikazmerad, "A Chronological Survey of the Iranian Revolution," 327-368.

<sup>233</sup> Khomeini, speech to a group of Iranian residents abroad, 20 November 1978 (29 Aban, 1357), in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 55.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid, 49-50.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

Are the workers aware that the guns which tear open the chests of our beloved youth and cause our men, women, and children to bleed and suffer are funded by this oil, which is extracted by these extreme efforts?<sup>236</sup>

On November 29, 1978, when Khomeini's return to Iran was on the horizon, a journalist from the magazine *al-Iqtisad al-Arabi*, asked a fundamental question about the free labor unions: "One of the demands of these strikes is the establishment of free trade unions. What is your opinion about trade unions? What will be their role in your plan of the Islamic Republic?"<sup>237</sup>

The deprived workers of Iran, who are mainly the former poor, hungry peasants and farmers, have every right to struggle through any legitimate and possible ways [*tariq*] to achieve their rights. They will be allowed in the Islamic Republic to have any possible form to resolve their problems and difficulties. Hence, [this] will inform the cabinet [*dowlāt*] of their problems and defend their professional rights.<sup>238</sup>

At the same time, Khomeini immediately cleared up any confusion or doubt about the potential role of the Left in the government of the Islamic Republic, as the political project of the IRI was taking shape with the movement being both more mature and more significant in numbers. The time was ripe for a straightforward rupture. Without explicitly mentioning the Tudeh Party, which de facto constituted the historical link between trade unions and the Left in the Iranian experience, he argued: "Every person will have the right to freedom of faith and expression in the Islamic Republic, but we will not allow any betrayal by any person or group depending on foreign

---

<sup>236</sup> Khomeini, message to the Muslim nation, 22 November 1978 (1 Azar 1357), in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 75-78.

<sup>237</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Al-Iqtisadi al-Arabi*, 29 November 1978, 8 Azar 1357, in *Talīehye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 135-138.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid*

powers.”<sup>239</sup> The official line of demarcation was religion, thus an unchangeable premise based on ideological divergencies, that would block any further claim:

Our program is the Islamic government and originating from monotheism [*tohid*]. They do not agree with this belief and ideology. Therefore, we cannot move with them in the same direction.<sup>240</sup>

By now, Khomeini was removing any ambiguity about the future Islamic Republic. Yet, he remained vague while speaking about the present. The Tudeh Party, to Khomeini, represented the Communist threat and, therefore, overlapped with both the Soviets (seen as a foreign “oppressor” against Iran’s independence) and infidelity/atheism. For the Ayatollah, the Tudeh should not be allowed to mushroom among the revolutionaries with the aspiration of any political role in the future. Portrayed as small in numbers, having no integrity, compared metaphorically to a drop in the ocean: this was how Communism appeared in Khomeini’s words. “Communism will never find a way in Iran [...] Out of a population of about thirty million Iranians, only a few are Communists [...] I do not believe that they are genuine Communists [...] Everyone knows that if a short slogan is chanted somewhere and we presume that some (true) Communists have created it, it is still only a drop compared to an ocean.”<sup>241</sup>

Nevertheless, the revolution-in-the-making needed unity, in terms of mobilization and a counteraction to the army’s violence in the streets. Khomeini’s short-term strategy could be summarized in an answer that he gave to the Lebanese Newspaper *al-Hadaf* on the last day of November: “We agree with anyone who asks for the Iranian nation and the Shah’s downfall.”<sup>242</sup>

Muharram, the sacred month of Shia Islam, had already started. Even without pronouncing the word

---

<sup>239</sup> Ibid 138.

<sup>240</sup> Khomeini, interview with a Danish Newspaper (name missing), in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsar-e Imām Khomeini, 1389/2000), 121-122.

<sup>241</sup> Khomeini, speech to Iranian students abroad, 26 November 1978 (5 Azar 1357), *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsar-e Imām Khomeini, 1389/2000), 129-30.

<sup>242</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Al-Hadaf*, 30 November 1978 (9 Azar 1357), in *Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangi, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 155.

*kārgar*, Khomeini's objective was to keep the strikes alive: "All the employees of the public (governmental) oil companies should continue their strikes [...] Capitalists that have sucked the blood of oil industry will not have any right to keep doing this anymore."<sup>243</sup>

***Walking towards victory: Khomeini's goal-oriented strategy in December***

December started with thousands of protestors marching through the streets of Tehran against the curfew imposed by the Shah a few days earlier. The army opened fire against the demonstrators. Oil workers went on with their strikes. Day after day, millions were taking to the streets across the country against the Shah. The revolution seemed to be closer. Khomeini continued to incite those participating in the strikes and demonstrations. His discourse over the course of December underwent a sharp transformation, as it began to focus on the one and only goal: victory. This comprised two main "means-goals" or achievements: the overthrow of the Shah's regime and the establishment of an Islamic Republic. Moreover, the strategy of ignoring the fragmentation of the Iranian opposition to the Shah, along with its political nuances, became more systematic and precise. In fact, in this phase, it served as a method to firstly, avoid any splits in the revolutionary movement and, secondly, to enhance popular unconditional support in the streets. Therefore, Khomeini declared: "In Iran, we have only classes and forces that all go in the same direction: destroy the Shah's regime, and they are united for this."<sup>244</sup> During an interview with the BBC on December 4, 1978, he combined the strategy of denial with that of conspiracy. He argued:

---

<sup>243</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Farda Afrika* magazine, 5 December 1978 (14 Azar 1357), in *Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangi, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 174-175.

<sup>244</sup> Interview with Italian Television, 2 December 1978, (11 Azar 1357), in *Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangi, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 163.

In the current movement in Iran, all can see that people have planned Islamic themes, and no communist question is working in progress [...] this is something that the Shah has spread to protect himself.<sup>245</sup>

As these weeks coincided with the holy month of Muharram for Shia Islam, Khomeini's strategy of co-opting the Karbala narrative of martyrdom reached its culmination. He turned his interviews during the sacred month into an ideological battle between believers and non-believers. It resulted in a losing game for the Leftists.

First, talking to a Lebanese reporter from *Amal* daily, Khomeini reinforced the idea of the Leftists as “pawns” in the hands of the foreigners who were not only against Iran but against the broader concept of Muslim nations:

The slogan on the separation of religion from politics is colonial propaganda meant to hinder Muslim nations from playing a role in their destiny.

Second, answering a question from the *Los Angeles Times* about the Leftist groups, he emphasized an unbridgeable divide between “we” and “them”:

Our and their objectives are different. We lie in Islam and monotheism. They do not agree on both points [...] They do not believe (have faith) in Islam, and we do not have any interest in working or collaborating with them.<sup>246</sup>

Third, he framed this clash already envisaging a solution: assimilation under the Islamic aegis.

Using the present tense to project an imperative into a certain future, Khomeini, for the first time,

---

<sup>245</sup> Khomeini, interview with BBC, 4 December 1978 (13 Azar 1357), in *Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangi, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 169-170.

<sup>246</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Los Angeles Times*, 7 December 1978 (16 Azar 1357), in *Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangi, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 181.



threatened all factions: “When the Islamic government is formed, all will obey the law of Islam and Islam is a united, uniform front.”<sup>247</sup> Elaborating on this paradigm and referring to Marxists, he made an explicit connection between the implementation of future Islamic law and the absorption of other “schools of thought,” because there will be only one option: Islam.

More than ninety-five percent of the Iranian people are Muslims and want the establishment of an Islamic government and the implementation of the progressive [*moterāqi*] Islamic laws. All the [social] strata in the country are united in seeking these demands. If some, whose number is minimal, raised a slogan other than Islam, they are biased, or they are taking orders from foreign powers if they are not the agents of the Iranian regime, or do not know Islam and what they have heard about Islam is from wrong or deviated [*enherāf*] propaganda. For this reason, they have found shelter in other schools of thought, and we believe that with the implementation of Islamic law, they will return to Islam.<sup>248</sup>

This last sentence expressing a vague plan for the future could be open to many interpretations, about how he meant to make people return to Islam through law. As will be explored in greater depth in the following chapters of this dissertation, this paved the way for the repression of Leftist ideas in Iran under the IRI. Nonetheless, until that moment, Khomeini had never conveyed any threat of elimination with regard to the Leftists. The message had been kept intentionally ambiguous with the concept of a whole community of believers pursuing a project with God's help and guidance being reinforced instead. Thus, when in mid-December, he called oil workers to go on strike, Khomeini referred to a religious obligation. He also strengthened the bond between the

---

<sup>247</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Voice of Luxembourg*, 12 December 1978 (21 Azar 1357), *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 223.

<sup>248</sup> Khomeini, interview with *l'Unità*, 14 December 1978, 23 Azar 1357, in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 231-231.

religious and nationalist element, aiming to achieve the final goal (victory) through two means-goals (giving a universal dimension to the strikes and stopping oil exports):

They [oil workers] will respond to God and the nation. All of them should go on strike [...] not even one drop of oil will leave the country [...] It is their religious duty; it is their divine obligation to make their strikes universal and stop the export of oil.<sup>249</sup>

To inspire courage and cause a reaction, he emphasized the contrast with the fear that the Shah provoked:

Do not be afraid of him, he is on his way out [*raftani ast*] [...] Pay neither attention [*e'ttenā*] to their supplications [*eltemās*], nor fear their words. Do not be afraid at all. Continue your strikes.<sup>250</sup>

To increase his persuasiveness, Khomeini relied on another expedient to call workers to go on strike: rhetorical questions that juxtaposed an obvious answer with no alternative.

Are we speaking irrationally when we tell the workers to strike when we tell them that it is their religious duty to strike, that it is for the good of the country and the good of the nation? [...] Should we just give the oil away?<sup>251</sup>

As the main goal was victory, unity and support from all was essential. This is why Khomeini throughout December repeatedly addressed the Iranian “nation” both abroad and in Iran, asking everyone to support the oil workers with “housing” and all “their needs.”<sup>252</sup> On December 27, he used patience with God's path as an emotional lever – along with fear, as abovementioned – until

---

<sup>249</sup> Khomeini, speech to Iranian students and residents abroad, 16 December 1978 (25 Azar 1357), in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 242-251.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Khomeini gave three different speeches on December 16, 22, and 27.

victory would be achieved. This latter was explicitly portrayed as a synonym of “independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic” [*esteqlāl, azādi, jomhouri eslāmi*], referring to a slogan chanted in the streets during the demonstrations.

The honorable nation must continue its Islamic movement until the achievement of the goal and remain patient in this way where the pleasure of God lies, and do not spare any effort to assist their brothers [...] They should not listen to the satanic temptations the diabolic agents of the Shah disseminate to create disappointment and indolence in the nation. They should rely on God in this path, which is the attainment of independence, freedom, and the Islamic Republic.<sup>253</sup>

Furthermore, even the economy became involved in this war between believers and non-believers. The barricades of anti-capitalism overlapped with those of Islam, eventually appropriating the class discourse championed by the historical Left. In fact, during an interview with an American professor in late December, Khomeini argued:

Many in Iran are involved in an economy that is against Islam, and it is capitalist. Now this will change because class distinctions [*fāseleh tabaqati*] should not exist anymore, but all should be on the same level [*sath*].<sup>254</sup>

### **Organizing the IRI before going back: shaping the strategies of ostracism and exclusion**

As the project of the Islamic Republic was materializing, in his interviews and messages from the suburbs of Paris in January, Khomeini gave more details about the future. By then, the need to make the final goal closer and more concrete seemed evident in his rhetoric. He re-adjusted his

<sup>253</sup> Khomeini, message to the nation of Iran, 27 December 1978 [6 Dey 1357], in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 283-285.

<sup>254</sup> Khomeini, interview with a professor from an American University, 28 December 1978 (7 Dey 1357), in *Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangi, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 222-223.

roadmap as follows: revolution, victory, elections,<sup>255</sup> Islamic government. By doing so, Khomeini triggered a crescendo of expectations and hopes.

After the revolution [...] after the elections, all duties and things to do about the government will be clear. Concerning the parliament, those who are not saboteurs will have the right to vote [*kasani ke kharābkār na bāshand haq-e ray dārand.*]<sup>256</sup>

First, he used the future tense to postpone the realization of this until after the revolution, which was yet to be successful. Second, he used the word “saboteurs,” previously used when referring to the Leftists, when talking about a future Parliament, which automatically gave to understand that Khomeini had reserved no place in the government for them. Third, he utterly changed the narrative and distanced himself from the previously stated pattern, “all will be free,” refusing the right to vote to those who wanted to “sabotage.” Fourth, the ambiguity of not clarifying who the *saboteurs* were, remained functional to maintaining unity until victory was achieved.

A few days later, Khomeini responded to a question from a German Radio-TV reporter on the Tudeh party and explained why no access to the Islamic government would be given to the Communists. What is relevant to the context of this chapter is the discursive logic of projecting the refusal and the fault onto the Tudeh, while rejecting it within a framework of “we” (believers) *versus* “them” (atheists):

<sup>255</sup> He talked about “free elections” during an interview with *Express English*, 3 January 1979 (13 Dey 1378), in *Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris*, 235.

<sup>256</sup> Khomeini, interview with journalists from *AP*, *Le Figaro*, *Miami Herald*, 4 January 1979 (14 Dey 1357), in *Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 241.

We organize an Islamic republic, an Islamic government relying on votes of the nation so that law will be Islamic. We will not allow a party that rejects the Islamic society to enter our government.<sup>257</sup>

Targeting and demonizing the Tudeh party, as the leading organized group on the Left, became a systematic move in the last phase of Khomeini's stay in Paris. For instance, when a journalist from *The Economist* inquired about legalizing the Tudeh, he responded: "Today, no group is as hated as the Tudeh Party, due to its terrible story in Iran."<sup>258</sup> Moreover, he declared: "No class or groups will be allowed to penetrate the elections." Answering a question on a potential Communist minister in the future, Khomeini replied: "If the people vote for the Islamic Republic, they will not accept a non-Muslim minister." He went even further by denying the idea that any of his supporters in the streets could be Marxist sympathizers.<sup>259</sup> The rest of the Leftist plethora was dissolved into the image of a young, inexperienced, and therefore insignificant group of people. This articulated and disclosed the strategy of minimization and represented the acme of it.

...a few boys that have a lack of experience and turned to the Left, as the Left, in its real meaning does not exist in Iran and among the Iranian intellectuals who know the Iranian society. In Iran, only Islam rules.<sup>260</sup>

Eventually, Khomeini acknowledged the fact that in his project, there was no space for non-religious representatives, at least in the government. As previously mentioned, the reason for exclusion lay – according to Khomeini - in an intrinsic incapacity of those marginalized parties to

<sup>257</sup> Khomeini, interview with German Radio-TV, Channel 2, 5 January 1979 (15 Dey 1357), in *Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangi, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 248.

<sup>258</sup> Khomeini, interview with *The Economist*, 8 January 1979 (18 Dey 1357), in *Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangi, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 263-265.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid. 267.

<sup>260</sup> Khomeini, interview with *The Times*, 8 January 1979 (18 Dey 1357), in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 392.

serve the IRI's political project. He was shifting the blame onto those who were not believers.

Talking to Italian TV on January 12, he stated:

Our government is Islamic, and those who are not religious/pious [*gheyr-e mazhabi*] do not have any chance to enter (any road) because they do not attract votes.<sup>261</sup>

Towards the end of his stay in Paris, with the risk that the model of Islamic Marxism could penetrate the universities and constitute a variable that could possibly run out of control through the Mojāhedīn-e Khalq or the Tudeh, despite the divisions and the government repression of the 1970s,<sup>262</sup> Khomeini proceeded to the utter repudiation of any theoretical overlap:

About Marxism, no kind of relations exists among the Islamic movement and the impious Marxism. It is impossible to be both a Muslim and a Marxist at the same time.<sup>263</sup>

What paved the way to the silencing of the Left which occurred after the Revolution – as chapter 4 will explore – began to come to the surface in these last weeks before Khomeini's return to Iran. Moreover, towards the end of his stay in Paris, the Ayatollah openly declared that he would have a role as a Guide [*naqsh-e hedāyat rahnemāy*] in the future Islamic Republic.<sup>264</sup> The revolutionary fervor was at its height. In response to the formation of Dr. Bakhtyar's government, Khomeini announced the establishment of a Council of the Islamic Revolution. The Shah left Tehran on January 16, 1979. Nonetheless, Khomeini encouraged the Iranians to keep struggling, as they had to achieve their final goal. Eventually, on January 23, 1979, talking to the Iranian newspapers *Kayhān* and *Ettelā'āt*, Khomeini unveiled his plan for the Left and the Tudeh in particular:

---

<sup>261</sup> Khomeini, interview with Rai Italian Television, 12 January 1979 (22 Dey 1357), in *Talīeh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslāmī. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 309.

<sup>262</sup> See Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojāhedīn*, 128.

<sup>263</sup> Khomeini, interview with AFP, 14 January 1979 (24 Dey, 1357), in *Sahīfeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzīm va Nashr-e Āsar-e Imām Khomeini, 1389/2000), 447.

<sup>264</sup> Khomeini, interview with Abc America, 12 January 1979 (22 Dey 1357), in *Talīeh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslāmī. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris* (Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1984), 312.

If it is to the detriment of the nation, it will be stopped, if not, and if it is only the expression of idea, there will be no restriction. All the people are free except a political party that is against the exigencies of the country [...] Islam will grant freedom and pay attention to the economy.<sup>265</sup>

Khomeini gave his last interview from Paris on January 27, 1979. By then, the Bakhtiyyar government had closed the airport to prevent the Ayatollah's return. Three days later, 3 million people gathered to welcome Khomeini back to Tehran. "When we landed in Tehran, I could not see anything on the ground but people, a big flock of people. The airport was closed," remembered a journalist who travelled from France to Iran on February 1, 1979.<sup>266</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the symbolic universe of signs and meanings that the Ayatollah Khomeini created during the last phase of his exile, in particular relating to the Leftists' potential for mobilization and their impact on workers. Between October 1978 and February 1979, while preparing the 1979 Revolution from Neauphle-le-Château, Khomeini shaped a discourse that was eventually and collectively accredited at the height of revolutionary fervor in Iran. His narrative of revolt evolved over the months. His discursive strategies transformed to adjust to and take advantage of the developing events as well as the shifting context. In this process, Khomeini managed to marginalize the Left, which represented a potential competitor among the deprived, which included workers. As he was imposing himself as a leader of the popular discontent against the Shah, his figure played a crucial role in the context of the struggle for hegemony both in discourse and in practice. By absorbing the rhetoric of class and social justice under his Islamic and nationalist project he, on the one hand, embodied a counter-hegemonic actor against the Shah. On the other, his discourse became hegemonic for those pursuing class struggle, overshadowing the

---

<sup>265</sup> Khomeini, interview with *Kayhān* and *Ettelā'āt*, 23 January, 1979 [3 Bahman, 1357], in *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*, Vol. 5, (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000), 519-521.

<sup>266</sup> Nella Condorelli, journalist from the Italian newspaper *Lotta Continua*, who travelled with the Ayatollah Khomeini from France to Iran on 1 February, 1979. Interview with the author, 5 February 2019.

Left's appeal in this regard. Drawing on the language of martyrdom, Khomeini aimed to embrace all classes of Iranian society. He managed to weave together nationalist, religious, and social justice grievances under the same collective cause. In his discourse, the Leftists constituted a blurred entity. He referred indiscriminately to "the Marxists," "the Leftists," or "the Communists." The intention was to undermine and control any impact they might have on the revolutionary movement that was emerging against the Shah. On the one hand, although weakened by the Shah's repression and internally divided, the Left could pose a threat to the stability of the future Islamic Republic. On the other hand, they could be a resource in fomenting the Revolution. This means that Khomeini needed to tread carefully, limiting the potential harm Leftist groups could do to his project of the Islamic Republic, but simultaneously keeping them on board as long as he needed them.

Importantly, he did not connect them with labor or workers until late 1978, when – as the next chapter will explore in more depth – they attempted to gain ground and mobilize workers. While unfolding his strategy of minimization and denial, Khomeini was aware of the Leftists' fragile bases for action. Neglect was a way of controlling a perceived – yet limited – threat. According to the Ayatollah, workers' grievances should not be seen as unique within the revolutionary corpus. Although a dichotomic understanding of poor versus rich, oppressed versus oppressors and domination versus independence permeated his rhetoric, Khomeini broadened the focus to look at social justice, placing it under the umbrella of Islamic and economic justice. When talking about labor strikes, he did not frame them in terms of class, or explicitly focus on blue-collar workers. From his perspective, these actions represented, first, an act against a common enemy (the Shah) and, second, a necessary move for a shared cause. It was only when massive strikes erupted across the country, that Khomeini delivered his explicit attack to eventually isolate and contain the Left. He deemed it: 1) divided, 2) unable to influence the revolutionary movement, and 3) a "pawn" in the Shah's hands. Khomeini used two other discursive stratagems: the binary comparison [good/evil], and numbers. The use of the collective pronoun "we" – depicted as one united group under the religious umbrella – against "they" reinforced this imagery. Creating a discursive overlap



between the “ambiguous” Leftists and extremists was another recurrent expedient. In fact, Khomeini attempted to neutralize the Leftists by enhancing their bad reputation among parts of Iranian society, which had already spread under the Shah’s censorship and repression. Reinforcing his political, and by then hegemonic stance among the revolutionaries, when massive strikes started to economically paralyze the regime apparatus, Khomeini envisaged a more definite project of the Islamic Republic. His plan for the future, although not fully detailed, would exclude the Left, along with their understanding of class struggle and social justice. Emphasizing Islam as a comprehensive umbrella for the Revolution and its aftermath, he stated that there was no place for the Communists who were chasing values that lay outside God’s morality. Thus, the Leftist presence began to constitute a “solvable” problem. By the beginning of December, the strategy of discrediting reached its peak. Leftist groups were not worthy of the “unity of the opposition forces.” Khomeini even denied that any slogans chanted in the streets belonged to the Leftists’ symbolics and insisted that they were praising only Islam. Moreover, during the holy month of Muharram, Khomeini suggested that at an unspecified point in the future, there would be a “solution” to the Marxists. Was he envisaging the misfortunes and repression that would befall the Left after the establishment of the IRI? He certainly needed to defuse a potential political bomb, that could have left his populist grip on the masses and the deprived in tatters. When his premises seemed to be accredited and consolidated, Khomeini’s discourse became even more militant. Thus, he started to focus exclusively on the main goals: the revolution, the overthrow of the Shah’s regime and the establishment of an Islamic Republic. In this delicate phase, the strategy of describing opposition to the Shah as a monolith served, first, to avoid divisions in the revolutionary movement and, second, to enhance popular unconditional support for the most violent and challenging phase of the Revolution. Indeed, until that moment, Khomeini had never conveyed any direct threat of elimination or repression in respect of the Leftists. Instead, he had reinforced the concept of a whole community of believers, officially excluding (only) the “atheists,” and aimed to achieve the final victory. Day by day, preparing the last phase of the Revolution from Paris, Khomeini fueled an

escalation of hopes, prompting some authors – such as Adib-Moghaddam – to compare his impact to that of other leaders such as Lenin, Mao and Castro.<sup>267</sup> Just before returning to Iran, the Ayatollah declared that “those who are not saboteurs will have the right to vote.” The ambiguity in his discourse was part of his success, that eventually made him the hegemonic actor in the counter-hegemonic struggle against the Shah. This is what the analysis of Khomeini’s speeches and interviews so far has indicated. It has provided important insights into this figure, and how he conceived social justice and referred to workers. Nonetheless, part of the context is still missing. The next chapter will attempt to bridge this gap. If we view this dissertation as an imaginary tape, chapter 3 will hit the rewind button. It will retrace the various stages of the revolutionary journey from a different perspective. Adopting a bottom-up approach, it will tell the story of the making of the Iranian Revolution through workers’ words and memories in order to comprehend not only what they said, but – more importantly – how they constructed their slogans and why they took to the streets as a distinguishable group, until the final days of the Revolution, on the side of millions of Iranians chanting “Esteqlāl, Azādi, Jomhuri-e Eslāmi,” “Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic.

---

<sup>267</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, 1-18.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Language of Resistance:

#### the Iranian Revolution in Workers' Words and Slogans



Oil workers, February 1979 (Photo: petromuseum.ir)

#### **Introduction**

There are aspects of the history of the 1978-1979 revolutionary movement against the Shah that have remained marginalized. One of them is the story of the workers' role through their own words and slogans. How did workers find their own paths of defiance through discourse? What can their statements and slogans tell us about the evolution of the mass protests and strikes that culminated in the February 1979 Revolution? How did they reflect and respond to Khomeini's messages, discussed in the previous chapter? These questions stem from a meeting I had in early November 2018 in Iran, with a revolutionary who actively participated in the demonstrations that took place in the streets and around the factories of Tehran. While discussing the reasons that gave the impetus to workers to mobilize against the Shah and join the other protesters, he stopped his stream of

consciousness abruptly and told me: “The real story is in our stories, in our words.”<sup>268</sup> This chapter will follow the path mapped out in this quote. Thus, it will shift the focus away from the broader perspective adopted by most of the existing academic literature on the 1979 Revolution, which mainly contextualizes labor strikes within a framework of structural factors and economic developments, as in the pioneering works of Asef Bayat, Ervand Abrahamian, Ahmad Ashraf and Misagh Parsa. Following the line suggested by Kurzman – “in favor of recognizing and reconstructing the lived experience of the moment” in approaching the study of the Revolution – this chapter concentrates on workers’ statements, rallying-cries, and memories as experiences.<sup>269</sup> Building on Sreberni-Mohammadi’s work on macro and micro histories of the 1979 Revolution through the narratives of “small media,” it contributes to the study of communication culture with a specific focus on workers.<sup>270</sup> Based on field research, and relying on primary sources such as interviews with workers, scholars, and journalists, along with historical newspaper articles in Persian, and foreign journalists’ reports from Iran in 1978 and 1979, it is an attempt to integrate the timeline of workers’ strikes with the evolution of their own expressions of dissent. As mentioned above, along with archival material, the chapter draws upon memories, which are here understood as tools that leave room for workers’ subjectivity. These have been collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six workers (both affiliated and not affiliated to political groups, from Ahvaz and Tehran), each of whom I met more than once. In the context of this chapter, the value of memories, which are lived experiences mediated into inevitably fragmented or biased stories, lies in the diverse interpretations and individual representations of a past event. Memories are not understood as mere record or interpretation of the past. They do not carry any historical and

---

<sup>268</sup> Former Leftist activist and scholar. Conversation with the author. Tehran, 1 November 2018.

<sup>269</sup> See Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 81-184; Asef Bayat, “Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers” in Lockman, 200-203; Ashraf, “Kālbod-shekāfi Enqelāb: Naqsh-e Kārgarān-e San‘ati dar Enqelāb-e; Abrahamian, *Mardom dar Siasat Iran*, People in Iran’s Politics, (Tehran: Cheshme, 1394-2015), 83-123; Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*; Ashraf and Banuazizi, “The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution,” 3-40; Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5 and 77-88; Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 126-188. Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?*, 89-101.

<sup>270</sup> Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

crystallized truth. Conversely, they are tools for unveiling the evolving political meanings given to words and the collective importance of testimonies attributed to individuals.<sup>271</sup> What matters here is the link between memory and resistance, as a bridge to explain political transformation. Therefore, the goal is not to follow impressions or workers' opinions, so as to use them as (impossible) keys to objectivity. Conversely, memories here represent tools used to tackle the (individual) triggers of a collective action, such as that of the revolution. Contributing some of the missing pieces of history through stories, they capture how workers' personal experiences became collectively political while the Revolution was unfolding.<sup>272</sup>

Three aspects are relevant to this analysis, which is based theoretically on Gramsci and Fairclough.

1) The construction of *the political*. Specifically, the process by which workers – acting as political subjects – constructed their struggle and generated a counter-hegemonic discourse in slogans; 2) what collective imageries and shared values formed the background to the discursive strategies that workers employed at the time of the 1978-1979 strikes; 3) what made the Revolution eventually “thinkable” and possible, according to the workers' understanding. Following this reasoning, the interaction between practices of language formulation and their premises, values, goals, and potential consequences is particularly relevant. It explains the factors that allowed workers to first, consciously transform slogans into calls to action and, second, to legitimize certain political choices. In particular, this chapter shows that – starting from the initial strikes in the summer of 1978 – there was a transformation in workers' statements and rallying-cries. These shifted in terms of the spectrum of their demands, as well as in the expressions of collective thinking. Initially, slogans served as a medium to spread economic complaints, housing demands, and class struggle-related requests. Later – particularly during the last months before February 1979 (when protesters

---

<sup>271</sup> See also Charles Tilly, “Afterword: Political Memories in Space and Time, in Jonathan Boyarin eds, *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Timespace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 247.

<sup>272</sup> The author expresses her gratitude to Prof. Naghmeh Sohrabi for sharing her knowledge, reflections and empathy on the use of memories in the study of the Iranian revolution with me. See Naghmeh Sohrabi, “Muddling through the Iranian Revolution,” *Perspectives on History*, November 1, 2015. [https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2015/muddling-through-the-iranian-revolution?fbclid=IwAR0Pa6M-vFTYfuwxlNUdi\\_yYVaXuG08AJcWn-K0YvU6pgRI5IQQIqxVuMdl](https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2015/muddling-through-the-iranian-revolution?fbclid=IwAR0Pa6M-vFTYfuwxlNUdi_yYVaXuG08AJcWn-K0YvU6pgRI5IQQIqxVuMdl) and Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1981): 96–107.

celebrated the success of the Revolution and the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty) rallying-cries became: a) more politically-driven, b) harshly anti-despotic and anti-imperialist, c) driven by claims for Iran's independence, as well as freedom and rights, and d) more focused on Khomeini as a leader. Furthermore, flyers, along with word of mouth and oral summaries of books that were spreading in semi-private meetings, gradually served as sites of confrontation and sources of story-telling. In fact, they shed light upon both the cruelty and the vulnerability of the monarchy.<sup>273</sup> When demonstrations became too dangerous – particularly after the “Black Friday” of September 8, 1978 – when the Shah's forces carried out mass shootings of protesters in Jaleh Square<sup>274</sup> – strikes developed as (almost) unique representational places of opposition.<sup>275</sup>

Interestingly, perceived threats coming from within the country (the Shah) and from abroad (“the imperialists”) brought out feelings of uncertainty/insecurity mixed with a sense of urgency that eventually translated into slogans. Thus, particular economic grievances or calls for solidarity were conveyed as necessities for the survival of the country. For instance, with their frequent references to “the people of Iran,” the Iranian workers were also trying to build bridges and a network of solidarity with other social groups such as students and peasants against a common enemy. In other words, political mobilization often arose and was spread through specific words, carrying shared emotions, and was based on communal experiences and a common adversary. It appealed to a collectivity, which was then galvanized into calls for unity, and collective opposition, as well as aggressive or defensive actions against the enemy.

Therefore, tackling connections and disconnections between verbal and relational elements and an action or a promised move, this chapter argues that: 1) workers made a performative and conscious political act – not only driven by economic needs – through statements and slogans;

---

<sup>273</sup> Former Leftist activist. Conversation with the author. Tehran, 5 November 2018. On the political function of leaflets and flyers, see also Sreberni-Mohmmadi *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 121-130.

<sup>274</sup> See *Ettelā'āt*, 18 Shahrivar 1357- September 9, 1978.

<sup>275</sup> Former Leftist activist. Conversation with the author. Tehran, 5 November 2018.

2) communication, transmitting shared knowledge and experiences, played a unique role in the processes of solidarity building.

### **Constructing a counter-hegemonic discourse**

Gramsci conceived the relations of power between ruling classes and those ruled as a matter of interaction, where resistance to political hegemony or forms of counter-hegemony actually (co)-exist within the framework of the hegemonic context rather than outside of it *per se*.<sup>276</sup> Workers' actions of resistance to the Shah and their participation in the revolutionary momentum are emblematic in this sense. In fact, the choice of slogans and their construction can be ascribed to the hegemonic context of the end of 1978, when a discursive war involving the Shah, Khomeini and Leftist groups was playing out before workers' eyes. Looking at the Iranian context through a Gramscian lens, it is possible to identify the stages workers passed through to reach the collective awareness that led them to take to the streets and loudly express their grievances. Throughout the summer and fall of 1978, their struggle progressed rapidly beyond "popular spontaneity," maturing into "awareness," although not fully "conscious leadership."<sup>277</sup> As will be investigated in the next sections, unrest as acts of "popular spontaneity" represented the initial expressions of the workers' voices that had remained unheard under the Shah. As Gramsci argued, spontaneity is to be considered an inner element of the history of the subalterns. Spontaneous rebellion unites those who live on the margins of society and have not been able to fully develop forms of collective awareness. In Gramsci's words, "they [the subaltern classes] do not even suspect that their history can be of any importance and have any value worth leaving documentary traces."<sup>278</sup> Nevertheless, within these spontaneous movements one can address some aspects which are moving in a "conscious direction or discipline."<sup>279</sup> In fact, what Gramsci calls conscious direction entails an ongoing process of solidarity-building within a collectivity. This is the final product of the

---

<sup>276</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q1, §44, 40-4.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid. Q3, §48, 328-329.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, 330-331

“elaboration of will,” which requires a “collective effort” made by concrete and not “fatal” individual efforts, that can be considered as “unrelated to the individual.”<sup>280</sup> Accordingly, in the Iranian context, through their joint actions and thoughts, as well as the words they expressed, workers lead to a change from the class *in se* to the class *per se*, meaning that purely economic demands have transformed into political consciousness.<sup>281</sup> Hence, by experiencing political consciousness, workers were able to leave an imprint and have a tangible impact on the Shah’s hegemonic project that was until then based on a combination of coercion and consensus.<sup>282</sup> As will be explored in greater depth in the next section, the Shah’s hegemonic rule served to repress any independent political initiative coming from workers. Since 1953, despite its growing size, the working class had not been able to play a significant political role because it had been prevented from doing so, as it had been subjected to the Shah’s surveillance and sporadic actions of repression.<sup>283</sup> Nevertheless, signs of the workers’ potential for resistance became manifest after the 1973 oil price rise, along with the Left increasing in influence.<sup>284</sup> In 1978, when workers took to the street with their rallying-cries, their slogans gradually showed an overtly political character – beyond any economic grievances – that effectively challenged the status quo. Following this line of reasoning, within the frame of the hegemonic discourse, disconnecting the *political* from the economic represents a means of decoupling resistance from politics and, hence, of disempowering those who protest. As this chapter will show, by calling for collective solidarity and expressing dismay and economic demands in words and slogans, the workers of Iran were acting *politically* during the months that led to the strikes of 1978. Again, using Gramscian terminology, when popular spontaneity finds its paths lead through conscious political demands and when it brings power to account – putting pressure on it – a conscious political project *de facto* manifests itself.<sup>285</sup>

---

<sup>280</sup> Ibid. Q6, §79, 761.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid. Q1, §47, 56-58. Here Gramsci refers to the Marxist definition of “class in itself” and “class for itself,” where the first applies to individuals with a similar source of income, and the second comprehend those who share also similar economic positions as well as political attitudes.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid. Q13, §37, 1638.

<sup>283</sup> Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 213-214.

<sup>284</sup> See Halliday, “Trade Unions and the Working Class’ Opposition,” 7-13.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid. See also Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 146.



However, once a collective solidarity is expressed, a further step is required: this is what Gramsci calls “awareness of duration,” a long-term goal. This is made explicit in everyday practice, which in the Iranian case took place over the months before the proclaimed success of the 1979 Revolution, and is necessarily intertwined and not independent from the power it engages with.

Therefore, everyday practice can be a form of resistance to cultural hegemony. Hence, it means resistance to a certain language. During the months leading up to the Iranian Revolution, this process unfolded through language itself, as this chapter will show in the next sections. While constructing a counter-hegemonic discourse, thus seeking hegemony, verbal as well as written expressions of dissent developed alongside the evolving dialectic of subjective/collective interpretations of those actually conducting the resistance. This is the point where the current analysis connects Gramsci to Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis. As Fairclough argued, “achieving hegemony entails achieving a measure of success in projecting certain particulars as universals. But this is in part a textual achievement.”<sup>286</sup> This method allows us to concentrate first on the texts as elements of social events and on their “causal effects” for change; and, second, on the processes of meaning-making as being interactive (involving producers, the text itself and the receivers.) Thus, to assess the impact and meanings of workers’ words, this chapter will proceed along a twin track. Following the chronology of the events, on the one hand, it will look at how meanings evolved, reflecting, adapting and responding to the shifting context. On the other hand, it will examine the rhetorical strategies and discursive techniques used, in order to understand the effects of hegemonic relations at play in the production of ideology.

### **1978-1979 workers’ strikes: a timeline through statements**

In order to understand the effects of hegemonic relations in play in the production of ideology among workers, this section will follow the evolution of workers’ participation and statements,

---

<sup>286</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse. Textual Analysis for Social Research*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 41.

starting from the mass strikes that occurred in fall 1978. It will look at how discourses from below concerning the factories reflected and responded to the shifting context. The following statement testifies that, until the first week of September 1978, workers had not actively participated in the revolutionary movement:

Today in all our cities masses of people [*tudeh-hāye mardom*] raised their voices against the criminal regime [*rejim jenāyatkār*]. Yet, this is just the beginning of our work. So far, a great part of the people [*khalq*] has not taken to the streets, especially workers. We, as the Organization of the Fedayān (*Sāzman-e Cherik-hā-ye Fedāii Khalq-e Iran*) are asking all the workers, toilers [*zahmatkesh*] and fighters [*mobārez*] to not keep silent while all these killings are perpetrated by the Shah's regime against the suffering masses [*tudeh-hā-ye ranjdideh*]. [You should] Protest against those who fired bullets [*goluleh bārān*] at the toiler people in the streets. Struggle against the plots [*tot'eh-hā*] orchestrated by the government.<sup>287</sup>

This message, written by the Leftist Fedayān group – which was particularly close to workers in the Tehran refinery – <sup>288</sup> was disseminated in early September 1978, soon after the *Jom 'eh-ye Siā*, the so-called Black Friday. Before concentrating on the different levels of discourse in the statement above, it is worth contextualizing one of the Revolution's key days of escalation. On September 8, 1978 (17 Shahrivar 1357) the Shah's army opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators in Jaleh Square in Tehran, officially violating the curfew that had been imposed a few hours earlier. Violent clashes and confrontations between the people and soldiers took place in the southern neighborhoods of the Iranian capital as well. According to the military data announced that night – as reconstructed by

<sup>287</sup> *Sāzman-e Cherikhā-ye Feda'ii Khalq-e Irān*, Shahrivar 1357/September 1978, reprinted by CISNU, (Berlin, 1978), as quoted in Ahmad Ashraf, "Kalbodshekafī Enqelāb: Naqsh-e Kārgarān-e San'ati dar Enqelāb-e Iran [Autopsy of the Revolution: The Role of Industrial Workers in the Iranian Revolution], *Goftogu*, No. 55 (2010): 55-123.

<sup>288</sup> Worker and labor activist. Interview with the author. Tehran, 30 April 2019.

Abrahamian – 87 people were shot dead. However, the opposition declared that there were more than 4,000 victims: a full-scale massacre.<sup>289</sup> Black Friday came as popular indignation across Iran, following the Cinema Rex fire of August 19 in Abadan that the opposition denounced as a mass killing perpetrated by the Shah regime's secret police, was being curbed. Although subsequent investigations uncovered that those responsible were elements of the religious opposition, Black Friday became a symbol for the revolutionaries. Until that moment, workers had not joined the students, intellectuals, *ulema* and *bazaaris* in the mass anti-Shah demonstrations.<sup>290</sup> Nevertheless, across different sectors, they had organized a series of protests and strikes, mainly over unpaid wages and housing, that had systematically increased since summer 1978. In fact, the cancellation of annual bonuses had triggered a chain of protests in the electricity and water sector, which began at the Tehran plant at the end of July, and continued intermittently until October 3, before becoming widespread across the country. More than 850 white collar workers from the same industry staged their first large protest that year on September 7 in Mashad and Shiraz.<sup>291</sup> About 1,300 workers from the car factory in Tabriz stopped their activities, first on August 6, and then one month later, claiming their pay, annual bonuses and housing.<sup>292</sup> They were followed by car workers' protests throughout September in Arak, Tehran and Ahvaz. The newspaper *Kayhān*, reporting on several protests in the southern area of the Iranian capital, summarized workers' demands as follows: "Pay rise, safer housing and conditions, better health services."<sup>293</sup> Moreover, in the last week of September 1978 railways workers started a six-day-strike, causing difficulties and inconvenience in the transportation system.<sup>294</sup> Therefore, until September 1978 workers had expressed their dissent mainly: 1) through protests lasting one or a few days; 2) by organizing their strikes around the factories; and 3) by articulating economic grievances. Black Friday – and more importantly, how it

<sup>289</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between two Revolutions*, 515-516.

<sup>290</sup> Ashraf and Banuazizi, "The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution," 3-40.

<sup>291</sup> *Ettelā'āt*, 11 Mehr 1357, October 3, 1978.

<sup>292</sup> SAVAK documents, Enteshārāt-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmi, Vol. 11, 350.

<sup>293</sup> *Kayhān*, 18 Shahrivar 1357 (8 September 1978).

<sup>294</sup> *Kayhān*, 9 Mehr 1357 (1 October 1978). *Ettelā'āt*, 15 Mehr 1357 (7 October 1978).

was narrated – precipitated events. What workers remembered as the “bloody massacre” became a symbol of the Revolution. It also marked a shift in the development of the revolutionary momentum, which gave impetus to many workers to leave their factories and join the massive anti-Shah demonstrations.

Taking to the streets was, indeed, the next step. The Fedāyān, which had strong connections in both the Tabriz and Tehran car assembly factories,<sup>295</sup> issued a call to action. Yet, as the statement opening this section demonstrates, they addressed a broader spectrum of the unheard within Iranian society. In fact, they referred not only to workers (*kārgarān*) per se, but they also solicited those who knew fatigue and resistance [*zahmatkesh va mobārez*] asking them to “raise their voices.” They gave meaning to the apparently faceless concept of “masses of people” who had already demonstrated. Leveraging the power from below to break “the silence,” in their message they envisaged a path of struggle, consisting of two phases. First, they made a call to protest against current events (“what is happening to people”). Second, they appealed for people to fight against the system as a whole (“the plots orchestrated by the government.”) They clarified that this was only the beginning, implying a Gramscian “awareness of duration” and the existence of a long-term goal. [*hanuz āghāz-e kār ast*]. Drawing on the language of defiance, the Fedāyān relied on linguistic choices that immediately connected them to Leftist realms. Instead of the generic *mardom*, they use the word *tudeh* “masses,” or *khalq* “people.” The imperative urge to break the silence “*sāket nabāshid*” formed the backdrop to the struggle “*mobārezeh konid*.” Furthermore, the Fedāyān, in their attempt to mobilize workers, framed the forthcoming struggle as a reaction against the Shah by those working, suffering, and living a life of fatigue [*kārgarān, ranjdideh, zahmatkesh*]. He, through a process of Othering, was presented as a “criminal,” responsible for the killings and suffering of the people, “conspiring” against the demonstrators. What justified this language of violence and pain were the events of Black Friday. In particular, the image of thousands of people

---

<sup>295</sup> Car worker, interview with the author, Tehran, April 28, 2019. Leftist activist, former Peykār member, 23 April 2019.

shot in the streets of Tehran initiated a trail of blood that the opposition, here in particular the Leftists talking to workers, wanted to avenge. As *Kār* reported:

The beginning of the organized movement of workers coincided with the massacre of people in the country, especially in Jaleh Square in Tehran, under the direct supervision of the Shah and his American advisers.<sup>296</sup>

Until early October, workers criticized the Shah's regime, its crimes, the violence of the army, but did not openly clamor for its overthrow. The demonstrations that followed protests and strikes began as acts of popular spontaneity, triggered by "anger," a "sense of solidarity with co-workers," [*hambastegi bā hamkāri-ye mā*] and by knowing that "the streets were crowded [*khiābān sholugh bud*]; people were demonstrating everywhere."<sup>297</sup> Not all the strikers among the industrial workers were close to Leftist ideas. As those interviewed for this research observed, the situation in the different factories was extremely diverse and fragmented. Oil workers and car workers were historically more organized and more numerous. Some started their protest out of exhaustion, resulting from a combination of economic factors, pressure due to monitoring and repression in the factories. As one worker said: "Ba' zi az kārgarān kollān khasteh shode budand."<sup>298</sup> De facto, intimidating forms of control and the fear of being reported to the SAVAK prevented many workers from keeping Leftist leaflets that were being secretly distributed.<sup>299</sup> Some others were striking because of a generalized "sense of hope," as the news began to spread more easily and "censorship's pressure" diminished.<sup>300</sup> Indeed, reports from the white-collar workers' strikes in the oil factory of Abadan began to circulate among workers, even in other cities. *Ettelā'āt* briefly

---

<sup>296</sup> *Kār*, "Tashakkolat-e Naftgarān dar Enqelāb 1357" Organization of Oil Workers in the Revolution of 1357 (1978), No. 308.

<sup>297</sup> Car worker, interview with the author, Tehran, 28 April 2019.

<sup>298</sup> Oil worker, interview with the author. Tehran, 21 May 2019.

<sup>299</sup> Leftist activist, former Peykār member, 23 April 2019; Car worker, interview with the author, Tehran, 28 April 2019; oil worker, interview with the author. Tehran, 3 May 2019.

<sup>300</sup> Manufacturing worker, interview with the author. Esfāhan-Tehran, 14 May and 8 June 2019.

reported their demands, mainly concerning annual bonuses and wages, but also contesting the martial law and curfew.<sup>301</sup> On October 13, the entire workforce at Abadan refinery went on strike, and two days later workers sent a message “in solidarity” with striking teachers in Tehran.<sup>302</sup> After five more days, Ahvaz white and blue-collar workers started their protest. Their grievances related to the deteriorating economic situation, but the strikes of both *kārgarān* and *kārmandān* lasted for about a month. During those days, workers had the opportunity to become more conscious of their own conditions and of their potential impact on the stability of the Shah regime. In fact, their demands politicized “against the regime and the foreigners.”<sup>303</sup> In the meantime, along with the news of the Shah’s army’s cruelty in Tehran on Black Friday, Khomeini’s messages started to spread across the country. Tape-recorded speeches were smuggled in and distributed. Furthermore, “some students printed leaflets secretly and they also provided us copies of Shariati’s books,” one worker from Ahvaz related.<sup>304</sup> By the end of October, oil workers emerged as the most politically organized of the sectors. Less than ten days later, the Abadan refinery – which employed 12,000 people – went on strike, and newspapers started reporting people standing in long queues in the streets, complaining of fuel shortages. It was October 22:



“Thousands of cars in Tehran without gasoline.” (*Kayhān*, 30 mehr 1357, 22 October 1978)

<sup>301</sup> *Ettelā'āt*, 2 Mehr 1357 (24 September 1978).

<sup>302</sup> *Ettelā'āt*, 23 Mehr 1357 (15 October 1978), and 30 Mehr 1357 (22 October 1978).

<sup>303</sup> Oil worker from Ahvaz, interview with the author. Tehran, 9 May 2019.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

From that moment on, workers gradually realized that they could effectively paralyze the state apparatus by blocking the economy of the country. Political awareness-building grew along with workers' consciousness of the economic impact and consequences of their actions. The strikes' committees in Abadan and Ahvaz were in contact with one another and produced a series of statements. They presented a list of demands:<sup>305</sup>

- (1) The end of martial law [*hukumat-e nezāmi*].
- (2) Full support and cooperation [*hemāyat va hamkāri*] for striking teachers.
- (3) Freedom and unconditional release of all prisoners.
- (4) The 'Iranization' of the oil industry [*Irāni kardan-e san'at-e naft*].
- (5) All relations in the oil industry to be held in Persian.
- (6) Exit/expulsion [*khoroj*] of all foreign employees.
- (7) An end to discrimination [*tab'iz*] against female workers and employees in the industry.
- (8) Implementation of the newly approved law on housing for workers and employees.
- (9) Support for workers' requests [*taqāzās*], including the dissolution of the SAVAK.
- (10) Continuation of the battle against the proximity of some employers to corrupt government.
- (11) Reduction in working hours on the oil rigs in the Persian Gulf.<sup>306</sup>

As the abovementioned demands demonstrate, from this moment onwards, the oil workers' requests abandoned the purely economic realm. Conversely, they showed a high level of politicization.

<sup>305</sup> *Kayhān*, 9 Aban 1357, (31 October 1978).

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

Because of the massive intervention of the state in capital accumulation and the central role of the oil industry in the Shah's economy, oil workers engaged in a direct negotiation. The restriction of oil exports in favor of domestic consumption was at stake. They knew their strikes could disrupt the country's economy. Strengthened by this awareness, the *United Syndicate of Oil Industry Workers* sought to up the ante. Three key themes are worth highlighting in their demands. First, the confrontation involved very sensitive topics – such as the release of political prisoners and the disbandment of the Shah's secret police – which were functional to a further politicization of the strikes and indicate a more structured plan with long term goals. Second, a strong anti-imperialist sentiment, mixed with a nationalist narrative, permeated the strikes. This constituted one of the bridges connecting the workers' struggle to Khomeini's populist discourse. Third, trajectories of solidarity-building networks with strikers from other sectors, although weak, materialized into words. Thus, they were elevated to a element that was potentially dangerous to the stability of the regime. A few days later, a foreign correspondent from the French newspaper *Le Monde* visited Abadan. He reported of a city in fear, where a large portion of the 5,000 striking workers went back to their units in the refinery, surrounded by tanks and soldiers. Workers had not forgotten the Cinema Rex fire in August, which they blamed on the Shah's army. The management threatened them again at the beginning of November: "If you don't start work again, you will be killed."<sup>307</sup> At least 30 people had reportedly been killed in the clashes following the strikes in Khorramshahr and Abadan in the previous days. Resentment at the combination of violence and repression overtook mere economic demands. Moreover, lines of collective assent and approval of the strikes began to take shape, as the following words from a worker show:

---

<sup>307</sup> As reported in *Le Monde*, November 16, 1978. English translation available, Jim Paul, "Fear Reigns in Abadan," MERIP Reports, No. 75/76, *Iran in Revolution* (1979), 18-19.



No one in particular [*gave us instructions to strike*]. Everyone agrees. There is really no organization. But by firing on us, the army has forced us to organize ourselves and even to arm ourselves. We listen to Khomeini and read the tracts of the Mojāhedin.<sup>308</sup>

This testimony gives an indication of both the evolution of workers' awareness and the potency of the popular spontaneity that triggered the strikes, at least in the first phases. The power of collectivity is manifest in the expression "everyone agrees." In this regard, a Gramscian framework helps us understand how a shared language, summarized in the plural "we" that precedes a list of common actions, shaped collective consciousness and characterized the strikes. By then, Khomeini's speeches, with their anti-imperialist, populist and anti-Shah class rhetoric, which chapter 2 explored, were being heard. A few weeks later, in mid-November 1978, Siegmund Ginzberg, who was special correspondent in Tehran for *L'Unità*, interviewed a group of workers in Abadan. He reported that they had took "some distance from 'Marxists' and 'capitalists.'" However, he added that it was "clear that in the Abadan refinery among the organizers of the strikes not everybody is religious and that here an organized tradition of the Left is still alive."<sup>309</sup> As the army occupied all the country's refineries and memories of repression and bloodshed were accumulating in their minds, workers decided not stop their strikes and to continue indefinitely.

"We realized then just how far the regime could go in its ferocity," a blue-collar worker in Abadan said.<sup>310</sup>

However, supported by students and bāzāris, the refinery workers avoided any confrontation with the army. "The workers call the soldiers their 'brothers' and are trying to win them over," reported a

---

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> *L'Unità*, "Giorno per giorno lo sciopero di Abadan," [Strike in Abadan, day by day], 24 Aban 1357 (15 November 1978).

<sup>310</sup> *Le Monde*, 16 November 1978.

foreign correspondent in Ahvaz in late November (as most Iranian newspapers were not on sale between November 5<sup>th</sup> and January 6<sup>th</sup>).<sup>311</sup> Nevertheless, their anger against the Shah and social injustice persisted. The anti-Shah sentiment was bred by a discourse of “robbery” and “crime” against the people, present in both Khomeini and the Left’s narratives. As the following words show, it was not a structural economic factor that eventually galvanized workers and led them out onto the streets:

We never saw any of that money anyway. It was all going in the pocket of Ali Baba and his 40 thieves.<sup>312</sup>

On December 2, workers in Abadan announced that their straightforward intention was to “fight until victory [*piruzi*].” The politicization of their struggle was clear to the government, who attempted to mute the workers’ resistance in a number of ways. Alongside using the army as a deterrent tactic, the management made some economic concessions. As the *Washington Post* reported: “The political nature of the strike was underlined by the handsome 40 percent increase in pay and fringe benefits won by oil workers last month as their price for dropping political demands.”<sup>313</sup> Two weeks later, the Common Syndicate of Employees of the Iranian Oil Industry (*Sāndikā-ye Moshtarak-e Karkonān-i san‘at-e naft-e Iran*) showed full political consciousness of their strikes’ impact, as they declared: “We know that our strike was a decisive factor. We control the country’s economy.”<sup>314</sup> On January 7, the first complete statement of oil workers was published

---

<sup>311</sup> *New York Times* 28 Aban 1357 (19 Nov 1978), “Despite Army’s Presence, Iranian Oil Town Is Challenging the Shah” Available here <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/11/19/archives/despite-armys-presence-iranian-oil-town-is-challenging-the-shah-no.html>

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>313</sup> *Washington Post*, 5 December 1978, “Spreading Protest Strike Cuts Output of Iranian Oil” available here [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/12/05/spreading-protest-strike-cuts-output-of-iranian-oil/b4822343-68d0-4128-ac42-eadc5360fb80/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.f2cbd80c6fd4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/12/05/spreading-protest-strike-cuts-output-of-iranian-oil/b4822343-68d0-4128-ac42-eadc5360fb80/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f2cbd80c6fd4)

<sup>314</sup> See OIPF, *Kārgarān Pishtāz-e Jonbesh-e Tudeh* as quoted in Mansoor Moaddel, “Class Struggle in Post-revolutionary Iran.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 23 (1991), 323.

at the bottom of page 4 by *Ettelā'āt*. Titled “The first statement of the striking oil industry,”<sup>315</sup> it granted full support to Khomeini.



*Ettelā'āt*, 17 Dey 1357, January 7, 1978

Writing from the refineries in the south of the country – as specified in their statement – workers not only recognized Khomeini's fight, but announced their will to follow his lead towards the overthrow of the Shah's regime.<sup>316</sup> They declared themselves ready:

To implement Khomeini's instructions for the convenience of the fighting nation [*mellat-e mobārez*] of Iran and the firmness of the holy struggle [*mobārezeh-ye moqaddas*] to overthrow the illegal regime [*rejim gheyr-e qānuni*].<sup>317</sup>

Using Khomeini's vocabulary, they openly entered the revolutionary movement and cast themselves under the Ayatollah's umbrella. Indeed, this declaration weaves together the three pillars of Khomeini's discourse, as described in chapter 2: the nationalist-populist ["fighting nation"], the revolutionary ["overthrow the illegal regime"] and the religious [holy struggle]. Workers' goals, through an economic plan of action listed in bullet points, were directed towards

<sup>315</sup> *Ettelā'āt*, 17 Dey 1357 (7 January 1978).

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*

delivering *the coup de grace* to the Shah monarchy by diverting oil exclusively to domestic production. First, they decided how to continue production, in order to guarantee the domestic supply, starting from the distribution of gas in Ahvaz. Second, they decided which particular unit should function in Ahvaz, and gave instructions for the distribution and coordination with the other refineries in Abadan and Tehran. Third, they assigned a group of workers to the telecommunications unit in order to guarantee phone communications and emergency calls between the regions producing oil for domestic consumption. Fourth, they announced specific committees in charge of managing the technical and safety operations, “in order to implement Khomeini’s orders.” Fifth, they designated the return of officers to guarantee the refinery’s “protection” and replace the Shah’s soldiers that had surrounded the plant. Sixth, they established that contact between the oil workers, representatives and refineries had to be coordinated by a specific committee in charge. Therefore, the decision of the workers to follow the path traced by Khomeini came only in the final months before the Revolution and displayed both political and economic characteristics. It can be interpreted as a conscious political move, rather than a calculation driven by religious fervor. Another example follows this line of argument. When Tehran’s refinery workers took to the streets in late January and marched to the university building, most of the rallying-cries – as the next section will explore – addressed general economic and political requests, without specifically mentioning Khomeini. On January 21, workers’ actions captured the headlines and the frontpage of *Ettelā’āt* once again: “Thousands of workers demonstrate.”<sup>318</sup>

---

<sup>318</sup> *Ettelā’āt*, 1 Bahman 1357 (21 January 1979).



*Ettelā'āt*, 1 Bahman 1357, 21 January 1979.

They had no intention of ceasing their strikes and demonstrations, believing that their fight was a tool with which they could reach the main goal: freedom. By identifying workers' struggle with the act of giving "blood for free," the *Sāndikā-ye-moshtarak-e kārgarān-e naft* presented the path towards freedom and a lack of corruption as a route of sacrifice, evoking the imagery of martyrdom that permeated Khomeini's rhetoric. A week before the Revolution was finally accomplished [February 11, 1979 - 22 Bahman according the Persian calendar], they issued the following statement:

It is at these moments of history that you give your blood free of charge as you will [*work to*] be free from corruption and punishment.<sup>319</sup>

Therefore, as this section has investigated, what Gramsci called "popular spontaneity" unfolded through workers' mobilization in the making of the Iranian Revolution, as it exposed the discursive dynamics involved in the process of constructing *the political*. Eventually, workers found their own path to tread through conscious political demands. Thus, they put pressure on the Shah's apparatus

<sup>319</sup> *Kayhān*, 15 Bahman 1357 (4 February 1979).

and contributed to the shift in power relations.<sup>320</sup> In fact, after expressing collective solidarity, they attempted to build their own plan of action – sowing the seeds for “awareness of duration” – towards a common goal: revolution.

**“Unity,” “freedom from dictatorship” and “foreign interference”: analyzing the slogans**

From the section above, recounting the chronology of workers’ engagement in the revolutionary movement, it became evident how the factories’ blue and white collar workers reacted to a shifting context by adapting their strategies of struggle. Language, through statements and declarations, represented an inherent part of this process. This section further explores these discursive mechanisms by zooming in on the slogans chanted in the making of the Revolution. The rallying-cries brought to the streets between October 1978 and February 1979 can further demonstrate that words represented sites of struggle, carrying contending ideologies and discourses. They served as tools to empower workers. At the same time, they represented imaginary stones to throw at the Shah’s regime, as they were dialogic and interactive. Moreover, they conveyed shared emotions (such as anger or frustration), along with images and hopes (blood and freedom) constituting the collective (and ideological) imaginings of most of the Iranians who were taking to the streets. As mentioned in the introduction, the current analysis is guided theoretically by the work of Gramsci and Fairclough. Drawing from Gramsci, Fairclough’s analysis concentrates on the use of specific vocabulary and expressions to serve the speakers’ ideological interests. That is the direction of the present section.

When workers joined the demonstrators in October, their slogans mainly called for unity among the different groups constituting the revolutionary body and made economic requests. As instruments to build solidarity with the poor, peasants, and students, they used the following rallying-cries:

---

<sup>320</sup> Ibid. See also Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 146.

*Kāregar, dāneshju, mostaz ‘af: mobārez va mottahed* [worker, student, downtrodden fighting and united];

*Kāregar, dāneshju: piruz piruz* [worker, student, the winners].

These kinds of slogans were primarily needed to create a sense of common identity and purpose, a sort of horizontal identification. Rhythmically constructed and chanted without verbs, they placed the worker at the beginning of the sentence, as they were the main addressees. At the same time, they encouraged the mass of workers, students and the broader category of the downtrodden to build solidarity for a common struggle: “fighting and united.” Short and repetitive, so as to be easy to remember, they envisaged victory to foment the crowds.

Furthermore, as other rallying-cries used during the first months of the strikes show, clearly distinguishable economic grievances emerged:

*Huquq-e kārgar pardākht konid* [Pay the worker’s salary];

*Na boyad kārgar ekhrāj konid* [You should not fire workers].<sup>321</sup>

Imperative and short, shouted with anger, they were conceived as a warning to the capitalists, a desperate plea calling for rights. Exposing the politics of the everyday, engaged with fighting against workers’ being fired, these slogans addressed a narrower segment of the Iranian revolutionaries and did not present a specifically ideological imprint.

Throughout November and December 1978, they evolved, adapting once again to the historical context. A revolutionary present was unfolding, with massive strikes and demonstrations in all the

---

<sup>321</sup> Slogans have been mostly collected from *Ettelā’āt* and *Keyhān* archives (October 1978-February 1979) and discussed with the workers during author’s interviews. See also *Donyāh Eqtesād* 19 Dey 1398, (Accessed 10 January 2019), and Mohammad Hossein Panahi – *Jām ‘eh shenāsi Sho ‘ārhā-ye enqelābi eslāmi Iran, The Sociology of Slogans of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Tehran, Nashr ‘elm, 1392).

urban settings across Iran. Furthermore, victory was looming for the crowds, embodying their main goal. Hence, workers had to strengthen their own identities as revolutionaries. They needed self-encouragement, so they started to praise themselves and their struggle. Oil workers' voices became louder. They were in strong need of incitement, as the army had surrounded their factories and there had been violent clashes. They wanted unity and support “until the victory”:

*Dorud dorud dorud bar kāgaran-e mobārez-e san'at-e naft* [Hail to fighting workers of oil industry];

*Ettehād ettehād ettehād* [union, union, union];

*Kārgarān irāni, ettehād ettehād* [Iranian worker, union union]

*Ettehād, mobārezeh, piruzi* [alliance, struggle, victory].<sup>322</sup>

Repetitive and short, they used incitement as a tool for mobilization. They called for unity in the factories and in the streets. The third one, in particular, was intended to energize the participants through their nationality, as it represented a claim for all Iranian workers, who were demanding the expulsion of foreign staff from the factories. The fourth slogan mentioned above summarized the road map in three steps to the main goal (the Revolution), which was identified automatically with victory. This could be achieved only through unity and continuous struggle (means-goals). Furthermore, workers chanted anti-despotic slogans against exploitation, which was mainly understood as coming from several sources (the Shah, foreigners, capitalists in a broader sense):

*Kārgar, kārgar, mā boyad mottāhed bāshim tā rishey-e estesmār ro bar konim* [worker, worker, we should be united to eradicate the root of exploitation];

---

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.



*Hey mellat-e mā, mottahed bāshim tā rishey-e estesmār ro bar konim* [Oh dear nation, let's be united to eradicate the root of exploitation].<sup>323</sup>

Vocative and imperative at the same time, both of the abovementioned slogans presented a shared goal: getting rid of a common enemy. The enemy was metaphorically referred as a harmful plant, whose roots should be removed.<sup>324</sup> In the first slogan, the pronoun “we” (plural) was associated with the worker, interestingly called to in the singular, before joining the collectivity. The second one, by appealing to “*mellat-e mā*,” called for unity, by evoking a patriotic sentiment and a sense of belonging to the same nation. It also framed the struggle as a sort of liberating instrument for the victimized (exploited) nation, apparently following Khomeini's lines of discourse, as explored in chapter 2.

At the end of January, the slogans reflected a full consciousness of workers as an inherent component of the revolutionary masses. Less than a month before the overthrow of the Shah, thousands of workers demonstrated in the streets of Tehran. They were organized in groups of hundreds, as they were trying to reach the university for a big meeting. Parading down the street in the city center, they chanted their rallying-cries, also showing support to Khomeini. What is relevant to the context of this analysis is that workers framed their endorsement of Khomeini as a leader. Their chants emphasized political rather than religious elements.<sup>325</sup>

Khomeini was expected to return to Iran soon. Workers shouted their support for him, while demonstrating in the streets. They were also looking forward towards a system in the factories that entailed a control from below, through the establishment of independent workers' councils

---

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> *Ettelā'āt*, 1 Bahman 1357 (21 January 1979).

(Showrā), that – as it will be explained in chapters 4 and 5 – would be dismantled during the first years of the Islamic Republic.<sup>326</sup> However, in January 1979, workers chanted:

*Dorud dorud dorud dorud bar Khomeini* [Long live Khomeini];

*Dorud dorud dorud dorud bar Khomeini, barābari hokumat-e kārgari* [Long live Khomeini, equality and worker's government].

Encouraging, inciting and galvanizing the crowd of workers, who were mainly from the oil and car sectors in Tehran, these slogans mixed the support for Khomeini with class discourses. The latter, as already discussed in the previous section, were championed by the Left and Leftist sympathizers in the factories. Rhythmically simple and repetitive, these slogans invoked equality and a government run by workers, while hailing Khomeini. A discursive war was already unfolding in the streets, as the Left represented a threatening shadow for the Islamic Republic project.

Nevertheless, the expressions of defiance developed throughout the months and as discussed above, revealed that workers cast themselves under the Khomeinist umbrella only in the very final phase of the revolution. As the first oil workers' statement analyzed in the previous section demonstrated, Khomeini gained strategic, political and economically driven support from blue and white collar workers. The religious element did not constitute a priority trigger. During the demonstrations in December and January in particular, workers chanted the following rallying-cries:

*Dorud bar Khomeini, Rahbār-e enqelāb, modafe esteqlāl, āzādi va huquq-e zamatkeshān*

[Long live Khomeini, guide of the revolution, defender of independence, freedom and rights of the poor;]

---

<sup>326</sup> Saeed Rahnema, "Work Council in Iran: Illusion of Worker Control," *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, February 1992, Vol.13(1), 69-94 and Haideh Moghissi and Saeed Rahnema. "The Working Class and the Islamic State in Iran." *Socialist Register*, No. 37 (2001): 207-208.

*Dorud bar mā kārgarān-e pālāyeshgāh Tehrān. Dorud bar Khomeini* [Long life to our workers from the Tehran refinery, long life to Imam Khomeini;]

*Kāregar, dehghan, mostaz‘af, randjbār, Khomeini ast rahbar* [Workers, peasants, downtrodden, toilers, Khomeini is the guide;] <sup>327</sup>

As these examples show, Khomeini’s figure as a leader and guide for the revolutionary movement was fully acknowledged during workers’ demonstrations. Although this does not mean that the Left’s legacies did not carry any weight, the present analysis suggests that a discursive interconnection and conflict with the populist elements of Khomeini’s narrative developed in the last phase of the revolution. By January 1979, secular slogans and symbols – such as class struggle, social justice and the fight against imperialism – appeared to be interwoven with Khomeini’s discourse. Some mottos, reported by Abrahamian, are emblematic in this regard: “Islam will eliminate class differences,” “Islam is for equality and social justice.”<sup>328</sup> The Marxist slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” was chanted in Persian as *Kārgarān jahān, mottahed shavid*. The famous “Oppressed of the world, unite” became *mostaz‘afān jahān, mottahed shavid*.<sup>329</sup>

Nonetheless, as chapter 2 explored and chapter 4 will explain in greater depth, there were other contending actors. Khomeini’s discourse aimed to assimilate the secular rhetoric of class, in order to nullify the Leftist secular groups within the anti-Shah movement.<sup>330</sup>

However, beyond supporting ideologies, how did workers portray themselves? The next section will delve into their self-definitions and memories of why the “unthinkable” revolution happened.

<sup>327</sup> For Khomeinist slogans see also Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 31.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> For further context on this process, see Peter J. Chelkowski, and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 9-10; Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, 71; M. Stella Morgana, “The Islamic Republican Party of Iran in the Factory,” 237-249.

**Self-definitions and memories from the Revolution**

In demonstrating and striking against oppression, as well as claiming freedom, workers presented themselves as “obstinate,” “awake, conscious”, the “pillar of the revolutions,” real “toilers,” fighting for their nation, “awakening” or “arising” – as in the discursive tradition of the Left –<sup>331</sup> from a sleepy past and “tired” of the monarchy, as the following slogans show:

*Kārgarān san ‘ate naft-e mā, hāmi sarsakht mā, dorud bar khalq irān* [Our oil workers, obstinate, long life to the people of Iran];

*Kārgarān hoshyārand, bozorgan bidaran* [Workers are conscious, the great ones are awake];

*Kārgarān Irān sotun enqelāband* [Iranian workers are the backbone of the revolution];

*Kārgarān Irān farzandān-e Irānand* [Iranian workers are sons of Iran];

*Kārgarān bidārand, az Pahlavi bizārand* [Workers have awakened, they are disgusted and fed up with Pahlavi].<sup>332</sup>

Therefore, was it loathing provoked by the Shah’s regime, economic pressure, anti-imperialism, and Khomeini’s political stature that triggered the revolution? Why did the revolution happen? Why did workers ultimately take to the streets? A few excerpts from their memories can help us in the process of tracking back this escalating parable, while identifying key factors.

Social pressure and lack of political freedom within the factories exhausted workers:

I was twenty at the time of the revolution. Even before the revolution, I participated in some protests. For this reason, I was fired and I could no longer work in the factory. As co-workers, at that time we were able to understand each other. At one

<sup>331</sup> As in the “International”: “Arise ye workers.” See <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/sounds/lyrics/international.htm> Accessed 15 September 2020.

<sup>332</sup> See *Kayhān* and *Ettelā’āt* archives.

point we became fully conscious of the pressure in our lives and we found a way of forming a solidarity.<sup>333</sup>

In fact, poor economic conditions were not the main reasons for supporting the revolution. Most of the workers saw the housing shortage and rising costs as a heavy burden to carry.<sup>334</sup> But repression and class inequalities were what truly provoked them:

There was no space to speak freely. We were tired of the daily general situation. Especially starting from the fall 1978, we received some flyers or other political information from outside the factory. Everything was hidden and everyone should be careful. We were afraid. These flyers or info were spread most of the time by members of our families who were students or close to Leftist groups.<sup>335</sup>

As explored in the previous sections, workers actually started their protests for economic reasons. However, their role gradually evolved and they eventually emerged as conscious revolutionaries:

At first, [our aim was] achieving our demands for better working conditions [...] When the Shah's regime opened fire on demonstrators in Tehran in September 1978, and when a cinema in Abadan was set on fire, killing many innocent people, we couldn't put up with such a situation any longer. That is why we didn't stay silent, and we entered the political arena rather than remain spectators. In other words, we were influenced by the people's struggles. That is why we set up the strike committee and we decided to encourage all oil

---

<sup>333</sup> Worker and labor activist. Interview with the author. Tehran, 30 April 2019.

<sup>334</sup> On this point see also Peyman Jafari, "Reasons to Revolt: Iranian Oil Workers in the 1970s," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, Vol. 84 (2013), 197-217; and Terisa Turner "Iranian Oil Workers in the 1978-1979 Revolution," in *Oil and Class Struggle*, ed. Peter Nore and Terisa Turner (London, Zed Books: 1980).

<sup>335</sup> Oil worker from Ahvaz. Interview with the author. Tehran, 12 May 2019.

industry employees to demonstrate, stage sit-ins and, later, a strike. We were now determined to overthrow the Shah.<sup>336</sup>

Personal awareness came first, and collective consciousness later, intertwined with the process of politicization and collective thinking:

When the Revolution started some students had connections with the comrades in the factories. They gave books or papers to workers who could read and they talked a lot to those who were not educated.<sup>337</sup>

Another crucial element that contributed to pushing workers together against the Shah was anti-imperialism:

On the eve of the Revolution there were several political groups, either religious or Marxist, which were particularly active and were able to influence people. They were claiming that the Shah was under the influence of America [Shah yek niru-ye Amrika bud.] Beyond the religious groups, most of the others belonged to the Mojāhedīn-e Khalq and the Cherikh-haye Fedayān-e Khalq [...] At that time I was only 19 years old and in our factory in Ahvaz there were many foreigners. All these words were coming both from the Leftists but also from the increasing number of Khomeini's supporters and we [workers] began to like the idea of the Revolution [...] They were all saying that the Shah was a tyrant [zālem] and his behavior was very cruel.<sup>338</sup>

Repression and facts about the bloodshed that occurred in Jaleh Square in Tehran on September 8<sup>th</sup> created an unbearable situation for many workers:

---

<sup>336</sup> Former Tehran refinery oil worker and activist, interview with Ali Pitchigah, "Oil workers in the Iranian revolution" in *Weekly Worker*, 4 Dec 2008.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Oil worker from Ahvaz. Interview with the author. Tehran, 20 May 2019.

That day the intellectuals demonstrated and the people supported Khomeini against the violence of the Shah's army. We received the news of those days in Ahvaz. Our solidarity strengthened.<sup>339</sup>

In this situation, the Shah's secret services tried to maintain an extreme control of the factories:

We could not talk and say what we thought. The SAVAK was everywhere in the factory. They were among us, they were working with us. The pressure from daily life (*feshār-e zendegi*) was very strong. When we started striking they also used many strategies to intimidate us and to force us to stop.<sup>340</sup>

In the middle of an ideological war then, where informal communication channels intertwined with rumors and there was a real need for exchanging ideas, workers created effective solidarity networks. Ultimately, it was that collective will that made them join the other social classes and overall made the Revolution possible.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the 1979 Iranian Revolution by studying workers' statements, slogans and memories. It focused on the words of resistance and on the evolution of collective thinking within the factories, which eventually created the impetus for the participation of laborers in the strikes and protests between 1978 and 1979 that led to the Iranian Revolution. As shown throughout the previous sections, the process of solidarity building was accompanied by powerful statements and slogans, that conveyed images of common realities such as exploitation, bloodshed, and suffering, as well as shared feelings.

---

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

From workers' statement and memories, six elements stand out in the analysis of the chronicles of the revolution-in-the-making.<sup>341</sup> First, workers' consciousness of their role became gradually distinguishable over the months leading up to February 11. Initially expressing their discontent through semi-spontaneous protests, workers felt an "active part of the nation," and towards December 1978 demonstrated themselves to be fully aware of their strike's impact on the economy. Most of them framed the impetus to participate in the movement as a collective need. A second factor is the expressed need for a guiding group. Workers were aware that a form of leadership was indispensable in order to coordinate, give security, and organization. This is why a strikes' committee emerged, to give the struggle a more systematic character. Third, workers had a precise list of priorities, which included the definition of their own grievances that needed to be shared with other co-workers, but also with other factories as the contacts between the Ahvaz and Abadan refineries demonstrated. Fourth, interrupting domestic production was initially seen as a trump card for the Shah's regime, which would have been able to manipulate workers' strikes in the *public opinion*.<sup>342</sup> For this reason at the beginning, and before Khomeini's encouragement, workers doubted whether they should go further with this kind of action, fearing a propaganda campaign against them.<sup>343</sup> Fifth, the process of forming a collective thinking passed through a stage of solidarity building, before arriving at shared goals. In this sense, the frequent exchanges between the striking white and blue collar workers on the strategies for action are emblematic. The sixth aspect which is worth noting concerns the fact that workers' grievances evolved, as they began to be: a) completely distinguishable from those claimed by other groups within the revolutionary body (such as intellectuals, students, bāzāris and public employers) and b) no longer merely economic, as they were entering the political sphere.

---

<sup>341</sup> Iranian oil worker. "How we Organized the Strike that Paralyzed Shah's Regime: First-hand account by Iranian Oil Worker," P. Nore & T. Turner, Eds., *Oil and class struggle*, (London: Zed Books, 1980), 293-301.

<sup>342</sup> Public opinion is here understood again through a Gramscian lens, thus as a tool of the hegemonic project. See Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q7, §83,914-915.

<sup>343</sup> Iranian oil worker. "How we Organized the Strike that Paralyzed Shah's Regime."

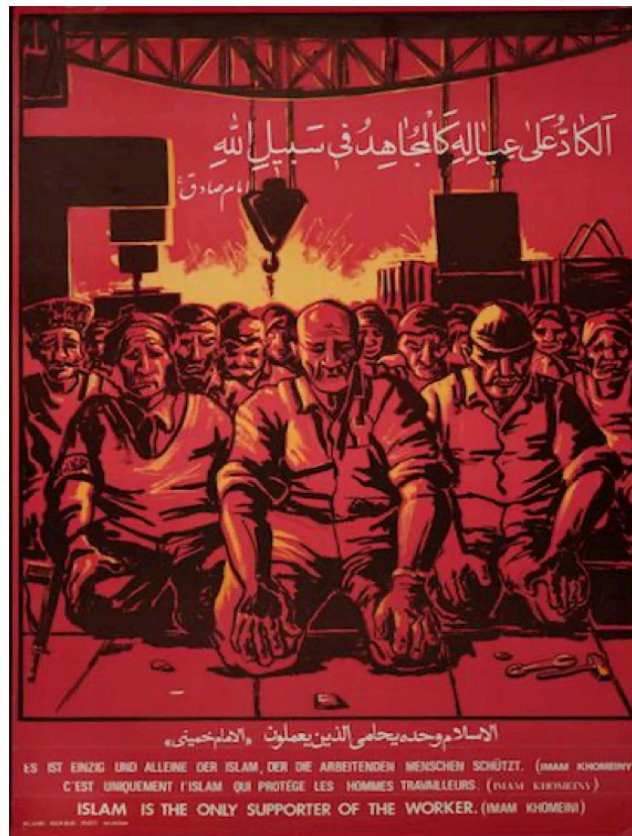


The effect of words through slogans was powerful in inciting the masses and galvanizing workers to mobilize. Rallying-cries were made to be chanted aloud, often with a particular rhythm. They were also relatively concise, as the main aim was to make them memorable and easily recalled. Another striking element was the unique link between the power of the words and the addressees, so that the slogans could become representative of all in the process of solidarity-building. Language acted as a tool to communicate emotions (economic discontent or frustration over class inequality), together with images of bloodshed or projections about a freer future away from the Shah's dictatorship. The analysis of slogans allowed us to understand that words were utilized as sites of struggle for contending discourses: Leftist, religious/populist, revolutionary. Moreover, rallying-cries on the one hand empowered workers and promoted their unity; while on the other hand, they served as direct and public accusations against the Shah. In this sense, slogans were dialogic and interactive, as they also called for unity within and beyond the factory. The Iranian Revolution in workers' words took shape, following a pattern where: a shared enemy was identified in the "assassin monarchy;" the concepts of grievances, protest and struggle overlapped, and statements and communiqués were used as calls for unity and latterly for action; the Shah's army's cruelty marked a fundamental shift that culminated in the Revolution. Furthermore, dissatisfaction and rage mounted, as the spontaneity of the workers' movement mutated into a more organized and united one. Therefore, workers' demands became sharply distinguishable from other groups within the polyphonic revolutionary body. Eventually, most of them recognized Khomeini as the leader of the Revolution and of the "holy struggle" to "eradicate" those deemed guilty of the sufferings of the country. Nonetheless, this move can be interpreted more as a political calculation than a decision driven by religion. In conclusion, the articulation of the voices of resistance in the workplaces passed through a combination of personal awareness and collective action. If workers were distinguishable within the social body for their particular economic demands and because they were able to paralyze the state apparatus, this research has also shown that the politicization of the oil workers in particular was influenced by the Left, as framed in the context of class struggle.

## CHAPTER 4

### Talking to Workers: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad, how the Islamic Republic's Discourse on Labor Changed through May Day Speeches (1979-2009)

M. Stella Morgana, "Talking to Workers: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad, how the Islamic Republic's Discourse on Labor Changed through May Day Speeches (1979–2009)," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 1-2: 133-158.



Workers as holy warriors in a poster issued by the IRI, 1980s. (The University of Chicago Library)

#### Introduction

Following its foundation, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), under the guidance of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, began a massive campaign geared to construct a morally guided imagery of labor as a “religious obligation” and of workers as “holy warriors,” under the auspices of Islam.<sup>344</sup> An integral part of this endeavor was triggering a process of appropriation of May Day, a historical

<sup>344</sup> See Morgana, “The Islamic Republican Party in the Factory, 237-249.

symbol of the secular Left. A new revolutionary meaning was assigned to words, and the International Workers' Day was assimilated to the Iranian calendar: precisely on the 11<sup>th</sup> of Ordibehesht as *Ruz-e Jahāni-ye Kārgarān*.<sup>345</sup> Thus, May Day was absorbed into the Khomeinist discourse and taken under the Islamic umbrella.<sup>346</sup> How did this process of absorption work? Which discursive mechanisms were engaged? Specifically, how did the IRI's dominant narrative on labor evolve throughout the years between the 1979 Revolution and the 2009 Green Movement upheaval? In fact the events of 1979 and 2009 represented two crucial moments of collective actions within the history of the Islamic republic, but with an enormously different participation of workers. While during the 1979 Revolution workers (particularly those for oil refineries)<sup>347</sup> were able to "paralyze the state apparatus,"<sup>348</sup> in 2009 they did not take to the streets collectively.<sup>349</sup>

The importance of May Day for the government of the Islamic Republic is underlined in speeches given for the occasion by the country's leadership. In the context of this chapter, by IRI is meant the dominant discourses articulated and transferred by Iran's Supreme Leader and president over time. Therefore, by analyzing and translating Workers' Day speeches of this period from Persian, this chapter navigates labor territory and its multiple constructions propagated by the Islamic republic's leaders. The analysis relies on the following primary sources: from 1979 May Day sermon, pronounced by Khomeini, to 2009 speech given by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (president, 2005-13), together with messages to workers sent by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (president 1981-89, and then Supreme Guide), Hojjatoleslam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (president, 1989-97), and Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Khatami (president, 1997-2005). First, in order to track the process of appropriation of the discourses on labor by the Iranian political establishment, this chapter investigates how workers' notion and role were conceived, utilized, and re-discussed during IRI's

<sup>345</sup> See Peter J. Chelkowski, and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

<sup>346</sup> Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, 1-88.

<sup>347</sup> See Ashraf, "Kalbod-shekāfi Enqelāb: Naqsh-e Kārgarān-e San'ati dar Enqelāb-e Irān [Autopsy of the Revolution: The Role of Industrial Workers in the Iranian Revolution], 55-123.

<sup>348</sup> Ashraf and Banuazizi. "The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution," 3-40.

<sup>349</sup> See Kevan Harris, "Iran: why workers aren't joining the protests," in *Time Magazine* (22 February 2011), [www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2053157,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2053157,00.html), Accessed 15 July 2018.

historical transitions. Second, to contextualize the evolution of the narratives on workers, the analysis tackles ruptures and transformations occurring within the state apparatus' rhetoric in relation to labor. Third, to shed light on the discursive mechanisms through which the official narrative on workers and labor took shape through several layers of discourse, this chapter illustrates formulations and symbols evoked to animate public sentiment and galvanize collective mobilization. The incorporation of 'workers' and 'labor' into the Islamic Republic's official narrative meant an incremental dissolution of both concepts as sources of political mobilization. Three discursive developments were central to this: 1) What began as a rhetoric, with workers seen as "slaves of God" within the broader group of the *mostaz'afin* – the downtrodden, which the Revolution was committed for – developed into the narrative of "produce and consume" for the IRI. 2) A discursive shift occurred in state discourse: from talking to the masses and urban poor, the Islamic republic began to speak to the middle class and therefore neglected the workers.<sup>350</sup> 3) A bottom-up *cleaning up* process slowly purified May Day from discourses of class and social justice, as workers' role as (revolutionary) social actors was gradually minimized. Why? Labor represented a domain of contending narratives, in other words a site of a discursive war between the IRI and the historical tradition of the Left. In fact, the latter – along with its class rhetoric and slogans on social justice – could have been perceived as a threat to the stability of the Islamic Republic.

### **Discourse as a tool of power: linking linguistic constructions and knowledge**

Looking at labor as a realm of discursive strategies within the Islamic Republic allows May Day speeches to be analyzed in terms of power relations as well as interactions between language and power. In fact, discourse is here understood as a tool of power, by which a set of values and beliefs is articulated and circulated. If, as Norman Fairclough argued, discourse is a way for ideology to become evident and to be perceived as a "common sense," a discursive approach is useful to disentangle the different modes of workers' representations by the IRI's leaders, who were

---

<sup>350</sup> See also Kevan Harris, "Class and Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Brief Introduction," *Merip- Middle East Report*, No. 277 (2016): 2-5.

responding to occasional historical and economic challenges. More specifically, as Fairclough explained, “conventions routinely drawn up in discourse embody ideological assumptions which come to be taken as mere ‘common sense’”.<sup>351</sup> Thus, it is through the “ideological workings of language” that power is expressed. From a critical perspective, all the official speeches delivered for the *Ruz-e Jahāni Kārgar*, are to be interpreted as a representation of political power through political discourse, where actors are engaged in processes that are fully political and they speak for the state.<sup>352</sup> Moreover, as discourse is here understood and analyzed as a changing linguistic process, this chapter will show the ideological shifts within the IRI’s dominant narrative. It will also explain how and why discourse intersected and involved what Fairclough defined as “social conditions” (where the discourse occurs and the wider context).<sup>353</sup> This means that understanding how workers were included in the official discourse and with what consequences all this occurred, may also reveal a lot more about the dynamics of the state and workers’ interactions/struggles. As Fairclough put it, struggle can be revealed “not only in language in the obvious sense that it takes place in discourse as evidenced in language texts, but also over language.”<sup>354</sup> Thus, what becomes relevant here is how discursive strategies were woven into the different imageries evoked and how political agents constructed facts through discourse. Moreover, the interaction between practices of language formulation and their premises, values, goals, and potential consequences reveal the strategies employed in order to transform words in calls for action or to legitimize certain political choices. For instance, as will be explained later, while often addressing their interlocutors as “the people,” the Iranian authorities presented themselves as problem-solvers, patrons, or agents who can guarantee security and welfare. The concept of *mardom-e Irān* – “people of Iran” – was in fact utilized many times over the years, carrying different meanings: people as a class, as a religious community, as a sovereign nation.

---

<sup>351</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 64.

<sup>352</sup> See Norman Fairclough and Isabela Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis. A Method for Advanced Students*, (London, Routledge, 2012), 17-18.

<sup>353</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 25.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 73

Therefore, in this chapter, discourse analysis will start from the construction of labor and workers, to further explore which features or qualities were attributed over time and through which frameworks certain claims were justified and expressed.<sup>355</sup> Then, it will develop along vocabulary and lexicon connections that were used by IRI's leaders in relation to the labor domain throughout the years. Finally, it will tackle the striking features within each May Day speech in terms of contents, relations and subjects: in other words, what is said, the relations of the people involved in the discourse and what position they occupy.<sup>356</sup>

**Labor as a manifestation of Allah, workers as “warriors” in the Islamic domain**

As this chapter is concerned with the discursive representation of workers and labor, a crucial point to start this analysis is looking at the consolidation of the 1979 Revolution and the Islamic Republic as a process. This process involved the factory and engaged in the transformation of the worker into a revolutionary *homo islamicus*, framing him within specific ideological frames and references, which were comprehensible to all those belonging to the revolutionary corpus. The inherent language, logic, and premises of the revolutionary discourse as a momentum to depose the Shah and establish a new order of things were gradually constructed and readjusted.<sup>357</sup> This was the case with May Day. As the Islamic Republic regarded itself as embodying genuine Islam, *Ruz-e Jahāni-ye Kārgar* – starting from 1979 – was turned into a site of generation for militant discourses within the Islamic domain. Other political perspectives were de facto marginalized or rendered void by absorption, as in the assimilation of Leftist historical symbols, such as those of social justice and class. It is worth dedicating a specific reflection to those narratives here, before starting with the analysis of the first May Day of the Islamic Republic. In fact, workers' rights, class struggle and social justice were part of the Marxist dominant discourses, which had developed throughout the years before the Revolution. The debate on class championed by the Iranian Left developed within

---

<sup>355</sup> See Ruth Wodack, Michal Krzyzanowski, *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 96.

<sup>356</sup> See Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 46.

<sup>357</sup> Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, 5.

the circles of the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party, formed in 1941, as well as within the guerrilla group and organization of *Fedā'iyān-e Khalq* and the Islamist *Mojāhedīn-e Khalq*, that emerged between 1965 and 1971, along with a Mojāhedīn branch, *Peykār* (Struggle), born in 1979, and afterwards *Rāh-e Kārgar* (Workers' Path).<sup>358</sup> Nevertheless, theoretical approaches and methods were different. If the Tudeh, since its foundation, presented a program of reforms and claims for workers' rights, demanding redistribution of wealth, insurance and housing throughout the years – as documented by scholars such as Abrahamian, Behrooz, Matin-Afsgari and others –<sup>359</sup>, the 1970s' Marxist and Islamist guerrilla armed struggle exposed the cause of social justice, framing it in a more radical pattern fully involving the workers' revolutionary potential. If, thanks to the Marxists' contribution, the meaning of trade union activism in Iran had developed already in the 1940s, it can be argued that with the 1970s' urban guerrillas a situation of warfare and public discourse of dissent strongly emerged.<sup>360</sup>

Therefore, when the Islamic Republic celebrated its first Workers' Day, the political arena close to workers was diverse and complex. As mentioned above, a discursive war was going on. Overall, the discourse pertaining to social justice and class struggle did not belong specifically to Khomeini and his followers.<sup>361</sup>

In May 1979, in the aftermath of the Revolution, Khomeini delivered a speech, which was recorded and broadcast on radio and TV. The day after, *Ettelā'āt* published the entire “Imam's message,” with the following headline standing out on the page: “Almighty God is the origin of labor.”

---

<sup>358</sup> Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, 22-132.

<sup>359</sup> See Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 284-321; Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, 48-134; Afshin Matin-Afsgari, “The Left's Contribution to Social Justice in Iran: A Brief Historical Overview” in Peyman Vahabzadeh ed., *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 255-269, and Saeed Rahnema “The Left and the Struggle for Democracy in Iran,” in Stephanie Cronin, *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 250-267.

<sup>360</sup> See Afshin Matin-Afsgari, “The Left's Contribution to Social Justice in Iran: A Brief Historical Overview” in P. Vahabzadeh eds, *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice*, 262-263 and Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Guerrilla Odyssey*, 46-52.

<sup>361</sup> See Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 126-188.

Labor is like the manifestation of God, who is in all creatures [*mojudāt*]. Labor is in all the creatures, which were made by hard work. All particles are workers, even atomic particles present in nature are workers. All the particles of the universe are active and vigilant [...] All workers are right; all are slaves of God; and labor is everywhere, and Workers' day is not just today.<sup>362</sup>

By defining labor as “a manifestation of God,” Khomeini dragged it into the religious sphere. Describing it as a sign of Allah, he attributed dignity to labor, which “is everywhere” as an inherent part of nature. Piety and universality permeated the society – here conceived as a bigger factory where workers, *kārgarān*<sup>363</sup> – were presented as all the natural particles. Hence, everyone could be a worker, a “slave of God,” a Muslim, part of “the” biggest design. Moreover, the Supreme Guide proclaimed that “every day should be [considered] as workers' day.”

As noted by Asef Bayat in his pioneering *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, what was stirring the crowds in the streets of Iran – according to Khomeini – was a struggle between *mostaz'afin* and *mostakbarin*, the oppressed and the oppressors.<sup>364</sup> Workers were cast into this conflict, not as a conscious working class, but within the broader category of the downtrodden. Nevertheless, on the occasion of *Ruz-e Kārgar* 1980, in his annual speech, Khomeini explicitly mentioned the word “class” when addressing laborers: “Workers are the most valuable class [*arzeshtarin tabaqeh*] and the most beneficial group [*sudmandtarin goruh*] in society.”<sup>365</sup>

Yet, he soon specified that “no particular group or specific movement” could ever represent workers' grievances, as the main goal was to cast workers under the Islamic umbrella and within the broader collectivity of the downtrodden. Hence, this was a strategy to defuse workers (together

<sup>362</sup> *Ettelā'āt*, 12 Ordibehesht 1358 (2 May 1979).

<sup>363</sup> See also Touraj Atabaki, “From Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker): Recruitment, Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, 84 (2013), 159-175.

<sup>364</sup> Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 77-100.

<sup>365</sup> *Ettelā'āt*, 13 Ordibehesht 1359 (3 May 1980).



with some Leftist groups such as the abovementioned Fedā'yān, Mojāhedīn and Peykāṛ who were still active in fueling protests) as a potential threat to the stability of the newborn IRI.<sup>366</sup> Indeed, the rhetoric of the enemy fueling strikes and chaos over the country, mixing with an anti-imperialist narrative, was recurrent in this speech. One year after the Revolution was accomplished, Khomeini's admonishment was dedicated, once again, to flushing out "traitors":

In this audience are also the destructive workers, the ones who, in the name of supporting workers, prevent them to work or those affiliated to those who are burning the fields.

Workers' day does not belong to them and to the enemies affiliated to them. Workers' Day is the day of burial of super powers and for independence, in all its dimensions, in order to give it back to the oppressed.

When comparing "the enemies" to "foreign powers" and "arrogant agents," Khomeini meant the interference in Iranian domestic affairs during the Shah's government.<sup>367</sup> In his message for May Day 1981 he went even further, depicting plotters and "counterrevolutionaries" as "enemies of God," therefore framing them in the realm of "infidels" (*koffar*). It was 12 Ordibehesht 1360 of the Iranian calendar when *Jomhuri-e Eslāmi*, the newspaper run by the Islamic Republican Party, went on sale with the following headline, quoting Khomeini: "The ignorant small groups showed with their acts and their words that they are enemies of the people and enemies of God. They are amateur actors in the scene."<sup>368</sup> The subtitle, over a full-page picture, contained a warning for laborers: "Be aware to give your valuable services to our dear nation. Do not be at the Americans' service through these groups."<sup>369</sup>

---

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> For more details on the evolution of the myth and reality of foreign conspiracy, see Abrahamian, "The Constitutional Revolution. The Impact of The West," in *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982; Ervand Abrahamian, "The 1953 Coup in Iran," *Science & Society*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), 182-215 and also E. L. Blout, "Soft war: Myth, nationalism, and media in Iran," *The Communication Review*, 20:3, (2017): 212-222.

<sup>368</sup> *Jomhuri-e Eslāmi*, 12 Ordibehesht 1360 (1 May 1981).

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

Khomeini was probably referring to the Mojāhedin and Fedā'yān's urban guerrilla actions occurring on those days. While casting all the different groups of the Iranian Left under the same generic word subgroups (*goruhak-hā*), the Supreme Leader started a process of suppression of the peculiarities of each organization. The discursive goal of not pronouncing the groups' names can be ascribed as a tactic of minimizing them within blurred lines, while de facto silencing their actions. Together with this anger against the enemy, Khomeini celebrated "the noble working class" (which was to be united and far from these groups). Moreover, praising it was to be considered not only as a religious duty, but also "national and public." In fact, the rhetoric of nationalist unity began to appear along these lines. The reason lay behind the war with Iraq. In fact, stressing nationalist unity had served the goal of raising popular support for those recruited to the war front after Iraqi troops invaded Iran on 22 September 1980. The foreign element was constructed as antagonistic to the construction of the self. By establishing this dichotomy within the discourse, Khomeini outlined the "enemy's profile as propagandist, despicable, liar, on America's and Russia's payrolls":

[Workers] smashed their powerful fist to the mouth of the wicked and foreigner propagandists, and the internal/domestic scum. They can push back everything, left or right. Today, after two years of this crime perpetrated by these groups depending on foreigners, their hand was revealed. These gangs proved with their acts and their words that they are enemies of the people and of God. They are amateur actors in the scene.<sup>370</sup>

Khomeini purposely inveighed against all rivals. He established two opposed camps, constructing *the* threat as coming from universities and rationalists: gangs "united against Iran and the Islamic republic." Examining the context closely, it can be argued that he was probably targeting all those Marxist ideas that were circulating within the universities even before the Revolution. The reason

---

<sup>370</sup> Ibid. *Jomouri-e Eslāmi*, 12 Ordibehesht 1360 (2 May 1981).

for such hatred lay in the fact that, through the Fedā'yān and the Mojāhedīn in particular, Marxist ideas had spread within some factories:

Dear workers, brothers, you are serving very hardly for the independence of the country with your hearts, your lives. These groups want to use you for their bad goals and to benefit the world's arrogance [*estekbār-e jahāni*, imperialists.] Be aware that these people are the ones who made universities a battlefield against Islam and Iran.<sup>371</sup>

During the first years after the Revolution, the struggle against the Left within the factories was not a matter of discourse only. There was a real fight going on within and outside the workers' councils (*shurā*) that had been established in many factories after 1978 as the outcomes of the strike committees, with the idea of control from below in the factory.<sup>372</sup> This conception of bottom-up management of labor issues began to vanish, as the political space for the councils' radical demands and workers' participation in management became increasingly restricted.<sup>373</sup> A purge of Leftist opponents among workers started and open warfare was also conducted in the streets, particularly in summer 1980.<sup>374</sup> This was the beginning of what Nomani and Behdad defined as a slow process of "deproletarianization of labor."<sup>375</sup> Therefore, along with discursive mechanisms of delegitimization of the Marxist groups—such as those mentioned above—repression was widely employed. In fact, between February 1979 and June 1981, a massive operation against opponents was carried out: in 28 months, 497 people were sentenced to death, classified as "counterrevolutionaries."<sup>376</sup> Another relevant transformation aiming at disempowering workers and gaining bottom-up control of the workplaces loomed within the factories: by 1981, the majority of

<sup>371</sup> Ibid. *Jomouri-e Eslāmi*, 12 Ordibehesht 1360 (2 May 1981).

<sup>372</sup> Moghissi and Rahnama, "The Working Class and the Islamic State in Iran," 206-208.

<sup>373</sup> On the political pressure on the workers' councils in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, see Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 155-160.

<sup>374</sup> For a more extensive chronology of these events, see Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, 178-184.

<sup>375</sup> Nomani and Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran*, 101.

<sup>376</sup> Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 181.

secular *shuras* were dismantled. In other words, workers' councils, which in some cases managed the workplaces, were eventually brought under the state umbrella.<sup>377</sup> The Islamic Associations were established and assumed de facto the discursive control of workers' organizations. Beyond the Workers' House, *Khāneh-ye Kārgar*, sponsored by the state, no other independent institution could represent workers.<sup>378</sup> However, it was a combination of factors that gradually allowed the Islamic Republic to consolidate itself: not discourse alone, nor ideology or repression only. Welfare policies represented one of the IRI's early preoccupations, as they also constituted a tool for gaining consensus among workers and preventing their discontent and consequently their mobilization.<sup>379</sup> At that time, as for the May Day 1981 speech, the discursive strategy was dual. On the one hand, Khomeini was instilling a sense of danger and need of defense, while conveying messages of urgency and anger. On the other hand, he presented the self against the other, so workers as "brothers and sisters," "great champion people," "Iran's dorsal spine [the country's pillar]," against the enemies:

Brothers and sisters, be aware that your valuable services in our dear Islamic country should not be used for the advantage of America by the hands of these criminal groups. You, the great champion people, be aware that these rationalists [*jire-ye khavār*] are at the service of colonialists.<sup>380</sup>

### **Work as a weapon against capitalism and imperialism for the community of believers**

Along with a discursive process of reframing workers from a "class" to "brothers and sisters" within the broader group of the *mostaz'afin*, Khomeini absorbed the Leftist anti-capitalist narrative

---

<sup>377</sup> *Shuras* were elective institutions and the post-revolutionary state tried to first reduce their role and then replace them. See Bayat, "Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers," 205; Asef Bayat, "Labor and democracy in post-revolutionary Iran", in *Post-revolutionary Iran* ed by Hooshang Amir Ahmadi and Manoucher Parvin, (London: Westview Press), 41–55.

<sup>378</sup> See Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 251–254; and Bayat, "Social Movements, Activism and Social Development," 7.

<sup>379</sup> See Harris, *A Social Revolution*, 14 and 31–45.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid *Jomhuri-e Eslami*, 12 Ordibehesht 1360 (2 May 1981).

under the Islamic umbrella, while the IRI began widening access to social welfare for those who had been excluded before 1979.<sup>381</sup> Indeed, the Supreme Leader's dictum "One day of you, workers, is more valuable than a capitalist's whole life," framed the narrative of labor within the Islamic Republic starting from May Day 1982. The maxim would appear several times in the following celebrations.<sup>382</sup> Nevertheless, the core values of this slogan lost momentum over the years, as economic and historical events started changing the IRI's attitude towards capital and production with the fatigue of the war and its repercussions. The speech of 11 Ordibehesht 1361 sealed the end of Khomeini's messages for Workers' Day. He once again warned workers that they should be careful and watchful, feeding the rhetoric of a conspiracy: "You won't see any capitalists or those who occupied honorable places [anymore]. Be sure that you do what you can."<sup>383</sup>

If the Imam Khomeini's notice leaped out from the right side of *Jomhuri-e Eslāmi*'s front-page, a full speech of Ali Khamenei as the president of the IRI took up the opposite side. The headline was eloquent: "The weapon [*salāh*] of workers is labor"<sup>384</sup>

For the first time – after almost two years of war with Iraq – the word production, *towlid*, entered the regime's vocabulary associated with labor as a "moment of pray." This represented a first important rupture since the Revolution. In fact, the country was experiencing a crisis of productivity and the IRI's leaders wanted to take ideological control of this moment, framing labor as a "religious duty."<sup>385</sup> Likewise, the term martyrdom, through blood (which is immediately connected to the tragedy of Karbala,) penetrated the IRI's discourse on workers: "Working hours are the moments of prayer and the tribute to the martyrs and the poor people and the downtrodden. So, wasting every moment of this work is like invading the right of poor people and insulting martyrs' blood."<sup>386</sup>

---

<sup>381</sup> Harris, *A Social Revolution*, 100-104.

<sup>382</sup> *Jomhuri-e Eslāmi*, 12 Ordibehesht 1361 (2 May 1982).

<sup>383</sup> *Jomhuri-e Eslāmi*, 11 Ordibehesht 1361 (1 May 1982).

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> Bayat suggests this interpretation: "The crisis of productivity in industry, along with ideological control by the state of the working class during the war with Iraq, was combined with the government's Islamic ideology to advocate work as a religious duty." See Bayat, "Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers," 181.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

Another element marked a shift of focus in this speech, as Khamenei clearly mentioned management that was not to be opposed. First, he urged workers to report disorders or “misconducts.” Second, he indicated to workers the path to obedience, recommending not to hinder or meddle in managers’ activities.

The manager of every factory and small enterprise is directly in charge of making order in every work unit. Workers should be aware of every misconduct and wrong acts or violation, but should not interfere in the management. They [workers] should report every violation.<sup>387</sup>

To eradicate Marxist symbolism from labor and to end the appeal of Leftist ideas within the factories, the president: 1) reaffirmed the concept of labor connected to Islam; and 2) specifically blamed those who conceived workers as a working class and not an “*ommat*,” a community of believers:

Workers must look at labor issues through an Islamic perspective. Differences in the expectations and requests should not be the cause of division between various [social] strata and should not damage the Islamic brotherhood. The atheist [*elhādi*] correspondents [*makāteb*] are trying to use these affairs to make workers distinguishable as a class, separated from the community of believers [*ommat*].<sup>388</sup>

### **Marginalizing Workers’ Day: the path to economic liberalization**

By the late 1980s, what was propagandized as the day belonging to workers and the downtrodden, *kārgarān va mostaz’afīn*, was slowly dismissed as a minor event within the logic of consolidation of the Islamic Republic. May Day lost its grandeur in the post-revolutionary discourse. Why? Khomeini died and his modalities of framing class struggle slowly started to be dismissed. The

<sup>387</sup> *Jomouri-e Eslāmi*, 11 Ordibehesht 1361 (1 May 1982).

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

legacies of the war had generated economic problems, as production was low. The Leftist threat was not perceived as being as dangerous as it was in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, because a combination of repression and discursive mechanisms had in part isolated it.

The media coverage of May Day decreased. Articles on the annual celebration were often relegated to more modest spaces or at the bottom of front pages. Official speeches were delegated to ministers. *Ruz-e Jahāni-ye Kārgar* 1986 provided an example of this process of transformation. Rafsanjani, at that time speaker of the parliament, sent his message for May Day, which was published on the front page of *Ettelā'āt* on 11 Ordibehesht 1365 (Persian calendar), along with an almost half-page picture standing out under the headline: “Legions of workers for the International Workers Day.”<sup>389</sup>

By evoking an imagery of war, Rafsanjani associated the notion of laborers’ strain to the pain of all those Iranians suffering for those on the frontline, while struggling to give freedom to Iran from the yoke of conflict with Iraq. The Karbala paradigm was kept as a catalyst, as the cult of martyrdom affected the visual discourse through graffiti and posters as well.<sup>390</sup> “Workers’ sweat is combined with martyrs’ blood in the way of freedom and love to make the country free.”<sup>391</sup> Furthermore, what emerged from these words was the discourse of the *uniqueness* of Iran as compared to “other countries,” where hard labor was falling short in giving rewards to workers.

When Rafsanjani took the helm of the presidency in 1989, it was seven weeks after Khomeini’s death.<sup>392</sup> The war with Iraq had ended less than a year earlier. The employment share of the Iranian working-class had declined since the Revolution.<sup>393</sup> The population was rapidly increasing.<sup>394</sup>

---

<sup>389</sup> *Ettelā'āt*, 11 Ordibehesht 1365 (1 May 1986).

<sup>390</sup> See Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*.

<sup>391</sup> *Ettelā'āt*, 11 Ordibehesht 1365 (1 May 1986).

<sup>392</sup> See Ervand Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 82-183.

<sup>393</sup> Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, “Labor Rights and the Democracy Movement in Iran: Building a Social Democracy,” *Northwestern Journal for Human Rights*, No 10, Vol. 4 (2012): 219.

<sup>394</sup> According to the data provided by Nomani and Behdad in *Class and Labor in Iran*, “the 1986 census reports a 3.9 percent average annual growth since 1976, compared with a 2.7 percent growth rate in the previous decade.” In 1976 the population was reported to be of 33.7 million. See Nomani and Behdad in *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?*, 65-66.

Rafsanjani named his first cabinet as the “*doulat-e sâzandegi*,” that of the reconstruction.<sup>395</sup> He “restructured” the Iranian economy, as he tried to stimulate capital accumulation. By implementing new liberal measures, the president attempted to raise productivity and deeply affected the labor market, with inevitable consequences for workers and their bargaining power.<sup>396</sup> Without ever labeling his policies as “neoliberal” and keeping his narrative aligned to revolutionary slogans, Rafsanjani aimed to increase investments, and improve the employment rate and Iranian welfare. It can be argued that the Islamic Republic effectively customized the dictum “produce and consume.” In fact, terms such as “development,” “economic production” and “productivity” pervaded the IRI’s new discourse. The idea of workers and working class was utterly reformulated. Neither the word *tabaqeh* nor *mostaz’afin* were adopted to address laborers in the president’s message in a meeting with workers’ representatives a day before *Ruz-e Kārgar*, but the concept of a working stratum, *qeshr-e kārgar*, or workforce, *niru-ye kārgar*, entered Rafsanjani’s narrative: “The working stratum [*qeshr-e kārgar*] is one of the most loyal social strata: it is loyal to Islam and to the Revolution. We appreciate the working force. This day [Workers’ day] has a big value and an important role in the whole world: the public opinion needs to comprehend workers’ rights.”<sup>397</sup>

As he needed production to rise and dissent to be eradicated – while the reconstruction period was putting the IRI under pressure – Rafsanjani couched workers’ rights in a new ideological frame, which until that moment had been overlooked during May day speeches: the legal element. Why? Almost eleven years after the Revolution, the Islamic Republic did not have a Labor Law. Although the first draft of a new law was submitted in 1982, it was not until six years later, in 1988 that the parliament passed the final version. The text was then ratified in 1989 by the Islamic Consultancy Assembly in 1989, and eventually approved by the Expediency Council in 1990.<sup>398</sup> Rafsanjani’s

---

<sup>395</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini. Iran Under His Successors*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56.

<sup>396</sup> See Mohammad Maljoo, “The Unmaking of the Iranian Working Class since 1990s,” in *Iran’s Struggles for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*, Peyman Vahabzadeh ed., 47-64.

<sup>397</sup> *Kayhān*, 10 Ordibehesht 1369 (30 April 1990).

<sup>398</sup> See Mohammad Hashemi, *Negaraeshi bar Qanun-e Jadid-e Kar-e Jomouri-e Eslāmi-e Iran*. Observation of the New Labor Laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran, (Tehran: Shahid Beheshti University Press, 1991).



government sold the approval as one of its achievements, using a collective *we*: “We are working to approve this Labor law and (...) soon a group able to approve a Labor law conformed to Islamic system will be formed.”<sup>399</sup>

The economic dynamics were changing, and the downtrodden were no longer to be central to the IRI’s narrative. In fact, sketching the contours of the myth of success, the president invoked workers’ stock options (*sahām*) within the logic of organization and management of the factory, as reported by *Kayhān*.<sup>400</sup> By then, the control from below period of the *shurā* seemed to be far away. Moreover, years of state-controlled-only unions had passed. Within this context, a group of workers chanted slogans in support to Rafsanjani. This of course represented another discursive strategy and a propaganda move. Yet, it also marked a shift from the past: “Workers are awake and they hate West and East’,” (*Kārgarān bidarand, az garb o sharq bizarand*); “Long live Khamenei and enduring Hashemi” (*Khamenei zende bād, Hashemi payānde bād*); “Hashemi Hashemi, we will protect and support you” (*Hashemi Hashemi emayatat mikonim*).<sup>401</sup> Another change that is worth noting here is that May Day gradually ceased to be central to the rhetoric of the IRI, as the social justice and class struggle narratives were no longer useful to Rafsanjani’s projects.

Already in that year, Rafsanjani left the floor to Hossein Kamali, minister of Labor. Kamali, on the one hand, reinforced the anti-capitalist rhetoric associated with May Day by the Islamic Republic authorities, neglecting any form of coercion over Iranian workers.<sup>402</sup> On the other hand, he presented to workers a future as productivity machines: “Workers should work more for this year.”<sup>403</sup> Actually sanitizing the discourse from any connection to the Leftist realm, Rafsanjani’s minister of Labor re-defined once again the notion of the worker and its attributes:

---

<sup>399</sup> *Kayhān*, 10 Ordibehesht 1369 (30 April 1990).

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*

Each move [*harekat*] either of only thought or on a factual level, if it gives a positive result to the society, is defined as labor. Who makes this movement is the worker [*kārgar*.] Who is a worker is and will be a free person [*ensān-e azād*] and a believer [*bā imān*].<sup>404</sup>

Upon closer inspection of the speech, the double-layered narrative of anti-capitalism and praise of productivity was maintained, in order to underpin a new argument: produce for self-sufficiency and to reconstruct the country after the war. The revolutionary element resisted more strongly than the religious. Claims to victory and the evocation of development and success after “hard work” were adopted as tools of mobilization, because the IRI needed supporters and human resources to reconstruct the country after the war:

Today we should mobilize all the energies of our country because this should be a year of hard work within the plan of production and development for the reconstruction of this country. This should become a slogan for self-sufficiency [*khod kafāi*], because in this way we can make good plans towards an improvement of the country’s economic system.<sup>405</sup>

On May Day 1990, *Kayhān* – among other major newspapers – published Rafsanjani’s directives in order to transform factories in sites of massive production. The religious dimension of discourse came again into sight, through the image of “believers’ hands.” It appeared to be far away from the claims for the *mostaz’afin* as expressions of militant discontent, proclaimed in Khomeini’s first May Day messages: “One of the goals of the Islamic Republic is to give the whole industry of the country in the hands of believers, who are the ones the Revolution belongs to.”<sup>406</sup>

The appeal to the revolutionary realm became even stronger, before escalating into the final motivating formula: more effort, more production. By that time, the neoliberal motto of the IRI’s

---

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> *Kayhān*, 11 Ordibesht 1369 (1 May 1990).

presidency could be summarized as such: “Wasting energy and time and working less, especially in this situation we are experiencing now, sometimes is unforgivable. It is a pity for the pure blood of martyrs of Islam.”<sup>407</sup>

Furthermore, what is relevant to the context of this chapter is that Rafsanjani – while invoking the professionalization of labor and keeping repressed any form of protests or organization in the factories – institutionalized the cult of hard work as a principle crossing industry, the economy, and politics: “Labor is one of the most important principles for economic independence in industry and in politics (...) Authorities should increase the educational and professional quality of workers”.<sup>408</sup> By 1992, Rafsanjani’s economic liberalization policies were launched.<sup>409</sup> The dynamics of the state-labor realm interactions were again changing, while workers’ as an organized group almost ceased to be addressed in the official discourse. The IRI sided with certain management mechanisms, as the 1990 Labor Law showed: 1) the rationalization of the labor process along with fewer guarantees for workers, and almost nothing for the unemployed; and 2) the introduction of temporary contracts.<sup>410</sup> Therefore, this whole process could be realized because workers were disempowered and de facto divided through several strategies employed along with discourse.

Progressively, the implementation of these strategies and policies served to strip the concepts of social justice [*edālat-e ejtemā’i*] and class conflict of their meanings. The following speech from Workers’ Day 1994 was part of this process:

The tranquility and wellbeing of workers is one of the bases of social justice in the Islamic Republic. In different aspects, workers’ rights lagged behind and you workers have done a lot to restore your rights [...] The entrance of workers in the factory will improve workers’ wellbeing. We should do more to increase workers’ shares [*sahām-hā-ye kārgarān*].<sup>411</sup>

---

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> See Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 182-183.

<sup>410</sup> See Maljoo, “The Unmaking of the Iranian Working Class since 1990s,” 47-64.

<sup>411</sup> *Salam*, 11 Ordibehesht 1373 (1 May 1994).

Moving from the particular to the broader context, few disruptions may be isolated. The president addressed oil workers of *Naft-e Pars-e Tehran*. He was speaking to those considered “the best” of the country [*kārgarān-e nemuneh*], waiting to be awarded during the *Ruz-e kārgar* celebrations. In the year he was giving the speech, oil workers received a proposal: transforming their contracts from blue to white collar workers and taking a promotion.<sup>412</sup> These measures integrated in a discourse that de facto ended class antagonism.

Obedience to revolutionary and religious instructions served as key elements of discursive transition within this phase of the IRI. Martyrdom as an image of sacrifice and collective defense of the symbols of the Revolution served to bridge the divide between a context that was rapidly being liberalized and the overarching ideological pro-*mostaz‘afin* narrative still in place. In this space of difference, workers emerged as “society’s force of production.”

Workers had a fundamental role in the reconstruction period after the imposed war [*jang-e tahmili*] and the Revolution belongs to them. Iranian workers followed the line of Revolution and the line of Imam [*khatt-e engelāb va khatt-e emām*] and with their small salary, they defended the symbols of the Revolution.

Martyr workers are proud in front of God. Without any slogan, we are trying to solve the main problems of the country [...] Production is the basis of economic independence of the country and we will try to invest correctly, in order to increase it.<sup>413</sup>

Eventually, workers were advised how to behave in the factory and outside it: “Keep your attitude towards work with responsibility and respect.”<sup>414</sup> This last sentence, while officially promoting the

---

<sup>412</sup> Rahmani. *Cherā va mo‘zalha-ye taghir-e sharayet-e kar-e naftgaran* (Reasons and Problems of Changing the Working Conditions of the Oil Labor), *Samane*, No 11–12, 2010: 53–65.

<sup>413</sup> *Salam*, 11 Ordibehesht 1373 (1 May 1994).

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*

maintenance of a certain etiquette, also reinforced a top-down characterization of the IRI's narrative that went along with repression *and increasing legal* insecurity of labor. The restrictive articulation of workers' code of behavior in the workplace challenged the reality of unrests that erupted throughout the country during the Rafsanjani presidency. Between 1991 and 1994, the IRI experienced a series of protests against the government's neoliberal agenda. Workers' unrest intensified, as well as unrest among the urban poor.<sup>415</sup> Grievances were a reaction against inflation and its effects on wages and purchasing power. After years of pursuing an agenda meant to liberalize the currency market, the exchange rate for the *riāl* against the dollar had risen from 1,800 to 3,200. In 1994, Rafsanjani did not pronounce his official message for *Ruz-e Kārgar*. As a strategy to neutralize recent outbreaks of protest and to reduce once again the importance of May Day, the Supreme leader Khamenei gave his May Day speech in 1997, merging Workers' and Teachers' Day into one moment.

### **The Islamic-Iranian rhetoric of cultural liberalization addressing the middle class**

The process of the dissolution of class struggle and social justice narratives and needs was almost complete, despite the real economic crisis that Iran was experiencing. The Islamic Republic was about to re-modulate its discourse towards the masses and particularly the middle classes,<sup>416</sup> which re-emerged during Rafsanjani's two-term presidency. Mohammad Khatami won the elections in 1997 and opened a new phase for the IRI, where the Islamic discourse merged with that of national identity.<sup>417</sup>

The Labor Party – connected to the *Khāneh-ye Kārgar*, Workers' House – supported the president, together with technocrats and intellectuals.<sup>418</sup> The spirit and tone of official rhetoric transformed.

<sup>415</sup> Asef Bayat, *Street Politics*, 97-99.

<sup>416</sup> See Farhad Khosrokhavar, "The Iranian Middle Classes Between Political Failure and Cultural Supremacy," *Sadighi Annual Lectures*, (Amsterdam: Sadighi Research Fund – International Institute of Social History, 2015), 13-70.

<sup>417</sup> Shabnam Holliday, "Khatami's Islamist-Iranian Discourse of National Identity: A Discourse of Resistance," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2010): 1-13.

<sup>418</sup> Other supporters of Khatami's campaign were, as retraced by Abrahamian in *History of Modern Iran*, 185-186, "Society of Militant Clergy – an offshoot of the Association of Militant Clergy; the Islamic Student Association; (...) the Kargozaran-e Sazandegi (Construction Executives) – a party formed recently by Rafsanjani; Zan (Women), a newspaper edited by Rafsanjani's daughter; the semi-legal Liberation Movement; and the Mojāhedin Organization of

Words such as downtrodden (*mostaz ‘afin*), the world’s arrogants (*estekbar-e jāhani*), martyrdom (*shahed*) made room for concepts such as participation (*moshārekāt*), dialogue (*goftogu*) and civil society (*jāme ‘eh -ye madani*). Workers were dispersed in this latter and broader group, by being addressed as *jāme ‘eh-ye kārgari* (workers’ society) or workforce (*niru-ye kārgar*). The term *tabaqeh* class completely disappeared from May Day speeches. Progress and production became recurrent in the new reformist narrative, resembling “creativity.”

We should arrive at a mentality and a new definition of our mission [*resālāt*], to pursue a new path. I am expecting that the labor sector and creativity of workers may make a better use of facilities and tools and with savings can strive for a better condition, to strengthen the economy of the country [...] We can change the oil economy and turn it into an economy without oil [*eqtesād-e bedun-e naft*]. This step needs a lot of determination from everybody. We are at a level of consolidating civil society [*jāme ‘eh-ye madani*]. We have a great need for the participation of all the people.”<sup>419</sup>

The call for participation was exalted by the repetition of “we” as an inclusive pronoun expressing closeness and sense of belonging. It also mutated into a direct message against any potential class conflict between workers and managers, through dialogue and workers began to be addressed as *jāme ‘eh-ye kārgari*: “No factor for the society of workers [*jāme ‘eh-ye kārgari*] and for production is worse than contrasts existing between the workforce [*niru-ye kārgar*] and management.”<sup>420</sup>

Laborers were labeled as “the axis of life [*mover-e hayāt*] of our society,” and glorified as “the most revolutionary, the most indefatigable.” For the first time in post-revolutionary Iran, the national dimension strongly entered May Day speeches, as workers were defined as “patriots.”

---

the Islamic Revolution – a circle of intellectuals and technocrats radical in economic policies but relatively liberal in cultural matters.”

<sup>419</sup> *Salam*, 10 ordibehsht 1377 (1 May 1998).

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*

The importance of the labor sector in the development and progress of the country is crucial. Labor and workers are the axis of life [*mehvar-e hayāt*] of our society. Two elements have been fundamental in history: thought [*āndishe*] and labor build the civilization, as they are the origin and pride of societies.

Furthermore, while giving “progress of economy” equal footing with “safety from perils and dangers,” Khatami devoted the last sentences of his message to a general labor “justice” (*edālat*), without referring to social justice and class conflict.<sup>421</sup>

Nevertheless, compared to Rafsanjani’s mandate, the new president was not concerned exclusively with a metamorphosis of markets and a relaunch of the Iranian economy. He led Iran to a cultural turning point where – together with words such as “democracy” (*demokrāsi*) or “equality” (*barābari*) – a renegotiation of spaces was carried out. Within this frame of new practices, labor activism found its channels to develop.<sup>422</sup> Yet, the formal legal framework and general overview of the phenomenon did not change substantially, as formal and informal networks of control over workers’ activities were kept in place.<sup>423</sup> For instance, throughout Khatami’s presidency, the Workers’ House continued to be under the Islamic Left, as part of the apparatus.<sup>424</sup>

Conservative factions exploited Khatami’s attitude towards civil society and the intellectual middle classes to gradually attract the support of those masses that had been neglected by the liberal discourse. Additionally, the Supreme leader Khamenei, on May Day 1998, reaffirmed his support to the *mostaz’afin* and to labor as a “religious duty” for economic independence.<sup>425</sup> As Iran was experiencing an intellectual opening to Western ideas, Khamenei warned workers and teachers

---

<sup>421</sup> *Salam*, 10 Ordibehsht 1377 (1 May 1998).

<sup>422</sup> This argument is based on several in-depth conversations with academics and former activists I conducted between July 2017 and May 2018 in Tehran.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>424</sup> Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran*, 145-146.

<sup>425</sup> *Ettelā’āt*, 12 Ordibehsht 1377 (2 May 1998).

against secular and anti-revolutionary “enemies” who were exploiting culture in order to allegedly manipulate them: “Today enemies just have no way [to go] and you workers, together with teachers and all the people, should pay attention and be aware. [...] Enemies are using culture to surround us, so they use media, newspapers, magazines, and TV against our Revolution and its concepts.”<sup>426</sup>

Within this context of political acrimony, it is interesting to note how Khatami struck back. The day after, the president – attending a meeting with teachers – sent a powerful message to those with a conservative view of society: “We cannot think that every cultural belief coming from the past is sacred and [we cannot think] that someone who has a critical point is unreligious or a foreign agent.”<sup>427</sup>

Despite this example of potent tenor in presidential rhetoric, Khatami’s agenda of “political development” – meant to empower “civil society” and to boost “citizen participation” – referred to a heterogeneous group of people and was not framed in term of class.<sup>428</sup> This was one of the reasons why Khatami’s liberal understanding of the Islamic Republic overlooked workers in terms of specific collectivity.<sup>429</sup>

Strikes and scattered workers’ collective actions broke out across the country between the end of 1997 and early 1998.<sup>430</sup> One year later, on May Day 1999 President Khatami used his words to encourage workers – once again – to boost Iran’s economy. The same neoliberal narrative, overlooking social justice for the sake of cultural reforms and “progress” was taking shape: “Our

<sup>426</sup> *Ettelā’āt*, 12 Ordibehesht 1377 (2 May 1998).

<sup>427</sup> *Ettelā’āt*, 13 Ordibehesht 1377 (3 May 1998).

<sup>428</sup> On Khatami “citizenisation of society” and how civil society “expanded” and “public society was relatively liberalised” under his administration see Shabnam Holliday, “The legacy of subalternity and Gramsci’s national–popular: populist discourse in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (2016): 917-933.

<sup>429</sup> As reported by labor activist Majid Tamjidi, under Khatami a “new system of management was institutionalized by: concentrating on elimination of collective bargaining agreements; division of large production centers into smaller units; handing out hiring and production contracts to outside contractors; reduction of inventory, production based on presold orders; non-coverage of workers in small workshop from Labor law protections (effecting millions of workers); drastic increasing of temporary work contracts and “white signature” contracts (contracts in which workers sign an unwritten contract, whose details are determined by the employees as they see fit) In the context of vast unemployment many retreats were imposed on workers. In this period non-payments of wages, sometimes going back to a year or two, became an ordinary phenomenon and a norm.” See “Neoliberalism in IRI, a brief history” IASWI, (May 2014).

<sup>430</sup> See *Kār* (Majority), “Hezārān Kārgar-e Goruh-e San’ati -ye Melli E’tesāb Kardand (Thousands workers of the National Industrial Group went on strike)” No. 175, (1998): 2, and “Shish tan az Kārgarān E’tesabi-ye Goruh-e San’ati-ye Melli Dastgir Shodand” (Six striking workers of the National Industrial Group arrested), No.177: 1-2.



economy needs evolution and progress. [...] We need to take a fundamental step further for the economy [...] we experienced a drop in government incomes because of oil prices. Prices decreased in terms of exports.”<sup>431</sup>

This presidential speech revealed a significant detachment from the past. In fact, there are several layers of discourse involved: tone, structure and goals. They mark a paradigm shift from the invincible Islamic Republic, whose authorities had thus far never openly admitted to be in trouble or always blamed an “enemy”: “We should not lie to people. [We should] not mention positive aspects and exaggerate them. I have to admit that we have some problems. Salaries are low, our health system does not work efficiently enough, but we strive with honesty and trust to cope with and solve these problems.”<sup>432</sup>

Although talking on *Ruz-e Kārgar*, Khatami effectively spoke to a broader audience of “workers, investors and producers.” It was to an even larger group, “the people,” that he addressed his demands for more efforts in the spirit of the triad “production, entrepreneurship and investment” that emerged as the new contours of the factory in the IRI’s narrative. All these components were woven together into an including “we.”

These problems are solvable with the noble character of the people and the mutual trust between governors and people [...] If we can, in the next ten years, we can be able to create more employment and a great part of our problems will be solved. Production does not mean only to work [...] production, beyond labor, is also entrepreneurship and investment (...).<sup>433</sup>

While Khatami’s approach kept the same spirit as during the first term, in his second term labor issues gradually disappeared from the front pages. Particularly the reformist newspapers, founded after Khatami’s election, such as *Khordād* or *Moshākerat*, largely overlooked social exclusion and

---

<sup>431</sup> *Ettelā’āt*, 11 Ordibehesht 1378 (1 May 1999).

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*

social justice.<sup>434</sup> *Ruz-e kārgar* slowly lost its centrality for the IRI's leaders, as social justice and class struggle, in the grievances of the reformists, were almost abandoned, because they had been deemed as not functional for the Republic at that moment. Furthermore, while the space for labor activism actually widened, it stayed on a level of informality, as the repression of workers' protests did not really stop.

**Justice, the allegiance of “the people” and repression: Ahmadinejad’s contradictions**

Give revolution back to the downtrodden, benefits of oil revenues to “the people,” social justice to the urban poor: with these key promises Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the elections in 2005 against former president Rafsanjani, after the reformists had held the reins of the government for eight years. Social justice [*edālat-e ejtemā’i*] was a recurrent theme in the president’s narrative, even though over his first term the space for political activism was massively eroded, as strikes were met with suppression and arrests.<sup>435</sup> Unpaid wages and unemployment, following years of privatization, had exasperated laborers whereas Ahmadinejad’s loyal followers tried to take control of Workers’ House.<sup>436</sup>

As will be argued later in this paragraph, an evident contradiction between reports and historical chronicles on the one hand, and the discourse in favor of “the people” on the other hand, loomed under the *populist* new dimension of the IRI.

Talking to both workers and teachers on *Ruz-e kārgar* in 2006, Ahmadinejad proclaimed workers (together with educators, thus not as a distinct group) “the next priority of the government,” as *Ettelā’āt* put in the headline on its front page.<sup>437</sup> The order of priorities utterly shifted in his narrative, where “unity” of “the people” and work, along with loyalty/faith, replaced the core role of the religious dimension.

<sup>434</sup> On how reformists almost ignored topics regarding social inclusion and labor as well, see Fatemeh Sadeghi, “The Politics of Recognition. The Barefoot of the Revolution and Elusive Memories,” *Merip*, No. 277 (2015): 15-19.

<sup>435</sup> See Mohammad Maljoo, “Worker Protest in the Age of Ahmadinejad,” *MERIP*, No. 241, <https://www.merip.org/mer/mer241/worker-protest-age-ahmadinejad> Accessed 25 July 2018.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>437</sup> *Ettelā’āt* 11 Ordibehesht 1385 (1 May 2006).

The role and position of workers in the development and progress of our country is crucial. Without labor and struggle, no nation has reached honor [*eftekhār*]. Unity, work, and faith are three important elements to win: without them, we go nowhere. Our aim is to dry all the roots of unemployment in the country and we will create job opportunities and a good atmosphere for our youth.<sup>438</sup>

Leaving behind the official narrative of entrepreneurship, social issues and unemployment permeated Ahmadinejad's rhetoric: "Solve the economic problem and create job opportunities is the absolute goal of my government. Our government is here for workers and it is honored to be at your service, dear workers."<sup>439</sup>

Always addressing "the people," the reproduction of a discourse focusing on dangerous enemies, seen as a threat to Iran, became instrumental to justify the government's problems because of "obstacles" created by others.<sup>440</sup>

Nevertheless, the historical context showed a discrepancy between Ahmadinejad's words, constructed facts, and reality. First, the ostentatious solidarity with workers: between January and February 2006 hundreds of bus drivers, striking in Tehran, were severely repressed and arrested.<sup>441</sup> Second, the imagery of a government "at workers' service," was at odds with the evidence of "blank contracts", according to which laborers – overwhelmed by unemployment due to the high rate of inflation– de facto were compelled to abandon their grievances regarding wages, working shifts, etc.<sup>442</sup> Furthermore, in the same year, it is relevant to note what Iran Khodro workers wrote

---

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Amnesty International, "Iran: Up to 500 Tehran bus workers imprisoned for planning strike," 3 Feb 2006 <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/iran-500-tehran-bus-workers-imprisoned-planning-strike>. Accessed 23 August 2018.

<sup>442</sup> See David Mather, Yassamine Mather & Majid Tamjidi, "Making Cars in Iran: Working for Iran Khodro," *Critique*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2007): 9-21 and the story told to Seday-e Kargaran by a worker: 'We Iranian workers have no job security. In jobs that ought to be permanent we work on a temporary and daily work basis. They force the workers to

in a letter to the Annual Conference of the International Labor Organization, lamenting the lack of labor rights and independence:

The Iran Khodro Company, with over 30,000 workers, has no labor organization of any kind. Why does the Labor Ministry not give the Islamic Labor councils, which the Iranian government itself recognizes as legal labor organizations, the permission to create legal labor organizations, when over 3,000 of us employed in it are devoid of any labor organization?<sup>443</sup>

As a harsher economic crisis was looming, sources of discontent spread throughout factories and labor units. On May Day 2007 Ahmadinejad urged workers to increase production, phrasing it as a request driven by the will to “develop” and “build the country.”<sup>444</sup> Opening his speech, he stressed labor and toilers as the most important elements for structuring a country: “Workers build the foundations of society, the future of the country and establish a happy life in society. We have progressed in this direction, but we have not reached a desirable position yet.”<sup>445</sup>

Then the president concentrated on encouraging production and pushing laborers to work more: “If we want to build the country we need to work. Today we are experiencing tremendous global transformations, and we are seeing that the world is rapidly evolving. Focusing on Iran’s development, we are obliged to build our country.”<sup>446</sup> In order to achieve his goals, Ahmadinejad reproduced the logics of belonging, by listing three key factors that allow a country to progress, such as 1) unity, 2) faith, and 3) justice:

---

sign a blank contract so that whenever the boss wants he can throw us out. We temporary workers are not entitled to unemployment benefit,” 15.

<sup>443</sup> Letter to the Annual Conference of the ILO, Etehadchap website, cited in David Mather, Yassamine Mather & Majid Tamjidi, “Making Cars in Iran: Working for Iran Khodro,” *Critique*, Vol. 35, No. 1, (2007): 20.

<sup>444</sup> *Mehr news*, 11 Ordibehesht 1386 (1 May 2007), <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/478654/> قشر- عزیزترین-کارگران- غیردولتی-های-بنگاه-هستند-جامعه . Accessed 22 August 2018.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

To build a country, the first elements are unity and sympathy. If a nation has all the wealth, but it is not united, labor results will not be achieved. Faith and trust in God are the second factor, as a country that does not believe will be lost [...] In addition to the fair distribution of opportunities, justice brings prosperity and security and contributes to a country's political and social sustainability. Nothing will be done without justice.<sup>447</sup>

Moreover, through a process of *Othering*, the president dissolved the notion of class division, by referring to “employers, managers and all the people of Iran”<sup>448</sup> as being all part of the nation (*mellat*).<sup>449</sup>

Therefore, workers became instrumental resources of propaganda, at a precise historical moment when the IRI was suffering economic difficulties because of Western sanctions.<sup>450</sup>

The president de facto inserted workers into the broader category of human beings. This means that workers reappeared as a most important audience for the president compared to Khatami’s times, but not as a class, despite Ahmadinejad’s official rhetoric portraying him as the workers’ protector.<sup>451</sup>

Characterizing the relations between workers and employers, Ahmadinejad stimulated and supported the idea of an “atmosphere of empathy.” Thus, he denied and erased any chance of class struggle, by remarking that

The employer should sacrifice himself for his worker, and the worker should not be hostile to the employer. If the atmosphere of empathy that exists is strengthened, it can move even

<sup>447</sup> *Mehr news*, 11 Ordibehesht 1386 (1 May 2007), <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/478654/> کارگران-عزیزترین-قشر. Last accessed 22 August 2018.

<sup>448</sup> As reported by *Mehr news*, 11 Ordibehesht 1386, 1 May 2007, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/478654/> کارگران-عزیزترین-قشر. Last accessed 22 August 2018.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*

further forward and progress ten times faster, because there are both resources and talent in our country.<sup>452</sup>

Housing was the only workers' demand mentioned in this presidential speech, as better conditions had been requested for years within and outside of the factories. Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad chose to procrastinate on this topic and shift the responsibility to single ministries. Why did he choose to do so? The bureaucratization of labor issues served as a tool to defuse a social mechanism that was about to explode.

Conversely, praising workers in May Day speeches, ignoring strikes, while practically repressing spaces of freedom: this was the three-sided strategy adopted by Ahmadinejad towards the end of his first term. While reiterating the concept of loyalty to his government, on May Day 2008, the president used Khomeini's phrase ("*Ruz-e jāhani kārgar* is everyday".) At the same time, he sketched once again the contours and definition of the worker as a human being:

Every day is worker's day and in the realm of creation everything comes from labor. Man becomes useless and workplaces degenerate without work. The realization of any goal and purpose requires work and effort. Without work and effort, even very small material goals are not possible to realize. Therefore, a great nation needs efforts in order to achieve its goals. The honorable worker is a human being and a vibrant person, and there is nothing created which is more beautiful than work and constructive effort. Workers are the most loyal, most enthusiastic and most persistent in the society.<sup>453</sup>

Along with applauding production and productivity, Ahmadinejad combined a strong criticism to capitalism. He described labor "as a social act carried out for the perfection of the society":

---

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

<sup>453</sup> Ahmadinejad website, 11 Ordibehesht 1387 (1 May 2008), <http://ahmadinejad.ir/دلسوزترین،-جزم-کارگران> / accessed 6 September 2018.

The productive work of the community is the best and most beautiful acts of righteousness, and all the movements that a nation performs [at work] in its lifetime and history are in the interests of the community and useful to the people [...] Within the capitalist thought and the domination of labor, the concept of organizing all affairs is used to fill certain pockets.<sup>454</sup>

Hence, the president disentangled his criticism to capitalism by: 1) presenting the worker and the employer on a “complementary” level and not framing this relation as class driven;<sup>455</sup> and 2) rediscovering the Islamic dimension and interpreting workers’ behavior towards managers through a three-dimensional lens including *the populist*, *the Islamic* and *the revolutionary*.

In the Islamic and humanist culture of our country, the worker and the employer are complementary and mutually supportive, and there should not be distance between them. Workers are followers of the idea of pure Islam and the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. As during the Revolution and throughout the war, the working community has always been prominent in work, production and creativity.<sup>456</sup>

Ahmadinejad's resentment of the capitalist organization of work reached its peak in the speech pronounced three days before *Ruz-e Kārgar* 2009, almost a month before the Green Movement demonstrations. As the June 12 elections were looming, the incumbent president was concerned to broaden his basis of consensus, by promoting a "culture of labor" against a "culture of capitalism." He recalled the imagery of workers and employers as "parts of the same system":

454 Ibid.

<sup>455</sup> On the transformations of the workers as a class and their bargaining power in post-revolutionary Iran see also Kheirollahi, *Kārgarān bi Tabāqeh*, 1–75.

<sup>456</sup>Ahmadinejad website, 11 Ordibehesht 1387 (1 May 2008), <http://ahmadinejad.ir>/دلسوزترین، جزء کارگران/ accessed 6 September 2018.

Our first mission is building the country and Iran can become a model society [...] In a situation where capitalism is in a dead-end road, the only way to live is to follow the big ideals of the Islamic Revolution. Within a capitalist system, pleasure is the final goal, so discrimination, aggression, poverty, and distance between classes are all natural, and we see the results in today's world. This is a dead-end road. [...] Workers are the cornerstone [*mehvar-e sākhtan*] of the country.<sup>457</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Processes of discourse formation are based on a set of rules that allow certain statements to harmonize themselves within a specific context. As this chapter has shown through a critical discourse analysis of official May Day speeches, since 1979 – when Khomeini founded the Islamic Republic on his interpretation of Islamic government – the IRI's narrative on labor profoundly transformed. Formulations and symbols employed to mobilize consensus changed throughout the thirty years to 2009, as they followed shifts of context, historical events and economic sources of concern. This chapter has argued that workers' role as social and revolutionary actors was gradually marginalized according to a systematic pattern reproduced by the IRI. This scheme effectively connected May Day messages to the premises, values, goals, and possible consequences that were related to it and meant to legitimize certain political choices. This analysis focused on three main dimensions of this process, which were shown to be eloquent: 1) The shifts connected to the concept of labor, largely downsized in terms of being an instrument of mobilization and a trigger to collective action; 2) the terminology employed to address workers, from the downtrodden to tools of productivity; 3) the role of May Day as a part of the broader IRI's rhetoric, utterly marginalized to give way to a more (neo)liberal narrative.

---

<sup>457</sup> *Mehr news*, 8 Ordibehesht 1388 (1 May 2009). <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/868165/> -شود-اصلاح-باید-کار-قانون/868165 -باز نشستگان-حقوق-افزایش-برای-دولت-تلاش



1) Concerning the first realm, labor was framed differently over the years. Particularly, in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution and while Khomeini was alive, it was defined as “a manifestation of God,” as “Almighty God is the origin of labor.” Labor was re-constructed as opposing the paradigm of capitalist exploitation. Concurrently, since the Iran-Iraq war loomed over Iranians’ survival, labor started to be associated to words such as “effort,” “a duty” and a tool to increase “production.” In fact, it was almost two years after the beginning of the war that the president of the day, Khamenei, mentioned the word “production”, *towlid*. In that context, production was associated to labor, conceived as a “moment of prayer.” Nevertheless, only in the 1990s with Rafsanjani’s *Dowlat-e sāzandegi* (government of the reconstruction) did the dictum “produce and consume” enter the IRI’s discourse, along with a more neoliberal terminology: “development,” “economic production,” “productivity,” “privatization.” Aiming to justify the calls to raise workers’ productivity, Rafsanjani linked a growing production to self-sufficiency, security, and a future success after “hard work.” The road to individualism started to be paved in these years. Furthermore, after 1997, with President Khatami a new phase for the IRI began as the Islamic discourse was woven together with that of national identity. Labor was cast as a component of the society, which was instrumental – through production – to the cultural progress and the “creativity” of a nation. The new president, beyond boosting markets as his predecessor, conducted Iran to a cultural turning point where words such as “democracy” (*democrāsi*), “equality” (*barābari*) and “dialogue” entered the public debate. Production beyond labor – according to Khatami – was also entrepreneurship and investment. Yet, the new reformist era did not effectively entail any benefit for labor. Indeed, workers’ issues, both under Rafsanjani and Khatami, were largely overlooked. This was one of the reasons that allowed Ahmadinejad to take the helm of the presidency in 2005. Social justice [*edālat-e ejtemā’i*] was a recurrent theme in the new president’s narrative, together with populist slogans pledging to give back oil revenues to “the people,” and solve problems of unemployment. Ahmadinejad cast labor as a crucial “priority for the government.” His narrative developed along three main lines: building the country, encouraging production, and pushing

laborers to work more. An anti-capitalist spirit permeated Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, despite evident contradictions with his policies and his government's repression of labor actions, as investigated in the last section of this chapter.

2) A second dimension investigated the terminology and meaning shifts that occurred in official May Day speeches while addressing workers. In Khomeini's view, a priority of the Islamic Republic was counter reacting to "plotters" and "enemies of the Revolution." Workers were then cast within a struggle between *mostaz'afin* and *mostakbarin*, the oppressed and oppressors. They were conceived as part of the downtrodden under the Islamic umbrella and not as a specific class. Khomeini referred to *kārgarān* as "brothers and sisters," "great champion people," "Iran's backbone." Moreover, in the mid-1980s, when Khamenei was president, he specifically blamed those who attributed to workers the notion of class and not that of an *ommat*, a community of believers.

With the *sāzandegi* era, Rafsanjani reformulated the meanings connected to the word *kargar*. As explored through this chapter, neither the word *tabaqeh* nor *mostaz'afin* were employed, as the concept of working stratum, *qeshr-e kārgar*, or workforce, *niru-ye kārgar*, entered the IRI's official lexicon. Once more, Khatami's cultural turn took the official discourse even further. Terms such as downtrodden (*mostaz'afin*) or martyrdom (*shahed*) gave way to the concept of civil society (*jāme'eh-ye madani*). Workers were considered as belonging to this broader group. Ahmadinejad presented himself as the president willing to "give the Revolution back to the *mostaz'afin*" and to "the people of Iran." Without looking at workers as working class, he dispersed them into the broader category of the "indefatigable human beings," "vibrant people."

3) Engulfed within the discourse of post-revolutionary Iran that aimed to neutralize a perceived threat coming from the historical left-wing and Marxist groups, May Day was gradually marginalized. Once the process of the absorption of Marxist symbols had annulled the perception of a danger, which was connected to the protests threatening the stability of the IRI, *Ruz-e Jahāni Kārgar* was actually dismissed, although still celebrated. In fact, starting from the late 1980s,

official speeches lost their function of mobilizing workers against “counter-revolutionaries” in the factories. At the end of the 1990s, May Day celebrations did not occupy big headlines and no longer stood out on every front page, as they were more often delegated to ministers. In the new millennium, as the IRI reinvigorated the revolutionary rhetoric, which was imbued with social justice, a sharp contradiction emerged since every spontaneous bottom-up demonstration was prohibited and severely repressed.

Following all the three abovementioned dimensions, the history of the Islamic Republic was marked by a paradigm shift as the IRI tried to combine, without success, revolutionary rhetoric with the “produce and consume” narrative. Therefore, by chasing economic progress, while prohibiting independent unions and restricting activism, the Iranian authorities de facto neglected workers and mainly addressed middle class needs. While appropriating the symbolic importance of social justice and class conflict from the rhetoric of the Left in the first place, and subsequently overlooking them, a top-down *cleaning up* process slowly purified May Day. Eventually, this almost erased social justice from the priorities of the Islamic Republic.

## CHAPTER 5

### Trajectories of Resistance and Shifting Forms of Workers' Activism (1979-2009)

M. Stella Morgana, "Trajectories of Resistance and Shifting Forms of Workers' Activism in Iran," *International Labor and Working-Class History (ILWCH)*, (forthcoming 2021)



"E 'teraz" [protest] (photo credits: *Iran Farda*, 2020)

#### **Introduction**

"When it came to issues such as shortage of salaries or safety in the workplaces, we were told to be patient and tolerant,"<sup>458</sup> said an industrial worker who shared his memories about the Workers' House, the 1979 revolution, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), and its consequences with the journal *Andisheh-ye Jām'eh*. His experience is emblematic, as it summarizes a crucial feature of the Islamic Republic of Iran's strategy towards workers: keep them waiting. On the one hand, throughout the years from 1979 onwards, labor was framed differently according to the IRI's dominant narrative. Depending on the political agenda, discourses on workers – considered as a fundamental audience

<sup>458</sup> Reza Kangarani, "Kārgarān va Showrahā -ye Eslāmi-ye Kār (Workers and the Islamic Councils of Labor)," *Andisheh-ye Jām'eh*, No. 16, (Ordibehesht 1380/April 2001), 10-12.

for the continuation of the status quo power relations – were adjusted from time to time.<sup>459</sup> On the other hand, from the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, to the populist president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s era in the late 2000s, workers were always invited to resist, to wait, to keep struggling for the nation and to be patient with regard to their own demands.

This chapter aims to investigate in greater depth, and from a workers’ perspective, the historical and political processes in which discontent was rooted. It tackles the ruptures and transformations in the forms of workers’ resistance and strategies of survival that took place between two key moments of upheaval in contemporary Iranian history: the 1979 revolution and the 2009 Green Movement. For instance – as chapter 3 explored – in 1979, the revolution would not have been successful without the workers’ mobilization that paralyzed the Shah’s economic apparatus. Almost twelve years after that moment, between 1991 and 1995, the IRI had to cope with repeated unrest on account of jobs and housing, and with inflation during the so-called “reconstruction” period (*sāzandegi*), which followed the eight-year war with Iraq. In 2005 and 2006, bus drivers, organized in a new independent – as yet not officially recognized – union took to the streets and demanded higher salaries, before being harshly repressed. In June 2009, the second re-election of populist President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad triggered a new wave of unrest. Nevertheless, while some young activists called for a universal strike, workers as a cohesive and distinct group did not respond, and some labor activists labeled the Green Movement’s participants as “narrow-minded liberals.”<sup>460</sup>

Relying on an analysis of newspapers, website reports, and interviews conducted in Iran, this chapter explores expressions of workers’ agency as well as emerging political subjects between 1979 and 2009. It also investigates the context, focusing on changing dynamics within the society and top-down mechanisms of repression. Examining shifting conditions for dissent is, in fact, crucial to understanding how individuals choose to engage in actions and which methods they opt to

---

<sup>459</sup> Morgana, “Talking to Workers: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad,” 133-158.

<sup>460</sup> Former labor activist. Conversation with the author, Tehran, March 2018.

use, whether formal or informal.<sup>461</sup> Therefore, this chapter contributes to the understanding of the shifting role of workers' and attempts at collective mobilization under the complex apparatus of the Islamic Republic. In particular, it evolves from the existing literature on labor activism in Iran, as it specifically problematizes the bottom-up responses to the top-down discourses and coercion, as well as the driving factors in the social context, which led to the reconfiguration of new paths of resistance.<sup>462</sup> The argument proposed here is two-fold. While from the 1990s onwards, the IRI's narrative was promoting neoliberal reforms and the "myth of the winner,"<sup>463</sup> workers as a collective entity were gradually fragmented, weakened, *precarized*, and eventually marginalized as political actors. Concurrently – as the effects of this discourse (together with repression) were generating new forms of discouragement for activists, emanating from several sources of power from across the whole of society – workers found alternative approaches to political mobilization. First, they managed to navigate authoritarian constraints by fluctuating from formal to informal activism. Second, they diversified their actions by using both online and offline spaces.

### **The politics of resistance**

Contemplating the Iranian context through a Foucauldian lens, resistance can be seen as eluding power, which represents its direct adversary within a framework of shifting relations. If – as Michel Foucault suggested – "power comes from everywhere" in the social body<sup>464</sup> and "where there is power, there is resistance,"<sup>465</sup> one could argue that the politics of resistance builds on this state of continuous interchange and relations between political actors. Following this line of reasoning,

---

<sup>461</sup> For a definition of informal activism and platforms see Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics. How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.)

<sup>462</sup> See Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, "Labor Rights and the Democracy Movement in Iran: Building a Social Democracy," *Northwestern journal of international Human Rights*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2012): 212-230; Malm and Esmailian, *Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers and Threats of War*; Sina Moradi, "Labour Activism and Democracy in Iran", Working Paper 22, Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries, The Hague (July 2013).

<sup>463</sup> M. Stella Morgana, "Produce and 'Consume' in the Islamic Republic: The 1990s Myth of the Winner in the Iranian Public Sphere and Its Impact on Workers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 52, No. 2 (2020): 340-344. See also Shahram Khosravi, *Precarious Lives. Waiting and Hope in Iran*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 11-12 and 214; and Fariba Adelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran*, (London: Hurst & Company, 1999), 139-160.

<sup>464</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 210.

<sup>465</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 9.

while the outcome might depend on changing conditions, there is always a possibility of resistance. However, there is a crucial point to consider. By producing *rituals of truth*, several sources of power work to maximize the productive nature of subjects in order to decrease their resistive potential.<sup>466</sup> The politics of resistance also involves “the path of imagination,” such as the daily narratives that construct the meanings of power and resistance.<sup>467</sup> Actors – such as the Iranian workers considered in this chapter – decide to mobilize when patterns of political opportunities transform, and new sites for struggle unfold within power relations. As Foucault argued: “We’re never trapped by power: it’s always possible to modify its hold, in determined conditions and following a precise strategy.”<sup>468</sup>

What were the strategies employed in the Iranian context? How did workers pursue their paths of defiance? In order to understand the inner dynamics of resistance against perceived constraints, this chapter focuses on methods and expressions of dissent that may mutate over time and place. For instance, from time to time, public spaces became sites of contestation of a source of power, such as the state. The streets, perceived as extended symbols of the authorities, were turned into sites of protest and strike, with the aim of renegotiating new spaces for expression. As Foucault suggested, it is more fruitful to examine resistance in terms of opposition to different forms of power, without perceiving power as monolithic in nature and fixed to the authority, thus meant as one omnipotent actor. A closer look shows that the inherent essence of the Islamic Republic presents several sources of power in the state apparatus itself: from the dual leadership President-Supreme Leader<sup>469</sup> to the different actors within the decision-making process (Parliament, Assembly of Experts, Council of Guardians, Expediency Council), and in the hierarchy of national security keepers (Security Council, Regular Army, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Ministry of Intelligence and

---

<sup>466</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 95; and Brent L. Pickett, *Polity*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer, 1996), 445-466.

<sup>467</sup> Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>468</sup> Michel Foucault, “The History of Sexuality: An Interview,” *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1980, 13.

<sup>469</sup> See Said Amir Arjomand, “Dual Leadership and Constitutional Developments after Khomeini,” in *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 36-55.

Security).<sup>470</sup> Furthermore, there are a series of agents that exercise social pressure and discourage activism, beyond the state apparatus. These are represented by family, school, friends, and partners.<sup>471</sup> Therefore, trajectories of activism are profoundly linked to all these dimensions, as forms of control are enacted both by the authoritarian state and society. Indeed, the effects reverberating from top-down narratives intertwine with discourses of morality/liberalism, safety or coercion that emanate from the whole social body. Eventually, as will be argued later, they can influence potential activists and discourage collective actions.<sup>472</sup>

### **Collective actions and counter-conduct: paths of defiance**

What gives impetus to collective actions? Before trying to answer this question, another interrogative arises. How is it possible to distinguish a social force from a *collectivity*? The *awareness* of its members is fundamental. According to Gramsci, this distinction constitutes a demarcation line that identifies those who act *politically* and play a decisive role instead of waiting for a more opportune moment.<sup>473</sup> Thus, developing *collective* objectives means thinking in long-term goals, rather than relying on short-term individualism.<sup>474</sup> This is what Gramsci calls “awareness of duration”, which is to be “concrete and not abstract.”<sup>475</sup> Therefore, *collective action* becomes a tool to challenge domination: through *political action*, workers in the context of this chapter can exercise power and perform an act of resistance.<sup>476</sup> Moving forward to a Foucauldian perspective built on a Gramscian theoretical legacy, resistance erupts when power manifests itself

---

<sup>470</sup> See Kazem Alamdari, “The power structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from populism to clientelism, and militarization of the government,” *Third World Quarterly*, 26:8 (2005), 1285-1301.

<sup>471</sup> Former Green Movement activist. Interview with the author, January 2018.

<sup>472</sup> Similar mechanisms also occurred among student activists, as explored by Paola Rivetti and Francesco Cavatorta, “Iranian student activism between authoritarianism and democratization: patterns of conflict and cooperation between the Office for the Strengthening of Unity and the regime,” *Democratization*, 21:2 (2014), 289-310, and Saeid Golkar “Student Activism, Social Media, and Authoritarian Rule in Iran” in Epstein I. (eds) *The Whole World is Texting*. Pittsburgh Studies in Comparative and International Education. (Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2015).

<sup>473</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 146-7; and Eric Hobsbawm, “Gramsci and Political Theory,” *Marxism Today*, 21 (7), 208.

<sup>474</sup> See Enrico Augelli and Craig N. Murphy, “Consciousness, myth and collective action: Gramsci, Sorel and the ethical state,” in *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies*, ed. Stephen Gill and James H. Mittelman, (London, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25-38.

<sup>475</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 146-147.

<sup>476</sup> Hobsbawm, “Gramsci and Political Theory,” 208-209.



as domination, even though power operates in invisible ways.<sup>477</sup> Moreover, although all forms of domination should be considered as power, this does not mean that power always belongs to the sphere of domination.<sup>478</sup> In Foucault's words: "In order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides [...] This means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, fight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all."<sup>479</sup> Therefore, room for *manœuvre* constitutes a crucial element in organizing and developing coherent (collective) action. Gramsci argues that even when subjected to severe disciplinary pressure, people may be able to perform acts of contestation together.<sup>480</sup> How do they do this? Understanding the nature of this contestation allows us to track its inner dynamics and relations from which a shared political vision might develop over time. Furthermore, shifting historical and economic specificities are pivotal to explaining why particular forms of mobilization occur. In Foucault's words, it is necessary "to analyze an event according to the multiple processes which constitute it."<sup>481</sup> For instance, in the context of this chapter, governmental power should be understood as "the way in which the conduct of individuals or groups might be directed" and, consequently, not only as the "political structures or to the management of states."<sup>482</sup> Far from neglecting the authoritarian core of the Islamic Republic and the strategies it uses, this approach allows us to demonstrate that those who are subject to these mechanisms can perform moments of counter-reaction. Hence, "the strategic codification of [disparate] points of resistance" leads to "great radical ruptures and massive binary divisions."<sup>483</sup> The Foucauldian notion of counter-

---

<sup>477</sup> Michel Foucault, "Subject and Power" in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*.

<sup>478</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge. Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, (New York: Pantheon books, 1980); and David Couzens Hoy, *Critical resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique*, (London, MIT Press 2004, 81-83.

<sup>479</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinov, 1997, 292.

<sup>480</sup> Marcus Schulzke, "Power and Resistance: Linking Gramsci and Foucault" in David Kreps eds, *Gramsci and Foucault: A Reassessment*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 71.

<sup>481</sup> Michel Foucault, "Questions of method," in G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller, (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 76-78.

<sup>482</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, Vo. 8., No. 4, (1982), 777-795.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.* 796.

conduct, conceived as “the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price,” describes this process and sheds light on the relationship between a source of power and protests against it.<sup>484</sup> This is to say that practices of resistance and forms of government are mutually related and constitutive, and they can both undermine or boost each other.<sup>485</sup> Moreover, the notion of counter-conduct not only allows us to grasp how the subjects of struggles subvert crystallized discourse and categories, such as the “good” worker or the “poor”. It also illustrates how new subjectivities are (inter)dependent on certain mentalities of discourse and government, yet can – while resisting – reinforce the practices they are reacting to.

**How workers emerged as revolutionaries in 1978-79 and consolidated in the 1980s**

In unity with the fighting people of Iran, the purpose of our strike is to destroy despotism and eliminate the influence of foreigners on our country, and create an independent, free and progressive Iran. These goals are the indisputable rights of the people. The people shall utilize all the means of self-sacrifice to achieve these goals.<sup>486</sup>

It was the end of 1978. With these words, the *Common Syndicate for the Employees of the Iranian Oil Industry* publicly declared its participation in the popular movement that led to the 1979 Iranian revolution and the overthrow of the Shah. Workers called for self-determination and independence from foreign interference and meddling in Iranian domestic affairs. They announced their support for the “fighting people of Iran,” and revealed their tools and strategies for engaging in a struggle against “despotism.” Therefore, “all the means of self-sacrifice” were accepted. The factory was turning into a site for *collective action*. How did forms of *collective awareness* develop? Until June

<sup>484</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is critique,” in Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. S. Lotringer; trans. L. Hochroth and C. Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)), 75.

<sup>485</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977 – 1978*, ed. M. Senellart, trans. G. Burchell, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 357.

<sup>486</sup> See OIPF, *Kārgarān Pishtāz-e Jonbesh-e Tudeh* in Mansoor Moaddel, “Class Struggle in Post-revolutionary Iran.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 23 (1991), 323.

1978, workers had mostly been far removed from any street protests. The city of Tabriz constituted the only exception. By the summer of 1978, recession indicators had reached their peak. The Shah canceled annual bonuses and blocked wage increases. Thus, the number of marchers rose sharply from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands.<sup>487</sup> They joined protesters from universities, bazaars and seminaries. Mainly coming from oil, construction and manufacturing factories, workers stopped their activities and took to the streets. Initially, there were strikes among the electrical and water system workers in Tehran. Progressively, laborers in other cities, such as Abadan, Behshahr, Tabriz, and Ahvaz joined their colleagues. They demanded the reintroduction of annual bonuses, better wages and housing, and health insurance. The violence of the regime's repression disrupted other demonstrations in Mashad, then in Qom and in Shiraz during the holy month of Ramadan, while Isfahan also faced bloody clashes.<sup>488</sup>

Nevertheless, workers determinedly continued to join the revolutionary body, which was made up of diverse and heterogeneous forces. As historian Ervand Abrahamian noted, if “the traditional middle class” (merchants and clergymen) “provided the opposition with a nationwide organization, it was the modern middle class that sparked off the Revolution, fueled it, and struck the final blows”, while “the urban working class” constituted “its chief battering ram.”<sup>489</sup> Workers became distinguishable from other groups opposed to the Shah and relevant to developments in the socio-political order. First, they had their particular grievances that prompted them to strike: demanding higher wages, better housing conditions, medical insurance and complaining about rising inflation. Second, their participation was crucial to the outcome of the Revolution, since they economically “paralyzed the state apparatus”, together with white-collar employees.<sup>490</sup> Oil workers played a particular role, as they first disoriented and then substantially undermined the basis of the Shah's

---

<sup>487</sup> See Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 510-525.

<sup>488</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 512-513.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid. 533-535.

<sup>490</sup> See Ashraf and Banuazizi, “The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution,” 34, and Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran, Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed*, (London, Harvard University Press, 2016).

regime.<sup>491</sup> On the one hand, they had *de facto* control of Iran's vital economic resource. On the other hand, previous strikes and the historical legacy of the Left had already provided them with a shared politically-driven experience.<sup>492</sup> By taking to the streets and through collective mobilization, workers became conscious of their common conditions, and aware of their impact on the outcomes of the social and productive processes that they activated.<sup>493</sup>

Religion did not act as a detonator for workers' protests.<sup>494</sup> Rather, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's followers within the factories, previously closer to Marxist groups,<sup>495</sup> were attracted by his "anti-despotic, anti-imperialist"<sup>496</sup> positions against the Shah and his attention to the declining living standards of the majority of Iranians.<sup>497</sup> As one worker told an American journalist: "We want Khomeini. He will take power from the rich and give it to us."<sup>498</sup> Another was reported as saying that Khomeini "has brought the eyes of the world on our problem here and made them see that the Shah is a puppet of the foreigners who are stealing our money."<sup>499</sup> Thus, in the last phase of the Revolution, part of the labor movement recast itself into the Khomeinist discourse, shouting rallying-cries such as: "The dark night of the people will turn into day. Khomeini will eventually win", "Long live the champion workers",<sup>500</sup> "Hussein is our guide, Khomeini is our leader", "independence, freedom, Islam", and "the Shah is a bastard."<sup>501</sup> Furthermore, secular slogans and symbols, such as class struggle, social justice and the fight against imperialism, were absorbed into

<sup>491</sup> For a detailed overview of oil workers' role in the 1979 revolution see Peyman Jafari, "Fluid History: Oil Workers and the Iranian Revolution," in *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*, edited by T. Atabaki, E. Bini and K. Ehsani, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 69-98.

<sup>492</sup> See Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, and Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*, 75-76.

<sup>493</sup> The political impact of the Iranian workers as a class on the revolution is debated beyond the paralyzing effect of their strikes on the economic system, as discussed by Ashraf, in "Kalbod-shekāfi Enqelāb [Autopsy of the Revolution], 55-123.

<sup>494</sup> Oil worker who participated in the revolution. Interview with the author. Tehran, April 2019. See also Youssef Ibrahim, "Despite Army's presence, Iranian oil town is challenging the Shah," *New York Times*, November 19, 1978.

<sup>495</sup> For more elaboration on the role of the Left and the impact of the different Marxist groups on workers during the Iranian revolution, see Val Moghadam, "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran," *New Left Review*, No. 166 (Nov.- Dec. 1987), 5-28, and Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, (London, Rutgers University Press), 141-167; and Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Guerrilla Odyssey*, 176-177.

<sup>496</sup> *Kayhān*, January 16, 1979.

<sup>497</sup> Parsa, *States, Ideologies and Social Revolutions*, 172.

<sup>498</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, "Iran in Revolution: The Opposition Forces," *MERIP Reports*, No. 75-76, (Mar-Apr 1979): 3-8.

<sup>499</sup> *New York Times*, 19 November 1978.

<sup>500</sup> *Akhbar*, 1979, No. 10, cited in Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 161.

<sup>501</sup> Abrahamian, "Iran in Revolution: The Opposition Forces," *MERIP*, 1979, 3-8.

the Khomeinist discourse. For instance, “Islam will eliminate class differences”, “Islam is for equality and social justice”, “the problems of the East come from the West, especially from American imperialism.”<sup>502</sup> This assimilation of secular rhetoric was Khomeini’s specific plan of action for all levels of power, aiming to nullify the Leftist secular groups within the anti-Shah movement.<sup>503</sup> The Marxist slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” was chanted as “Oppressed of the world, unite.” Laborers’ discontent, which struggled to find its own safe channels of organization, was engulfed in Khomeini’s discourse for the masses of *mostaz’afin*, the oppressed. In Asef Bayat’s words, this process rendered the historical Left confused: “Not only the working class but also the traditional Left became confused by the populist, ‘anti-capitalist’, and ‘pro-downtrodden’ stance of the Islamic state.”<sup>504</sup>

The mentality of struggle gradually emerged among those who wanted to unite, despite a particularly fragmented labor force. Organized workers’ movements with a long-term strategic project were hindered by the small scale of industrial enterprises nationwide. About 89 percent of the total units (6,738 factories) had fewer than one hundred employees, and 4,628 enterprises each had fewer than 19 workers.<sup>505</sup> In fact, at the beginning workers did not express political concerns or demands.<sup>506</sup> When industrial strikes caused upheaval among large numbers of workers, economic disruption started in the country as well.<sup>507</sup> As a result, the role of these workers became crucial in undermining the Shah’s regime, as oil workers explained:

Both the government and Iranian Oil Company officials suddenly realized that we were serious about the demands we had been putting forward from the start: end martial law, full solidarity and cooperation with the striking teachers, and unconditional release of all

---

<sup>502</sup> For Khomeinist slogans see Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, 31.

<sup>503</sup> See Peter J. Chelkowski, and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution*, 9-10, Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, 71; and Morgana, “The Islamic Republican Party of Iran in the Factory,” 237-249.

<sup>504</sup> Bayat, “Labor and democracy in post-revolutionary Iran”, in *Post-revolutionary Iran* ed by Hooshang Amir Ahmadi and Manoucher Parvin, 41-54.

<sup>505</sup> Mansoor Moaddel, “Class Struggle in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 23 (1991), 329.

<sup>506</sup> This point is the fruit of several interviews with the author, Tehran, July 2017 and May 2019.

<sup>507</sup> Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?*, 37.

political prisoners. Our economic demands included “Iranianization” of the oil industry, all communications to be in the Persian language, and for all foreign employees to leave the country.<sup>508</sup>

In the summer of 1979, owners fled abroad and many factories were nationalized.<sup>509</sup> The Revolution was accomplished, but a power vacuum was left in the industrial units of the country. The only surviving organization was the Worker Council, *Showra*, established in many factories after 1978 as a strike committee with a strong emphasis on management from the bottom up.<sup>510</sup> Mobilization had led to a phase of control from below. Although at the beginning workers had been protesting to achieve economic gains, month by month they had built a network of members who were *conscious* of their *political* role and goals. As a solution to the crisis of productivity in industry, the new ruling bloc promoted labor as a religious duty.<sup>511</sup> The idea of control from below in the factory began to vanish, while the Khomeinists started “purifying” labor activities of Leftist slogans and symbols. By 1981, most of the secular work councils were disbanded. Gradually, the workers’ secular “control from below” disappeared under the Islamic Republic’s discourse of “power from above”.<sup>512</sup> Step-by-step, a slow process of “deproletarianization of labor”<sup>513</sup> was carried out and a purge of opponents started. Between 1981 and 1983, many work council activists were arrested, and about 600 of them were executed. Work councils were replaced by the state-controlled *Showrā-ye Eslāmi*, Islamic Labor councils,<sup>514</sup> and *Khāneh-ye Kārgar*, the Workers’ House. The religious transformation of the Iranian factories was implemented by members of the

<sup>508</sup> Oil Workers, “How We Paralyzed the Shah’s Regime,” *Payam-Danesju/MERIP*, No. 75/76 (March-April 1979), 20-28.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>510</sup> See Saeed Rahnema, “Work Council in Iran: Illusion of Worker Control,” *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1992): 69-94, and Moghissi and Rahnema, “The Working Class and the Islamic State in Iran,” 207-208.

<sup>511</sup> See Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 181-184 and Bayat, “Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers” in *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East*, 200-203.

<sup>512</sup> According to Bayat (1987), the post-revolutionary history can be divided into three different phases. From an initial period of “power vacuum” in the factories and the illusion of “control from below” (1978-1979), Iran experienced a second stage of management from above (1979-1981), followed by the imposition of Islamist control over labor.

<sup>513</sup> Nomani and Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?* 101.

<sup>514</sup> Qānun-e Showrāhā-ye Eslāmi Kār (Law on Islamic Councils of Labor), *Majles*. Available at <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/91022>

Islamic Associations (IAs) for labor, which were supported by the ruling Islamic Republican Party. The IAs were established for educational and social purposes, as mandated by the Iranian constitution, but they soon became instruments of control over workers.<sup>515</sup> Meanwhile, the war with Iraq (1980-1988) had broken out and its effects became visible: calls for patience spread within the factory. As a labor activist remembered:

When [workers] raised the issue of wages, safety in the factory or surveillance, most of the times the advice of the *Khāneh-ye Kārgar*'s officials was to be patient and tolerant, because the pressure of power of capital was kept hidden from workers' eyes by certain managers and workers' nomination for leadership was [actually] threatened. The war [with Iraq] imposed patience and tolerance in relation to strikes and any other action [*harekat*] was made difficult, along with the lack of clever leadership in the factory. Some forms of resistance [*moqāvamat*] were [still] possible and some of the demands considered, but eventually it began an era of repression [*sarkub*] and there was no collective support [*hemāyat jām 'eh*]. *Khāneh-ye Kārgar* had imposed passivity towards power and so undermined collective activity.<sup>516</sup>

While Khomeini was spreading messages of social justice and praising workers as “holy warriors,” the relations between the state management of the factories and workers underwent radical change. The right of laborers to organize in independent unions was denied, except in councils under the Workers' House umbrella. As a process of “sanitization of labor activism”<sup>517</sup> took place and Islamic populism and nationalist discourses<sup>518</sup> sought to engulf workers' needs, spaces for dissent and collective actions were swept away.

---

<sup>515</sup> See Bayat, *Workers and Revolution*, 186.

<sup>516</sup> Reza Kangarani, “Kārgarān va Showrahā -ye Eslāmi-ye Kār (Workers and the Islamic Councils of Labor),” *Andisheh-ye Jām 'eh*, No. 16, (Ordibehesht 1380/April 2001), 10-12.

<sup>517</sup> See also Joel Beinin, “Sanitizing the Tunisian Revolution,” 12 October 2015. Accessed 31 September 2018. Available here <http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2015/10/sanitizing-the-tunisian-revolution.html>.

<sup>518</sup> See Peyman Jafari, “Introduction: Against All Odds – Labor Activism in the Middle East” in *Workers of the World – International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts*, No. 7 (2015): 6-13.

From 1985, the Ministry of Labor started to be “required to work in units with more than 35 permanent employees that are allowed to form the Islamic Labor Council.”<sup>519</sup> These came under pressure. As one oil worker said:

Even when someone is elected as workers’ representative, the managers of the contract firm put strong pressure on him through various ways, such as postponement of paying his wages or fringe benefits threatening him with changing his workplace, and dismissing him, so that he is forced to either resign or stay quiet.<sup>520</sup>

The Workers’ House and its members established a direct connection with the IRI’s state apparatus, as they received financial and logistical support from it:

The *Khāneh-ye Kārgar* after the Revolution gradually turned into a state union or the governmental reign of labor. It receives money and help from the Islamic Republic. Their members and leaders are with the system, not with workers.<sup>521</sup>

Therefore, a combination of factors undermined organized labor activism: 1) the repression of militant opponents; 2) the co-opting of workers into the new Islamic councils and Workers’ House; 3) a discourse that assimilated social justice slogans and Leftist symbols under the umbrella of religion/Islam. Throughout the 1980s, especially with the escalation of the war with Iraq, the opportunities for collective action within and outside the factories declined. Under these conditions – once the IRI had consolidated its institutional power – the spontaneous mobilization of labor and

---

<sup>519</sup> See Qānun-e Showrāhā-ye Eslāmi Kār (Law on Islamic Councils of Labor), *Majles*. Available at <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/91022>.

<sup>520</sup> Mohammad Maljoo, “The Unmaking of the Iranian Working Class since the 1990s,” in *Iran’s Struggles for Social Justice*, 47-63.

<sup>521</sup> Former labor activist and academic. Conversation with the author on Skype, March 2017.



independent workers groups had very little room to flourish without being controlled, isolated and repressed.<sup>522</sup>

**Negotiating spaces for struggle against liberalization policies in the 1990s**

How did labor activists and workers' expressions of dissent manage to develop and survive, despite this situation? Is repression a definitive obstacle that prevents mobilization? As shown above, the circulation of *positive* discourses among the whole social body and the co-opting of workers into key institutions in the factory, such as Islamic councils or the Workers' House, contributed to the fragmentation of laborers' cohesion. The history of the Islamic Republic and the *sāzandegi* period, the period of the country's reconstruction after eight years of war, demonstrates that sources of power are mutually constitutive and that room for resistance exists even under repression. However, in this context, the forms of expression of dissent varied, as formal and independent networks of workers had already been disbanded. Between 1989 and 1997, during Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency, manifestations of popular defiance and expressions of workers' dissent intensified. Liberalization policies, the removal of subsidies, increasing inequalities, and high inflation with the consequent fall in the value of wages brought about a rapid deterioration in the country's economic situation. While the top-down discourse was following the mantra of production, shifting its focus from the masses to the new middle classes, laborers and the lower strata of Iranian society were left behind.<sup>523</sup> Before workers raised their voices as a specific and distinguishable social group, thus collectively in a Gramscian sense, the masses of the oppressed and urban poor took to the streets. Embryonic forms of resistance appeared, due to economic pressure. The seeds of discontent lay in the suburbs of the cities, where illegal shacks – the product of a rapid urbanization of the country in the decade after the Revolution – had been built for the poor. In 1991 and 1992, breeding grounds

---

<sup>522</sup> Sohrab Behdad and Farhad Nomani, "Iranian Labor and the Struggle for Independent Unions," Tehran Bureau – PBS, April 2011. Accessed on 2 October 2018. Available here <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/04/labors-struggle-for-independent-unions.html>

<sup>523</sup> See Morgana, "Produce and 'Consume' in the Islamic Republic," 340-344.

for rebellion manifested all over the country: in South Tehran, Shiraz, Mashad, Khoramabad, Arak. Throwing stones and setting police cars and buses on fire, rioters expressed their frustration for days. Shiraz experienced a violent one-day protest in March 1992, initiated by war veterans complaining about the “lousy” management of the Foundation of the Dispossessed. Squatters joined the riots and two people were killed. In the industrial city of Arak a riot that had been triggered by a dispute involving a municipality pickup, that had killed a boy while trying to remove a dump truck, turned into three thousand people marching against the mayor.<sup>524</sup> It was May 1992. A few days later the religious city of Mashhad became a battleground as squatters mobilized against the destruction of their dwellings. A small unrest developed into a big crowd of people, impoverished and lacking the basic money to live. Once again, the police acted harshly in repressing the mobilization.<sup>525</sup> These protests were deemed to be the “most serious urban disturbances in 12 years.”<sup>526</sup> A witness of the Mashhad protests commented:

The state insists on calling these people enemies of the Revolution. Men, women and children who are economically much worse off than they were 10 years ago, they are not going to go away if we deny that they have problems.<sup>527</sup>

Sources of defiance were mainly economic and not politically directed by a specific group or network. Images of riots were broadcast on national TV, showing a massive deployment of police forces. Protestors were portrayed as violent agitators threatening the IRI’s security. However, new sites of struggle were being unveiled within power relations. Impoverished daily workers and street vendors joined the protests that were taking place in Islamshahr, in the suburbs of Tehran, where

---

<sup>524</sup> Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People’s Movement in Iran*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 106-107.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid.

<sup>526</sup> *New York Times*, June 1, 1992. Accessed 20 October 2018, available here <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/01/world/violence-spreads-in-iran-as-the-poor-are-evicted.html>

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

more than five hundred thousand people were living in illegal settlements. As water supplies were scarce and the cost of a transport ticket rose, two hundred young boys initiated the protests. In a few hours, the crowd had increased to fifty thousand people, calling for better living conditions and blaming the IRI for food shortages and inflation. The *mostaz'afin* raised their voices once again. Under shifting economic conditions, opportunities for acts of contestation appeared. However, these riots did not show particular *awareness of duration*, with regard to the protesters' grievances or goals. Fuel prices had soared, bus fares had almost doubled.

Early one morning, workers from a nearby shantytown en route to Teheran revolted. They marched to the bigger town of Islamshahr, picking up jobless supporters, smashing storefront windows, and setting fire to banks, gas stations and government buildings along the way.<sup>528</sup>

Most of the people taking to the streets were jobless, and they chanted that they had nothing to lose. Tehran state radio spread the news, reporting that a crowd had assembled to protest against water shortages. Rioters were called “agitators,” in a discourse that minimized the protestors' demands. The police opened fire on protesters:

Agitators among them attacked vehicles, public transport and other facilities, causing damage (...) With the intervention of security forces, several agitators were arrested and handed over to the judicial authorities.<sup>529</sup>

---

<sup>528</sup> *New York Times*, July 16, 1999. Available here <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/16/world/town-hushed-in-95-crackdown-sees-no-reason-to-join-iran-riots.html>

<sup>529</sup> Radio Tehran, 14 Farvardin 1374, 3 April 1995. Confirmed by an Iranian scholar in a conversation with the author, Tehran, August 2017 and March 2019. See also “Iran Police Open Fire On Protesters,” *Upi archives*, April 4, 1995, available here <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1995/04/04/Iranian-police-open-fire-on-protesters/2958796968000/>.

Concurrently, discontent was mounting inside the factories as well. In addition to experiencing repression, the legal conditions did not fully satisfy the workers. The Labor Law (ratified in 1989 and finally approved in November 1990) provided for written or oral contracts, which began to pave the way for blank signed contracts.<sup>530</sup> Bargaining power was reserved for Islamic Labor Councils and workers' representatives (and later to Guild Societies,) which all operated under the Worker House's umbrella. Interestingly enough, the Workers' House was not specifically mentioned in the Labor Law. Yet, free independent unions had no right to exist beyond it. Furthermore, for the first time since the Revolution, the IRI drew up temporary contracts. This policy granted greater power to employers, who were able to hire and fire employees more easily. Initially, workers expressed their economic grievances, that rapidly became more political and collectively shared. Nonetheless, the expression of these demands remained weak and could not flourish due to both repression and lack of support from the Workers' House.<sup>531</sup>

Workers started to pursue their own "paths of imagination," such as the daily narratives that construct the meanings of power and resistance mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter. Overdue payments and short contracts were at the core of the strikes. In 1995, workers from Khalifeh Abad, in the northern province of Gilan, went on strike for the fourth time in less than a year. They started with a sit-in in front of the Asalam Lumber factory, asking for their salaries, which had not been paid for two months. Then they blocked the Anzali-Hashtpar road for hours. The same year, Khavar Benz's factory workers went on strike demanding rights and greater bargaining power. A statement published online by workers described a "critical" economic situation for the Islamic Republic:

---

<sup>530</sup> Labor Law, article 7. *Iran Data Portal*, Syracuse University. 1990, available here in Persian <http://irandataportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/labor-law-2.pdf> and here in English <http://irandataportal.syr.edu/labor-law>

<sup>531</sup> Interview with the author, workers. Tehran, March-April 2019.

The regime's critical economic state has stagnated Iranian factory production. Most of the factories operate at 20% of their capacity. Workers routinely do not receive their salaries for several months. Presently 16 million workers are either unemployed or laid off from their jobs.<sup>532</sup>

Almost a year later, in December 1996, oil workers at the refineries in Tehran, Shiraz, Tabriz and Esfahan organized a two-day strike. They went out of the factories and for the first time in the 1990s, seventeen years after the Revolution, they took to the streets with structured political demands. The strike stood out as the main headline in *Kār*, the magazine of Fedayān (Minority), that extensively reported workers' frustrations at the Workers' House actions in monitoring potential sources of dissent. It also analyzed the roots of workers' dissatisfaction, that originated in the lack of collective bargaining rights in the refineries.<sup>533</sup> Two months later, in February 1997, the same workers organized a sit-in in front of the Oil Ministry, protesting the arrest of labor leaders. The security forces repressed the demonstration.<sup>534</sup> A statement from the Committee for the Defense and Support of Iranian Workers described a "direct confrontation" between workers and regime, with clear political contours:

The oil workers are involved in a direct confrontation with the Iranian regime. They are protesting against their working conditions, the level of wages and for the right to form a workers' organization. Up to now the regime which governs Iran has refused to accept these

---

<sup>532</sup> Iranian workers statement, IASWI. Available at <https://workers-iran.org/old/asalem.htm>

<sup>533</sup> *Kār*, "E 'tesābāt Sarāsari Kārgarān San 'at Naft (Oil Workers Strikes)", Bahman 1375 – February 1997, No. 298, 1-3.

<sup>534</sup> *Kār*, "Tazāhorāt-e Hezārān az Kārgarān San 'at Naft (Demonstration of thousand oil workers), Esfand 1375- March 1997, No. 299, 4.

basic demands. The oil workers had previously threatened to go on an all-out national, unlimited strike if their legitimate demands are not met.<sup>535</sup>

Eighteen years after the Revolution, workers finally had the chance to re-organize collective actions, as they kept trying to form independent unions. As previously discussed, when viewed through a Gramscian lens, even when subjected to severe repression, workers were seeking to perform acts of collective contestation.

On 5 and 6 February, they [workers] elected representatives who then went to Tehran to form a national organization. This organization met there on 7 February, but the Iranian government intervened and dissolved the meeting. It then forced the representatives to return to their respective cities and prohibited them from leaving them, putting them under “city” arrest.<sup>536</sup>

However, the only response to come from the IRI at that moment was to refuse permission:

The government has declared all oil workers’ organizations illegal, prohibited the formation of a national organization and refused the collective bargaining demand.<sup>537</sup>

As inequalities were increasing, workers continued to demand higher wages. In September 1997, workers in Arak protested for better salaries at a machinery factory. Beyond repression, the state’s need to address these continuous demands and strikes finally compelled the Labor minister to

---

<sup>535</sup> Committee for the Defense and Support of the Iranian Workers (Communist Party of Iran, Iranian Workers Left Unity, Iranian refugee Workers Association), “Iranian Oil Workers Arrested,” February 16, 1997. Available at <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/086.html>

<sup>536</sup> Ibid.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid.

intervene: “The workers’ main grievance is an increase of their pay. This should be pursued through legal channels.”<sup>538</sup>

While the oil workers were making a breach in the wall of Iranian public debate on the issue of labor rights, the gap between social classes and between generations was widening. As the neoliberal policies promoted by Rafsanjani spread across the whole country, a new middle class emerged. On the one hand, the discourse of social justice and the redistribution of wealth disappeared from official May Day speeches, as described earlier.<sup>539</sup> On the other hand, the new middle class began to promulgate its self-perception as “the successful entrepreneur” as a social model. Throughout the 1990s, the Rafsanjani government promoted privatization and neoliberal policies as a means of solving Iran’s economic problems. This line of reasoning followed a trend of liberal ideas, that spread particularly among upper middle-class Iranians, who believed that these policies would pave the way to democracy.<sup>540</sup> Among the lower classes and the youth, a refusal of poverty and a rejection of the label of “lower/working class members” circulated. Slogans championing social justice and ideology were gradually robbed of their significance, as society began to perceive them as associated with IRI propaganda.<sup>541</sup>

### **Resisting precarity and isolation in the Reformist era (1997-2005)**

With the process of stripping concepts such as ideology and modernity of meaning, as well as progress and the redistribution of wealth, the needs and demands of workers were gradually being overlooked. Both the government and parts of society dismissed them, while chasing after a cultural and intellectual opening offered by the newly elected president, the reformist Mohammad Khatami. Meanwhile, workers were fighting both social isolation and the precarity/fragmentation created by

---

<sup>538</sup> Quoted in a Statement of *Confederation of Free Trade Unions*. Available here <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/090.html>

<sup>539</sup> See Morgana, “Talking to Workers: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad,” 133-158.

<sup>540</sup> Independent scholar. Conversation with the author, Tehran, August 2017. See also Sohrab Behdad, “From Populism to Liberalism: the Iranian Predicament,” in Parvin Alizadeh *The Economy of Iran: Dilemmas of an Islamic State* (London and New York, IB Tauris 2000).

<sup>541</sup> Worker, interview with the author. Tehran, October 2018.

temporary contracts and the use of employment agencies.<sup>542</sup> These measures were threatening job security and collective bargaining, in a particularly complex context.<sup>543</sup> On the one hand, Khatami's administration limited legal access to job security, by exempting small enterprises with five or fewer workers from being subject to the Labor Law.<sup>544</sup> On the other hand, it sought to open up the space for participation and limited criticism. In fact, his administration tried to reform, without success, chapter VII of the Labor Law on collective bargaining and workers' organizations.<sup>545</sup> As the economic situation deteriorated, workers gradually exploited the greater – although still limited – space for collective mobilization. In early January 1999 more than 1,500 workers from several factories organized an action in Kashan and demonstrated in front of the governor's office.<sup>546</sup>

Beyond demands for higher salaries and overdue pay, between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the workers' political positions took shape again. They continued to demand their rights, raising their voices against temporary contracts and the expulsion of workers from the factories. This was the case between February and April 1999, when oil workers gathered in Ahvaz, Abadan and Shiraz, with sixteen of them being arrested. Likewise, the Azmayesh factory workers in Sarvdasht were in open conflict with their management, marching together against them in late May 1999.

As *Rāh-e Kārgar* reported:

In early June Oil Refinery workers in Abadan, Mahshahr, Bandar Abbas, and Masjed Soleiman warned President Khatami's administration of strike action if he did not increase wages in accordance with inflation and is prepared to accept group negotiation. Teheran refinery workers added their support.

---

<sup>542</sup> *Kayhān*, 24 Mordad 1383 (14 August 2004).

<sup>543</sup> Legal expert, interview with the author. Tehran, May 2019.

<sup>544</sup> See Majles, amendments of Labor Law as approved on 27 January 2003 (7 Bahman 1381). Available here: <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/122666>

<sup>545</sup> *IRNA*, 24 Ordibehesht 1382. English translation *Payvand*, 15 May 2003 <http://www.payvand.com/news/03/may/1084.html>

<sup>546</sup> *Khordād*, 15 Dey 1377 (5 January 1999).



The regime had accepted both demands in January last year after nationwide strikes and demonstrations outside the oil company headquarters in Teheran. Instead hundreds have been arrested. More ominously, a number of oil workers have died under mysterious circumstances, suggesting extra-judicial execution.<sup>547</sup>

Across the country, almost four hundred factories and manufacturing units were shut down in 1999.<sup>548</sup> Hence, the specter of unemployment loomed over laborers. Iran Khodro, one of the biggest car factories in the Middle East, went on strike demanding the removal of temporary contracts from the Labor Law, safer working conditions, and higher salaries for night-shift workers. The demonstrations continued for months.<sup>549</sup> In a statement the workers declared:

In the early hours of 18th May 2005, a 30-year old worker in Assembly Section 4 of the Iran Khodro car plant was killed in a horrific accident involving a defective lift, while on a night shift. He was the 9th worker to die at Iran Khodro in the past two years due to the hazardous conditions at the plant. Lack of training, raised output targets, speedups, long hours (including forced overtime, weekend work and night-shifts), and the resulting overwork, are among the factors behind the deaths and injuries. Furthermore, more and more of Iran Khodro's workers - in line with the government and employers' agenda nationally - are being forced to work under temporary contracts, for private contractors, with few or no rights.

The management's response to the workers' protests over pay and conditions at Iran Khodro has been to bring in the factory's Security Organization (Harassat) to interrogate and detain

---

<sup>547</sup> *Rāh-e Kārgar*, 24 Tir 1378 (15 July 1999). Translation available here <https://workers-iran.org/old/archives.htm>

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>549</sup> International Labor Organization, ILO. Report No. 337 (2005).

dissident workers. In 2005, one of these workers, Parviz Salarvand, was taken away for questioning and kept in detention for nearly a month.<sup>550</sup>

However, other social groups, such as the middle class, did not share this frustration or the desire to participate in the decision-making process in the workplace. As Behdad and Nomani wrote on the subject of the Khatami era and the president's allies:

Their potential advances were limited by their liberal economic position, prevailing unfriendly (and somewhat arrogant) attitude toward subordinate classes, and preference for a truncated, exclusionary brand of liberal democracy in the face of rising secularism across every social class.<sup>551</sup>

As this discourse spread throughout society, the number of crackdowns by the security forces dropped, but suffocating protests did not stop being a useful strand of the IRI's policy. Nonetheless, workers managed to continue to create moments of counter-reaction to coercive measures, both in online and offline spaces. There was little support from most of the reformist intellectuals. In fact, the rift between the so called *roshanfekrān* [the "enlightened"] and workers widened irremediably further, as the divide between rich and poor grew. From the end of the 2000s, consumerist habits merged with the rising inequality growing in the country. The desire for luxury began to permeate the upper-middle classes, particularly in the big cities: clothes, cars, houses, restaurants.<sup>552</sup> The myth of the winner contrasted with the working man or woman, who were no longer seen as models for the country's youth.<sup>553</sup> Working-class men remained trapped in their "precarious status."<sup>554</sup>

---

<sup>550</sup> *Etehādchap Kārgari* (Workers Left Unity Iran), 8 June 2005, in Yassamine Mather & Majid Tamjidi, "Iran Khodro," *Critique*, 19.

<sup>551</sup> Sohrab Behdad and Farhad Nomani, "Iranian Labor and the Struggle for Independent Unions," Tehran Bureau – PBS, April 2011. Accessed on 2 October 2018.

<sup>552</sup> This affirmation is confirmed by the author's archival research and fieldwork interviews between 2017 and 2019.

<sup>553</sup> Green Movement activist. Conversation with the author, Tehran, February 2018.

<sup>554</sup> Shahram Khosravi, "The Precarious Status of Working-Class Men in Iran," *Current History*, Vol. 116, No. 794: 355.

Nevertheless, having benefitted from the opening of a relatively freer political space under Khatami, they did not give up their struggle.

**Coping with Ahmadinejad's crackdown: struggle, informal activism and the internet**

From 2005, when the conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took the helm of his populist government, the IRI president claimed to speak once again for the masses and the lower classes. In actual fact, his government repressed the spaces for renegotiating workers' activism that had been relatively open. Nonetheless, workers found their own way of coping with the transformed political context. First, labor activists responded to the repression and arrests with sit-ins and other demonstrations. Second, they continued to demand room for dissent and the recognition of their rights: new independent unions were born, such as the Tehran Bus Drivers Syndicate, *Haft Tapeh*, the Sugar Factory Workers' Union and the Free Union of Iranian Workers. Third, when the state reaction began to be excessive, most of the workers decided to avoid contact with official networks. Forms of activism shifted from formal to informal groups, from organized unrest to individual participation, from semi-public action or statements to those online networks that had partly flourished during the reformist era.

Two interesting developments occurred in labor activism between 2004 and 2007, representing important attempts at official collective organization. The first one involved the United Bus Company of Tehran and Suburbs (*Sherkat-e Vahed Otubusrani-ye Tehran va HumeH*), usually referred as *Sherkat-e Vahed*, which was re-founded, having been disbanded in 1983. Collectively organized, bus workers called for the abolition of Islamic Councils and their replacement with independent trade unions. A semi-public meeting was organized in 2005 and 9,000 signatures were collected in favor of founding a new syndicate. In September 2005 the bus drivers staged their first strike, and in December almost 5,000 of them gathered in downtown Tehran. Nevertheless, both of these actions were met with harsh persecution and the organizers of the protests were arrested. The syndicate president was jailed between 2006 and 2011. Likewise, the syndicate's treasurer Reza

Shahabi was kept in solitary confinement and charged with “conspiring” against the Islamic Republic. Moreover, according to labor activist Davoud Razavi in a long piece published online, more than 400 workers were arrested and 300 were expelled from their workplaces on account of their union activities.<sup>555</sup> He also added:

Decisions on the expulsion of the Syndicate’s main members were taken at the highest level of the country’s security authorities, and copy (proof) is available.<sup>556</sup>

However, in a long piece published online in Persian, Said Torabian, board member of *Sherkat-e Vahed*, denied the importance of repression as a tool to stop workers’ actions:

Members and the board of our syndicate believe that expulsion, unemployment, repression, arrest, and imprisonment are not convincing reasons to quit the struggle [...] Despite all these problems there is still hope to change. What we experienced over the past few years for all our workers and activists and board members not only did not stop us, but represents also an incentive to continue our work and make further efforts to regain the lost rights of workers.<sup>557</sup>

Following the experience of Tehran’s bus drivers, workers from the *Haft Tapeh* sugar cane factory in the southern region of Khuzestan, repeatedly went on strike in 2007. Although labor activists were arrested and imprisoned, 2,500 workers signed a letter calling for the abolition of the Islamic Council and the establishment of an independent union. In November 2008, a second illegal trade

---

<sup>555</sup> *Akhbar-e Rooz*, 22 Dey 1391, January 11, 2013. Available here <http://www.akhbar-rooz.com/article.jsp?essayId=50292>

<sup>556</sup> Ibid.

<sup>557</sup> *Asr-e Nou*, “Jām’eh Bandi Se Sālāhā-ye Mobārezat-e Kārgarān Sendikā-ye Sherkat-e Vahed” Sum up of three years of Workers’ Struggles of the Syndicate United Company, 11 Bahman 1387/30 January 2009. Available here <http://asre-nou.net/php/view.php?objnr=2054>.

union was established.<sup>558</sup> The Free Union of Iranian Workers followed a similar path: established between 2006 and 2008, one of its main goals was to gather together all the expelled and unemployed workers. Despite being weak in its organization and harshly targeted by state police, throughout those years it represented a significant collective experience in the long battle to form independent labor organizations and diminish *Showrā Eslāmi*'s control over workers.<sup>559</sup> All the above-mentioned experiences suffered harsh persecution, but workers' endurance led them to find new spaces where they could express their dissent. Labor Committees and the new independent unions started to move their activities online. Several websites were set up, spreading news about labor activism and strikes across the country, among them Kargaran.org, Ettihadchap.org, Jonbeshekargary.org, Iranlaborreport.org, and Gozaar.org. However, once they became too popular the government decided to shut them down.<sup>560</sup> Through email exchanges, blogs and forums, informal and small networks flourished keeping labor activism alive. Beyond repressive mechanisms and concession from the government, even during and immediately after harsh repression, ordinary people and workers' agency was not erased or nullified. What became routine under Ahmadinejad in particular however, was the fear of being labeled activists.<sup>561</sup> Therefore, the transformations explored above show that, before the Green Movement took to the streets in 2009 in the largest mass revolt since the 1979 Revolution, with its liberal requests for change (democracy and civil rights instead of social justice), labor activism had already been weakened and fragmented. Demands had changed: no social justice grievances or strong anti-imperialist rallying cries were chanted. Instead, the movement's main slogan was "where is my vote?", which was far removed from workers' specific needs. Furthermore, as has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, workers' demands had been gradually neglected and there

<sup>558</sup> See "Kārgarān Haft Tapeh az Sāzmān-e Jahāni Kār Komak Khāstand," Haft Tapeh Workers ask International Labor Organization for help, 11 Mehr 1386, October 3, 2007 and Worker-Today (Persian). Available here [http://www.bbc.com/persian/business/story/2007/10/071003\\_mf\\_hafttappe.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/persian/business/story/2007/10/071003_mf_hafttappe.shtml) and here [http://www.worker-today.com/gozaresh/7tapeh\\_1.htm](http://www.worker-today.com/gozaresh/7tapeh_1.htm)

<sup>559</sup> See International Labor Organization, Report No. 346 (2007), available here [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:50002:0::NO::P50002\\_COMPLAINT\\_TEXT\\_ID:2910267](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:50002:0::NO::P50002_COMPLAINT_TEXT_ID:2910267)

<sup>560</sup> See a list in Persian here <http://www.ofros.com/payvandha.htm>

<sup>561</sup> This was confirmed to the author by several activists and ordinary people met in Iran between 2017 and 2019.

was no realistic chance of them being manifested and shared within the social body at that time. There were also other reasons. First: harsh repression, as more than 150 activists were arrested and jailed a month before the Green Wave erupted. By the same token, precarity reduced workers' collective awareness and their will to look to long-term goals.<sup>562</sup> A third point relates to the radical Left's reaction to the 2009 revolt: it dismissed the potential of the Movement as speaking for the liberal upper-middle class and not for the masses.<sup>563</sup> Finally, most workers – as a result of all the motivations mentioned above – were individual activists, in other words disconnected from formal networks or independent unions. In fact, as formal activism was made illegal, informal groups were more difficult to track.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored ruptures and transformations in the processes of resistance undertaken by Iranian workers. It investigated the historical and social context where seeds of revolt flourished. It contested the idea that the emergence of workers' agency and new subjectivities were impacted solely by state repression and concessions by the authorities. Rather, labor activism in Iran evolved systematically between two key moments for the Islamic Republic, the 1979 Revolution and the 2009 Green Movement. By adopting the perspective of the workers, this chapter attempted to examine labor protests beyond the idea of an omnipotent state, although without neglecting the IRI's inner dynamics and mechanisms of controlling dissent. Therefore, its analysis dealt with a fundamental question: while authoritarian regimes diversified and reinvented their response to several forms of organized and semi-organized expressions of dissent, how did labor activism change and manage to survive?

---

<sup>562</sup> See M. Stella Morgana, "Precarious Workers and Neoliberal Narratives in Post-revolutionary Iran: Top-down Strategies and Bottom-up Responses," *Middle East Institute*, MAP Project, January 28, 2020.

<sup>563</sup> See Maljoo, "Tabaqeh Kārgar pas az Entekhābāt Dahom: Enzevā ya E'telāf" [The Working Class after the Elections: Isolation or Coalition], *Goftogu*, No. 55 (1389-2010): 7-16. See also "Iran After the Elections," *Jacobin magazine*, 5 November 2016. Available here <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/05/iran-elections-rouhani-reformists-nuclear-deal/>. Accessed 23 October 2018.

Over the thirty years between the Revolution and the Green Movement, workers' role within society and as a distinguishable advocate for political change gradually weakened. It was first contained and suppressed from the top, and was then fundamentally overlooked and isolated within society as a whole. Eventually, it became fragile, fragmented and without long-term goals.

On the one hand, in order to divide and “precarize” the workers, the IRI employed various strategies, which were both negative and “positive,” in other words discursive in a Foucauldian understanding. 1) It monitored, controlled and repressed any form of independent defiance against the Khomeinist apparatus. 2) As social justice and labor mobilizations were instrumental in the success of the Revolution, throughout the 1980s labor was associated with Islam and fashioned as a religious duty. This *positive* discourse spread throughout the social body and merged several sources of power. 3) While Leftist symbols (perceived as a threat to the stability of the IRI) were assimilated into a broader narrative in favor of the downtrodden and the masses, workers lost their specificity. 4) Some workers identified themselves as revolutionary laborers and were co-opted through Islamic councils and Workers' Houses. 5) Beginning in the 1990s, with the ratification of the Labor Law, workers were denied the right to organize into independent unions, and temporary contracts were introduced. 6) During the reformist era workers did not represent the main audience for the IRI's discourse on progress.

On the other hand, most academic research concentrates only on constraints and repressions, and depicts the IRI as an omnipotent entity. However, this approach erases people's agency. In the workers' case, it is worth clarifying the following points. 1) They demonstrated that repression alone may not silence or block acts of resistance. 2) Perceived and/or experienced repression, both in the protests of the early 1990s and in the case of the Bus Drivers Union, did not deter workers from engaging in new activities. 3) Strategies for performing acts of defiance evolved, along with the changing context. 4) From the mid-1990s onwards, workers on temporary contracts did not have the opportunity or the time to strengthen networks. As a result, most of the protests did not have long-term goals. 5) The myth of success spreading as a model within the social body contrasted

with the ideal of the working man or woman. 6) Social justice demands were not shared by the new middle class that flourished in the 1990s. 7) When public places were considered too dangerous, workers reinvented their methods of organization and opened websites, moving channels of resistance online. 8) Exercising self-censorship, caused by a certain social pressure, workers began to avoid formal activism in order not to be expelled from workplaces or factories.

In conclusion, what has emerged from a closer analysis of the trajectories of labor activism in Iran, is a new subjectivity of the worker/activist who is able to assess how “red lines” shift and is more aware of which places to go or how to merge online and offline spaces. This new subject may lack formal connections and long-term goals, also being restrained by several sources of power within society (family, friends, colleagues) that can discourage acts of rebellion. In fact, activism and collective actions in Iran are continually *de facto* described in terms of disorders and public security, as well as relegated to the realm of what is illegal, not only by state officers or supporters. The next chapter will navigate the top-down processes that contributed to isolating the collective element versus the individual.



## CHAPTER 6

### “Produce” and “Consume” in the Islamic Republic: the 90s’ Myth of the Winner and its Impact on Workers

M. Stella Morgana, “‘Produce and Consume’ in the Islamic Republic: The 1990s Myth of the Winner in the Iranian Public Sphere and Its Impact on Workers,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 52(2): 340-344.



“Big successes for Iran’s economy” (*Iran*, 1374-1995)

#### Introduction

“Produce to solve Iran’s problems.”<sup>564</sup> “Boost production to exit this labyrinth of difficulties.”<sup>565</sup> “A new road [different] from the past” has to be taken.<sup>566</sup> “Big successes of our economy.”<sup>567</sup> Iran’s “new goals are: development, growth, efficiency.”<sup>568</sup> “We should promote industrial research.”<sup>569</sup> “The youth looking for a job needs to be skilled to succeed.”<sup>570</sup> If newspapers are sites for the public sphere and can give any indication about the top-down narratives in Iran, the mantra behind

<sup>564</sup> *Kayhān*, 24 May 1993 (3 Khordad 1372).

<sup>565</sup> *Iran*, 26 July 1995 (4 Mordad, 1374).

<sup>566</sup> *Kayhān*, 23 May 1993 (2 Khordad 1372).

<sup>567</sup> *Iran*, August 1995 (Mordad 1374).

<sup>568</sup> *Iran*, 8 August 1995 (17 Mordad 1374).

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>570</sup> *Iran*, 9 September 1994 (18 Shahrivar 1373).

these headlines was certainly *decide, produce, and succeed*. From the early 1990s, the dominant discourse within the Islamic Republic de facto customized the dictum “produce and consume” (*toulid va masraf*.) As already alluded to in both chapters 4 and 5, neoliberal narratives began to emanate from the new IRI administration led by president Rafsanjani.

The previous chapters gave an overview of discourses about labor from two different perspectives: top-down approaches that addressed workers, as well as bottom-up responses, such as expressions of dissent from both inside and beyond the factories. This chapter focuses on the 1990s, offering a new avenue for navigating the processes that led to workers’ *precarization* in post-revolutionary Iran. The reason for concentrating on these years stems from my belief that they constitute a vantage point on some of the most critical historical transformations experienced by the Islamic Republic. Indeed, between 1988 and 1998, the chronicles reported a series of key events: the end of the Iran-Iraq war; the death of Khomeini, founder of the IRI and ideological leader of its apparatus; the approval of the first Labor Law under Islamic rule. Consequently, at the beginning of the 1990s, the IRI needed to reconstruct the country physically, economically, and ideologically. During the so-called reconstruction era (*sāzandegi*) following the Iran-Iraq war, a new narrative that boosted domestic production, fostered the idea of impressive career growth, and promoted the recognition of talent began to permeate the Iranian public space. The top-down rhetoric, which this chapter examines, was framed along the following lines: liberal market economy, consumer culture, an opening up of the country to the international arena. Although Iran’s path towards liberalism has been “tortuous,” when Rafsanjani took the helm of the presidency in 1989, the myth of the winner in an increasingly competitive society began to take shape.<sup>571</sup> Hence, workers became politically trapped in this new public arena. This chapter explores the factors that created the conditions for this impasse. It engages with the following questions: What were the mechanisms employed to boost the thirst for progress? On this path to economic liberalization, how and why were workers

---

<sup>571</sup> Ahmad Ashraf and Ali Banuazizi, “Iran’s Tortuous Path Towards Islamic Neoliberalism,” *International Journal of Culture, Politics and Society*, Vol. 15, No.2 (2001): 237-256.

marginalized from the dominant myth of the winner? Along what lines did the new generation of economic success take shape?

By reading through the pages of two leading newspapers published over the 1990s, *Iran* and *Hamshahri*, and by analyzing Rafsanjani’s words, this chapter investigates the connections between the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony and the production of discourse through news, official speeches, and advertisements. As will be shown in the next sections, the IRI started to pave the way for social dichotomies such as classy/luxury (*bā kelās/luksi*) versus poor/cheap/provincial-kitsch (*bi kefyat/Javad/dehati-khaz*) to flourish.<sup>572</sup> The government’s policies – intended to rehabilitate the Iranian economy after the destruction of the eight-year-long war with Iraq (1980-1988) – followed the production imperative. This process of rationalizing productivity as the only way to achieve national growth was fully appropriated into the public realm – and the labor dimension in particular – so that it eventually permeated Iran’s social relations and narrowed workers’ political space. Furthermore, the dominant discourse, voiced through newspapers and advertisements, sketched the ideal profile of success as belonging to those who dare, plan, and work hard.<sup>573</sup> This demonstrates the tight linkages between hegemonic relations and discourse: on the one hand, they determine it, on the other, they are reproduced in discursive practices.<sup>574</sup> Indeed, through a money-oriented discursive strategy permeating the public space, during the years of the Rafsanjani presidency, the Islamic Republic gradually institutionalized the hunger for success and addressed the new middle class. Navigating this context that encouraged rivalry and praised the accomplishment-based culture, this chapter argues that a crucial shift occurred: the political space was almost emptied of the revolutionary *collective* element and replaced by the rhetoric of the *individual*, eager to compete. The abovementioned process went hand in hand with two significant transformations: the

---

<sup>572</sup> This stigmatization in language emerged during the interviews conducted by the author during her research stay in Tehran between January 2018 and October 2019. See chapter 8 on the voices of 2009 for further elaboration. See also Shahram Khosravi, “The Precarious Status of Working-Class Men in Iran,” *Current History*, (December 2017): 355-359.

<sup>573</sup> See *Kayhān*, 22 May 1993 (1 Khordad 1372); *Kayhān*, 14 September 1994 (23 Shahrivar 1373); *Iran*, 1-8-13 August 1995 (10-17-22 Mordad 1374); *Iran*, 30 December 1996 (10 Dey 1375); *Iran*, 25 July 1996 (4 Mordad 1375); *Iran*, 9 January 1997 (20 Dey 1375).

<sup>574</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, (New York: Longman, 1989), 40-42.

*glamorization* of the neoliberal subject, such as the successful individual, and the dismissal of the 1979 revolutionary slogans claiming social justice. On the one hand, the winner – understood both as a consumer open to the international arena and a wealth producer – entered the public space of competition. On the other hand, the figure of the worker as “the revolutionary oppressed” became marginalized from the public discourse in news headlines, slogans, images, and advertisements. Thus, an alienated workforce, trapped in a domain of social stigmatization, emerged as a product of the neoliberal discourse. This, from the 1990s and throughout the 2000s, created conditions for: 1) the erosion of the political centrality of workers as the *mostaz‘afin*; 2) their detachment from the neoliberal subjects; 3) providing a breeding ground for practices of blaming or isolating those victims of increased inequality.

### **Analysis of representation: framing change and projecting success through discourse**

In his “Prison notebooks,” Gramsci pointed out that innovation, “at least in its first stages,” has no chance of becoming mass-spread unless it is conveyed by an elite.<sup>575</sup> On its path to reconstructing the country, the dominant discourse within the Islamic Republic started framing change as innovative, new, projected to the future and no longer looking to the past.

How relations of power and domination manifested, while the IRI was pursuing this path towards liberalization, success and productivity, is – as mentioned above – at the core of this chapter.

Particularly, analyzing the strategies employed to present neoliberal discourse allows us to understand why certain policies were established, as well as how they came to be accepted.

Therefore, exploring representation here means assessing to what extent neoliberal narratives became crucial to the establishment and endurance of certain political choices. The contexts of actions, as well as values and goals, were expressed as part of a precise strategy that sketched the contours of cultural hegemony, as understood by Gramsci and elaborated in Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis.<sup>576</sup> If discourse contributes to delineating relations of power and reproduces

---

<sup>575</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q11, §17b, 1387.

<sup>576</sup> Fairclough and Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 80.

asymmetries between classes, it also serves as a tool for understanding political dynamics and even the contrasting aspects of the IRI’s ideology in play. As the introduction of this dissertation explored, through a Gramscian lens, it is possible to see language as a tool of power but also as a metaphor for the way power operates. Thus, studying language is directly bound to the study of political and cultural processes, as language is also a metaphor for political positions.<sup>577</sup> This means that power manifests itself in particular bodies of text, in speeches, in intertextuality, as already explained in the previous chapters. However, it is in assumptions that it reveals its implicit meanings. Building from these concepts and drawing on the close connection between language and power, this chapter identifies the discursive practices that paved the way for the normalization and, consequently, the implementation of certain policies. It acted as a driver for the institutionalization of certain neoliberal values, ideas, and beliefs, despite the IRI’s claims of speaking for the downtrodden. Following this line of reasoning, the analysis of representation sheds light upon the processes that eventually created the conditions for these beliefs to shape public practices. Maintaining this approach will allow us to identify the continuous conjunctions between discourse and other historical/structural factors. Going beyond the examination of ideology in merely descriptive terms, this chapter concentrates on how the *dowlat-e sâzandegi* (government of the reconstruction) framed aspects of realities as premises to achieve its political and economic goals, leveraging post-war circumstances and values of national cohesion.<sup>578</sup>

This chapter enhances the analysis of this dissertation by navigating the discourses glamorizing success that eventually impacted the dynamics of social change. Drawing on Fairclough’s methods, it examines a claim firstly as relating to its premises and then to its contextual beliefs (and structural factors.)<sup>579</sup> Moreover, broadening the lens and building on Foucault’s conception of power as productive and circulating, it contends that the thirst for success began to spread from the top and – through mechanisms of persuasion – permeated certain segments of the social body, such as the

---

<sup>577</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q11, §28, 1438-1439.

<sup>578</sup> Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis*, (2012), 80-86.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid.

youth. However, comprehending how the winner became a myth – hegemonic in its potential – entails exploring the linkages between shared beliefs, common objectives, and what Fairclough terms “means-goals.”<sup>580</sup> In fact, means-goals are represented as necessary steps to reach a goal, but are also framed discursively as alternative choices. Under Rafsanjani, the dominant narrative introduced the IRI’s goals along two trajectories: first, as a reaction to a problem; second, as belonging to a dimension of values. This means that *Iran* and *Hamshahri* presented the government’s goals as inextricably linked to consequences, described as positive and inevitable. Therefore, here it is interesting to note that potential effects or repercussions embodied both “reasons for actions” and “reasons for believing.”<sup>581</sup> Consequently, throughout the newspapers’ pages reporting official speeches or economic agreements, almost every claim related to what to undertake and what to avoid. They proposed a specific to-do-list to follow, in order to achieve the intended outcomes ideologically, politically, economically, or socially. Therefore, in their audiences’ messages, they projected a potential – yet seemingly certain – future, implying their perspectives and their own conclusion already in their premises. As will be shown later, verbs such *boyad* (must, should) served this intention, denying any alternative. On the one hand, the top-down discourse presented the road to take in order to solve a specific problem. On the other hand, it reached a conclusion based on its own assumptions, thus not including all the potential consequences of a claim or call to action. Consequently, once navigating the realm of uncertainty and an objectively unknown future, it resorted to a hierarchy of values that could be broadly shared according to the shifting context. Ideology and morally accepted norms became tools for justifying both claims and consequent actions. In fact, as already explored in chapter 4 and as will also be demonstrated in the next sections of this chapter, framing a requested action as a necessary/sufficient condition for the country and concurrently justifying it as a religious duty or a moral obligation for Iran’s reconstruction was a recurrent strategy. Furthermore, by choosing

---

<sup>580</sup> Ibid. 35-78.

<sup>581</sup> Ibid.

specific photos or advertisements, this commitment engaged people’s emotions, in an attempt to establish relations of trust.

Moreover, the context was framed according to the changing structural factors, as mentioned above. Bound to values, the commitment of the Rafsanjani administration was also presented in a context of data and institutional facts, intended to underpin the power of the message being conveyed. Thus, following Fairclough’s pattern of discourse analysis, it became a concern for the future, a need, a goal to aim for within a framework where circumstances necessarily led to the presumptive claim. This shows how the range of potential actions to take, which developed from a particular context, values and perspectives that all validated a certain claim, became restricted. The actions *should* systematically fit the framework. Consequently, what the analysis of representation tells us is that the agents tended to present the steps to take as coinciding with their decision and as being just, fair, and right, in order to overcome an obstacle or a standstill.<sup>582</sup>

Therefore, these theoretical reflections have clarified how, under the auspices of a claimed truth, the IRI’s dominant discourse made premises and conclusions that mirrored each other, eventually overlooking all other steps in the process.

The next section will focus on the historical context, as well as the economic premises that fostered the *produce and consume* dictum during Rafsanjani’s presidency, which gives the title to this chapter.

### **“Veiled capitalists?” in context: the “second republic” on the road to production**

When Rafsanjani - previously Iran’s Parliamentary Speaker – obtained nearly 95 percent of the votes cast in the presidential election, the Iranian news agency *IRNA* announced the news in triumphalist tones.<sup>583</sup> It wrote that 16.4 million Iranians had cast their ballots to elect Rafsanjani in the race against his challenger, Abbas Sheibani. It was less than two months after Khomeini’s

---

<sup>582</sup> Ibid. 44-45.

<sup>583</sup> *Reuters* and *IRNA*, 30 July 1989.

death.<sup>584</sup> The country was slowly getting back on its feet after a devastating Iran-Iraq war that had deeply compromised its economy. Private consumption expenditure per capita had declined by 30 percent.<sup>585</sup> Capital accumulation, due to the war and because of the populist Islamic Republic's post-revolutionary approach, had dropped.<sup>586</sup> Five south and south-western provinces - Khuzestan, Bakhtaran, Ilam, Kurdistan, and West Azarbaijan - had reported huge damage. According to official data, there were about 300,000 casualties, 2.5 million people had been displaced, and 52 cities had registered various levels of damage, 6 of them at the high rate of over 80 percent.<sup>587</sup> Most rural areas were devastated. Class inequalities had been exacerbated. The old state class and technocrats were poised to gain political space and to shift the dominant discourse from revolutionary commitment (*ta'ahhod*) to praising professionalization and expertise (*takhasos*).<sup>588</sup> In Rafsanjani's entourage, most were technocrats with degrees obtained in Western universities.<sup>589</sup> The reconstruction era started with a Five-Year Development Plan (1989/1990- 1993/1994) pledging the implementation of neoliberal measures (without ever calling them such) along with reforms aimed at boosting productivity, efficiency and growth, and intended to encourage private capital, stimulate new investment, reform currency-exchange rates, and reduce oil dependency and state-controlled economic sectors.<sup>590</sup> The plan had already been drafted in 1986, two years before the ceasefire with Iraq. The Parliament finally approved it at the end of January 1990. The debate around agreeing a strategy to address the war damages did not go smoothly, as the approaches of

---

<sup>584</sup> Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 182-183.

<sup>585</sup> Sohrab Behdad, "From Populism to Economic Liberalism: The Iranian predicament," in Parvin Alizadeh ed. *Economy of Iran: Dilemma of an Islamic State*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, 112.

<sup>586</sup> See also Jahangir Amuzegar, "Iran's Economy: Status, Problems, and Prospects," Wilson Center, 2004, 3-4 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/JahangirAmuzegarFinal.pdf>, and Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad "The Rise and Fall of Iranian Classes in the Post-Revolutionary Decades," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 44:3, (2008): 377-396, DOI: 10.1080/00263200802021558

<sup>587</sup> See Hooshang Amirahmadi, "Economic Reconstruction of Iran: Costing the War Damage," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (January 1990), 26-47 and Rafsanjani's Friday Sermon 28 Mordad 1367, 1988, cited in Amirahmadi, *Revolution and Economic Transition: The Iranian Experience*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 240-242.

<sup>588</sup> As noted by Kaveh Ehsani in "Survival through Dispossession: Privatization of Public Goods in the Islamic Republic," *Middle East Report*, No. 250, The Islamic Revolution at 30 (2009), 26-33.

<sup>589</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini. Iran under his successors*, 56-65.

<sup>590</sup> First Five-Year-Development Plan (Tehran, 1989), full text available here <http://www.maslehat.ir/Contents.aspx?p=17e0f3f3-5988-4069-a89b-73ad17f87e9d>



the different factions within the Islamic Republic diverged, particularly concerning ways to revive the national economy, the opening of the nation to foreign investment, and social welfare measures towards either a more populist or state-centered economy or a free market-oriented model.<sup>591</sup> The de-regulation of economic activities and de-nationalization of industry represented the main requests of the pragmatist faction supporting Rafsanjani, and championing liberalization policies. For example, ten key car industries were soon set to be included in the plans for privatization: Iran Kaveh, Iran Khodrow, Iran Vanet, Khavar, Khodrowsazan, Moratab, ParsKhodrow, SAIPA, Shahab Khodrow, and Zamyad.<sup>592</sup>

The first Five-Year Development Plan was approved under the auspices of achieving an average annual growth rate of 8 percent in GDP and reducing fluctuations in oil revenues from 21 billion to 6 billion dollars. It committed to reducing Iran’s dependence on oil revenues, eliminating the government budget deficit, improving industrial efficiency and productivity, as well as implementing fiscal reforms.<sup>593</sup> Nearly 28 billion dollars of foreign borrowing were projected over the five years. This open-door project included the activation of the Tehran stock exchange and free trade areas. In a country very vulnerable to the external effects of oil markets, two other key steps embodied the core of the Plan: the reduction of state control on prices and a gradual subsidy reduction.<sup>594</sup> This latter move was quite controversial, as it generated discontent among the poorer strata of the population. Nevertheless, the state kept prices of primary goods low, even though, as Harris pointed out, “electricity and other public utilities were so cheap that many households let their bills run up for months.”<sup>595</sup> This was only the case for the middle classes, as in some cases the

---

<sup>591</sup> On economic policies, the debate within the IRI apparatus and the process of isolation of the Left, see Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 163-175.

<sup>592</sup> Anoushirvan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic*, New York: Routledge, 1995, 27-44.

<sup>593</sup> First Five-Year-Development Plan (Tehran, 1989), full text available here <http://www.maslehat.ir/Contents.aspx?p=17e0f3f3-5988-4069-a89b-73ad17f87e9d>. On fiscal development strategies see M. R. Ghasimi, “The Iranian Economy after the Revolution: An Economic Appraisal of the Five-Year Plan,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1992): 599-614

<sup>594</sup> For a more detailed elaboration on this, see Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Labor and the Challenge of Economic Restructuring in Iran,” *Middle East Report*, No. 210, (1999): 34-37.

<sup>595</sup> Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution*, 144-174.

prices of electricity, gas, telephone and public transportation actually doubled.<sup>596</sup> Therefore, the lower classes were profoundly affected by these measures.

However, when navigating the announced policies and assessing their effects in the IRI, it is important to contextualize the neoliberal turn of Iran under Rafsanjani as a hybrid. Two main aspects are worth taking into consideration: 1) the rigidity of the Iranian economy; and 2) the Islamic-populist ideological dimension where these neoliberal measures flourished. The discourse over taxation is emblematic of the complexities of neoliberalism in Iran. In fact, unlike the Western liberalization model, the *dowlat-e sâzandegi* did not chase after tax reduction slogans. Conversely, it pushed on with improving the tax collection system. As extensively noted by Mohammad Maljoo and Parviz Sedaghat – among other scholars<sup>597</sup> – neoliberalism in the Iranian context took a more mitigated form, occupying a middle ground between welfare policies and neoliberal measures.<sup>598</sup> Furthermore, with regard to privatization, it is more accurate to refer to semi-privatization and to see Iran as a “subcontractor state” employing a specific, yet a non-exceptional, form of capitalism.<sup>599</sup>

When the *Wall Street Journal* reporter Geraldine Brooks reported from Tehran, on September 16th, 1991, she referred to new forms of capitalism in Iran. Her piece was titled “Veiled Capitalists: The New Revolution in Iran Is Taking Place on an Economic Front.” The sub-heading read: “Moves Toward Free Market Pit Rafsanjani Against Religious Hard-Liners. A Spate of Suspicious Fires.” When the article went on sale, Rafsanjani had been president for two years. There had been

<sup>596</sup> Behdad, “From Populism to Economic Liberalism,” 150-151.

<sup>597</sup> Arash Davari, Peyman Jafari, Ali Kadivar, Zep Kalb, Arang Keshavarzian, Azam Khatam, Saira Rafiee, and Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, “Roundtable: Iran’s Domestic Politics and Political Economy,” *Jadaliyya*, 26 November 2019. Available here <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40287/Roundtable-Iran%E2%80%99s-Domestic-Politics-and-Political-Economy-Part-1>

<sup>598</sup> Interview with Mohammad Maljoo and Parviz Sedaghat, “Neoliberalism dar Iran: afsaneh ya vâqey’at?” *Akhbâr Rooz*, December 14, 2019, <https://www.akhbar-rooz.com/%d9%86%d8%a6%d9%88%d9%84%db%8c%d8%a8%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%84%db%8c%d8%b3%d9%85-%d8%af%d8%b1-%d8%a7%db%8c%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%86%d8%8c-%d8%a7%d9%81%d8%b3%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%87-%db%8c%d8%a7-%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%82%d8%b9-2/?fbclid=IwAR2kNIEGRc77X-L7SjuCZjTjT2J0CqK5Sr-4BesdXwAiZDvmkklyScibFnE>. See also Kayhân Valadbaygi, “Hybrid Neoliberalism: Capitalist Development in Contemporary Iran,” *New Political Economy*, (2020), DOI: 10.1080/13563467.2020.1729715

<sup>599</sup> Kevan Harris, “The Rise of the Subcontractor State: Politics of Pseudo-privatization in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45, 1 (2013): 45-70.

frequent scattered disturbances protesting the rising prices.<sup>600</sup> As chapter 5 extensively explored, sources of discontent were mainly erupting from the irate poor, along with workers. “Death to the anti-people regime of Rafsanjani,” and “Hashemi Shah” were some of the expressions of dissent chanted.<sup>601</sup> The bazaar was one of the arenas in which the scattered protests took place. Some demonstrators marched with their pockets turned inside out, signaling their lack of money. The above-mentioned article commented: “The rich, by contrast, already are beginning to feel benefits. Iran’s gross domestic product surged more than 10% last year, wheat production almost doubled and light-industrial output trebled. But for the poor, reforms so far have brought nothing but pain. Elimination of price controls and food subsidies has left some families struggling to buy staples such as rice and bread.”<sup>602</sup> What was the political strategy behind these economic choices? Behdad interpreted them as a push for Iranians to invest their money in domestic consumption, reduce demand for imports and channel all the other products that commanded a high price – such as Persian rugs or pistachios – toward exports. Another objective was to attract foreign investment. Yet, at what price? In the Majles, Rafsanjani’s opponents accused him of profiting at the expense of the living standards of ordinary Iranians.<sup>603</sup> The president was accused of “masterminding” the exclusion of the Leftist faction from Parliament to avoid any criticism of his strategy of reducing the state’s official role in the economy.<sup>604</sup>

### ***A cure for pain in discourse: economic and industrial “achievements”***

As the previous section showed, it was no easy task to advocate for the “structural adjustment” (*ta’dil*) and attempts at privatization (*khosousi sāzi*).<sup>605</sup> The IRI needed a strategy of persuasion and

---

<sup>600</sup> Geraldine Brooks, *The Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 1991.

<sup>601</sup> Ibid.

<sup>602</sup> Ibid.

<sup>603</sup> As reported by Elaine Sciolino in April 1992, some were asking for “government-run economy, self-sufficiency, price controls, Government subsidies.” *New York Times*, April 13, 1992. Available here <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/13/world/iranian-president-appears-to-beat-anti-west-rivals.html>

<sup>604</sup> Bahman Ahmadi-Amui, *Eqtesad-e Syasi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi (Political Economy of the Islamic Republic)*, (Tehran: Gam-e Now, 2003), 392-395.

<sup>605</sup> For further details on the difficult context in which Rafsanjani’s government started see Mas’ud Safiri, *Haqiqat-hā va Maslahat-hā. Goft-o-u ba Hashemi Rafsanjani*, (Tehran, Nashr-e Ney, 1378- 1989), 105-106, 128-129 and 130-132.

a myth to believe in. In Rafsanjani’s words, 1989 (1368 in the Persian calendar) was the year when Iran *should* find its “calm after the storm” (*arāmesh ba ‘d az tufān*). He framed the reconstruction project as an overlapping premise and goal to restore the country. Boosting production was presented as a collective need to improve living standards. Beyond “breathtaking negotiations with Saddam Hussein to implement resolution 598,” the country – he wrote –*needed* to “meet the consumer needs of the country, that people are waiting for after the war.”<sup>606</sup> “Given heavy government debt and the deficit in the country’s budget,” he continued, the goal was to “safeguard the budget for reconstruction costs and expenses, as well as the living needs of society and the raw materials for production.” Rafsanjani added: “Supply what is needed for production in agricultural, industrial and service sectors.” Therefore, following the logic of the urgency and emergency, a pressing lack expressed in the envisaged roadmap dictated the imperatives: produce and meet the consumer demands to “safeguard” the country. Thus, the wellbeing of Iranians, who were understood as consumers, was at stake together with Iran’s security. Rafsanjani appealed to the nationalist sentiment of Iranians who cared about protecting their country. Less than three years later, in 1992, the president announced a thirty-point bullet list. He introduced the remedy for Iran’s pain in terms of “economic and industrial achievements.”<sup>607</sup> This goal-oriented terminology, devoted to wealth creation and improvement, shaped the dominant discourse throughout the early 1990s. To reduce the Central Bank debt, the recipe provided suggested converting “loss to profit” (*az zarar-e dehi be sud-e āfarini*). Development and growth in GDP, as well as impacting the national budget and credits, went along with attracting foreign currency and adjusting subsidies to lift restrictions.<sup>608</sup> Rafsanjani put them conceptually on the same strategic plan, as they were

<sup>606</sup> Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Sāzandegi va bāzsāzi. Ketāb Khāterāt 1368*, moqadameh. (Reconstruction and renovation, Book of Memories 1368, introduction.

<https://rafsanjani.ir/records/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85%D9%87-%DA%A9%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-1368?q=%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF%DA%AF%DB%8C>

<sup>607</sup> Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Sāzandegi va Shokufāiy. Ketāb Khāterāt 1370*. (Reconstruction and blooming, book of Memories, 1370). <https://rafsanjani.ir/records/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85%D9%87-%DA%A9%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-1370?q=%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF%DA%AF%DB%8C>

<sup>608</sup> Ibid

coordinated actions to be performed in tandem. Every goal was a sacrifice under the banner of Iran’s wellbeing. Reducing the role of the state (*kam kardan-e bār-e dowlat*), starting a process of privatization (*khosousi sāzi*), and the profitability of capital (*soud āvar nemudan-e samāyeh-ha*) were represented as three *means-goal* to achieve national competitiveness. Rafsanjani, interestingly, depicted the price liberalization of most goods in opposition to the black market. Picturing the reconstruction plan as a sequence of growth (*roshd*), development (*touseh*), liberalization (*azad kardan*), adjustment (*ta’dil*), abundance (*vofur*), increase (*bālā bordan*), activation (*fa’āl kardan*), acceleration (*tasri’*), and strengthening (*taqviat kardan*) meant also focusing the government’s gaze on producers. Rafsanjani argued that “special attention [must be given] to the development of the industrial sector, in order to remove any problems for the producers.”<sup>609</sup> Newspapers, as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, played a fundamental role in spreading this new narrative with headlines, such as: “Boost production to exit this labyrinth of difficulties.”<sup>610</sup> “A new road [different] from the past” has to be taken.<sup>611</sup> “Big successes of our economy.”<sup>612</sup>

### **Marginalizing workers discursively and legally**

While the appetite for productivity and success was pervading the public spaces, the notion of labor – and consequently that of workers and the working class – was being profoundly altered. In official speeches, newspaper interviews and public discourse, the expression “working class” (*tabaqeh-ye kārgar*) almost disappeared. As chapter 4 showed, it was replaced by the concept of a “workforce” (*niru-ye kārgar*) or “labor stratum” (*qeshr-e kārgar*).<sup>613</sup> In Rafsanjani’s words, workers represented the “country’s force of production” (*niru-ye kār va toulid keshvar*) and “had a fundamental role in the reconstruction era after the war imposed by force (*jang-e tahmili*): therefore, the Revolution

<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

<sup>610</sup> *Iran*, 26 July 1995 (4 Mordad, 1374).

<sup>611</sup> *Kayhān*, 23 May 1993 (2 Khordad 1372).

<sup>612</sup> *Iran*, August 1995 (Mordad 1374.)

<sup>613</sup> *Kayhān*, 30 April 1990 (10 Ordibehesht 1369). See also Morgana, “Talking to Workers: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad,” 133-158.

belongs to them.” Likewise – he added – they need to be educated because “this increase in education will raise production.”<sup>614</sup>



“15 large-scale projects to increase the production of steel, copper, aluminum and zinc” (*Hamshahri*, 1375-1996)

As May Day became marginalized throughout the 1990s, its media coverage and public echo decreased. What made the headlines over the years were Iran’s economic performance and all new goals for the *country to be*. While words such as “progress” (*pishraft*), “production” (*toulid*), “successes” (*movāffaqyat-hā*), “development” (*touseh*) and “growth” (*roshd*) started to dominate the front pages of newspapers such as *Iran* and *Hamshahri*, workers – here understood as a group with specific grievances or demands – were almost entirely absent from the government-filtered public arena. When announcing Iran’s successes or discussing data about production or new projects, photos usually represented industrial settings.

<sup>614</sup> *Salam*, 1 May 1994 (11 Ordibehest 1373).



“Iran has developed a technology for the production of refractory materials.” (*Iran 1376 – 1987*)

News about rising social inequalities, inflation and general discontent among the lower classes occupied very little space or indeed none at all.<sup>615</sup> In fact, as chapter 5 investigated, between the end of 1991 and 1995, protests and expressions of dissent erupted against Rafsanjani’s neoliberal agenda, subsidy cuts, and wage decreases.<sup>616</sup> Yet, coverage of such events almost faded away. One of the few exceptions was in summer 1995, when *Iran* newspaper reported on workers’ demonstrations all over the country, dedicating only a few lines to them at the bottom of the economy section page. Another compelling case occurred at the end of 1996, when – for the first time – the Ministry of Labor explicitly mentioned non-wage-based activities (*fa’alyat-ha ye gheyr-e dastmozd*) as a potential solution to reducing unemployment. This last case actually constituted a first step towards a debate about short term contracts and the flexibilization of labor.<sup>617</sup> As the next chapter will discuss in more detail, after the approval of the 1990 Labor Law, a series of legal mechanisms initiated a process that eventually caused workers to become both precarious and alienated. Workers’ alienation in discourse took place alongside structural measures.<sup>618</sup>

<sup>615</sup> *Iran*, 26 July 1995 and 16 August 1995 (4-25 Mordad 1374) and *Hamshahri*, 29 June 1996 (9 Tir 1375).

<sup>616</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 2 January 1992 (12 Dey 1370); 7 October 1993 (15 Mehr 1372); 4 August 1996 (14 Mordad 1375); *New York Times*, 1 June 1992. Accessed 20 September 2019, available

<https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/01/world/violence-spreads-in-iran-as-the-poor-are-evicted.html>. See also Asef Bayat, *Street Politics. Poor People’s Movements in Iran*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 97-99.

<sup>617</sup> *Iran*, 2 August 1995 (11 Mordad 1374) and 24 November 1996 (4 Azar 1375).

<sup>618</sup> Labor Law, 1990. *Iran Data Portal*, Syracuse University. Chapter six, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/workers-and-employers-organizations>.

**Constructing the “successful” through a culture of competition**

The IRI, from the *sāzandegi* period onwards, moved its focus from the 1979 Revolution’s “downtrodden” (*mostaz’afin*) – which included workers and the poor who were all cast under the Islamic umbrella – to the new middle classes. This shift profoundly enlarged the socio-economic divide and affected the already precarious lives of ordinary Iranians, particularly those who could not participate in the social-climbing race.<sup>619</sup> For instance, when Rafsanjani thanked his voters for their renewed trust after his re-election in June 1994, he also expressed his full intention to “give answers to the needs and problems of the people.”<sup>620</sup> What he meant by “the people” became clear immediately afterward, as he traced the perfect pattern of the ideal citizen as being: hardworking and dedicated to the production mantra, oriented towards personal independence and eager to develop specialized skills. Thus, social worth started to be measured through numbers and data, as well as financial fulfillment or personal achievements. At the end of July 1995, the newspaper *Iran* went to press with a frontpage praising the industrial sector successes: “403,000 people are working in the Iranian industry.” The article added: “The most developed sector is the food sector, which consists of 78,595 factories;” in the whole country “12,432 factories are considered big, with more than 50 employed workers;” “more than 1,308,000 families are participating in the economic activities.”<sup>621</sup> Pictures of men working hard with heavy machinery accompanied the article. A few months later, “48 plans are ready to improve production all over the country.”<sup>622</sup> However, development was not running in tandem with other key concepts associated with the 1979 Revolution and the labor realm, such as social justice: e.g. “Iranian industrial sector: 8 million tons produced, 100 million dollars of products exported. In 1373 (1994), the production of oil products reached 35 percent” and “Iran is among the 10 most productive countries in the world oil sector.”<sup>623</sup>

---

<sup>619</sup> See Khosravi, *Precarious Lives. Waiting and Hope in Iran*, 11-12 and 214.

<sup>620</sup> *Kayhān*, 14 June 1994 (24 Khordad 1373).

<sup>621</sup> *Iran*, 24 July 1995 (2 Mordad 1374).

<sup>622</sup> *Iran and Hamshahri*, 1 August 1995 (10 Mordad 1374).

<sup>623</sup> *Iran and Hamshahri*, 23 August 1995 (1 Shahrivar 1374).



In the same year, the government-aligned newspaper quoted the president encouraging the boost in domestic production, announcing “90 billion capital to be invested in the electronics sector,” and setting out the roadmap to development which would pass through industrial companies and production companies as well as national and international transportation.<sup>624</sup> Hence, electronics was constructed in the public space as a distinctive sign of progress, perfectly overlapping – within the context of this rhetoric – with job security and individual success: “90 billion rials invested in the industry of electronic screens” and “25 thousand new job positions for experts.”<sup>625</sup> Furthermore, the culture of competition and the *glamorization* of success was spread through prizes, races, awards for exemplary individuals and new entrepreneurs: e.g. “Tax waiver announced for 117 new activities.”<sup>626</sup>

Moreover, the hunger for progress manifested through a conscious strategy to also imbue and appropriate the public discourse with exhibitions, such as a fair aimed at “showing the progress of the country,” announced to be held in autumn 1995.<sup>627</sup> Planning for a neoliberal industrial future was the refrain of Rafsanjani’s second term, which occupied the news with examples such as the following, structured into eight main goals, which were introduced - as mentioned earlier in this chapter - in a bullet list of achievements (with no alternatives): 1) increase of industrial exports to 4-5 billion dollars; 2) average value added growth of 6 percent; 3) increase of specialized labor force (*niru-ye ensāni motekhasses*) to 15 percent; 4) annual growth of efficiency (*roshd-e sālāne bahrevārī*) up to 3 percent; 5) increase of research/investigation expenses to 1.5 percent of the value of the increase of the industrial sector (*afzāyesh-e tahqiqat dar sad arzesh afzāyesh-e bakhsh-e san‘ati*); 6) increase of the proportion of the added value to industrial production 2 percent (*afzāyesh-e nesbāt-e arzesh afzode be toulidat-e san‘ati*); 7) improvement of production standards by 15 percent (*afzāyesh-e estandard*); 8) increase in industrial production, capacity utilization, and

<sup>624</sup> *Iran*, 26 July 1995 (4 Mordad 1374).

<sup>625</sup> *Iran*, 28 July 1995 (6 Mordad 1374).

<sup>626</sup> *Hamshahri*, July-August 1995, (Mordad 1374). See also Adelpkhah, *Being Modern in Iran*, 139-160.

<sup>627</sup> *Iran* and *IRNA*, 2 August 1995 (11 Mordad 1374).

growth of trade levels, upgrading of quality (*afzayesh-e toulidat-e san'ati, bahrebardari az zarfiat-ha, behboud-e teraz-e tejari va erteghay-e kefiat*).<sup>628</sup>

### **Youth as an element functional to the neoliberal project and the praise of technology**

The daily media provided a perfect setting in which to spread the myth of success. Therefore, while the adjective “new” was abundantly used in contrast with the past, the youth – in other words the generation born in the 1980s in the aftermath of the Revolution and during the war – began to be bombarded by these messages. The inner life of a successful youth was functional to the broader picture of a developed country. Essays and analyses on the young Iranians “looking for a job and the necessities of a specialized training” multiplied, as they were connected to “IT skills,” “progress,” “growth” and “success.”<sup>629</sup> The neoliberal project did not address the lower classes or young workers who were willing but unable to study or had no chance of becoming entrepreneurs. These were overwhelmed by a political phase where their existential meaning within the IRI’s dominant framework was directly incorporated into the “produce and consume” dictum. Within that dimension, the “new” entrepreneur or engineer represented the bridge in the labor realm between the new achievement-oriented government policies and the factories. For this reason, the universities as public spaces were transformed into practical tools of discursive intervention. Indeed, news about the increasing number of students in the Iranian public universities systematically appeared throughout the 1990s under Rafsanjani’s rule. Relying on a young, educated and specialized population equaled projecting success. Constructing the myth of the winner, by boosting competition and praising success among young Iranians, operated as a tool of progress to brandish at home as well as abroad. In fact, Iran was trying to open up to the international arena after years of economic isolation: “Big successes of Iran in the international market,” proclaimed *Iran* in September 1995, referring to trade export to Europe that had reached 6

<sup>628</sup> *Iran* and *IRNA*, 8 August 1995 (17 Mordad 1374).

<sup>629</sup> *Hamshari* and *Iran*, August 1995 (Mordad 1374), December 1996 (Azar 1375), January 1997 (Dey 1375), May 1997 (Ordibehesht 1376).

billion dollars. Furthermore, feeding the consumer generation through the praise of technology operated as a *means-goal* to galvanize the population and make them participate in the national endeavor of the *toulid va masraf* mantra. The new sections for technology and state-of-the-art products in *Iran* for example, as well as the growing advertisement section in *Hamshahri*, from the 1990s onwards represented a step in this direction.



A smart and foldable car called Ludo (*Iran*, 1374-1995)

Newspapers became sites for spreading the myth of progress through technology and innovation. Thus, the reader was directly projected to an imagined future they would achieve once the route to production was taken. The recourse to technology and novelty functioned as a tool to foster a new *habitus* in the eyes of young generations, pushing them to dream of a tangible goal. The rhetorical construction of production was linked to a certain understanding of modernity where the concept of progress overlapped with one of novelty. This meant that the electronic frontier encompassed the opening-door and neoliberal discourse. Hence, symbols of the public realm (such as newspapers close to the government) fostered the spread of products that were at the cutting-edge. Nevertheless, these products were beyond the reach of most Iranians, because they were either impossible to import or too expensive. However, promoting technology as being connected to words such as success, growth, development, and innovation represented a stimulus for raising aspirations as an all-encompassing solution for a country in need of reconstruction. Advertising and promoting hi-tech products discursively

sold as classy or luxury (*ba kelās, luksī*), therefore, embodied the myth of those who dare. Consequently, aspiration began to represent a sort of *sine-qua-non* condition in the process of creating the ideal neoliberal citizen, who should be continuously committed to self-improvement.



New sensors against accidents, a special Japanese device against falling asleep while driving and GPS technology (Iran, 1374-1995)

Technologically-mediated spaces framed social and cultural truths, continuing to break new ground for the involvement of people as forward-looking consumers. What is interesting to note here is the progressive nature attributed to technology. It became appealing and was therefore supported, as it was conceived of as producing results that would make Iran progress. Therefore, the 1990s' modern-day framework in Iran launched a message to the youth, telling them where to look and what they should aim for (i.e.: technical universities, science faculties.) Another element, which was discursively relevant, was the new relation taking shape between the addresser (the IRI) and the addressee (the winner, the new neoliberal and Iranian subject who had success.)<sup>630</sup> According to this logic, those who were economically disadvantaged were unable to fulfill the social requirements. Tragically, they did not fit the new trend.

<sup>630</sup> Mohammad Amouzadeh and Manouchehr Tavangar, “Decoding pictorial metaphor Ideologies in Persian commercial advertising,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2004): 147–174.

**Connecting spaces: normalizing the modes of middle classes through urban transformations**

The previous sections explored the connections between language use in the newspapers and the process of *glamorizing* success, within the broader context of Iran’s power and labor relations.

*Hamshahri* (fellow-citizen) represented a crucial link in this chain. Its story deserves further explanation. Published by the Tehran Municipality since 1992, throughout the 1990s the newspaper projected the Rafsanjani administration’s plan for the transformation of the public realm. It envisaged the future of Iran’s capital as a metropolis. “Tehran’s population will increase to 20 million”, a headline from January 1997 read. Iran’s capital represented the field of action for the new neoliberal subjects as well as the heart of the reconstruction economy. The transformations in public spaces that occurred in Tehran over the course of the 1990s under mayor Gholamhossein Karbashi, who was also the founder of *Hamshahri*, profoundly impacted social relations. If the statistics of over-population were worrying particularly during the first Five-Year Economic Plan (1989-1994), the Rafsanjani/Karbashi solution was soon presented: the new administration geared itself up to focus on construction. The business of construction made its appearance as a new response to housing scarcity. An ambitious plan of urban renewal boldly transformed the capital, with the headlines fostering this narrative: “A new plan for the housing sector,” “New development construction policies,” or “Rise of 48 percent of private capital in the construction sector.”<sup>631</sup>

Most of these plans concentrated on the northern area of Iran’s capital, falling short of tackling the overpopulation in the southern neighborhoods. In 1999, Ehsani described the socio-geographic discrepancy between the two areas as a developed and prosperous north juxtaposed with a lower-working class south described as “over-crowded, hotter and more polluted with smaller lots.”<sup>632</sup>

With considerable investment in urban planning, the direction followed during those years was not one of leaving the poorer districts of the south behind. Instead, the strategy was to provide new

---

<sup>631</sup> *Hamshahri*, *Ketāb-e Sāl 1375 and 1376* (Tehran: Hamshahri Publications, 1999). See also *Iran*, 13 August 1995 (22 Mordad 1374), 1 January 1997 (12 Dey 1375), and 26 August 1997 (4 Shahrivar 1376).

<sup>632</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, “Municipal Matters: The Urbanization of Consciousness and Political Change in Tehran,” *Middle East Report*, No. 212 (Autumn, 1999): 22-27.

urban spaces that fashioned the south as a reflection of the north.<sup>633</sup> Although sharp distinctions of class and status diminished, these spaces first, fully mirrored the myth of success and second, began to normalize the social modes and practices of the middle, bourgeois, new entrepreneur-oriented classes.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the mechanisms through which the thirst for progress, success and competition became a hegemonic myth in the IRI’s dominant narrative over the 1990s. Through the analysis of newspaper headlines (in *Iran* and *Hamshahri*), and in particular the economics and technology sections, along with Rafsanjani’s words and memories, it has shown how the discourses of change and production took shape. The reconstruction era carried the burden of conveying Iran to economic and ideological rehabilitation following the end of the devastating Iran-Iraq war and in the aftermath of Khomeini’s death. The new government managed to discursively construct a new potential future for Iranians, by championing neoliberal narratives in support of liberalization policies. Encouraging progress and growth through the projection of an advanced and competitive future was one of the first mechanisms employed to push Iranians to produce more and to participate in the national sacrifices required to overcome the economic disruptions caused by the war and the Islamic populist anti-capitalist posture adopted after the 1979 Revolution. The idea of public space was conceptually transformed from one dedicated to the oppressed and the poor to an arena devoted to producers and consumers. Values of national cohesion or the Islamic dedication to labor<sup>634</sup> were directly linked to goals such as “increasing” the GDP, “advancing” the industrial sector, following the “efficiency” imperative, and converting “loss to profit.” The dominant discourse of pragmatists, therefore, presented innovation and forward-looking subjects as both goals and premises to improve the country’s successes even more. On the one hand, technological development represented one of the goals in the various bullet lists distributed by the government.

---

<sup>633</sup> Ibid.

<sup>634</sup> See chapter 4, “Labor as a religious duty.”

On the other hand, it was also the premise for the expansion of the industrial sector. Thus, it also constituted a means-goal to achieve a rise in terms of national growth. Language played a crucial role in the processes of establishing cultural hegemony. Verbs such as *should* or *must* went along with requests to increase production workloads or the privatization of some industries, without ever mentioning the negative consequences. Terms such as growth (*roshd*), development (*touseh*), liberalize (*azad kardan*), adjustment (*ta'dil*), abundance (*vofur*), increase (*bālā bordan*), activate (*fa'āl kardan*), accelerate (*tasri' kardan*), and strengthen (*taqviat kardan*) became a constant refrain. Premises such as “heavy government debt and deficit in country’s budget,” constituted necessary and sufficient conditions for calls to action, which were justified by the concepts of “safeguarding” or the “protection” of the country. Although advocating for *individual* achievements, the mythology of success was systematically framed and re-invented as fostering a *collective* need to improve living standards. Nevertheless, this resulted in the conceptualization of the exact opposite, as the thirst for progress also imposed specialization, and personal improvement instead of collective goals. Social worth became a value to be measured in numbers, along with financial fulfillment or individual achievements. Data and stated structural factors underpinned the same logic. Therefore, context was framed accordingly to reinforce the message being conveyed. Workers were almost entirely absent from the government-filtered public arena, with no place remaining for any working-class focused political plan. Only on the path to production were they part of the triumphalist and “big successes of Iran in the international market.”

As partly investigated in chapter 4 and elaborated in more depth here, the 1990s marked a fundamental paradigm shift: the IRI chose to overlook social justice and move its gaze to the middle classes. Indeed, this chapter has explored how the existence of a successful youth was functional to the open-door policy championed by Rafsanjani. The self-made man or the young entrepreneur “looking for a job” made the headlines and the calls for “specialized” employees

multiplied, as they were connected to “IT skills,” “progress,” “growth” and “success.”<sup>635</sup> In the broader neoliberal framework, the lower class’s only role was as the brawn and muscle for the supposedly brilliant minds committed to conjuring up the “big successes.” If the dominant discourse glamorized goals as money-oriented and projected towards wealth creation, this created the public arena and the political space that: 1) marginalized discourses of social justice; 2) paved the way for the sharpening of the social distance between classes; and 3) created the space for liberal reactions to the repressive mechanisms of the IRI to flourish.

More importantly, this chapter has made two main points, which are useful for understanding the changing context. First, by boosting production while encouraging competition, advertising new prizes at university and in workplaces for “exemplary individuals,” the IRI opened up to private investment, while glamorizing the neoliberal subject. Gradually spreading the culture of entrepreneurship and the private sector, it drew up a profile of the ideal citizen who aspired to self-improvement and was committed to achieving. Hence, it institutionalized a certain mentality fostering the implementation of potentially divisive policies.

Second, this chapter has contended that the transformations that occurred in discourse mirrored structural changes. Thus, the transformation that made workers precarious did not lie only in economic explanations or legal factors. Starting with precisely this phase, precarity and precarious employment began to widen the social gap, both in terms of perceptions of class belonging and in reality. To a certain extent it is possible to argue that the 1990s era paved the way for the social stigma that became attached to those who were not productive, depicting them as an obstacle to the development of the whole society. Through these mechanisms, neoliberal language, even if top-down imposed, actually circulated in the social body and permeated the younger generations. Therefore, the accusations of championing “neoliberal” causes, which part of the organized labor

---

<sup>635</sup> *Hamshari and Irān*, August 1995 (Mordad 1374), December 1996 (Azar 1375), January 1997 (Dey 1375), May 1997 (Ordibehesht 1376).



movement would make against the Green activists in 2009 as chapter 8 will show, had their roots in the processes of individualization started in the 1990s.

## CHAPTER 7

### Lagging Behind:

### Labor Precarization, Civil Society and the Khāneh-ye-Kārgar's Discourses during the Reformist Era (1997-2005)

M. Stella Morgana, "Labour Rights in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *The Rule of Law and the Politics of the Judiciary in Contemporary Iran*, edited by Hadi Enayat and Mirjam Künkler, (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2021).



Disputes over the Labor Law discussed in *Kār-o-Kārgar* (May 2000-Khordād 1379).

### Introduction

To what extent did the Khatami government's top-down discourse on labor stimulate hegemonic labor-related projects? How far were counter-hegemonic plans able to develop? This chapter addresses these questions by exploring the encounters between the top-down and bottom-up realms within what Gramsci calls "civil society."

Chapter 4 discussed the strategies of constructing consent among workers, and chapter 5 followed the trajectories of resistance of the labor force. This chapter navigates the connections and disconnections between these two dimensions, through the Gramscian prism of civil society, as

developed and understood during Khatami's presidency (1997-2005). In particular, it examines the role of a key actor, the Workers' House (*Khāneh-ye Kārgar*), which represented a potential bridge between the Islamic Republic government and workers. The analysis of both primary and secondary sources in Persian and English (such as labor regulations, newspapers, official statements, and interviews with labor experts and workers conducted by the author in Iran) proposes a two-fold argument. 1) Under the reformist government, the IRI, while promoting the formation of civil society, kept pursuing the path of labor precarization processes. These processes had already started during the Rafsanjani presidency, through liberalization policies and the glamorization of success, as detailed in chapter 6. 2) The Workers' House acted ambiguously. On the one hand, it challenged Khatami's reforms of the Labor Law and criticized practices that exploited and discriminated against workers, claiming to be an independent organization. On the other hand, it operated alongside the state apparatus, as a complicit actor in maintaining the status quo and curtailing independent workers' attempts to exert their influence and utilize their bargaining power. Furthermore, discourses on civil society and participation that spread during this period developed beyond the control of the IRI's apparatus, producing unintended consequences that will be explored in chapter 8. As chapter 5 has already shown, precarious workers took advantage of the opening of new political spaces and managed to build networks of collective solidarity. Most of these transformations occurred beyond the umbrella of the Workers' House.

Developing these arguments, this chapter first delves into Gramsci's conception and critique of civil society, by unfolding its dual meaning and potential. Second, it progresses from the theory to the Iranian context, introducing how the reformists in power overlooked workers in their civil society rhetoric, reduced the space for workers' legal protection, and were unsuccessful in bringing about change with regard to the legalization of independent labor unions. Third, it reflects on the attitude of the Workers' House towards the government and the workers by carefully analyzing its discourses in the early 2000s about the battle for small enterprises to be exempt from the Labor Law, as expressed in the *Khāneh-ye Kārgar*'s newspaper *Kār-o-Kārgar*.

**The multifunctional arena of civil society in a Gramscian understanding**

Discourses expose the connections between domination and the production of consensus. As noted throughout the previous chapters, these imaginary bridges are revealed through language. Words are useful tools of power. They involve hegemony. This chapter is about the arena where these conjunctions of coercion and consent are created, a place where relations of power and domination manifest, a site where conflict and counter-hegemonic trajectories develop. Gramsci calls it “civil society.”<sup>636</sup> Before proceeding to the exploration of the reformist era in Iran, it is worth dwelling on how the concept of civil society is understood here.

In Gramsci’s analysis, civil society is linked to what he terms “political society.” The state –which is hegemonic in nature–<sup>637</sup> is “a balance between political society and civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the entire national society exercised through so-called private organizations, such as the church, trade unions, schools.”<sup>638</sup> Each fortifies the other, even though both apparatuses’ inner dynamics might diverge from time to time. They are woven together. They both correspond to “the function of hegemony that leading groups exercise over the whole society and the ruling classes express through State domination.”<sup>639</sup> Politics represents the ground where relations between the state and civil society unfold, as the first intervenes “to educate” the latter, which should educate the society.<sup>640</sup> The active and positive moment of historical developments, as Gramsci reflects throughout his *Prison Notebooks*, is situated in civil society.<sup>641</sup> Therefore, on the one hand, political society dominates, and civil society creates the cultural-hegemonic conditions for its power to be accepted. On the other hand, beyond a “balance based on compromise”<sup>642</sup>

---

<sup>636</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q13, §18, 1590; Q 26, §6, 2302

<sup>637</sup> Ibid.

<sup>638</sup> Antonio Gramsci, “Lettera a Tania del 7 Settembre 1931,” [Letter to Tania, September 7, 1931,] in A. Gramsci, T. Schucht, *Lettere 1926-1935 [Letters 1926-1935]*, A. Natoli e C. Daniele eds., (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), 791.

<sup>639</sup> See Antonio Gramsci, *Gli intellettuali e l’organizzazione della cultura*, [Intellectuals and Organization of Culture], (Torino: Einaudi, 1949), and Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere [Letters from Prison]*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1947), 481.

<sup>640</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q7, §19, 868

<sup>641</sup> The concept of civil society, strictly related to that of hegemony, is scattered across the three volumes of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*.

<sup>642</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q10, §61, 1359-1360.

between the two, civil society could pave the way for both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles. In other words, civil society is the arena where knowledge can be disseminated, intellectuals can develop, and ties of solidarity can potentially be built. When Gramsci questions the ideological structure of a ruling class, and how it is actually organized, he links it to cultural hegemony, referring to “the material organization meant to preserve, defend, and develop the ideological front.”<sup>643</sup> Therefore, the tools for deactivating relations of domination potentially lie in civil society, as well as in access to political power. Civil society represents the first stage in the struggle for hegemony, as, initially, it carries the values of the dominant classes and contributes to the formation of its hegemonic discourse.

Going back to the questions opening this chapter, the horizon where top-down discursive projects and counter-hegemonic plans meet is precisely civil society. This encounter – Gramsci argues – occurs in hegemony, as civil society can produce both hegemony and counter-hegemony. Civil society is both the site where consent is constructed in the service of the ruling apparatus and potentially the channel for the expression of the masses’ dissatisfaction. For this reason, the state apparatus (here understood as its coercive dimension) can act ambiguously. It might decide to legally empower civil society, in order to de facto co-opt it. Concurrently, it can opt for direct encroachments into the space of civil society, through repression. When conflict arises, Gramsci argues, “some tools of civil society might resemble defense systems in a war of position.”<sup>644</sup> A war of position is carried out into the sphere of civil society. At that point, a crisis of hegemony occurs, as political society and civil society separate. “The most acute phase of the struggle against the despotism of career intellectuals and against those who exercise authority by divine right consists in the effort to enrich culture and heighten consciousness. Moreover, this effort cannot be postponed until tomorrow or until such time as when we are politically free. It is itself freedom, it is itself the stimulus and the condition for action,” Gramsci writes.<sup>645</sup>

---

<sup>643</sup> Ibid. Q3, §49, 332-333.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid. Q7, §10, 860.

<sup>645</sup> Gramsci-Leonetti, “Prima Liberi” [*Free first*] in *Il Grido del Popolo*, August 31, 1918.

For workers, in a Gramscian understanding, this would mean: first, becoming conscious of their class potential; and second, overcoming the economic determinism of corporativism. Civil society is a mediator of private and economic interests, at least in a first stage. It can act only for the benefit of the dominant classes. However, the struggle goes beyond the narrow economic space. It is an ideological competition for hegemony, where all spheres are involved. For this reason, Gramsci rejects the limited concept of economic determinism. Likewise, his critique addresses the unions in particular, when they act to maintain the status quo. Regarding corporativism and unionism, he notes: “It is the form that labor-force as a commodity can take, when a regime manages to dominate the market [...] it forces the entrepreneur to accept legality when dealing with the worker, and this legality is conditioned by the trust that the entrepreneur has in the solvency of the union to obtain the respect of the obligations contracted by the working masses.”<sup>646</sup> Therefore, when in this form, unionism can hinder workers in their struggle to “become dominant and to develop beyond the economic-corporativist phase in order to elevate itself to a phase of hegemony, which is political in the civil society.”<sup>647</sup>

How will looking at the reformist period in Iran through a Gramscian lens enhance the analysis? In the context of this chapter, Gramsci’s reflections provide the theoretical tools to avoid the risk of situating workers exclusively within an economic context and its direct expressions (unionism). How the concept of civil society, in its dual meaning and role, developed under Khatami, both for the president and for the Workers’ House, is at the core of the following sections. The aim here is to elaborate the connections and disconnections between the IRI government’s legal/economic apparatus and civil society – understood in all its nuances, as Gramsci reflected. Specifically, the next section will proceed in this direction by delving into the historical context. It will look in more depth at the Khatami government’s understanding of civil society, that they

---

<sup>646</sup> Gramsci, *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 15 June 2020.

<sup>647</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q13, §18, 1589-1590.

combined with the concept of the rule of law, before analyzing the labor transformations that took place during his presidency.

### **Khatami's quest for the rule of law and civil society**

How were civil society and the rule of law understood by the reformists led by Khatami? What “participants” in the public arena were missing in his narrative? This section seeks to answer these questions by looking closely at and contextualizing the words and imagery used by Khatami in his vision for Iranian society.

When the newly elected president gave his inaugural speech as President in front of the Iranian parliament, the words “rule of law,” “rights,” “civil society,” “freedoms of individuals,” and “participation” resonated several times around the room.<sup>648</sup> In calling for the support of “political institutions and organizations, associations, the media, scholars and researchers, academicians and educators, experts and specialists, all men and women of science, letters, culture and art, and all citizens in all walks of life,” and by claiming to address the “people’s most fundamental right, [as] the right to determine their own destiny,” the newly elected president of the Islamic Republic did not mention workers specifically.<sup>649</sup> He presented his plan of action by founding it on three pillars: the rule of law, justice, and civil society’s participation. He declared: “The overall policies of the executive branch will be based on institutionalizing the rule of law; vigorous pursuit of justice as an exalted religious value and the pivotal factor for social trust, stability, progress and prosperity [...] empowering the people in order to achieve and ensure an ever-increasing level of their discerning participation.”<sup>650</sup> Furthermore, he referred to the establishment of the rule of law as “an Islamic, revolutionary and national obligation, which requires a conducive and enabling environment as well as legal means and instruments coupled with public involvement and assistance.”<sup>651</sup> Khatami

---

<sup>648</sup> Mohammad Khatami, Inaugural speech at the Iranian Majles, 4 August 1997. Full transcription in Mohammad Khatami, *Hope and Challenge: The Iranian President speaks*, (Binghamton, NY: Institute of Global and Cultural Studies, 1997), 70-86.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid, 76-77.

<sup>651</sup> Ibid, 77.

envisaged the future of the Islamic Republic under his rule by specifically addressing “a morally and materially prosperous individual,” “the freedom of individuals and the rights of the nation,” in order to provide “the necessary conditions for the realization of constitutionally guaranteed liberties, strengthening and expanding the institutions of the civil society.”<sup>652</sup> If, on the one hand, his government project was meant to “strengthen the culture of dialogue, discourse, appraisal and critique,” on the other hand, his reform-oriented speech situated the concepts of law and justice and narrowed the framework of social justice, by increasing the focus on the progress of individuals within the context of civil society.<sup>653</sup> During his campaign, his emphasis on civil society boosted women’s and the youth’s participation and engagement in what was defined as “healthy competition” and “collective cooperation.”<sup>654</sup> As Khatami had gained about 80 percent of the vote in the May 1997 turnout, analysts stressed that his victory had only been made possible by the crucial support of women, young people, and the middle class, who had not participated in previous elections.<sup>655</sup> Those who went to the polls followed the president’s program and hopes, which were oriented towards “a more legal society with more clearly defined rights and duties for citizens.”<sup>656</sup> In this perspective, the ideal “citizen” was a “participant,” “empowered,” mastering his/her own “destiny.” Thus, in the expected confrontation with the representatives of the state, citizens – according to Khatami’s nationalist narrative and understanding – had to embody specific features: being critical, yet obedient and loyal. Hence, the modalities for accessing participation, and the future lay in the encounter between the citizen and the state.

Therefore, the connecting link between the rule of law and civil society in Khatami’s discourse is to be interpreted as the cooperation between the government and organizations from civil society. This bond represented a critical stimulus for the opening up of political space and participation, as

---

<sup>652</sup> Ibid, 77-80.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>654</sup> *Iran News Daily*, 5 April 1997.

<sup>655</sup> Ghoncheh Tazmini, *Khatami’s Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 54-55.

<sup>656</sup> Khatami, *Hope, and Challenge: The Iranian President speaks*, 89.



mentioned in chapter 4. At the same time, the administration could benefit from its move in terms of legitimacy and consent.<sup>657 658</sup> As the previous section highlighted discussing the Gramscian theoretical foundations of civil society, during the reformist era the ruling apparatus used this concept instrumentally in order to solidify its consent.

Before this chapter proceeds to the exploration of labor policies and the implementation of the rule of law, it is worth reflecting on the relation between addresser and addressee. What did consent mean? Consent by whom? As chapter 4 argued, a shift in focus was taking place: the top-down discourse began to address the educated middle classes, leaving the masses and workers out of the spotlight. Nevertheless, it was a slow process. The myth of the winner and success – which was glamorized throughout Rafsanjani's presidency, as chapter 6 showed – had provided fertile ground for Khatami's policies to bloom, especially among the youth. In the new president's conception, the legal and civil society approach lacked de facto a definite awareness of the heterogeneity of Iranian society. Indeed, in its realization of cultural and political "development" and "prosperity," it largely overlooked the structural and legal obstacles hindering workers' participation in particular, such as class, economic, and bargaining power.<sup>659</sup> Economic and labor issues were not at the center of the public debate stimulated by Khatami, as a clear economic agenda did not capture the slogans or make the headlines throughout his presidency.<sup>660</sup> In the words of a leading reformist member of the Majles, Mohsen Armin, the reformists were pursuing the objective of improving the economic situation in Iran by turning "the attention to the political structure" and creating, in the first instance, the "mechanisms of political control."<sup>661</sup> In this regard, before moving on to the next section that will delve into these obstacles in more depth, tackling the legal reforms relating to the

---

<sup>657</sup> See Paola Rivetti, *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 113.

<sup>658</sup> For an overview of the broader debate on the concept of civil society in Khatami's Iran, see Mehran Kamrava, The Civil Society Discourse in Iran, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 28:2 (2001), 165-185 and Said Amir Arjomand, "Civil Society and the Rule of Law in the Constitutional Politics of Iran under Khatami," *Social Research*, Summer 2000, Vol.67(2), 283-301.

<sup>659</sup> Khatami, *Hope, and Challenge: The Iranian President speaks*, 70-86.

<sup>660</sup> See Farhad Nomani & Sohrab Behdad, "The Rise and Fall of Iranian Classes in the Post-Revolutionary Decades," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 44:3(2008), 377-396.

<sup>661</sup> Interview with Kār-o-Kārgar, 20 September 2000 (30 Shahrivar 1379).

labor realm, it is essential to provide at least a glimpse of the complexities of the context. Once at the helm of his government, the road ahead for Khatami was full of pitfalls, both political and economic. He was under pressure from hardliners who were, firstly fearful of, and latterly opposed to his attempts at reform, labeling them “Western” or anti-Islamic, as well as threats “to security and order” in the country.<sup>662</sup> The factional struggle reached its peak in February 2004, when the conservatives gained control of two-thirds of the parliament: a harsh setback for what had by then been termed the “Tehran Spring.”<sup>663</sup> In terms of the economy, part of the Second Development Plan (1995-1999) – approved during Rafsanjani’s term and advocating stabilization along with economic liberalization and privatization – coincided with the initial phase of Khatami’s administration. By then, he had inherited high inflation, increasing social inequalities, rising youth unemployment, a substantial budget deficit, low crude oil prices, and declining non-oil exports.<sup>664</sup> Thus, the expectations in terms of GDP growth remained unfulfilled. When Khatami’s administration launched the Third Development Plan (2000-2005), it was in the spirit of “progress” and, de facto, rapid growth, aiming to privatize several industries, reorganize bureaucracy and subsidies, and reduce poverty, along with the creation of an Oil Stabilization Fund.<sup>665</sup> Hence, boosted by external factors (such as the oil boom and the rising oil prices during his second term), Iran’s economy enjoyed a growth phase. Indeed, the overall situation in terms of real wages and unemployment partly improved.<sup>666</sup> However, not for all strata of Iranian society, and not for all “participants” in the arena of civil society.

The next section will start from this state of neglect.

---

<sup>662</sup> See Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, 257-265 and Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 94-99.

<sup>663</sup> Morad Saghafi, “The New Landscape of Iranian Politics,” *Middle East Report*, 233 (Winter 2004), 16-23.

<sup>664</sup> See Jahangir Amuzegar, “Khatami’s Legacies: Dashed Hopes,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter, 2006), 57-74.

<sup>665</sup> *Hamshahri*, 2 November 2004; *Donya-e Eqtesad*, 24 May 2005.

<sup>666</sup> See Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Oil Wealth and Economic Growth in Iran,” in eds. Ali Gheissari, *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 3-37. See also Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Population, Human Capital and Economic Growth in Iran,” in *Human Capital: Population Economics in the Middle East*, eds. Ismail Sirageldin, (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2002), 142-157.

**Unprotected ergo invisible: cornering workers while seeking to reform the Labor Law**

Capturing the disjuncture between Khatami's discourse around participation and the effects of it on workers would be not an easy task without investigating the boundary between *de jure* and *de facto* realms. What has remained unwritten so far in the analysis of the reformist period is, indeed, two-fold. First, it concerns the mechanisms by which the reform-oriented presidency narrowed workers' space for legal protection. Second, Khatami's administration failed in its attempts to enhance the confrontation between the IRI and wage earners, through the (unfulfilled promise of) the legalization of independent trade unions. In fact, it was at the legal level that the reforms did not succeed in turning workers into participant citizens.

As a result of the Labor Law amendments approved by Khatami's administration between 1999 and 2003 – amid much criticism from the Workers' House, as the next section will discuss – approximately 3 million wage earners remained legally unprotected and mostly unrepresented.<sup>667</sup>

The *Majles* passed the provisions that exempted small enterprises and workshops with five or fewer workers from part of the labor law's coverage. Initially, it approved the measure on a temporary basis, in the context of the administration's efforts to reduce bureaucracy in order to boost the private sector.<sup>668</sup> The Labor Law amendments should have lasted for three years. Nevertheless, they were extended beyond this date: in 2003, small firms with ten or fewer workers were allowed – *de jure* and *de facto* – to operate outside of 37 articles of the Labor Law.<sup>669</sup> The formulation was vague because it referred to "particular circumstances" and "exceptional cases," subject to the consideration of the Council of Ministers.<sup>670</sup> The temporary basis of the measure was renewed after

---

<sup>667</sup> As reported by ILO in a document on Convention no. 111 on Labor discrimination, citing a worker member of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Available here: [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/fr/?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P13100\\_COMMENT\\_ID,P13100\\_LANG\\_CODE:2555743,en](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/fr/?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P13100_COMMENT_ID,P13100_LANG_CODE:2555743,en)

<sup>668</sup> See International Labour Organization, "An Employment Strategy for the Islamic Republic of Iran" (ILO, 2003), 31-37.

<sup>669</sup> See *Majles*, amendments of Labor Law as approved on 27 January 2003 [7 Bahman 1381]. Available here: <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/122666>

<sup>670</sup> Iran Labor Law, miscellaneous provisions. English translation is available here: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WEBTEXT/21843/64830/E90IRN01.HTM#c12>. In Persian: Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare, available here <https://rkj.mcls.gov.ir/fa/moghararaat/ghavanin/ghanoonkar>

two years and became widely adopted.<sup>671</sup> For workers, it constituted a considerable loss in terms of working conditions and contractual guarantees, as it was officially incorporated in article 191. This limitation of legal labor protection paved the way for the deregulation of working conditions and workers' precarization. It impacted overtime pay, additional remuneration for nightshifts, paid leave, and employers' duties related to job classification or severance pay. The relation between employers and employees began to detach from its initial definition in the 1990 Labor Law, shifting in favor of employers. Larger enterprises began to benefit from these new measures to bypass the law through the use of different contractors.<sup>672</sup> In June 2003, when the International Labour Organization assessed the employment situation in Iran, it recommended that Iran "improve compliance of the labor laws by micro and small enterprises since the growth of small enterprises is often constrained by their inability to comply."<sup>673</sup>

The provision, which exempted small workshops from compliance with part of the Labor Law, fitted a context where a plethora of temporary contracts was expanding. These contracts had been made legal during Rafsanjani's second term and codified into article 7 of the Labor Law. This states: "A labor contract is composed of a written or oral contract according to which the worker will provide labor on a temporary or non-temporary duration for the employer, in exchange for receiving compensation for his efforts."<sup>674</sup> The maximum temporary duration was not determined. As note 1 to the same article clarifies, "it will be determined by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and confirmed by the Cabinet."<sup>675</sup> A second note was added to minimize abuse by employers, stating that "in jobs which by nature have a continuous duration, should the duration not

---

<sup>671</sup> The widespread diffusion and the strategies for circumnavigating the new regulation have been discussed and confirmed to the author during several interviews with workers between January 2018 and October 2019, as well as interviews with a lawyer and employment law expert (Tehran, 6 June 2019), and a labor economist (Tehran, 18 January 2018 and 11 June 2018).

<sup>672</sup> Legal expert, interview with the author. Tehran, 11 May 2019.

<sup>673</sup> International Labour Organization, "An Employment Strategy for the Islamic Republic of Iran," 74.

<sup>674</sup> Labor Law, 1990, Chapter two. In Persian: Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare, available here <https://rkj.mcls.gov.ir/fa/moghararaat/ghavanin/ghanoonkar>. English translation, *Iran Data Portal*, Syracuse University, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/labor-contracts>

<sup>675</sup> Ibid.

be mentioned in the contract, the contract will be considered permanent.” Nevertheless, the consequences of the erosion of workers’ rights proved to be disruptive.

At the start of Khatami’s presidency, unemployment and discontent among the jobless population were severe issues to cope with, as mentioned in chapter 5. At the same time, supporters of economic liberalization continued to press for the relaxation of legal regulations to achieve a more private enterprise-friendly framework. The reformists were more concerned with removing any obstacles in their way in their pursuit of the accumulation of human capital, firmly convinced that Iran’s regulations were written only to protect jobs rather than facilitate their creation.<sup>676</sup> Therefore, temporary contracts became tools to contain criticism, at least in the short term. However, events did not go this way. Looking back at the phenomenon over time can help us understand the impact of such a legal basis to the casualization of labor in the country. In 1990 only 6 percent of workers were on temporary contracts. By the end of the 2000s, they represented 90 percent of all contracts.<sup>677</sup> Short-term contracts narrowed wage earners’ space for labor protection further, as they excluded workers from rights enshrined in the law, such as severance benefits, paid sick or maternity leave, etc. Moreover, they contributed to fragmenting the process of solidarity building among workers, thus hindering collective bargaining, despite – as chapter 5 discussed– the continual eruption of labor protests against the widespread use of these measures.

From a legal point of view, Khatami sought to facilitate workers’ articulation of their collective requests. He attempted to make their voices heard, through the establishment of independent institutions. Nevertheless, it was a lost battle. Drafting the legal conditions for the “empowerment” of workers as citizens represented a crucial step for the reformist president. In 2003, the

---

<sup>676</sup> See Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Human resources in Iran: potentials and challenges,” *Iranian Studies*, 38:1 (2005): 117-147.

<sup>677</sup> *Iranian Student News Agency* (ISNA), 20 July 2010, <https://www.isna.ir/news/8904-16059/%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%83%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D9%82%D8%AA-%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%87-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86>.

negotiations lasted for seven months. Indeed, by cooperating with the International Labour Organization, and paving the way for Iran to join the World Trade Organization, Khatami considered new changes in the Labor Law. In particular, he attempted to reform Chapter 6 of the Code on labor organization, freedom of association, and collective bargaining. As in the ILO's report, the existent regulation provided by the Islamic Republic was deemed "deficient," and "undermining confidence in collective bargaining," the organization made a series of recommendations to the Islamic Republic. It advised reforming the law to: first, "respect freedom of association and facilitation of collective bargaining;" and second, strengthen workers and employers' organizations "to fully participate in social dialogue."<sup>678</sup> Editing note 4 of article 131 was the option on the table. It could represent the first brick in the wall to allow the establishment of unions that would be beyond state control and intervention, thus without any subordination to the IRI. Additionally, the reformist administration would have had to ratify the Freedom of Association and Protection of the right to organize Convention 1948 (no. 87). In article 2, it stipulates that "Workers and employers, without distinction whatsoever, shall have the right to establish and, subject only to the rules of the organization concerned, to join organizations of their choosing without previous authorization."<sup>679</sup> In May 2003 Bernard Jernigan, Director General of the liberalization department of the ILO, reported on the meeting with Iranian officials from the Ministry of Labor in triumphalist tones. "From now on, the syndicates are authorized to represent laborers, while the Islamic Labor Councils will act as consultants in the welfare affairs of guild units (...) guild associations will be registered by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, while this does not mean that the ministry has the right to interfere with their affairs," he said.<sup>680</sup>

<sup>678</sup> International Labour Organization, "An Employment Strategy for the Islamic Republic of Iran," 60 and 72.

<sup>679</sup> ILO, Freedom of Association and Protection of the right to organize Convention 1948 (no. 87). Available here [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312232](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312232)

<sup>680</sup> *IRNA*, 24 Ordibehesht 1382 (14 May 2003). English translation available via *Payvand*, 15 May 2003 <http://www.payvand.com/news/03/may/1084.html>

Nevertheless, free and independent unions became victims of deadlocked negotiations and factional struggles. The Guild Union Act of May 2004 did not bring about the expected results.<sup>681</sup> Stumbling blocks brought Khatami's endeavor to a political impasse. The Workers' House proved a determined and decisive opponent of these reforms. The next section will investigate its complex role, as a *trait-d'union* between the IRI and labor, and as a tool of control over workers. It will show how the Workers' House acted as a member of civil society according to the two-fold notion discussed by Gramsci: working in the interests of the status quo, while at the same time challenging it.

### **The Workers' House under the magnifying glass**

The *Khāneh-ye kārgar* has a unique status in Iran. Its name is not mentioned in the Labor Law. It is not a fully independent trade union or a workers' council; it does not represent an NGO; it is not recognized as a party.<sup>682</sup> However, it is supported by the Islamic Republic, financially, logistically, and politically. Self-defined as “an organization believing in the concept of *velāyat-e-faqih*<sup>683</sup> and adhering to the Constitution [...] defending the rights of the deprived and the oppressed,”<sup>684</sup> it constitutes de facto the most influential workers' organization in Iran, and it operates as a confederation. Articles 130 and 131 of the Labor Law's chapter VI stipulates that workers can be represented by 1) Islamic Labor Councils (that can exist in any workplace with more than 35 employees) along with Islamic Societies, 2) Guild Societies (*anjomān-e senfi*); or 3) they can nominate their own representatives (*namayandegān-e azād*). These institutions are explicitly conceived to “propagate and spread Islamic culture and defend the Islamic Revolution's

<sup>681</sup> *Majles*, 24 Esfand 1382 (14 March 2004). See ILO, in Persian

<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/91489/106120/F2053865805/IRN91489.pdf>

<sup>682</sup> Alireza Kheirollahi defines it as an “ideological party that has a not clear and not democratic legal and political structure.” See Alireza Kargaran *bi Tabaqeh: Tavān-e Chānezani Kārgarān dar Iran pas az Enqelab*, Workers Without Class: Bargaining Power in Iran after the Revolution (Tehran: Agah, 1398). Abbas Khalegi defines it a “party organization.” See Abbas Khaleji, “Tahavvol Māhiat va Kārkard Tashakkol-hā ye Kārgari dar Irān pas az Enqelāb-e Eslāmi,” *Motāl'āt-e tārikhi nezāmi*, 1389 (no.8-9), 99-22.

<sup>683</sup> The doctrine of guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, as expounded by Khomeini.

<sup>684</sup> Khāneh-ye kārgar, “Dar bāreh-ye mā,” <http://workerhouse.ir/subject.aspx?groupid=18>

achievement" in the workplace.<sup>685</sup> Their right to existence is enshrined in Article 26 of the Iranian Constitution's framework, thus on the condition that they do "not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, Islamic standards, and the foundation of the Islamic Republic."<sup>686</sup> Procedures, duties, and powers, as well as their activities, must be supervised by the Ministries of the Interior and Labor and Social Affairs and the Organization of Islamic Propaganda. They are controlled by the IRI, as the law requires "a representative on behalf of the Velayat-e Faqih" to be present.<sup>687</sup> Therefore, the modalities of access and participation belong to the top-down sphere, as they do not directly involve workers in these processes. Within this power vacuum from a bottom-up perspective, the Workers' House managed to expand its room for *manoeuvre*, claiming to be independent from the government. Islamic Labor Councils, Guild societies, and workers' representatives all function de facto under the Workers' House umbrella, although there is no record of this in the Labor Law. Therefore, this section will proceed driven by the following questions. Where did this status as an umbrella organization originate? Moreover, how did it impact Khatami's quest for civil society in the context of labor relations?

The *Khāne-ye kārgar* was formed in the 1960s<sup>688</sup> During the period of revolutionary momentum, as a secular entity, it played a crucial role in fostering workers' collective demands. It became a point of reference for the working poor and unemployed, influenced by the Leftist group Peykār.<sup>689</sup> In the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, following a struggle for hegemony with Leftist groups that had been purged by the newly created Islamic Republic apparatus, the Workers' House came under the influence of the Islamic Republican Party. After the IRP's dissolution in 1987, it was considered close to the faction of Rafsanjani, which it openly supported during the Fifth Majles vote.<sup>690</sup>

---

<sup>685</sup> Labor Law, chapter 6.

<sup>686</sup> The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. English translation available via *Iran Chamber* [http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution\\_ch03.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_ch03.php)

<sup>687</sup> See Labor Law, Article 138.

<sup>688</sup> Afshin Habibzadeh, *Moshārekāt Siyāsī Tabaqeh-ye Kārgar dar Irān*, [Political Participation of the Working Class in Iran,] (Tehran: Enteshārat Kavir, 1387), 90-92.

<sup>689</sup> As noted by Asef Bayat, "Workless revolutionaries. The Unemployed Movement in Revolutionary Iran," in Stephanie Cronin eds, *Subalterns and Social Protest. History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 104-106.

<sup>690</sup> See Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran*, 54-55.



Khatami could not enjoy the same support, as towards the end of his presidential campaign in May 1997, the Workers' House announced that it would not be endorsing any candidates.<sup>691</sup> Although gravitating towards the Islamic Left orbit, the Workers' House distanced itself from Khatami since the beginning of the reformist mandate. Nevertheless, its leadership started early on to benefit from the open-door policy towards parties promoted by Khatami, which between 1997 and the late 2000s resulted in the number of parties in Iran increasing from 35 to 95.<sup>692</sup> In fact, in October 1998, the Islamic Labor Party was officially registered in Tehran. Among its key members were Alireza Mahjoub, the secretary-general of the Khāne-ye Kārgar, as well as Hossein Kamali, who was already Minister of Labor in Rafsanjani's cabinet. In the words of another of its members, Abdolqasem Sarhadizadeh, the party's aims were to boost "workers' participation" in public life, and protect their rights.<sup>693</sup> On the one hand, these details provide a benchmark for evaluating the actual connections between the Workers' House and the political sphere of the state apparatus, despite their claims of being independent and non-governmental. On the other hand, they allow us to grasp the disconnection points through the lens of the discursive – as well as instrumental – use of "participation." Indeed, on several levels, participation [*mosharekat*] represented a key notion for the encounters between the top-down and bottom-up realms during the Khatami era. First, the Workers' House appropriated the terminology that was closely associated with the reformists. At the same time, it exploited the more extensive – although still limited – political space for criticism, to engage in a campaign against Khatami's government. It took a critical stance on its provisions regarding labor precarization through the newspaper *Kār-o-Kārgar*, waving the flag of workers' rights and participation, as the next section will reveal.

It acted ambiguously when Khatami's team, in cooperation with the ILO, proposed to reform chapter VII of the Labor Law on collective bargaining. It fiercely opposed the changes regarding

---

<sup>691</sup> *Iran News*, 8 May 1997.

<sup>692</sup> Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 109.

<sup>693</sup> *Iran*, 19 Bahman 1377 (8 February 1999).

the establishment of free unions in order to maintain the status quo. It can be argued that independent workers' organizations would have threatened the powerful position of the Workers' House as a self-appointed labor stronghold with a dual role that could be expressed as follows: 1) advocating for workers' justice and challenging the government's decisions, while 2) contributing to investigating activities in the workplace, isolating potential conflicts as they arose and stepping in to quell further outbreaks of protest – as the workers and labor experts interviewed for this research critically reported.

### **Rights and participation in *Kār-o-Kārgar***

Top-down discourses may produce unexpected consequences. They cannot determine whether or to what extent outcomes will develop into counter-hegemonic projects. Navigating the complexity of the role of the Workers' House entails taking these considerations into account to avoid the risk of stigmatizing an actor as being either for or against the IRI tout-court, as well as for or against workers. A closer look at how the discourses about rights and participation that emanated from Khatami's administration were conveyed by the Workers' House, can shed light upon its objectives and achievements. Analysis of the *Kār-o-Kārgar* newspaper headlines criticizing the government's economic policies, as well as the amendments to the Labor Law in 2000, leaves one grappling to identify what ideas of legality the Workers' House embodied during the reformist era. It can be argued that it acted within the IRI framework, both against the government and for workers' job security, while operating to defuse social conflict. This behavior, on the one hand, stimulated the internal debate about labor protection and job security. On the other hand, it reinforced the role of the Workers' House as a political yet not independent organization,<sup>694</sup> with no interest in campaigning for the establishment of free unions, beyond its own sphere of interest. These explorations allow us to grasp the discursive and political trajectories that eventually provided a

---

<sup>694</sup> For more details on the Workers' House's claims to be independent and a critical discussion, see the answers to the following interview provided by Alireza Mahjoub (Khāneh-ye Kārgar) and Farshad Esmaili, lawyer and labor expert, *Zamaneh*, "Khaneh-ye kargar dar yek negah," The Workers' House at a glance, 6 May 2019. <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/444886>

fertile breeding ground for workers' alienation and distance from other classes, as chapter 8 will reveal more in detail.

Alienation was a widespread condition in workplaces in Iran by the early 2000s. About 53 percent of workers spent more than 12 hours per day working.<sup>695</sup> Thousands of workers in state-run factories were still waiting to be paid.<sup>696</sup> Those in the factories who were receiving their wages were complaining that the amount was not enough to live on. *Kār-o-Kārgar* described the situation as the “tragedy of wages.”<sup>697</sup> The official unemployment rate reached 11 percent, even though some suspected it had in fact climbed to 20 percent.<sup>698</sup> In this context, the discursive campaign of the Workers’ House targeted the Khatami government’s attempts at liberalization and its moves to reform the Labor Law. For months during 2000, the main headlines ignored the president’s declarations. At the beginning of April, *Kār-o-Kārgar* headlined its front page with Rafsanjani’s sermon on Friday prayer: “Unemployment, particularly for the youth, is a matter of national security.”<sup>699</sup> According to the former president, “workers and young people without a job are a time bomb, as they can represent a problem and a danger.”<sup>700</sup> The solution – he continued – “is an investment that does not lie in unsafe working spaces.” The endorsement to the Rafsanjani bloc was evident, making the position of the Workers’ House in the political arena clear. The following day, a significant quote, stating, “we are ready to legalize workers’ strikes,” stood out on the newspaper’s front page. The Islamic labor councils were declaring war on the decision by Khatami’s government to exclude workshops with less than five people from legal protection, as regulated by the Labor Law.<sup>701</sup> Reporting protests while announcing new initiatives against the measure, *Kār-o-Kārgar*, made its call to action for May Day. Soheila Jelodarzadeh, a member of the Islamic Labor Party and supporter of both workers’ rights and a more significant role for

---

<sup>695</sup> *Kār-o-kārgar*, 23 May 2000 (3 Khordad 1379).

<sup>696</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 4 May 2000 (15 Ordibehesht 1379)

<sup>697</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 5 April 2000 (17 Farvardin 1379)

<sup>698</sup> Interview with the author. Worker and labor activist, 29 April 2019.

<sup>699</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 2 April 2000 (14 Farvardin 1379).

<sup>700</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>701</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 3 April 2000 (15 Farvardin 1379).

women in key positions, was quoted as saying “the exemption of small workshops from Labor Law is cruel.”<sup>702</sup> In this relatively open space for criticism, to which Khatami had given rise, the Workers’ House was sharpening its words, and trying to build consensus among the workers and the working poor, while conducting its political struggle within the IRI’s factional system. For months, workers took their battle over the impact of the recent regulation on small enterprises to the International Labour Organization. As the ILO’s documents reported, they urged for help in pressuring the government, labeling its provisions as “discriminating against workers” and highlighting that “it was unprecedented in the history of this country for a law to be adopted to provide for the non-application of law to one part of the working population. This new law was against the essence of the Islamic Constitution and principles of social justice and would usher in an era of exploitation,” endangering 3 million people.<sup>703</sup> In the discourse conveyed through *Kār-o-Kārgar*’s pages in the months leading up to and after May Day 2000, when a fierce and lively debate raged on the Labor Law, three elements catch the eye. First, the use of terms evoking suffering and disorder, as well as a sense of insecurity, such as “cruelty,” “threatening,” “danger,” and “problems.” Second, the language used in the headlines and articles prompted mobilization by projecting it into the future, as a tool for negotiation with the government: “ready to strike,” “workers will protest,” “demonstrations.” Third, the front page headlines were rarely devoted to the president’s words and speeches, or connected to workers’ or economic issues. In some cases, the discursive picture constructed by *Kār-o-Kārgar* purposely expressed the disconnection between labor-related news and Khatami’s quotes, such as: “Our culture should be out to date.”<sup>704</sup> The following page represents a meaningful example. The first headline, quoting the president, reads:

---

<sup>702</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 8 April 2000 (20 Farvardin 1379).

<sup>703</sup> ILO, Discussion on Convention 111 on discrimination in the workplace. Available here [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/fr/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P13100\\_COMMENT\\_ID,P13100\\_LANG\\_CODE:2555743,en](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/fr/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P13100_COMMENT_ID,P13100_LANG_CODE:2555743,en)

<sup>704</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 6 April 2000, (18 Farvardin 1379).

“Young people need guidance and education.”<sup>705</sup> Lower down on the page, a statement attributed to Jelodarzadeh, read: “The removal of small workshops from the Labor Law is cruel.”



*Kār-o-Kārgar*, 6 April 2000, (18 Farvardin 1379).

Accusations about the government’s economic choices impacted on the discursive reshaping of power relations. Headlines embodying this dissatisfaction found their place in *Kār-o-Kārgar*:

“Wrong policies caused factories closures and unemployment,” “Workers are waiting for the president,” “Workers defend their rights until the end.”<sup>706</sup> Thus, the problems of the labor realm

were framed as originating from misguided choices. Workers were described using the language of siege, thus developing the idea of the need for defense. What is worth noting here is that Khatami’s economic policies, as already mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter, were not harsher than those of the Rafsanjani era. Furthermore – as chapter 4 and chapter 6 explored, through May Day speeches, market-oriented measures, business-friendly narratives, and the rhetoric of the myth of the winner – workers and the masses had already become the victim of processes of marginalization during Rafsanjani’s presidency. Nevertheless, Alireza Mahjoub, the Workers’ House secretary-general, provided a different picture. From his perspective, “Mr. Hashemi’s government paid special attention to the workers (...) Thanks to Mr. Kamali [Labor Minister] who constantly opposed privatization policies, the privatization debate was delayed. Mr. Hashemi

<sup>705</sup> Ibid.

<sup>706</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 10 April 2000 (22 Farvardin 1379), 18 May 2000 (29 Ordibehesht 1379), 22 June 2000 (2 Tir 1379).

[Rafsanjani] wanted his words to end and agreed.”<sup>707</sup> According to Mahjoub, although “the Workers’ House did not take a specific position in 1376,” “most of the workers voted for Mr. Khatami.” He defined Khatami as “the bridge between what was done and what was to be done, as necessary for economic and political development (...) We were the backbone of the reformists.”<sup>708</sup> However, within the bloc supporting the reformists, there was no shortage of confrontations. As *Kār-o-Kārgar* pages show, workers became tools of negotiation: their protests were cast as instruments of pressure, and their possible strikes were used to threaten the government. As an example, the following headlines opened the national news section in mid-May 2000: “Workers of Khuzestan will strike,” with the caveat “If workers’ protests are not taken seriously” only appearing in the subheading.<sup>709</sup> Once again, the battleground represented in the article concerned the exemption of small workshops from the Labor Law. A newspaper editorial on the issue constructed it as a binary opposition between the government's quest for job creation and the demolition of workers’ legal protection. Titled “Job creation or elimination of workers’ rights,” it argued that the new provisions paved the way “to unjust, illegal developments and will lead to chaos.”<sup>710</sup> The metaphor of chaos evoked a blurred vision of disorder and confusion. Without any further detail, it mirrored a sense of discomfort caused by perceived lawlessness. The editorial piece continued with a bitter equation projecting the workers as victimized: “It is interesting that they say that workers and their low wages were an obstacle to job creation, in other words, workers caused the unemployment.” Hence, it formulated explicit accusations, targeting the government and referring to “the weakness of strategic planning, lack of organization and incapacity of realization.”

<sup>707</sup> *ILNA (Iranian Labor News Agency)*, 4 August 2014 (13 Mordad 1393.) Also available at *Tarikh Irani* <http://tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/4626/%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA-%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87-%D9%88%DB%8C%DA%98%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%AE%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B5%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%85>

<sup>708</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>709</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 10 May 2000 (21 Ordibehesht 1379).

<sup>710</sup> *Ibid*.

Moreover, by rhetorically questioning the government, the editorial reinforced its bond with its readers: “Establishing law in support of the capitalists, and reducing legal support to workers where do they want to go? Doesn’t this expand illegality?”. Within this framework, threatening strike action beyond mere protests represented a way of upping the ante. However, using the word “strike” (*e’tesāb*) as a useful scarecrow did not mean that the Workers’ House, in its columns, was campaigning for the right to strike. Headlines such as “strikes are the last option for workers” or “strike: understanding its legal connotation,” introduced commentaries that delved into the formulations (and omissions) in the Labor Law, and ultimately discouraged workers from stopping their work activities.<sup>711</sup> In this regard, it is fundamental to clarify two aspects. The first one is legal: there is no mention in the Labor Law of the word “strike.” Chapter VII (article 142) refers to “cessation of work with the presence of workers in the workshop or any deliberate cut in output by the workers.”<sup>712</sup> Specifically, this is discussed as a potential scenario relating to any cessation of contract. It does not concern the right to organize a strike.<sup>713</sup> Moreover, as in the legal formulation that lists Islamic Labor Councils’ role and duties, it can be deduced that they represent the first official filter for any disagreements that arise in the workplace.<sup>714</sup> Therefore, there is no legal recognition of the right to strike. The second point concerns control and the use of force. As emerged from the author’s interviews with workers, labor activists, and labor experts, any action potentially leading to “work stoppage” could be monitored, reported to the Ministry of Intelligence, and repressed. Therefore, the idea of legality and bargaining conveyed by the Workers’ House considered the articulation of labor grievances as a defensive struggle against employment policies, wages, and the lack of job protection. Moreover, protests were not promoted against employers, as a closer look at the combination between the headlines and iconography shows. For instance, *Kār-o-*

<sup>711</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 9-10 April 2000 (20-21 Farvardin 1379), 13 May 2000 (23 Ordibehesht 1379).

<sup>712</sup> Labor Law, Chapter VII on Collective Bargaining and contracts. ILO [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p\\_lang=en&p\\_isn=21843](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=21843)

<sup>713</sup> For a broader discussion on the legal formulation of work stoppage in the Iranian Labor Law see Kheirollahi, *Kārgarān bi Tabāqeh: Tavān-e Chānezani Kārgarān dar Iran pas az Enqelāb*, [Workers Without Class: Bargaining Power in Iran after the Revolution], (Tehran: Agah, 1398), 73-74.

<sup>714</sup> Islamic Labor Councils Law, *Majles*. Available <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/91022>

*Kārgar* defused the potential for class struggle that existed in the Iranian factories, going on sale with the following headlines: “Most of the problems in the factories did not lie in the disagreements between employers and workers,” reporting a meeting between the Supreme Council of Labor and the Employers’ Guild Society.<sup>715</sup> Furthermore, in the articles discussing legal disputes workers appeared closer to the authorities.

The limits of the Workers’ House rhetoric and its effective role in protecting workers and representing their grievances and pushing their demands forward, became a subject of debate among workers and labor activists in Iran. As Khatami’s open-door strategies towards civil society and participation had produced spaces for critique, especially in his first term, publications such as *Andisheh Jām’eh* or *Iran Fardā* critically discussed the needs and shortcomings surrounding labor and workers’ lives. The system of the Islamic Council and its historical role of gate-keeper, as well as its ties with the controlling state apparatus, emerged, for example, in a three-page essay written by a worker, Reza Kangarāni.<sup>716</sup> A worker and activist for union rights, Hossein Akbari, had the chance to publicly shed light on the Workers’ House activities “and real foundation.” He urged it towards a more radical attitude, while exposing the weakness of its methods of understanding workers’ slogans and demands, and the dynamics and difficulties of organizing protests under the IRI’s umbrella.<sup>717</sup> Karim Maniri argued for an independent workers’ movement.<sup>718</sup> An editorial of *Iran Fardā* argued that “through participation and social activities, the economic wheels will start to spin.”<sup>719</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a critical analysis of labor transformations under Khatami’s reformist government. It has reflected on the connections between the discourses of civil society and

---

<sup>715</sup> *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 1 June 2000 (12 Khordad 1379).

<sup>716</sup> *Andisheh-ye Jām’eh*, May 2001 (16), Ordibehesht 1380, 10-12.

<sup>717</sup> *Andisheh-ye Jām’eh*, December 2001, Dey 1380, 48-52.

<sup>718</sup> *Andisheh-ye Jām’eh*, October-November 2001 (20), Abān 1380, 48-51.

<sup>719</sup> *Iran Fardā*, August 1998, 3-4.



participation spreading from the top down, and the narratives that reached workers, through the mediation of a key actor, the Workers' House. Following a Gramscian conceptualization of civil society, it has shown how hegemonic relations unfolded within this arena. On the one hand, the ruling apparatus appropriated the concept to stimulate citizens' participation while broadening consensus even further. On the other hand, the Workers' House took advantage of this broader – although still limited – space and acted both as part of the IRI's apparatus and as a distinct actor. However, overall the interests of the dominant classes were protected. In this sense, the reformist era saw the evolution of civil society in the first stage of its struggle for hegemony. In this phase, as Gramsci conceptualized, civil society carries the values of the dominant classes and contributes to the formation of its hegemonic discourse.

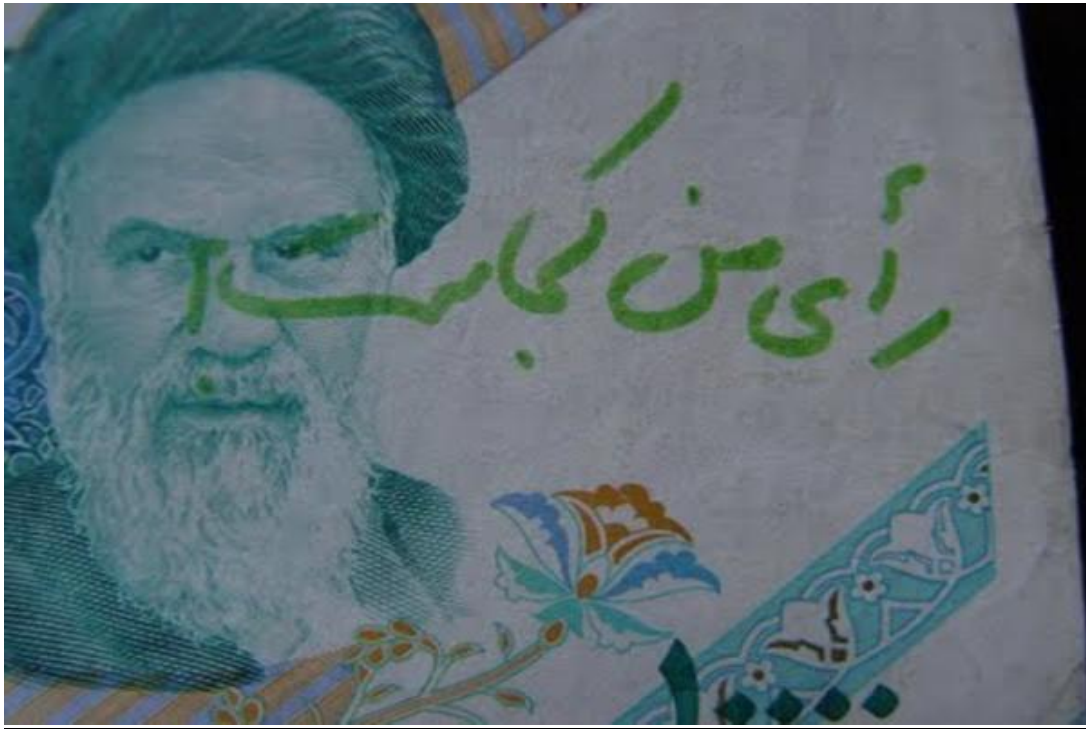
This chapter has demonstrated that the reformists in power did not succeed in improving workers' conditions. First, because under their rule the exemption of small enterprises from the Labor Law was approved, depriving workers of labor protection. Second, because their attempts to legalize independent and free trade unions were politically not strong enough to challenge the harsh opposition they received. And the Workers' House actively participated in the struggle against the government plan. Even though it had the opportunity to push for the improvement of workers' rights and tools of collective bargaining, the *Khāne-ye Kārgar* preferred to maintain the status quo. This does not mean that it did not fight for workers' conditions. In fact, this chapter has demonstrated that it effectively fought for labor protection and to secure workers' contracts, in a context where it represented the only legal connection between the IRI and the labor force. Nonetheless, the Workers' House did not operate as a fully independent entity and, in the broader picture, continued to work for the state system, by controlling workers, monitoring potential conflict and hindering the establishment of other unions. These mechanisms fostered the processes of labor casualization that the Workers' House itself claimed to fight against. Beyond the precarity connected to short-term contracts and low wages, workers remained precarious and afraid of repression. They could not build strong networks of solidarity with other groups in the public arena,

because this was dominated by the Workers' House unidirectional discourse. However, as already mentioned in chapter 5, a unique mushrooming of ideas, and flourishing of critical thought during the reformist era accompanied the workers' alienation and separation. It was about to reach its peak when Khatami left office. As the next chapter will discuss, it exploded during Ahmadinejad's first term. Whereas this chapter has explored connections and disconnections, chapter 8 will investigate the breaking points.

## CHAPTER 8

### The Green Movement vis-à-vis Workers:

#### Missing Connections and Breaking Points within the 2009 Uprising



The slogan “Where is my vote?” written on an Iranian currency note (photo: UCLA Library)

#### Introduction

The processes of struggle and counter-hegemonic pushes that developed in post-revolutionary Iran culminated in 2009. It was June 13, a day marking the beginning of a hot summer of discontent in Tehran. On that morning, the streets turned into a site of confrontation. Once again, and for the first time since the 1979 Revolution, hundreds of thousands of people poured out onto the capital’s main roads to protest. They questioned the election outcome, claiming their votes back. It was the beginning of a confrontation that exposed the fragilities of the Islamic Republic, as well as the popular strength of a “green wave” that over the following days eventually filled the streets of other cities, such as Shiraz and Isfahan, across the country. The Green Movement exploded with all its potency and weaknesses. It was mostly young men and women who demonstrated, holding up placards that read: *Rāy-e man kojast?* [Where is my vote?]. In the aftermath of Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad's victory in the presidential elections of June 12, they kept asking: "Where is my vote?". Nevertheless, the notable absentee was a cohesive opposition group of workers among the demonstrators, sharing the same slogans and common spaces. This does not mean that workers, as individuals, did not participate in the demonstrations. The point relates to the expression of an organic set of collective demands challenging the status quo and embracing different strata of Iranian society. In fact, a missing link was revealed, embodied in the lack of social justice grievances.

This chapter starts precisely from this breaking point. By exploring the discursive disconnections that led to the Green Movement's genesis and development, through the slogans and rallying-cries of the protestors, it traces the contours of the fragile identities that animated the uprising. Moreover, it contests two stereotypical interpretations that emerged both from the mainstream coverage of the protests in the international media, and during the author's interviews in Iran: the labeling of the Green Wave as an exclusively rich, middle-class movement; and the understanding that workers did not take to the streets because they were mostly Ahmadinejad supporters.<sup>720</sup> Building on interviews with both labor and Green Movement activists conducted in Tehran between 2017 and 2019, the chapter investigates why cross-class alliances did not solidify in the streets. It argues that both structural and discursive factors hindered the processes of solidarity-building between workers and the Greens. Drawing on the perspectives of both workers and Green Movement participants, it contends that ultimately the conditions for a general strike were not present, unlike in the 1979 Revolution, when processes of solidarity unfolded in the streets and paralyzed the economy. First, as chapter 6 showed, years of neoliberal policies had widened the economic gap between classes. During the *sāzandegi* period, the myth of the winner had given impetus to the spread of newly-constructed narratives around success and production, which had increased the class divide and marginalized workers. Second, despite Ahmadinejad's populist claims to speak for the dispossessed

---

<sup>720</sup> This refers to interviews with workers, labor activists and Green Movement activists conducted by the author in December 2017-March 2018 and March-October 2019.

and to guarantee social justice, his government had not abandoned the path of economic liberalism. Among other measures, at the start of its second term, it had embarked on a plan to reduce subsidies for fuel as well as other public goods, such as electricity.<sup>721</sup> As chapter 4 discussed, during one of his May Day speeches in 2006, Ahmadinejad had declared himself to be on the workers' side: "To solve the economic problem and create job opportunities is the absolute goal of my government. Our government is here for workers, and it is honored to be at your service, dear workers."<sup>722</sup> Yet, in the same year, his administration had sought to amend the Labor Law. It attempted to pass a series of provisions that would have seriously threatened to erode job security by eliminating the restrictions on the dismissal of workers in the event of a decrease in their productivity or alleged misconduct.<sup>723</sup> Ironically, Mohammad Jahromi, the then Labor Minister, campaigned to reform the legislation claiming to increase job security in the Iranian labor market. Furthermore, he argued that altering the Code's rigidity was the only way to boost productivity and foster job creation.<sup>724</sup> The Workers' House openly attacked the draft, accusing the government of enabling employers to fire workers easily and dismantling the protection of workers' rights.<sup>725</sup> Indeed, the draft failed to progress any further. Third, as chapter 5 explained, intermittent yet constant repression of independent labor activism constrained spaces for workers' dissent. Oppressive control and the fear of coercion undermined the chances of building strong political networks, both within the workplace, and beyond. Fourth, Khatami's era and his push to consolidate civil society in Iran represented a missed opportunity in terms of political connections between the new intellectual middle class and the labor realm, as explored in chapter 7. Fifth, as the traditional Left had been repressed and marginalized during the post-revolutionary years – also due to a deradicalizing trend

---

<sup>721</sup> See also Fariba Adelkhah, "The Political Economy of the Green Movement: Contestation and Political Mobilization in Iran" in eds. Negin Nabavi *Iran. From Theocracy to the Green Movement*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 17-38.

<sup>722</sup> *Ettelā' āt*, 11 Ordibehesht 1385 (1 May 2006).

<sup>723</sup> Labor Law, Chapter II.

<sup>724</sup> *Kayhān*, 22 Shahrivar 1385 (13 September 2006).

<sup>725</sup> *Irān*, 22 Shahrivar 1385 (13 September 2006).

<sup>725</sup> Mahjoub openly confronted Ahmadinejad's policies from the columns of *Kār-o-Kārgar* and *Mardom-Salari* between 2006 and 2007.

championed by the reformists – the debate around social justice had been relegated to small political circles.<sup>726</sup> Furthermore, the majority of Leftist labor activists criticized the Green Movement’s protestors for fostering mainly liberal demands and not paying attention to workers.<sup>727</sup> Therefore, this chapter answers new questions about how the Green Movement activists and workers experienced the politics of the everyday when the popular anger against the presidential elections erupted in June 2009. In particular, it reflects on what these experiences can teach us about the modalities and meanings of building broader coalitions, developing counter-hegemonic processes, as well as performing bottom-up collective actions. In fact, in the face of harsh repression and internal divisions, the Green Movement failed to reframe its demands. It did not involve social justice and failed to fully embrace workers. In so doing, it sealed its fate.

### **Navigating the breaking points: between discourse and collective awareness**

In order to understand the evolution of the disconnections explored earlier in this dissertation, this chapter focuses on the breaking points that emerged when the Green Movement erupted with all its peaceful force. From a theoretical perspective, it builds on the links between: 1) the development of a counter-hegemonic project as a discursive practice through slogans, 2) Gramsci’s concept of *awareness of duration*, which leads to conscious political acts and 3) new subjectivities emerging, which contest power, while demanding new forms of politics. As chapter 3 reflected in discussing the role of workers in the Iranian Revolution through their words of defiance, slogans convey grievances and dissent through their brevity and imperative tone. Representing tools of discourse as well as sociocultural practices, they reveal a multiplicity of layers of meaning, which are embedded in a specific context. As explored in the previous chapters, discursive practices

---

<sup>726</sup> This deradicalization process is not unique to Iran. In his analysis of the Arab Springs, Asef Bayat explores the penetration of neoliberalist elements and its effects on politics and activism. See Asef Bayat, *Revolutions without Revolutionaries. Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, (Stanford University Press, 2017), 1-27.

<sup>727</sup> Former labor activist, interview with the author. Tehran, April 30, 2019. Worker, interview with the author, April 15, 2019. Economist and independent scholar, conversation with the author February 2018. See also Mohammad Qarāgozlu, “Dar bāreh-ye gheybat tabaqeh-ye kārgar,” 8 Dey 1388-December 29, 2009, *Alborz*, available here [http://www.ofros.com/maghale/gharegozolo\\_gh-tabaghe.htm](http://www.ofros.com/maghale/gharegozolo_gh-tabaghe.htm). Accessed 17 December, 2018.

function through mechanisms of causality and determination that eventually secure power relations.<sup>728</sup> In this sense, the production of slogans is interwoven with the specific historical and political context in which this takes place. It represents a mode of political practice: it expresses power. Therefore, as will be explored later in this chapter, slogans manifested the Green Movement's ideological foundations, showing the Greens' reinterpretations of and disconnections from the past. In fact, the vocabulary and lexical patterns explain the political strategies behind the construction of the slogans in 2009. Moreover, discourse unveils the processes of inclusion and exclusion at work in context, and can bring to light the breaking points. The latter are here understood as markers of political transformation and also as consequences of dissimilarities in class experiences and reciprocal representations. How does this analysis proceed to investigate the abovementioned dynamics of inclusion and exclusion? As Fairclough's work emphasizes, what is absent from discourse is as significant as what is present. Establishing whether absence exposes either a lacuna or a conscious choice of removal is central to the present reasoning. Thus, the next sections will follow this track, aiming to identify and delve into the multi-nuanced relation between the Green Movement and workers as a distinguishable group. As a tale of presences and absences, the analysis will emphasize tensions and reconciliations, illusions, disappointments and unfulfilled expectations. Therefore, the critical approach to discourse will go beyond language *per se*. Besides merely being assessed linguistically, slogans need to be contextualized in time, as symbols of transformations and discontinuities. In 2009, representing social determinations, they exposed the impulses to either change or maintain certain relations of power. However, a discourse analysis of their slogans cannot fully disclose – for the broader goal of this chapter – the Green Movement's political impact as a counter-hegemonic project. In order to appraise its political significance, as well as its boundaries and limits, this section continues by encouraging the reader to broaden their focus to the hegemonic dynamics that connect discourse to the political weight of counter-

---

<sup>728</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*, (London: Longman, 1995), 132.

hegemonic action. These links, according to Gramsci, should be examined in terms of their continuity and endurance. Whereas an uprising represents the explosive phase of collective action, and expresses itself through slogans, it is only when consciousness stands the test of time that the uprising evolves and consolidates. The *awareness of duration*, following Gramsci's argumentation, gives meaning to an endeavor. It "must be concrete and not abstract." Hence, time and continuous struggle allow actors to avoid what Gramsci labels as "distortions" and "deviations" from a movement's main goal. As Gramsci argued in writing about political parties, remaining crystallized and trapped in "action for the sake of action, struggle for the sake of struggle, and especially shabby, petty individualism, which is a capricious satisfying of momentary impulses" represents a concrete risk.<sup>729</sup> When engaging in activities that challenge what embodies hegemony, the actors involved need to trigger a declared collective action against a common target. Explicit assaults on the status quo, and other forms of peaceful resistance, materialize in what Gramsci refers to as "wars of movement" and "wars of position." Two conditions are necessary and sufficient to realize these "wars:" counterhegemonic consciousness and collective awareness. In this direction, discourse plays a crucial role: it potentiates the process of realization and fosters the cultural hegemony, which surrounds the counterhegemonic project. Nonetheless, in order to intervene in the mechanisms of solidarity-building and unleash the power of consciousness at a collective level, the praxis of constructing a new "common sense" constitutes the fundamental *trait-d'union*.<sup>730</sup> As Gramsci argued, the production of knowledge, ideas, and ideology is carried out by those – i.e., the intellectuals, representing the "organizers of hegemony" – who formulate an alternative formulation of the so-called "common sense."<sup>731</sup> Therefore, thought and action can merge in a cohesive and structured plan of counterhegemony where discourse is the expression of collective consciousness. However, the encounter does not always occur in these terms. Without *awareness of duration*, thus devoid of long-term goals and consciousness of the complexities that mark the development of

---

<sup>729</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 146.

<sup>730</sup> See Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q27 (XI), §1, 2311-2314.

<sup>731</sup> Ibid. Q2, §45, 199 and Q4, §20-21, 441.



political transformations, a counterhegemonic project is unable to bind together an efficacious collectivity. It is exactly on this breaking point that a Foucauldian understanding of the subject versus power enhances the analysis. Beyond the effects of disciplinary power on subjects, Foucault dedicated part of his work to what he calls the “technology of the self.”<sup>732</sup> He studied the mechanisms by which subjects pass from being passive to being active actors. Thus, he made a distinction between: 1) the effects of the technologies of power, determining “the conduct of individuals” and submitting to them to a certain extent; and 2) the operations that involve individuals, through which they express their own subjectivities and desires. What Foucault’s reflections add to the understanding of the Green Movement lies in the practices of self-expression and self-production that will be uncovered through the analysis of the slogans, that are still largely influenced by the dominant narrative.

These theoretical reflections raise a series of questions that will be addressed throughout this chapter. Was the bulk of the Green Movement capable of critically reflecting on its inner disciplinary norms, understood in terms of intellectual and historical legacy? Did it manage to create room for the articulation of a wide collectivity’s demands? What factors contributed to the shaping of the Movement over time and place? Along what lines did collective consciousness develop? Who were the actors involved in the processes of articulating discourses and actions during the months following the widespread street protests? Before delving into these questions, the next section will revisit those days of June 2009, when the streets became a site of confrontation, retracing the Green Movement’s footsteps.

### **From the elections to the streets: chronology of an uprising**

Most of the Iranians involved in this research work referred to the events of summer 2009 as *Entekhābāt-e hashtād-o-hasht* [the 1388 elections]. It was 22 Khordad, according to the Iranian calendar. On that Friday, June 12, a record 85 percent of the 46.2 million eligible Iranians cast their

---

<sup>732</sup> Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the self”, in L.H. Martin, H. Gutman and P.H. Hutton (eds.) *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*, (USA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18-20.

vote in the 10<sup>th</sup> presidential race of the Islamic Republic.<sup>733</sup> They had been called to choose between the incumbent president Ahmadinejad and the 68-year-old former prime minister, Mir Hossein Mousavi, leader of the reformist faction. According to the then Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, participation among Iranians living abroad rose 300 percent.<sup>734</sup> People stood in long lines, particularly in Tehran and in other big cities. The polls remained open until midnight, later than usual. A general euphoria permeated the atmosphere, as people felt that they had a choice again and their vote could make a real difference. The youth that had energized Mousavi's campaign stayed up the whole night waiting, keeping their green ribbons on their wrists. The color of their strips and scarves was a symbol, marking the Seyyed status of Mousavi, as an heir of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. The special nuance of green "was first tested in Mashhad in Mr. Mousavi's rally [in April]" but there was "no specific person as a strategist, and it was the fruit of a team work in Tehran," as Behzad Mortazavi, the head of Mousavi's campaign committee, explained.<sup>735</sup> Most of the students, women, and young people campaigning for Ahmadinejad's rival believed that victory was "in their hands."<sup>736</sup> Basiji paramilitary units and anti-riot troops were already on the streets during the voting process, close to the polling stations, and near the university dorms and the Greens' headquarters. Communications were intermittent throughout the night, as the IRI firstly slowed down and then interrupted the SMS messaging system, while blocking access to Facebook.<sup>737</sup> The preliminary results came late at night, earlier than expected. Suspicion circulated among activists and Mousavi's supporters. The speedy counts raised concerns about irregularity in the procedures. As in the previous elections, votes were counted by hand. This time, official data

---

<sup>733</sup> *Associated Press*, 15 June 2009. Retrieved through webarchive.org. Accessed 15 January 2020.

<sup>734</sup> *CNN* report, June 13, 2009. Retrieved via web.archive.org.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20090615071130/http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/13/iran.election/index.html#cnNSTCText>. Accessed 10 January 2020.

<sup>735</sup> *Financial Times*, June 12, 2009. <https://www.ft.com/content/4aef93a8-56c1-11de-9a1c-00144feabdc0>

<sup>736</sup> Green Movement activist and Mousavi campaigner, Tehran section. Interview with the author, November 1 and 2, 2018.

<sup>737</sup> Green Movement activist, Isfahan section. Interview with the author, Tehran. March 2019. On SMS interruption and Facebook ban see also *New York Times*, June 13, 2009  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14iran.html>

were released the next day, after only 12 or 24 hours.<sup>738</sup> As the Iranian News Agency reported, Ahmadinejad had won his second term with 62.63 percent of the votes, while Mousavi had received 33.75 percent of the vote.<sup>739</sup> While the polling stations were still open, Kamrān Dāneshju, chairman of the electoral commission at the interior ministry, had already announced a wide gap between the candidates, with Ahmadinejad leading the race.<sup>740</sup> The other two competitors, Mehdi Karroubi for the reformists, and Mohsen Rezaï, a former commander of the Revolutionary Guards who was standing for the conservatives, were far behind. Mousavi reacted immediately with a declaration on his website, denouncing “taqalob va dorough”, “fraud and lies.”<sup>741</sup> As dissatisfaction grew and discontent spread, protesters started gathering in small groups in northern Tehran throughout the election night. The gatherings increased almost spontaneously. A long series of acts of violence and punitive arrests commenced. Valiasr Street, Vanak Square and Mirdamad Boulevard turned into sites of confrontation. On the morning of June 13, peaceful yet “noisy” marches began.<sup>742</sup> Thousands took to the streets. Later that Saturday, the police attacked the protestors. Plainclothes security officers, dressed in *lebās-e shaksi*, carried out acts of violence against the demonstrators.<sup>743</sup> Clashes erupted near Mohseni Square in the Iranian capital. Video footage showing protests in Shiraz and Isfahan were shared on the internet, despite the government limitations.<sup>744</sup> While Mousavi was calling for calm and patience, a pressing unanswered question remained. With over approximately 39.2 million paper ballots cast during the elections, had all votes been counted? According to the newspaper *Kalemeh Sabz*, which was close to Mousavi, about 10 million votes

---

<sup>738</sup> Green Movement activist. Interview with the author, April 2019.

<sup>739</sup> *IRNA*, June 13, 2009. <http://www4.irna.ir/En/default.aspx?IdLanguage=3>  
Retrieved through an activist’s personal archive by the author, Tehran November 2019.

<sup>740</sup> *Al Jazeera*, 13 June, 2009. Retrieved via [webarchive.org](http://web.archive.org)  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20090614054941/http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/06/2009612195749149733.html>

<sup>741</sup> Mousavi’s official website, June 13, 2009. Retrieved  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20090529044421/http://www.mirhussein.com/>

<sup>742</sup> *Al Jazeera*, 13 June, 2009.

<sup>743</sup> Green Movement activists, conversation with the author. Tehran, January 2018 and November 2018.

<sup>744</sup> Most of the videos uploaded from Iran on opposition websites and Youtube have been removed or deleted. Some materials can be retrieved via [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org). Two Green Movement activists shared their personal archive with the author.

could not be considered valid or traceable, because the national identification numbers on them were not registered.<sup>745</sup> In the meantime, the doubts of Mousavi supporters were turning into certainty of fraud. Until that moment, the Green Movement had not extended beyond the central-north neighborhoods of Tehran. The *New York Times* reported that “the working-class areas of southern Tehran where Mr. Ahmadinejad is popular were largely quiet.”<sup>746</sup> What did that silence truly mean? It would be inaccurate to overlap the absence of protests in the south of Tehran, and broadly in the poorest or rural areas, with alleged unconditional support for Ahmadinejad, as will be discussed later in this chapter.<sup>747</sup> On June 14, when Ahmadinejad’s supporters staged a rally to counterbalance the mass demonstrations of the day before, the semi-spontaneous impetus that had brought the Greens to the streets in the aftermath of the election turned into a more organized demonstration. It was early evening when a detailed post on Mousavi’s Facebook page informed his followers of what is remembered as the “one-million silent march”<sup>748</sup> scheduled for June 15, all across the country.<sup>749</sup> That night (and over the following evenings), from Iran’s rooftops, the sound of the chant of *Allahu Akbar* [God is the greatest] rose above the noise of the traffic, as it had done at the time of the 1979 Revolution.<sup>750</sup> The morning after, Tehran woke up already at boiling point, with people expected to march from Enqelāb Square to Azādi Square in the afternoon. Since

<sup>745</sup> *Kaleme Sabz*, as reported by the *Associated Press*, 15 June 2009. After the elections, the newspaper came under pressure, ceased publication and was raided by the security forces, as this written by Mousavi in an open letter. See *Iran Data Portal*, 25 June 2009, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/mousavis-response-to-the-attack-on-kalameh-sabz-and-other-limitations-imposed-on-the-iranian-media-25-june-2009>. Accessed May 29, 2020.

<sup>746</sup> *New York Times*, 13 June 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14iran.html>. Accessed March 10, 2018.

<sup>747</sup> For the breakdown of votes for each candidate, see *Iran Data Portal*, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/2009-presidential-election>. Accessed 19 January 2020. See also Eric Hooglund, “Iran’s Rural Vote and Election Fraud,” PBS-Tehran Bureau, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/06/irans-rural-vote-and-election-fraud.html>. Accessed 22 May 2020.

<sup>748</sup> Asef Bayat, *Why did Iran’s Green Wave not feel the Arab Spring*, Sadighi Annual Lectures, (Amsterdam: Institute of Social History, 2012), 33.

<sup>749</sup> Mir Hossein Mousavi, Facebook page, “E’tesāb, Rahpeymāhi va Tajammo‘-e Fardā, Farmān-e Allah Akbar Emshab.” Available here <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mir-hossein-mousavi-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%88%DB%8C/%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%BE%DB%8C%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A7%DA%A9%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A8/96698427605>

<sup>750</sup> *Youtube*, “Poem for the Rooftops of Iran,” June 2009 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAXW-73qy1o&feature=related>. Accessed May 18, 2019.

internet connections were often interrupted and too slow, protesters coordinated through face-to-face meetings and phone calls. More importantly, they knew that photos and videos could capture live the reality that they were experiencing, as it was ripe for sharing. As Kurzman underscored, “virtually every image of the Iranian Green Movement included, somewhere in the frame, a picture of someone taking a picture.”<sup>751</sup> Furthermore, although no one could verify whether the election had been stolen, as Mousavi had claimed, what became crucial was the collectively shared perception that it had. Diverse segments of Iranian society were in uproar. Zahra Rahnava Mousavi, Mousavi’s wife, joined the demonstrations and became a source of inspiration for many women.<sup>752</sup> Between one and three million people are believed to have participated in the march.<sup>753</sup> On June 16, protesters gathered again and walked all the way from Valiasr Square to Parkway crossroad, in north Tehran. People demonstrated in other cities, such as Tabriz, Isfahan, and Shiraz, reclaiming their votes, denouncing the electoral fraud, the arbitrary rule of the system and the state media that had portrayed them as “tools of foreign propaganda” against Iran. As the next section will show, on the fourth day of protests, the slogans and the dynamics of participation evolved. Maintaining peaceful conduct and in almost total silence, on June 18, hundreds of thousands of Iranians marched in central Tehran.<sup>754</sup> Besides students and young people wearing green neckerchiefs and ribbons on their wrists, showing the V-sign for victory, people of all ages joined the demonstrators. It was a day of defiance and mourning, as Mousavi had called on his followers to commemorate the victims of repression during the clashes of the previous days.<sup>755</sup> Protesters flooded into Imam Khomeini Square at 4 pm. Paramilitary Basij militia violence did not stop. The

---

<sup>751</sup> Charles Kurzman, “The Arab Spring: Ideals of the Iranian Green Movement, Methods of the Iranian Revolution,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 44(1), (2012), 162-165.

<sup>752</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *The Green Movement in Iran*, (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 25.

<sup>753</sup> Pouya Alimagham, *Contesting the Iranian Revolution. The Green Uprising*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 84.

<sup>754</sup> Youtube, “Iran June 18 2009 – 28 Khordad 1388.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdaGIIdQB0s> Accessed 16 June 2020.

<sup>755</sup> *New York Times*, 18 June 2009 <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/19/world/middleeast/19iran.html>. Accessed 22 May 2020.

University of Tehran's dormitories came under attack, while intimidation and arrests continued.<sup>756</sup> The next day, during his Friday prayers sermon, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei warned the protesters and dismissed the accusation of electoral fraud. He declared the June 12 presidential elections regular and valid. He called on the opposition leaders to stop the protests, warning that they “would be considered responsible for blood and chaos.”<sup>757</sup> His move dispelled any hope of a political confrontation or compromise. By then, at least 13 people had been reported as killed in the aftermath of the elections. According to ISNA 457 people were arrested. Khamenei's words did not restrain Mousavi's political anger, as – through his website – he continued to accuse the system of lying. Moreover, he urged his supporters to avoid violence.<sup>758</sup> Nonetheless, June 20 changed the course of a critical moment of the struggle, turning the tide of the Green Movement. Videos showing a bleeding woman – Neda Agha-Soltan – being fatally shot by a sniper, during the demonstrations in central Tehran's Kārgar Street, began to circulate on the web.<sup>759</sup> They spread across the world. Neda Agha-Soltan became a tragic symbol of state brutality against protesters. As night-time raids of both Green Movement activists and ordinary protesters continued, fear of repression became mixed with a sense of solidarity against a common source of injustice.<sup>760</sup> The long shadow of violence cast over the Movement sought to demobilize the organized bulk of the protesters, divide the opposition and scare ordinary Iranians who had started to join the unrest. On June 28, before the Guardian Council officially certified the results of the elections, declaring them valid, the government allowed a mourning gathering. It was the commemoration of former chief justice Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti's martyrdom. As Iranian state television reported, “supporters of defeated presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi also marched down Tehran's

---

<sup>756</sup> “Dormitory Raids, video”, 2009/1388. International Digital Ephemera Project, UCLA - University of California Los Angeles. <https://idep.library.ucla.edu/search#!/document/greenmovement:9376> and photo <https://idep.library.ucla.edu/search#!/document/greenmovement:11973>. Accessed 2 January 2020.

<sup>757</sup> Friday Prayer sermon in Tehran, Khamenei's website (Persian) <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=7190>, 29 Khordad 1388/June 19, 2009. Accessed 10 November 2019.

<sup>758</sup> *New York Times*, June 21, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/22/world/middleeast/22iran.html>

<sup>759</sup> “Last Moments of Neda,” June 20, 2009/30 Khordad 1388

<https://idep.library.ucla.edu/search#!/document/greenmovement:8077>, International Digital Ephemera Project, UCLA - University of California Los Angeles. Accessed 20 June 2020.

<sup>760</sup> Worker and student, interview with the author. Tehran, April 2019.

Shariati Street from north to south and silently gathered outside the Qoba Mosque, where the event was being held.”<sup>761</sup> From the end of June and throughout the summer, national anniversaries and public holidays became opportunities for people to flood onto the streets. But gatherings became smaller and more scattered. At every new protest, the paramilitary Basij dispersed the crowd with tear gas, pepper gas, and “beating demonstrators with batons,” as happened on July 9 at the commemoration of the 1999 protests by Iranian students.<sup>762</sup> This was a period of transition. In the words of Malekzadeh, “before there was a Green Movement in Iran, there came the Green Wave.”<sup>763</sup> Hence, protests in the fall erupted more violently (on September 18 for Qods Day, November 4 for the anniversary of the U.S. Embassy takeover, December 7 for the Students’ Day, December 19 for the anniversary of Ayatollah Montazeri’s death, December 27 for the Ashoura).<sup>764</sup> With participants fewer in number yet more heterogeneous in composition, these events marked significant continuities and ruptures in the processes of the Greens’ expressions of defiance. As the next section will explore, their demands developed, targets were sharpened, slogans evolved, repression intensified, and the grip of censorship tightened. Nevertheless, the political stance of the Movement weakened.

### **Evolving slogans, fragile identities**

Tracing the evolution of the Green Movement’s slogans allows us to grasp its particularities and weaknesses. As the theoretical section of this chapter already noted, the sentences on the placards held by demonstrators, along with their rallying-cries, expose the ideological foundations on which the fragile identities that constituted the crowd were based. As tools of discourse, they represented

---

<sup>761</sup> Press TV, 28 June 2009. Retrieved via webarchive.org <https://web.archive.org/web/20090701111805/http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=99288&sectionid=351020101>. Accessed 10 July 2019. See also *Youtube*, Qoba Mosque, 28 June 2009 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcvfXKely30>

<sup>762</sup> *WSJ*, 10 July 2009 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124714734408618155>

<sup>763</sup> Shervin Malekzadeh, “Reliving The Ahmadinejad-Mousavi Debate,” *Lobelog*, 10 June 2019 <https://lobelog.com/reliving-the-ahmadinejad-mousavi-debate/>. Accessed 20 June 2020.

<sup>764</sup> See Abbas Milani, “The Green Movement,” Iran Primer, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/The%20Green%20Movement.pdf>. Accessed 8 December 2019.

sites of confrontation, but also – and more importantly – of interaction with the sociopolitical context. They revealed both particular reinterpretations of the past and representations of the present. Thus, this analysis of the mechanisms of slogans’ causality and determination functions aims to understand *the what*, *the how*, and *the why* of the Greens vis-à-vis workers.

It all started with a question that arose in the immediate aftermath of the elections: *Rāy-e man kojast?* [Where is my vote?]. Focusing on the individual citizen claiming their vote, “my vote,” this request was framed with the first person possessive adjective. It implied the presence of an interlocutor. It was dialogic in nature. The addressee was the Islamic Republic’s electoral system. Yet, the slogans contained both confrontation and interaction. As a rhetorical question, it already included the answer, which seemed to be obvious to those who chanted the slogan. In fact, it was mainly skepticism and suspicion over electoral fraud that gave impetus to the protests after the results were released. The slogan *Rāy-e man kojast?*, as time-specific, immediately developed further over a few hours. It became, *Rāy-e man ku? Doroughgu* [Where is my vote? Liar] with the rhyming word “ku” replacing “kojast.” Interestingly, the implied answer carried an accusation, a definitive condemnation of what was perceived to be an unfair process. Following this line of reasoning, the sketch of the direct recipient of the message took shape. Throughout those hours, the conservatives were hailing the vote. Ahmadinejad celebrated in a nationally broadcast TV speech on Saturday night, declaring: “The people of Iran inspired hope for all nations and created a source of pride in the nation and disappointed all the ill-wishers [...] This election was held at a juncture of history.”<sup>765</sup> The response to Ahmadinejad’s “intolerable hubris”<sup>766</sup> – as seen by Mousavi’s supporters – condensed in the following comment. *Rāy-e sabz man esme siyah to nabud* [My green vote was not your black name,] as appeared in a sign held by a protester in Shiraz.<sup>767</sup> By using

---

<sup>765</sup> CNN report, 13 June 2009. Retrieved via web.archive.org. <https://web.archive.org/web/20090615071130/http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/13/iran.election/index.html#cnSTCText>. Accessed 10 January 2020.

<sup>766</sup> Mousavi supporter and campaigner, conversation with the author. Tehran, November 2018.

<sup>767</sup> Elham Gheytaichi “Symbols, Signs, and Slogans of the Demonstrations in Iran” in Yahya R. Kamalipour eds., *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age. The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 251. The chapter previously appeared online, Elham Gheytaichi, “A Revolutionary



colors, the slogan achieved a transfer of meaning through metaphor: it identified Mousavi's Green supporters and Ahmadinejad's conservative voters.

While independent investigators were being banned from entering the polling stations, protests rose. The opportunity for collective action promptly emerged. The motto of these moments summarizes the different layers of meaning, but also the shifting interpersonal relations. *Rāy-e mā rā dozdidad* [They stole our vote.] Beyond the fact that electoral irregularity was at the core of the confrontation, two other elements are worth highlighting. First, the use of the first person plural “mā,” our” marked a transformation from the individual to the collective, as it evoked a common experience. Second, this was bound to the theft, a term which carries a strongly negative connotation in Iran, of a right. The step from individual to plural agency was taken through the perceived “blatant” appropriation of the elections, embodying a moment of collective hope. Indeed, this was the common thread that galvanized many people, who had not participated in the previous round of voting. Mousavi had envisaged “a leap toward high peaks of aspiration and progress.” Thus, the impetus to demonstrate stemmed from the anger that arose from the perception of stolen hopes. The interaction was with those considered responsible for the electoral “theft.” The fear had already been tangible even before the elections, as Mousavi's supporters created the slogan *Agar taqalob nashe, Musavi avval misheh* [If there is no fraud, Mousavi will come first.]<sup>768</sup> This persisted over the days following the vote, turning into *Agar taqalob besheh, Iran qiyāmat besheh* [If there is fraud, Iran will rise up.]<sup>769</sup> Excitement at the increasing number of people joining the silent march of June 15 and 16 mingled with encouragement to fellow demonstrators to overcome their fear of repression. On the one hand, while recording videos on their cellphones, protesters' voices could be heard, commenting with surprise *Che qadr zyād shodim! Qashange* [There are so many of us!

---

Tradition: Shoars in Iranian Street Politics,” *Words Without Borders*, October issue (2009), <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/a-revolutionary-tradition-shoars-in-iranian-street-politics>

<sup>768</sup> Alimagham, *Contesting the Iranian Revolution. The Green Uprising*, 73.

<sup>769</sup> Annabelle Sreberny, Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 177

Wonderful]<sup>770</sup> On the other hand, on June 15, when crowds of people walked to Azadi Square, a powerful slogan was adopted as a social glue *Natarsim, natarsim! Mā hameh bāhamim* [Don't be afraid, don't be afraid! We are all together.] Processes of solidarity-building were underway. However, these proved to be seeds that would struggle to grow. On that day, some students sought to share the public places with older members of their families. Some workers and informal labor activists participated as well, although individually. The organizational backbone of the protests was in the universities and among those who had already been responsible for the electoral campaign.<sup>771</sup> Although the repressive apparatus had already demonstrated how cruel it could be, the videos from the demonstrations and the participants' memories mostly recorded a sense of relative safety because of the number of people present.<sup>772</sup> The young people energizing the protests managed to drag others, who were watching the crowd, into the march. Other participants remembered receiving help from shopkeepers and local residents when the security forces used tear gas and batons to disperse the protesters. As the days of defiance multiplied, the concept of falsehood became a refrain, and it was codified differently. Besides placards reading *Rāy-e man ku?* [Where is my vote?], other signs appeared, such as *Dorough mamnu* ' [Lies are forbidden.]<sup>773</sup>

---

<sup>770</sup> "Iran, silent protest in Valiasr street," *Youtube*, June 16, 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVBZQCsqdjo>. Accessed September 16, 2019.

<sup>771</sup> This point relies on several conversations with both workers and Green Movement activists and Mousavi supporters.

<sup>772</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>773</sup> "Iran, silent protest, Valiasr street," *Youtube*, June 16, 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVBZQCsqdjo>. Accessed September 16, 2019.



Tehran, June 16, 2009. “Lies are forbidden” (photo from a video)<sup>774</sup>

This accusation showed that the Iranians flooding into the streets were conscious that their discontent went beyond the mere mistrust of the IRI’s system. The slogan was chanted while the crowd was walking close to the national television building. It represented a retort to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)’s coverage of the protests that dismissed the Green Movement, deeming it a group of “losers,” “rioters,” and “thugs.” It also revealed an almost total lack of fear of directly addressing and naming the perceived enemy, as another placard communicated: “Ahmadi is not my president.” Interestingly, this last sign was in English, as the Greens were aware that the world was observing them. They were walking on the brink, staging a public contestation, daringly interacting with Ahmadinejad. During a rally in Tehran’s Vali Asr Square on Sunday 14, Ahmadinejad labeled the disappointed protesters as *khas o khāshāk* [dirt and dust.] Talking to his supporters, he stated: “The nation’s huge river leaves no room for the expression of dirt and dust.” Hence, once again, Mousavi’s supporters expressed their dissent using slogans dialogically. As a direct response to the proclaimed president, they took a new catchphrase to the streets *Khas o khāshāk to-I* [You are dirt and dust.]<sup>775</sup> A huge banner appeared in the first

<sup>774</sup> Ibid.

<sup>775</sup> Dirt and dust, footage from the Green Movement, 1388-2009. UCLA Library.

<https://idep.library.ucla.edu/search#!/document/greenmovement:10566>. Accessed 20 June 2020.

See also *The Guardian*, June 18, 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/18/ahmadinejad-iran-insults-dirt-dust>. Accessed November 2, 2018.

week of protests: “The Epic of dirt and dust.” The expression became iconic, as ironic jokes pervaded the comments sections of news posts on the web. The newspaper *E'temād* published pictures of the demonstrators carrying the banner on its front page.



Tehran June 18, 2009. “Epic of dirt and dust” (photo from a video - UCLA archive)<sup>776</sup>

Therefore, in the first week after the results of the elections were released, slogans mostly conveyed instant reactions to the events and to Ahmadinejad accusing the protestors of serving “foreign propaganda,” and spreading “lies” and “trash,” as he repeatedly declared on national television. Expressing dissatisfaction with the results, they opposed the incumbent president’s victory, targeting Ahmadinejad as the main enemy, labeling him a liar, who was deemed responsible for the perpetrated fraud. As the days of defiance accumulated and the debate became bitter, demonstrators’ placards became more daring, especially in mocking Ahmadinejad, as the following sentence shows *Ahmadi gusaleh, bazam migi footballeh?* [Ahmadi, calf, do you still think this is a soccer game?]<sup>777</sup> As explored above, the slogans sought to reclaim the Greens’ votes, firstly as individual citizens, then collectively. Nevertheless, this process of Othering appeared incomplete. The different identities that made up the crowd were not immediately distinguishable. Beyond the

<sup>776</sup> Ibid.

<sup>777</sup> Gheytnchi “Symbols, Signs, and Slogans of the Demonstrations in Iran” in Yahya R. Kamalipour eds., *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age. The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran*, 255.

first person pronouns (*man* and *mā*), which referred to Mousavi's supporters, the slogans did not deal with more specific identities, failing to tighten the focus on the so far indistinct – although potentially polyphonic – social body that was revolting. As a result, what might have had the potential to be heterogenous and grow, remained stuck in its first articulation.

While addressing the urgent need for contestation, they lacked political articulation both in the short and the long term. The rallying-cry *Marg bar diktator, che shah bāsheh che doktor*, [Down with the dictator, either the shah or the doctor [Ahmadinejad]], constituted a timid attempt to channel the popular actions towards more definite goals.<sup>778</sup> By pointing the finger at Ahmadinejad, it attempted to broaden the political focus. Evoking the time of the 1979 Revolution – when Iranians from different classes shared their struggle on the streets against the Shah Pahlavi's rule and managed to overthrow the monarchy – the abovementioned slogan contested the authoritarian rule. Yet, it did not develop over the days that followed, exposing the lack of political articulation and direction, beyond the mere rejection of a rule framed as a dictatorship. In contesting the Islamic Republic system, the slogans drew on the past, in particular the 1979 Revolution. As the *Allahu Akbar* chants from the rooftops indicate, this process was not meant to completely emulate and reproduce the revolutionary experience. These chants in 2009 can be understood not as a full appropriation, but more as a mechanism to redefine a past practice, by giving it new meanings. The conservatives minimized the impact of the *Allahu Akbar* chants in 2009 as the Shah's prime minister, General Gholam Reza Azhari, had done in 1978-79, when he minimized the extent of the phenomenon attributing it to cassette recordings.<sup>779</sup> Therefore, the Greens transformed the revolutionary cry, *Azhari gusāleh, bazam migi navāreh? Navār ke pā nadāreh!* [Azhari, calf,<sup>780</sup> do you still say that it is a tape? The tape does not have feet!] into *Ahmadi, gusāleh, bazam migi footballeh?* [Ahmadinejad, calf, do you still say it is football?], mocking Ahmadinejad's attempts to minimize

<sup>778</sup> BBC, 14 June 2009 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8099115.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8099115.stm) Accessed 15 June 2020.

<sup>779</sup> See Negar Mottahedeh, *#iranelection Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 26.

<sup>780</sup> Also meaning "idiot" in Persian.

the demonstrations.<sup>781</sup> Furthermore, the Movement transformed the notorious motto *Esteqlāl, āzādi, jomhuri-ye eslāmi* [Independence, freedom, Islamic Republic,] into *Esteqlāl, āzādi, jomhuri Irani* [Independence, freedom, Iranian Republic.] Nevertheless, it would be misleading to argue that the Movement was secular in character. Although it tended to push towards civil rights and most of Mousavi's campaigners led a secularized life, there was no rejection of religion *tout-court* in the slogans. *Ya Hussein* [Oh Hussein] was chanted from the beginning, combining Mousavi's figure with the call for piety of Imam Hussein of the Shia tradition. Echoes of the concept of martyrdom recurred on June 18 when the crowd gathered to mourn those killed during the previous days' demonstrations. According to *Reuters*, one placard read: "Our martyred brothers, we will take back your votes," alongside others asking: "Why did you kill our brothers?"<sup>782</sup> Rallying-cries, such as *Ya Hussein* and *Salam bar Beheshti, dorud bar Mousavi* [Peace to Beheshti, long live Mousavi] were recorded on June 28 at the gathering at the Qoba Mosque.<sup>783</sup> Thus, the movement did not challenge the status quo, at least not to the extent it wished to overthrow the regime, following the example of the 1979 Revolution. De facto, the Green revolt politically identified with Mousavi. He was a Khomeinist, a revolutionary, a former Prime Minister. Thus, he was the embodiment of a man of the system, desiring to reform it from within.

Furthermore, the rallying-cries followed the news, and responded to the evolving events, striking back at leaders. Thus, they led the debate. Nonetheless, in this first explosive phase of the Green Movement they neither proposed an ideological alternative to the Iranian Revolution,<sup>784</sup> nor enlarged the spectrum of their demands to include structural themes. In fact, social justice, as well as the broader topic of political rights, was absent from the debate. Conversely, the Greens mostly

<sup>781</sup> Gheytnachi "Symbols, Signs, and Slogans of the Demonstrations in Iran" in Yahya R. Kamalipour eds., *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age. The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran*, 255.

<sup>782</sup> *Reuters*, 18 June 2009. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election-rally/big-crowd-masses-for-mourning-rally-in-tehran-idUSTRE55H3DF20090618>

<sup>783</sup> *Press TV*, 28 June 2009. Retrieved via webarchive.org

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090701111805/http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=99288&sectionid=351020101>. Accessed 10 July 2019. See also *Youtube*, Qoba Mosque, 28 June 2009

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcvfXKe1y30>

<sup>784</sup> See Alimagham, *Contesting the Iranian Revolution. The Green Uprising*, 277.

circumscribed their broader goal to freedom, as these examples show: *Azādi, azādi* [Freedom, freedom]; *Azādi, Mousavi* [Freedom and Mousavi.]

After the summer of 2009, the slogans shifted and there was an attempt to reorganize the Movement that had met with harsh repression and was suffering from a lack of effective political support.

During the fall, the confrontation remained alive. The grassroots sought to renegotiate their spaces of freedom, operating in parallel with reformist politicians, so starting from below.<sup>785</sup> The more active, cohesive, and collectively organized were students from Tehran University and Sharif University. Whereas protests became rarer and more diluted over time, three main trajectories of change are worth noting. First, slogans became more accurate and fearless. Second, women from different generations participated more actively. As several videos show, they challenged the violence of young Basij militia men against the protesters. Third, as activists were refining their strategies, they tried to reach a new consciousness of street politics. In terms of rallying-cries, they targeted the Supreme Leader, calling Khamenei a “murderer.” The slogan read: *Khamenei qāteleh, Velāyatesh bi e ‘tebāreh* [Khamenei is a murderer, his guardianship is invalid.]<sup>786</sup> As some protestors remember, it felt like “crossing a dangerous red line.”<sup>787</sup> Furthermore, in November, for the first time a slogan called for the separation of religion from politics, building on a nationalist sentiment based on race: *Nejād-e mā aryast, din az syāsat joddast* [Our race is Aryan, religion is separate from politics.] Another one contested Iranian foreign policy choices and the IRI’s expenses to support allies abroad: *Na Gazā, na Lobnān, jānam fadāy-e Irān* [Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life for Iran.] Activists remember that the dark and fear-filled atmosphere was palpable. Beatings and arrests were described as being perpetrated with “brutal violence, as they were animals.”<sup>788</sup>

Apprehension, mixed with despair and dismay for many, led the enduring group of students still willing to publicly protest to adjust their strategies. They eventually managed to: 1) move most of

<sup>785</sup> Green Movement activist, conversation with the author. January 2018.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid. See also *BBC*, eyewitness, December 7, 2009. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking\\_point/8375866.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/8375866.stm)

<sup>787</sup> Green Movement activist, conversation with the author. January 2018.

<sup>788</sup> Ibid.

their online activities to offline meetings; 2) go out in groups, aiming to better communicate any unfortunate event of someone's arrest; 3) in some (rarer) cases, even carry their own sticks for protection against violence. However, they did not succeed in broadening the spectrum of the unrest and guiding it towards a sharper politicization. Although most of the students and Mousavi's campaigners defined themselves as well aware of Iran's huge social gap and class differences, social justice was not among their immediate priorities. Freedom came first, as it was considered "more important."<sup>789</sup> This did not mean that they were not conscious of their precarity, or that they all came from the rich neighborhoods of north Tehran. Most of those who suffered violence and the harshest repression lived in the male dorms at Tehran University, where living conditions were very basic, housing students from other cities or villages who could not afford to live alone. Furthermore, they felt a generational gap with those intellectuals who were close to the labor activists, criticizing them for being too liberal. found themselves the target of resentment, among those who labeled them as simply "privileged and spoilt."<sup>790</sup>

As this chapter does not aim to merely re-create the facts and establish whether labor and class mattered for the Greens, the next section will navigate how the abovementioned perceptions and discourses shaped the potential cross-class alliances that were oriented towards social justice.

### **Workers, social justice and the Greens**

Chronicles of the one-million march towards Azadi Square recorded a vast cross-section of Iranian society walking through Tehran's streets on June 15, 2009. "For this was not just the trendy, young, sun-glassed ladies of north Tehran. The poor were here, too, the street workers and middle-aged ladies in full chador. A very few held babies on their shoulders or children by the arm, talking to them from time to time, trying to explain the significance of this day to a mind that would not remember it in the years to come that they were here on this day of days," wrote the journalist

---

<sup>789</sup> Ibid. and 1 November 2018; 28 December 2018; 29 April 2019.

<sup>790</sup> Ibid. 5 November 2018.



Robert Fisk who witnessed the demonstration.<sup>791</sup> On that day, pathways for solidarity-building that were at an embryonic stage spontaneously took shape. In particular, this section investigates how political participation developed, what obstacles and misconceptions hindered it, and through what lens labor activists and workers viewed the Green Movement. As confirmed by most of the Green activists and Mousavi campaigners consulted during the research conducted in Tehran for this dissertation, the community that was committed to the slogan-making consisted of students and the urban middle-class intellectuals. They effectively coordinated the calls to action through meetings, flyers, Facebook posts or emails, where possible.<sup>792</sup> These organizational practices did not suddenly emerge. They blossomed from the seeds of student activism and intellectual fervor, which went back to the 1999 students' protests.<sup>793</sup> They grew through informal networks throughout early 2000, even though during Ahmadinejad's first term dissent in universities was tracked through the so-called *Dāneshjuyān-e Setārehdār*, the "asterisked students," who were reported as potential threats to national security.<sup>794</sup> Beyond the explosive moment of the Movement, erupting with a shared sense of dissatisfaction at the electoral "fraud," were there any opportunities for cross-class alliances, generated by the common denominator of labor precarity processes? In order to address this question, some elements need clarification. In most of the media reports in English, and in some author's interviews with Green Movement activists, the south of Tehran, its suburbs (such as Eslāmshahr or Robāt Karim), the countryside, and Iran's peripheral regions were often assimilated into poor areas, all supporting Ahmadinejad.<sup>795</sup> This description coincided with the false dichotomy

---

<sup>791</sup> *The Independent*, 16 June 2009 <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-irans-day-of-destiny-1706010.html>. Accessed 29 May 2019.

<sup>792</sup> The internet was instrumental in activists reaching a broader audience, and crucial when they managed to overcome the ban. Nevertheless, the role of social media should not be exaggerated, as it was mainly used to organize off-line activities.

<sup>793</sup> See Paola Rivetti and Francesco Cavatorta, "Iranian student activism between authoritarianism and democratization: patterns of conflict and cooperation between the Office for the Strengthening of Unity and the regime," *Democratization*, Vol.21(2), 2014, 289-310.

<sup>794</sup> Navid Pourmokhtari, "Understanding Iran's Green Movement as Movement of Movements," *Sociology of Islam*, Vol.2 (2014): 144-177.

<sup>795</sup> *New York Times*, 13 June 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14iran.html>. Accessed 10 March 2018; *The Observer-The Guardian*, 14 June 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/14/iran-tehran-election-results-riots>; see also the point raised against these clichés by Eric Hooglund in "Iran's Rural Vote and Election Fraud," PBS- Tehran Bureau, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/06/irans-rural-vote-and->

of the “ignorant workers” (who had supposedly voted for the incumbent president)<sup>796</sup> versus the educated and rich intellectuals who endorsed Mousavi. According to this line of argument, first, it would be assumed that the sympathies of the poor and the workers were somehow naturally oriented towards the conservatives. Second, they would be devoid of the ability to adopt a critical attitude toward politics. Third, the absence of labor or social justice grievances in the Green Movement could be easily attributed simply to a question of income. Research conducted by the author in Iran and academic evidence proves the fallacy of these presumptions, which attribute Mousavi’s supporters and the whole bloc of protesters to a narrow portion of Iranian society. Conversely, the situation in 2009 was more complex. Therefore, other discursive and socio-structural aspects should be considered in the analysis, such as education mixed with neoliberal narratives, workers’ bargaining power, and political representation, as examined in chapters 6 and 7.<sup>797</sup> Furthermore, as the analysis of the support for each candidate showed, poorer areas and regions across the country did not choose Ahmadinejad *en bloc* on account of his populist campaign focused on reducing poverty and returning to the true value of the revolution for the downtrodden.<sup>798</sup> The equation between being poor or on low income and being conservative fails to explain why students living in dormitories, who came from small villages and modest family backgrounds, shared the same demonstrations with workers and laborers, especially after June 15. The assertion that workers – because of their lack of education – not only supported Ahmadinejad, but were also distant from the Green Movement, needs further explanation. First, it would be false to say that workers did not participate, albeit episodically. Beyond the evidence provided in the previous sections, the profiles of those arrested during the crackdown of June 2009 proves the

---

election-fraud.html. Accessed 22 May 2020. For a complete summary of the election results, see *Iran Data Portal*, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/2009-presidential-election>.

<sup>796</sup> See Mohammad Qarāgozlu, “Dar bāreh-ye gheybat-e tabaqeh-ye kārgar,” 8 Dey 1388-December 29, 2009, *Alborz*, available here [http://www.ofros.com/maghale/gharegozolo\\_gh-tabaghe.htm](http://www.ofros.com/maghale/gharegozolo_gh-tabaghe.htm). Accessed December 17, 2018.

<sup>797</sup> Kevan Harris in *A Social Revolution. Politics and Welfare State in Iran*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 209, argues that educated professional-technical workers of the public sector represented a substantial segment of the demonstrators, and they can be classified as “a new middle class.”

<sup>798</sup> See *Iran Data Portal*, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/2009-presidential-election>.

opposite.<sup>799</sup> Hence, concentrating on the motivations behind workers' absence as a collectivity with distinguishable slogans, instead of their presence *per se*, facilitates the reasoning. Consequently, it is central to consider whether opportunities to broaden the Movement existed, as contingencies useful to giving rise to a larger coalition between different groups and addressing a diverse spectrum of grievances.

Dissatisfaction at the electoral fraud, as well as discontent arising from the repression of spaces of expression and state surveillance policies during Ahmadinejad's first term, found a larger consensus among heterogeneous segments of the Iranian population. Nevertheless, the Green Movement exposed a deep rift within the potential bloc of forces. As chapter 5 demonstrated, labor activism had been weakened over the years, both politically – due to the purge of the Left – and practically, because of the security apparatus' repressive response to independently organized workers' protests. Thus, it did not have the chance to establish ties with other classes or groups, as it remained mostly confined to scattered unrest aimed at specific economic demands. Whereas Leftist intellectuals could have constituted a bridge in this regard, the IRI crackdown – especially during Ahmadinejad's first term – silenced any attempts involving journalists, independent syndicalists, and scholars. This was the case even before the 2009 presidential election and represents one of the reasons why labor issues were not represented in the uprising.<sup>800</sup> In particular, about 150 labor activists and supporters were arrested following a May Day demonstration in Tehran in 2009, a month before the Green Movement's unrest.<sup>801</sup> Furthermore, political antagonism and mutual misrepresentations hindered the potential for cross-class alliances and the creation of a broader coalition. On the one hand, labor activists who defined themselves as belonging to the radical Left perceived the Green Movement's younger activists as “too liberal,” seeking only freedoms.<sup>802</sup>

---

<sup>799</sup> Labor activist, interview with the author. Tehran, 29 April 2019.

<sup>800</sup> Ibid.

<sup>801</sup> Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran. Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016), 166.

<sup>802</sup> Labor activist, interview with the author. Tehran, 29 April 2019. Journalist and human rights activist, interview with the author. Tehran, April 23, 2019. See also Qarāgozlu, “Dar bāreh-ye gheybat tabaqeh-ye kārgar,” 8 Dey 1388-29 December 2009, *Alborz*, available here [http://www.ofros.com/maghale/gharegozolo\\_gh-tabaghe.htm](http://www.ofros.com/maghale/gharegozolo_gh-tabaghe.htm). Accessed 17 December 2018.

Indeed, from the perspective of some workers, it was “rich kids,” ignoring the contours of class differences and social justice<sup>803</sup> who formed the backbone of those involved in Mousavi’s campaign. Thus, political antagonism, accentuated by a generational gap and dissimilar experiences, emphasized the disconnections, precluding further encounters that would lead to working towards a common ground. Individual competition and the glamorization of success, spread through neoliberal narratives throughout the 1990s, widened the rift between the two generations. On the one hand, there were those who had participated in the 1979 Revolution. On the other hand were those belonging to the generation of the 1360s, that is children of the Iran-Iraq war era. The presidential campaign, and its aftermath, did not create the conditions to benefit the economically impoverished among both groups.<sup>804</sup> In fact, economic impoverishment and, more importantly, *precarization* processes were not at the center of the debate, despite the fact that both issues would have united generations and classes. Beyond mutual perceptions and actual class differences, the 1990s paved the way for narrowing the social gap between the new middle class and workers.<sup>805</sup> Through temporary contracts, the erosion of job security and rising unemployment, processes of *precarization* became intertwined with a progressive *proletarianization*. These latter affected *in toto* the active bulk of the Green Movement activists. How? Precarity had given birth to a new figure of the worker: not only the man or woman associated with the imagery of the factory, but also the educated professional or underemployed technician struggling to eke out a living, leave their family home in south Tehran or manage to marry.<sup>806</sup> Another trend in this direction is also worth mentioning: although impoverished, this figure often aspired to the status and lifestyle of the middle-class to escape stigmatization.<sup>807</sup> Nonetheless, the Movement did not evolve towards the

---

<sup>803</sup> Worker, interview with the author. Tehran, 2 June 2019. Worker and student, interview with the author, Tehran, April 2019. Scholar, conversation with the author, Tehran, March 2019.

<sup>804</sup> Mohammad Maljoo, “Hamrāhi Jonbesh-e Sabz va Kārgarān. Projeh nimeh tamām,” Green Movement and Workers’ Sodality: An Unfinished Project.” *Alborz* <http://www.alborznet.ir/Fa/ViewDetail.aspx?T=2&ID=237>, retrieved. Available here [http://www.ofros.com/entexabat1/maljo\\_hamrahi.pdf](http://www.ofros.com/entexabat1/maljo_hamrahi.pdf)

<sup>805</sup> See Nomani and Behdad “The Rise and Fall of Iranian Classes in the Post-Revolutionary Decades,” 377-396.

<sup>806</sup> Unemployed, film maker, former worker and Green Movement participant. Interview with the author. Tehran, 12 August 2017; 10 January 2018 and 9 March 2018.

<sup>807</sup> Manata Hashemi, “Tarnished work: dignity and labour in Iran,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2018.1552116, 1-16.

engulfment of social justice grievances, as it remained stuck in its post-civil society discourse based on political and human rights. The breaking point was unveiled. This is not to say that civil society and social justice narratives are mutually exclusive or that the debate among Leftist labor activists is to be fully dismissed.<sup>808</sup> However, as chapters 4 and 7 explored, during the Khatami era, workers and the economically impoverished were excluded from the mainstream discourse. Moreover, deregulation was supported by both reformists and conservatives and they benefitted from the increasingly precarious situation of workers.<sup>809</sup> With the Leftists being marginalized, social justice almost disappeared from the political debate, and neoliberal policies did not face strong opposition,<sup>810</sup> except from the Workers' House with all its limitations. While the state apparatus and the Khāneh-ye Kārgar were impeding independent trade unionism, the opening of spaces for expanded – albeit limited – critique produced a cultural frenzy. This atmosphere did not last long enough to generate cross-class alliances, beyond individual-centered and liberal demands. As a result, it increased the distances between social groups.<sup>811</sup> In a Gramscian understanding, civil society and the synergies between intellectuals and workers had the potential to forge new trajectories of solidarity. Nonetheless, the Green Movement did not succeed in shaping a project with long-term vision and goals. Overlooking social justice, neglecting the precarious status of a vast swathe of its supporters, failing to update its slogans beyond contesting the election results, and the system, it lacked what Gramsci called *awareness of duration*. A missed opportunity materialized in spring 2010 when demonstrations on May Day were held at Tehran University. Students chanted: *Azādi, E' dālat, in ast Sho'ar-e Mellat* [Freedom, Justice, this is the slogan of the

<sup>808</sup> See “Kārgarān va Jām'eh Madani. Goftogu ba Hossein Akbari, Hossein Nuriniya, Mohammad Maljoo” Workers and Civil Society. Roundtable with Hossein Akbari, Hossein Nuriniya, Mohammad Maljoo,” *Irān Fardā*, Ordibehesht-Khordād 1397 (May-June 2018), 62-71.

<sup>809</sup> Paola Rivetti, *Political Participation from Khatami to the Green Movement*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 40.

<sup>810</sup> See Peyman Vahabzadeh, “Social Justice and Democracy in Iran: in Search of the Missing Link,” in Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Iran's Struggle for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 289-306.

<sup>811</sup> See also worker and labor activist, interview with the author. Tehran, 30 April 2019.

nation.]<sup>812</sup> It was a step in the direction towards radicalizing the movement, but the leadership and the reformists did not show any willingness to start pursuing this path.<sup>813</sup>

The intellectual debate discussed different options to overcome the obstacle of a Movement that, from workers' perspectives, was focused on factional rivalry. A strike that ultimately never happened emerged as an option.<sup>814</sup> As the experience of 1979 had taught, when public employees and workers had joined students and intellectuals on the streets to economically paralyze the Shah's regime, a collective strike could have turned the tide for the Green Movement pressing the Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, as this chapter has shown, there were not the political and safety conditions for this to happen. The strong current of Leftist activism connected to labor did not see any concrete goal in bonding with the Green Movement. The Greens were irreparably accused of representing bourgeois interests, as summarized in the following words: "The working class welcomes the creation of open political space. Without a doubt, in an open political space, there is more opportunity for labor activists and workers to organize. But the working class is not going to sacrifice in alliance with parts of the bourgeoisie to open up the political space of society. A change in government will not create a political open space for the working class. Because at the first opportunity, the same labor activists will be eliminated from the political relations of the society."<sup>815</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Green Movement constituted a potential opportunity for street politics in post-revolutionary Iran. Rich in protest tactics, but poor in long term strategies, it exposed the fragilities and

---

<sup>812</sup> Labor Day Protest at University of Tehran, May 1, 2010. UCLA, International Digital Ephemera Project, <https://idep.library.ucla.edu/search#!/document/greenmovement:7886>

<sup>813</sup> Arash Reisinezhad, "The Iranian Green Movement: Fragmented Collective Action and Fragile Collective Identity," *Iranian Studies*, 48:2 (2015), 193-222.

<sup>814</sup> See Saeed Rahnema interviewed by Ian Morrison on the Green Movement, "Not by street demonstration alone," *PBS*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/03/not-by-street-demonstrations-alone.html>, March 2010. See also Mohammad Maljoo, "The Green Movement Awaits an Invisible Hand," *Middle East Report Online*, June 26, 2010 <https://merip.org/2010/06/the-green-movement-awaits-an-invisible-hand/>.

<sup>815</sup> Tirozh Azād, "Ettehād-e Tabaqeh-ye Kārgar bā Jonbesh-e Sabz bā Kodām Hadaf? Pasokhi be Aqā-ye Māljo," [http://www.ofros.com/maghale/azad\\_maljo.htm](http://www.ofros.com/maghale/azad_maljo.htm) 25 Abān 1391, 15 November 2012.

weaknesses of cross-class alliances under the Islamic Republic. This chapter has navigated the genesis of the Movement's protests and its development along three trajectories. First, it traced the evolution of the demonstrations chronologically. Second, it tracked the development of the slogans. Third, it assessed the relationship between the Green activists and workers. Whereas the protests started almost spontaneously, triggered by the rage of a perceived electoral fraud, they evolved and became gradually more structured. They began with a question, focusing on the individual citizen claiming their vote in the immediate aftermath of the elections: *Rāy-e man kojast?* [Where is my vote?] Dialogical in their nature, most of the Green Movement slogans developed and directly addressed the political apparatus, in particular Ahmadinejad. Moreover, it would be misleading to label the Movement as fully secular in character. Although it tended to push towards civil rights and most of Mousavi's campaigners lived a secular life, there was no rejection of religion *tout-court* in the slogans. Religion was more a tool to convey the continuities and discontinuities with the past, such as in the *Allahu Akbar* chants that were appropriated from the 1979 Revolution, but were absorbed and characterized by the new context.

As rallying-cries shifted, they kept their subject-centered focus, calling for freedom and civil rights. Economic or social justice-related grievances were kept out of the streets' demands. This represented the main limiting factor of the protests, beyond repression. While addressing the urgency to contest, they lacked political articulation, particularly in the long-term. Beyond severe repression, the Movement exposed the fragile results of years of repression, but also top-down narratives of individualism and neoliberal behaviors permeating the social body. These factors contributed to enlarging the youth's distance from politics and fueled a certain political antagonism and mutual misrepresentation between older and new generations of the weakened Left. They also blocked, beyond class belonging, the flux of ideas and hindered the chances of cross-class alliances. As the chapter explained, labor activists with Leftist ideas labeled the Green Movement's younger activists as "too liberal rich kids."

Although the Movement brought to light the transformative capacity of a vast swathe of Iranian society, it failed to pursue an alternative path where workers could have walked alongside students and the new middle-class members. Despite the fact that it demonstrated its ability to conceive and re-invent dissent, it was not able to generate new forms of politics. However, by remaining trapped in the confrontation modality of its early days, it did not manage to find trajectories of collective resistance. The breaking point was social justice. It missed the opportunity to draw the economic and social vulnerability of the people who participated in the demonstrations individually into a common channel: labor precarity. Workers' collective actions could have potentially empowered the Movement and impacted on its fate.

The Green Movement was the movement of the movements with all its diverse souls, significantly exposing the social and political gaps of the IRI. Indeed, as each group had already fought separately over the years, it failed the test of the state apparatus' "divide and rule" tactics. It fell victim to it. It did not bring justice to the fragile identities within it, all, once again *precarized* and divided.



## CONCLUSION

Some journeys may have two beginnings, depending on what one considers the point of departure and what the end point. One can merely follow the chronology of events or, instead, go backwards. The journey undertaken by this dissertation started conceptually with a series of questions that required movement in both directions. It has traveled through time, navigating the encounters, confrontations and breakdowns that occurred within and beyond the Iranian labor realm between the 1979 Revolution and the 2009 Green Movement. On the one hand, this study has analyzed the evolution of discourses in the context of hegemonic relations by following a chronological timeline. On the other hand, the impetus to begin its exploration stemmed from the absence of workers as an organized group in 2009. In this sense, this work has tracked back to the origin of particular dynamics and power relations that manifested in the Green Movement. It has attempted to comprehend how certain transformations that unfolded in the streets in 2009 emerged historically. Furthermore, it has sought to understand whether the agency of labor represented a driver for change through the events of 1979 and 2009.

This dissertation represents the first scholarly attempt to tackle political changes in the Iranian labor realm from 1979 to 2009 through the lens of discursive shifts and transformations in hegemonic relations. It demonstrates that – beyond repression – precarization processes, both structurally and discursively, prevented workers from being the linchpin of grassroots politics in post-revolutionary Iran. The absence of workers as a collective force in the 2009 events contrasting with their crucial presence as a collective force in 1978-1979 is best understood in a context of legal, economic and social marginalization. This context mirrored in the IRI's main discourse, hindering the development of solidarity building mechanisms and cross-class alliances, but did not alter the way workers' agency was expressed.

This work constitutes a timely contribution to the field of Iranian Studies, as it expands the study of labor in Iran by including workers' words and words on workers, beyond mere economic factors.

Future authors in the fields of Middle Eastern Studies and Labor Studies might profit from this research for two main reasons. First, this work has combined both a perspective from above and an approach from below to contribute to the identification of the multiple constructions of labor and workers over time. Second, it explores the processes of *precarization* beyond mere economic or legal dimensions, by following the discursive shifts and by connecting them to the structural factors that led to the weakening of grassroots politics in Iran through deradicalization.

The Gramscian conception of hegemonic relations, with its balance between coercion and consent, have been key to addressing the above-mentioned issues. Indeed, relations of power and domination shaped the processes through which workers expressed their role in terms of collective thinking and solidarity-building. Language, by conveying shared values and meanings, was instrumental both for the dominant narratives spread by the IRI and for the discourses taking shape from below. Although – as Gramsci argued – hegemony does not solely belong to the ruling apparatus, this dissertation has shown that the IRI did not consolidate itself in the labor realm purely through coercion. This work has demonstrated how discourses and structural factors intertwined. In fact, top-down strategies concerning labor and workers' bottom-up responses both mirrored and contrasted with each other in post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>816</sup>

Most academic research concentrates only on constraints and repression and depicts the IRI as an omnipotent entity. However, this approach erases people's agency. As this study showed throughout its chapters using a bottom-up perspectives (chapters 3, 5 and 8), in the case of workers two crucial elements emerge. 1) Repression does not represent the only factor that may silence or block acts of resistance. 2) Workers may lack formal connections and long-term goals. They are discouraged and alienated by several sources of power within society (family, friends) and public discourse. This reflection is not meant to minimize the role of the IRI's control and repression of forms of activism that might constitute a threat to its stability. This work tried to push the academic

---

<sup>816</sup> See Morgana, "Precarious Workers and Neoliberal Narratives in Post-revolutionary Iran," *Middle East Institute*.

critique and debate forward, by giving a broader picture of Iran's complex – though not exceptional – reality. Indeed, looking at the country through a historical lens helps avoid the risk (and fallacies) of trapping facts inside the cage of the present, while – at the same time – starting from a present-day issue (or the most recent one).

When, how and why did the discursive shifts and transformations in hegemonic relations occur? The dynamics of language and discourse went hand in hand with political confrontations, and generated both intended and unintended consequences. Here it is worth retracing the crucial stages of these shifts. As chapters 2 and 3 showed, the charismatic figure of Ayatollah Khomeini managed to cast workers under his umbrella not through any religious path, but mainly due to his political stance as a leader. During the making of the 1979 revolution, oil workers in particular, by following Khomeini, made a political and strategic move. At that time a discursive war was going on within and beyond the factories, involving the crucial legacy of the Left for the labor movement. Workers not only paralyzed the economy, but contributed to advancing political demands against the monarchy. Their consciousness as a cohesive group gradually matured along with their strikes, throughout the months between the end of 1978 and the Revolution day. When they joined the massive demonstrations, workers shared slogans and goals with the other groups on the streets. They did not merely walk alongside. They were able to build weak – yet important – cross-class alliances that were the fruits of family connections, political contacts established with Leftist groups and intermittent links with the student movement.

Once the Islamic Republic was established, another struggle for hegemony began, as the discursive war had not stopped. Beyond coercion, the discursive battle for consent in the labor realm was fought over social justice. While Khomeini was still alive, the IRI engulfed the class language championed by the Left by absorbing it into the Islamist discourse of the *mostaz'afin*. Thus, it sanitized the anti-capitalist struggle in the factories and defused any potential revolt against the management. This discursive strategy accompanied a massive purge of Leftists and the dismantling of the secular workers' councils, which were replaced by an Islamic counterpart. Concurrently, the

Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) had already started, looming over the lives of Iranians. It brought death, destruction, and massive economic disruption. During the 1980s these factors inevitably impacted the labor realm, as discourses over workers adapted. The narratives of workers as “God slaves” and “martyrs” of the cause spread along with the rhetoric of “labor as a religious duty.” Boosting production was presented as a structural need, and it was exploited by the ruling apparatus, as it became a tool of political intervention. By being institutionalized in the discourse of the post-war era – the so-called *sāzandegi* (reconstruction) – *produce and consume* became a mantra. Spreading from the top, it aimed to reach the new generation. It eventually circulated more generally in the social body.

Since the 1990s, two main factors, beyond actual repression, contributed to narrowing workers’ political space: first, neoliberal narratives and policies; and second, specific legal measures.<sup>817</sup> Both of them involved the economic and political structure, but – as chapters 6 and 7 demonstrated – became interwoven with discourses that addressed the new middle classes, rather than embraced workers and the needs of the labor realm. While the economy needed investment, capital and productivity, top-down discourses strengthened citizens’ individual participation, drifting away from the rhetoric of collectivity and dismissing social justice as a core element of the IRI’s discourse. Within this context, the implementation of the newly approved Labor Law soon carried the seeds of labor flexibilization and *precarization*. Short-term contracts narrowed wage earners’ space for labor protection, excluding workers *de facto* from severance benefits, paid leave, etc. More broadly, these measures made it almost impossible for workers to share the same workplace, and thus to develop common grievances. Hence, by making the labor realm precarious, fixed term and blank daily contracts contributed to the fragmentation of the processes of solidarity building among workers. They hindered collective bargaining, despite Khatami’s attempts to facilitate the codification of workers’ independent unions in early 2003. Nevertheless, it was a losing battle on

---

<sup>817</sup> Ibid.

the legal and political front, at least from a top-down perspective. In fact, the battle from below had never stopped. As chapter 5 showed, workers kept protesting both for their economic needs, and to a more limited extent, for their rights to collectively and freely organize.

In this regard, this research has challenged the idea that the emergence of workers' actions and new subjectivities relied on state mechanisms of repression versus concessions. Instead, labor activism in Iran evolved systematically between 1979 and 2009, and the top-down/bottom-up confrontation never ceased, although it was extremely fragmented. Along with repressive acts constraining the opportunities for expressions of workers' agency, and legal measures undermining collective bargaining, labor suffered from a broader process of *precarization*: it led to deradicalization. This latter should be understood through the Gramscian prism of *acting politically*, which entails consciousness, room for *manoeuvre* and *awareness of duration* that have been used throughout this analysis. How did that happened? By delegitimizing the Left, appropriating collective celebrations such as May Day, and casting social justice under the IRI's umbrella, the ruling apparatus successfully sanitized radical ideas. The alternatives proposed, since the 1990s, de facto discredited political activities beyond the IRI's apparatus, as acting *politically* was identified either with the system or with dangerous activities that might be subject to repression. Although Khatami attempted to enlarge the spectrum of participants in socio-political life and a limited space for criticism was created, workers largely remained outside of his focus. Economically, his presidency followed the path pursued by Rafsanjani, and his understanding of civil society crystallized with an individualist citizen-centered dimension. Thus, the children of the Revolution – the generation born during the 1980s – represented Khatami's main interlocutors. They had experienced neither the enthusiasm and solidarity of 1979, nor the eight years of war as adults, nor the early days of the Islamic Republic permeated by both political struggles and repression. Leftist ideas and radical understandings of class, social justice, and collective actions were too extreme or equated for most of the new generations with the IRI's dominant narrative.

The paradoxical tendency of this deradicalization process emerged in 2009. As chapter 8 discussed, the Green activists that the bulk of the Leftist organized workers labeled as “rich,” “neoliberal” and fundamentally “devoid of political belonging,” did not only challenge the political system. They looked for a lost language of revolt. With their support for Mousavi and their civil rights requests, they attempted to articulate their contestation politically. Beyond repression – this dissertation argues – their limits and their failures were purely political. In fact, the Green Movement fully embodied the product of the contending narratives championed by the IRI. On the one hand, it opposed for the first time since the 1979 Revolution an elite that had disfigured the dialectics of politics in its essence. On the other hand, it did not have the political stance and strength to radicalize the movement towards the Left, in order to include social justice among its core demands. The real nature of the disconnections between unofficially organized labor activists and the Greens was not economic, nor should it be ascribed to the misleading dichotomies of rich versus poor, or liberal with Mousavi versus workers/the backward poor with Ahmadinejad. The breaking point was political. This is not to conclude that the Greens demonstrated indifference to politics. On the contrary, the Movement exposed the absolute relevance and necessity of politics.

Ultimately, another paradox within the paradox emerged, as the missed opportunity to trigger cross-class alliances and solidarity-building mechanisms lay precisely in precarity. The Green Movement could have embraced social justice as one of its slogans. It could have seized the chance to mobilize against the *precarization* processes that had already overwhelmed a large segment of the silent Iranians in the 1 million march in June 2009. Yet, it did not. The practices and discourses of politics established by the neoliberal order had gradually transformed the meaning of politics itself. The Green Movement brought to light the outcomes of a decades-long process that involved structural and discursive factors. The structural factors may explain the transformations occurred in the streets only if presented as inextricably connected to the discursive shifts, through a process of interaction that involved different actors: the workers, the IRI’s leadership, the evolving society that eventually emerged in 2009. A key factor to explain not only how the role of workers changed, but why it has

changed is “precarization.” While turning into more precarious subjects through temporary contracts and eroded legal rights, workers became more vulnerable. Their opportunities to unite and organize decreased. Discourse mirrored workers’ marginalization in reality, while the IRI began to praise the middle classes, which were fundamental to economic recovery and functional to the new image of Iran.

The absence of workers as a collective force in the 2009 events, contrasting with their crucial presence as a collective force in 1978-1979, is to be understood within a context of discursive as well as socio-economic *precarization* (and consequent *marginalization*). These dynamics prevented the development of solidarity-building mechanisms and cross-class alliances, but did not fully erase workers’ agency. However, the compression of politics gradually manifested in the compression of society, whose inner components of plurality and unity were canceled as a result, both from above and from below. Eventually, workers as a broader group of precarious subjects were left behind. “Precarized” and, ultimately, divided.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Academic articles, books, and book chapters

Abrahamian, Ervand. "Social Bases of Iranian Politics. The Tudeh Party 1941-1953." PhD dissertation. Columbia University, 1969.

"Iran in Revolution: The Opposition Forces." *MERIP Reports*, No. 75-76, (Mar-Apr 1979): 3-8.

*Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

*Radical Islam. The Iranian Mojāhedin*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.

"Khomeini: Fundamentalist or Populist." *New Left Review*, V. 186 (Mar/Apr 1991): 102-119.

*Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. Berkeley: University of California, 1993.

"The 1953 Coup in Iran." *Science & Society*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Summer, 2001):182-215.

*History of Modern Iran*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

*The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations*. New York: The New Press, 2012.

*Mardom dar Siasat Iran* [People in Iran's Politics]. Tehran: Cheshme, 1394/2015.

Adelkhah, Fariba. *Being Modern in Iran*. London: Hurst & Company, 1999.

"Islamophobia and Malaise in Anthropology," in *Conceptualizing Iranian Anthropology. Past and Present Perspectives* eds. Shahnaz Najmabadi, 207- 224. New York, Berghahn Books, 2009.



Adib-Moghaddam, Arshin. (eds). *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

*Psycho-nationalism: global thought, Iranian imaginations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Ahmadi-Amui, Bahman. *Eqtesad-e Syasi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami [Political Economy of the Islamic Republic]*, Tehran: Gam-e Now, 2003.

Alamdari, Kazem. "The power structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from populism to clientelism, and militarization of the government." *Third World Quarterly*, 26:8 (2005): 1285-1301.

Alimagham, Pouya. *Contesting the Iranian Revolution. The Green Uprising*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Altorki, Soraya (eds). *A Companion Anthropology of the Middle East*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.

Amirahmadi, Hooshang. "Economic Reconstruction of Iran: Costing the War Damage." *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 1990): 26–47.

*Revolution and Economic Transition: The Iranian Experience*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.

Amouzadeh, Mohammad and Manouchehr Tavangar. "Decoding pictorial metaphor Ideologies in Persian commercial advertising." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Volume 7(2), 2004: 147–174.

Amuzegar, Jahangir. "Iran's Economy: Status, Problems, and Prospects." *Wilson Center*, 2004.

"Khatami's Legacies: Dashed Hopes." *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter, 2006): 57-74.

Anderson, Perry. "The Heirs of Gramsci," *New Left Review*, 100 (2016): 71-98.

Arjomand, Said Amir. "Civil Society and the Rule of Law in the Constitutional Politics of Iran under Khatami." *Social Research*, Vol.67, No. 2 (2000): 283-301.

*After Khomeini. Iran under his successors.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Art, David. "Archivists and Adventurers: Research Strategies for Authoritarian Regimes of the Past and Present." *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 97, No. 4, (December 2014): 974-990.

Ashraf, Ahmad. "From the White Revolution to the Islamic Revolution," in *Iran after the Revolution: Crisis in an Islamic State*. Eds. Saeed Rahnema and Sohrab Behdad (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996).

"Kalbod-shekāfi Enqelāb: Naqsh-e Kārgarān-e San'ati dar Enqelāb-e Irān [Autopsy of the Revolution: The Role of Industrial Workers in the Iranian Revolution]. *Goftogu*, 55 (2010): 55-123.

Ashraf, Ahmad and Ali Banuazizi. "The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution." *State, Culture and Society*, Vol. 1. No. 3 (Spring 1985), 3-40.

"Iran's Tortuous Path Towards Islamic Neoliberalism." *International Journal of Culture, Politics and Society*, Vol. 15, No.2 (2001): 237-256.

Atabaki, Touraj. "Writing the Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 84 (2013): 154-158.

"From Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker): Recruitment, Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry." *International Labor and Working Class History*, 84 (2013):159-175.

"Chronicles of a Calamitous Strike Foretold: Abadan, July 1946." In Karl Heinz Roth eds. *On the Road to Global Labour History*, 93-128. Leiden: Brill, 2017.

Atabaki, Touraj and Marcel van der Linden. "Twentieth Century Iran: History from Below." *International Review of Social History* 48, No. 3 (2012): 353-359.

Atabaki, Touraj, Elisabetta Bini, Kaveh Ehsani eds. *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Augelli, Enrico and Craig N. Murphy. "Consciousness, myth and collective action: Gramsci, Sorel and the ethical state." In *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies*, ed. Stephen Gill and James H. Mittelman, 25-38. London, Cambridge University Press, 1997. .

Bayat, Asef. *Workers and Revolution in Iran. A Third World Experience of Workers' Control*. Zed Books: London and New York, 1987.

"Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers." In Zachary Lockman eds. *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1994.

*Street Politics: Poor People's Movement in Iran*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

*Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

*Life as Politics. How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.

"Workless revolutionaries. The Unemployed Movement in Revolutionary Iran." In Stephanie Cronin eds, *Subalterns and Social Protest. History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*. London: Routledge, 2011.

*Why did Iran's Green Wave not feel the Arab Spring*. Sadighi Annual Lectures. Amsterdam: Institute of Social History, 2012.

*Revolutions without Revolutionaries. Making Sense of the Arab Spring.* Stanford University Press, 2017.

Baqi, Emadeddin. *Tarikh-e Shafahi-e Enqelab-e Eslami-e Iran: Majmu'eh-ye Bamameh-ye Dāstān e Enqelāb az Radio BBC.* Tehran: Nashr-e Tafakkor, 1994.

Behdad, Sohrab. "From Populism to Economic Liberalism: The Iranian predicament." In Parvin Alizadeh eds. *Economy of Iran: Dilemma of an Islamic State.* London: I.B. Tauris, 2002.

Behrooz, Maziar. *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran.* I. B. Tauris: London and New York, 1999.

Beinin, Joel. "Sanitizing the Tunisian Revolution," 12 October 2015. Accessed 31 September 2018.  
<http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2015/10/sanitizing-the-tunisian-revolution.html>.

Bharier, Julian. *Economic Development in Iran 1900-1970.* London: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Blout, E. L. "Soft war: Myth, nationalism, and media in Iran. *The Communication Review*, 20:3, (2017): 212-22.

Bromberger, Christian. "On Anthropology and Ethnography of and in Iran." *American Anthropologist*, Vol.120(1) (2018): 147-150.

Carapico, Sheila. "No Easy Answers: The Ethics of Field Research in the Arab World." *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 39, No 3, (2006): 429-431.

Chehabi, Houchang E. "Staging the emperor's new clothes: dress codes and nation building under Reza Shah." *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3-4 (1993): 209-233.

Chelkowski, Peter J. and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran.* New York: New York University Press, 1999.

- Clark, Janine A. "Field research methods in the Middle East." *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3, (2006): 417-424.
- Coffey, Amanda. *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London: Sage, 1999.
- Couzens Hoy, David. *Critical resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique*. London: MIT Press 2004.
- Cronin, Stephanie. "The Left in Iran: Illusion and Disillusion." *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, No. 3 (2000): 231-243.
- The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921-194*. Routledge/BIPS Persian Studies Series, 2003.
- "Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike." *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46:5 (2010): 699-732.
- Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Cupples, Julie. "The Field as a Landscape of Desire: Sex and Sexuality in Geographical Fieldwork." *Area*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (2002): 382-390.
- Davari, Arash. *Indeterminate Governmentality: Neoliberal Politics in Revolutionary Iran, 1968 1979, PhD Dissertation*. University of California Los Angeles, 2016.
- Dabashi, Hamid. "By What Authority: The Formation of Khomeini's Revolutionary Discourse, 1964-1977." *Social Compass* 36, No. 4 (1989): 511-538.
- Theology of Discontent. The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New York: New York University Press, 1993.
- The Green Movement in Iran*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2011.
- Dehghani, Ashraf. *Torture and Resistance in Iran*. London: 1976.

Ehsani, Kaveh. "Municipal Matters: The Urbanization of Consciousness and Political Change in Tehran." *Middle East Report*, No. 212 (Autumn, 1999): 22-27.

"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(3), (2003), 361-399.

"Survival through Dispossession: Privatization of Public Goods in the Islamic Republic." *Middle East Report*, No. 250, The Islamic Revolution at 30 (Spring, 2009): 26-33.

Ehteshami, Anoushiravan. *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Engelke, Matthew. *How to Think Like an Anthropologist*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Fairclough, Norman. *Discourse and Social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.

*Critical discourse analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman, 1995.

*Language and Power*. London and New York: Longman, 2001.

*Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Fairclough, Norman and Isabela Fairclough. *Political Discourse Analysis. A Method for Advanced Students*. London: Routledge, 2012.

Foran, John. *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*. Westview Press, 1993.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975.

*Power/knowledge. Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon books, 1980.

*The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, 1980.

“The History of Sexuality: An Interview.” *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1980).

“Technologies of the Self.” In L.H. Martin, H. Gutman and P.H. Hutton (eds.) *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*. USA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

“Politics and the Study of Discourse.” In *The Foucault Effect. Study in Governmentality*. Eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

“Questions of method.” In *The Foucault Effect. Study in Governmentality*. Eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

“The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom.” In Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinov. New York: New York Press, 1997.

“Subject and Power.” In *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954 1984*. Eds. James Faubion. New York: The New Press, 2000.

*Society must be defended: lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*. New York: Picado, 2003.

*Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*. Eds. M. Senellart, trans. G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

“What is critique.” In Michel Foucault. *The Politics of Truth*, ed. S. Lotringer; trans. L. Hochroth and C. Porter. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007.

Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. “The Divine, the People, and the Faqih.” In Arshin Adib Moghaddam eds. *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, 211-238. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Ghasimi, M. R. “The Iranian Economy after the Revolution: An Economic Appraisal of the Five-Year Plan.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Nov., 1992): 599-614.

Gheytanch, Elham. “Symbols, Signs, and Slogans of the Demonstrations in Iran.” In Yahya R. Kamalipour eds. *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age. The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010.

Glasius, Marlies and Meta de Lange, Jos Bartman, Emanuela Dalmasso, Aofei Lv, Adele Del Sordi, Marcus Michaelson, Kris Ruijgrok. *Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Golkar, Saeid. “Student Activism, Social Media, and Authoritarian Rule in Iran.” In Epstein I. eds. *The Whole World is Texting*. Pittsburgh Studies in Comparative and International Education. Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2015.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Lettere dal Carcere [Letters from Prison]*. Torino: Einaudi, 1947.

*Gli Intellettuali e l'Organizzazione della Cultura [Intellectuals and The Organization of Culture]*. Torino: Einaudi, 1949.

*Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*. Eds. Valentino Gerratana. Torino: Einaudi, 1975.

*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.



- Habibzadeh, Afshin. *Moshārekat Siyāsi Tabaqeh-ye Kārgar dar Irān* [Political Participation of the Working Class in Iran]. Tehran: Enteshārat Kavir, 1387/2008.
- Halliday, Fred. "Trade Unions and the Working Class' Opposition." *MERIP Reports*, Oct., 1978, No. 71 (Oct., 1978), 7-13.
- Iran: Dictatorship and Development*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979.
- Harris, Kevan. "The Rise of the Subcontractor State: Politics of Pseudo-privatization in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45, 1 (2013): 45-70.
- "Class and Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Brief Introduction." *MERIP -Middle East Report*, No. 277 (2016): 2-5.
- A Social Revolution: Politics and Welfare State in Iran*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.
- Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Akbar. *Sāzandegi va Shokufāiy. Ketāb Khāterāt 1370*. [Reconstruction and blooming, Book of Memories, 1370-1992]..
- Sāzandegi va bāzsāzi. Ketāb Khāterāt 1368*. [Reconstruction and renovation, Book of Memories 1368-1990]. Tehran, personal website.
- Hashemi, Manata. "Tarnished work: dignity and labour in Iran." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2018.1552116, 1-16.
- Hashemi, Mohammad. *Negareshi bar Qanun-e Jadid-e Kar-e Jomhouri-e Eslami-e Iran* [Observation of the New Labor Laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran]. Tehran: Shahid Beheshti University Press, 1991.
- Hegland, Mary Elaine and Erika Friedl. "Methods Applied: Political Transformation and Recent Ethnographic Fieldwork in Iran." *Anthropology of the Middle East*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Winter 2006: 1-19.

Holliday, Shabnam. "Khatami's Islamist-Iranian Discourse of National Identity: A Discourse of Resistance." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, No. 37:1 (2010): 1-13.

"The Legacy of Subalternity and Gramsci's National-Popular: Populist Discourse in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Third World Quarterly*, 37:5 (2016): 917-933.

Hobsbawm, Eric. "Gramsci and Political Theory." *Marxism Today*, 21 (7): 205-213.

Hoodfar, Homa and Fatemeh Sadeghi. "Against All Odds: The women's movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Development*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (June 2009): 215-223.

Jafari, Peyman. "Reasons to Revolt: Iranian Oil Workers in the 1970s." *International Labor and Working Class History*, No. 84 (Fall 2013): 195-217.

"Introduction: Against All Odds – Labor Activism in the Middle East." *Workers of the World – International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts*, No. 7 (2015): 6-13.

"Fluid History: Oil Workers and the Iranian Revolution." In *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*. Eds. Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini and Kaveh Ehsani, 69-98. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Jahanbakhsh, Forough. "Religious and Political Discourse in Iran: Moving Toward Post Fundamentalism." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Winter/Spring 2003): 243-254.

Kamrava, Mehran. "The Civil Society Discourse in Iran." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 28:2 (2001), 165-185

Kar, Mehrangiz. *Crossing the Red Line: The Struggle for Human Rights in Iran*. Costa Mesa: Blind Owl Press, 2007.

Kangarani, Reza. "Kārgarān va Showrahā -ye Eslāmi-ye Kār [Workers and the Islamic Councils of Labor]." *Andisheh-ye Jām'eh*, No. 16, (Ordibehesht 1380/April 2001): 10-12.

- Katouzian, Homa. *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo Modernism 1926-1979*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1981.
- Kapiszewski, Diane, Lauren MacLean and Benjamin Read. *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Khan, Shahnaz. "Reconfiguring the Native Informant: Positionality in the Global Age." *Signs*, Vol. 30, No. 4, (Summer 2005): 2017-2037.
- Khatami, Mohammad. *Hope and Challenge: The Iranian President speaks*. Binghamton, NY: Institute of Global and Cultural Studies, 1997.
- Khomeini, Ruhollah. *Sahifeh-ye Imam. Majmu'eh-ye Āsar-e Imām Khomeini*. Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1389/2000.
- Talieh-ye Enqelāb-e Eslami. Mosābeh-hā-ye Emām Khomeini dar Pāris*. Tehran: Setād Enqelāb Farhangī, Markaz-e Nashr-re Dāneshgāhi, 1363/1984.
- Khosravi, Shahram. *Precarious Lives. Waiting and Hope in Iran*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
- "The Precarious Status of Working-Class Men in Iran." *Current History*, (December 2017): 355-359.
- Khosrokhavar, Farhad. "The Iranian Middle Classes Between Political Failure and Cultural Supremacy." *Sadighi Annual Lectures*. Amsterdam: Sadighi Research Fund –International Institute of Social History, 2015.
- Koch, Natalie. "Field Methods in 'Closed Contexts': Undertaking Research in Authoritarian States and Places." *Area*, Vol. 45, No. 4, (2013): 390-395.
- Kurzman, Charles. "The Arab Spring: Ideals of the Iranian Green Movement, Methods of the Iranian Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 44, No. 1 (2012): 162-165.

- Ladjevardi, Habib. *Labor Union and Autocracy in Iran*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985.
- Lazreg, Marnia. "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 81-107.
- Mahdavi, Mojtaba. "The Rise of Khomeinism. Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran." In *A Critical Introduction to Khomein*. Eds. Arshin Adib Moghaddam, 43-68. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Maljoo, Mohammad. "Worker Protest in the Age of Ahmadinejad." *MERIP*, No. 241 (2006). <https://www.merip.org/mer/mer241/worker-protest-age-of-ahmadinejad>. Accessed 25 July 2018.
- "Tabaqeh Kārgar pas az Entekhābāt Dahom: Enzevā ya E'telāf" [*The Working Class after the Elections: Isolation or Coalition*], *Goftogu*, 55 (1389/2010): 7-16.
- "The Green Movement Awaits an Invisible Hand." *Middle East Report Online*, June 26, 2010 <https://merip.org/2010/06/the-green-movement-awaits-an-invisible-hand/>.
- "The Vicious Circle Trapping Iranian Workers since the 1990s." *Revue Internationale des Études du Développement*, N. 229 (2017): 137-162.
- "The Unmaking of the Iranian Working Class since 1990s." In *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*, eds. Peyman Vahabzadeh, 47-64. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Malm, Andreas and Shora Esmailian. *Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers and Threats of War*. London, Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto, 2007.
- Mather, David and Yassamine Mather & Majid Tamjidi. "Making Cars in Iran: Working for Iran Khodro." *Critique*, 35:1 (2007): 9-21.

- Matin-Asgari, Afshin. "The Left's Contribution to Social Justice in Iran: A Brief Historical Overview." In Peyman Vahabzadeh eds. *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Milani, Abbas. "The Green Movement." *Iran Primer*.  
<https://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/The%20Green%20Movement.pdf>. Accessed December 8, 2019.
- Mitchell, Timothy. *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Moaddel, Mansoor. "Class Struggle in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 23 (1991): 317-343.
- Moghadam, Val. "Industrial Development, Culture, and Working-Class Politics: A Case Study of Tabriz Industrial Workers in the Iranian Revolution." *International Sociology*, Vol.2, No.2 (1987): 151-175.
- "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran." *New Left Review*, No. 166 (Nov-Dec 1987): 5-28.
- "The Revolution and the Regime: Populism, Islam and the State in Iran." *Social Compass* 36, No. 4 (1989): 415-450.
- "Hidden from history? Women workers in modern Iran." *Iranian Studies*, 33, No. 3-4 (2000): 377-401.
- Moghissi, Haideh and Saeed Rahnema. "The Working Class and the Islamic State in Iran." *Socialist Register* 37 (2001): 207-208.
- Moradi, Sina. "Labour Activism and Democracy in Iran." Working Paper 22, Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries, The Hague (July 2013).

- Morgenbesser, Lee. "Survive and Thrive: Field Research in Authoritarian Southeast Asia." *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2018): 485-403.
- Morgana, M. Stella. "The Islamic Republican Party of Iran in the Factory: Control over Workers' Discourse in Posters (1979–1987)." *Iran - Journal of the British Institute for Persian Studies* 56, no. 2 (2018): 237-249.
- "Talking to Workers: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad, how the Islamic Republic's Discourse on Labor Changed through May Day Speeches (1979-2009)." *Iranian Studies*, 52:1-2 (2019):133-158.
- "Precarious Workers and Neoliberal Narratives in Post-revolutionary Iran: Top-down Strategies and Bottom-up Responses." *Middle East Institute*, MAP Project, January 28, 2020.
- "'Produce and Consume' in the Islamic Republic: The 1990s Myth of the Winner in the Iranian Public Sphere and Its Impact on Workers." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 52(2), 340-344.
- Moslem, Mehdi. *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002.
- Mottahedeh, Negar. *#Iranelection Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Najmabadi, Shahnaz. "From 'Alien' to 'One of Us' and Back: Field Experiences in Iran." *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4, (December 2004): 603-612.
- Nia, Mahdi Mohammad. "Discourse and Identity in Iran's Foreign Policy." *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 2012): 29-64.
- Nikazmerad, Nicholas M. "A Chronological Survey of the Iranian Revolution. *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1/4, Iranian Revolution in Perspective (1980): 327-368.

Nomani, Farhad and Sohrab Behdad. *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006.

“The Rise and Fall of Iranian Classes in the Post-Revolutionary Decades.” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 44:3, (2008): 377-396.

“Labor Rights and the Democracy Movement in Iran: Building a Social Democracy,” *Northwestern journal of international Human Rights*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2012): 212-230.

OIPF, *Kārgarān Pishtāz-e Jonbesh-e Tudeh*.

Parsa, Misagh. *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*. London and New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989.

*States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions. A Comparative Analysis of Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

“Ideology and Political Action in the Iranian Revolution.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2011): 53-68.

*Democracy in Iran. Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016.

Portelli, Alessandro. “The Peculiarities of Oral History.” *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 12, Issue 1, Autumn 1981, 96–107.

Pourmokhtari, Navid. “Understanding Iran’s Green Movement as Movement of Movements.” *Sociology of Islam*, Vol.2 (2014): 144-177.

Rahmani. “Chera’ va mo‘zalha-ye taghir-e sharayet-e kar-e naftgaran” [Reasons and Problems of Changing the Working Conditions of the Oil Labor]. *Samane*, No 11–12, 2010: 53–65.

Rahnema, Saeed. “Work Council in Iran: Illusion of Worker Control.” *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (February 1992): 69-94.

“The Left and the Struggle for Democracy in Iran.” In Stephanie Cronin eds.  
*Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran*, 250-267. London: Routledge, 2004.

Rahnema, Ali. *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Reisinezhad, Arash. “The Iranian Green Movement: Fragmented Collective Action and Fragile Collective Identity.” *Iranian Studies*, 48:2 (2015), 193-222.

Rezai-Rashti, Goli M. “Conducting Field Research On Gender Relations in a Gender Repressive State: a Case Study of Gender Research in Iran.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2013): 489-502.

Rivetti, Paola. “Methodology Matters in Iran: Researching Social Movements in Authoritarian Context.” *Anthropology of the Middle East*, Vol. 12, No.1, (Summer 2017): 71-82.

*Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Rivetti, Paola and Francesco Cavatorta. “Iranian Student Activism between Authoritarianism and Democratization: Patterns of Conflict and Cooperation between the Office for the Strengthening of Unity and the Regime.” *Democratization*, 21:2 (2014): 289-310.

Rouhani, Farhang. “Multiple Sites of Fieldwork: A Personal Reflection.” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Dec. 2004): 685-693.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

Sadeghi, Fatemeh. “The Politics of Recognition. The Barefoot of the Revolution and Elusive Memories.” *Merip*, No. 277 (Winter 2015): 15-19.

Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Eskandar. *Revolution and its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.



Safiri, Mas'ud. *Haqiqat-hā va Maslahat-ha. Goftogu bā Hashem Rafsanjāni*. Tehran, Nashr-e Ney, 1378/1989.

Saffari, Siavash. "Two Pro Mostaz'afin Discourses in the 1979 Iranian Revolution." *Contemporary Islam*, Vol.11 (2017): 287–301.

Saghafi, Morad. "The New Landscape of Iranian Politics." *Middle East Report*, 233 (Winter 2004): 16-23.

Salehi-Isfahani, Djavad. "Labor and the Challenge of Economic Restructuring in Iran." *Middle East Report*, No. 210, (Spring, 1999): 34-37.

"Population, Human Capital and Economic Growth in Iran," in *Human Capital: Population Economics in the Middle East*, eds. Ismail Sirageldin. Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2002.

"Human resources in Iran: potentials and challenges." *Iranian Studies*, 38:1 (2005): 117-147.

"Oil Wealth and Economic Growth in Iran." In Ali Gheissari eds, 3-37. *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Sariolghalam, Mahmood. "Iran in Search of Itself." *Current History*, December 2008, 425-431.

Sāzman-e Cherikhā-ye Feda'ii Khalq-e Irān, Shahrivar 1357/September 1978, reprinted by CISNU, (Berlin, 1978).

Schulzke, Marcus. "Power and Resistance: Linking Gramsci and Foucault." In David Kreps eds. *Gramsci and Foucault: A Reassessment*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2015.

Shahbazi, Mohammad. "Past Experiences and Future Perspectives of an Indigenous Anthropologist on Anthropological Work in Iran." In *Conceptualizing Iranian*

*Anthropology: Past and Present Perspectives*. Shahnaz Nadjmabadi eds., 143-56. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009.

Shahshahani, Soheila. "Reflections on My Research in Iran, 1976–2006." *Anthropology of the Middle East*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Winter 2006: 67.

Shavarini, Mitra. "Western Procedures, Eastern protocols: Conducting research in the Western wary Islamic Republic of Iran." In J. E. Larkley & V. B. Maynhard eds., *Innovations in education*. New York: Nova Science, 2008.

Sohrabi, Naghmeh. "Muddling through the Iranian Revolution." *Perspectives on History*, November 1, 2015.

Sreberny-Mohammadi, Annabelle and Ali Mohammadi. *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Sreberny, Annabelle and Gholam Khiabany. *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.

Suzuki, Yuko. "Negotiations, Concessions, and Adaptations during Fieldwork in a Tribal Society." *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4, (2006): 623-632.

Tapper, Richard. "What is this thing called "ethnography?" *Iranian Studies*, 31:3-4 (1998): 389-398.

"Personal Reflections on Anthropology of and in Iran." In *Conceptualizing Iranian Anthropology. Past and Present Perspectives*. Shahnaz Najmabadi eds. New York,: Berghahn Books, 2009.

Tazmini, Ghoncheh. *Khatami's Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

- Tilly, Charles. "Afterword: Political Memories in Space and Time." In Jonathan Boyarin eds. *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Timespace*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- Turner, Terisa. "Iranian Oil Workers in the 1978-1979 Revolution." In *Oil and Class Struggle*. Peter Nore and Terisa Turner eds. London: Zed Books 1980.
- Vahabzadeh, Peyman. *Guerrilla Odyssey. Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fada'i Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971–1979*. Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, 2010.
- Iran's Struggle for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Vahdat, Farzin. "Post-Revolutionary Islamic Discourses on Modernity in Iran: Expansion and Contraction of Human Subjectivity." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Nov. 2003): 599-631.
- Valadbaygi, Kayhān. "Hybrid Neoliberalism: Capitalist Development in Contemporary Iran." *New Political Economy*, (2020), DOI: [10.1080/13563467.2020.1729715](https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2020.1729715)
- Veyne, Paul. "Foucault Revolutionizes History." In *Foucault and his interlocutors*, A. Davidson eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Wodack, Ruth and Michal Krzyzanowski. *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

### Archives

National Library of Iran

Library of the Iranian Parliament

UCLA, International Digital Ephemera Project

University of Chicago Library, Middle Eastern Posters Collection

*Newspapers, news agencies, magazines, TV reports*

Andisheh-ye Jām'eh

Al-Jazeera

Associated Press

BBC

CNN

Ettelā'āt

Financial Times

Goftogu

Hamshahri

Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)

Iranian Student News Agency (ISNA)

Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA)

Iran

Iran Fardā

Kār

Kār-o-Kārgar

Kayhān

Le Monde

Lotta Continua

L'Ordine Nuovo

L'Unità

Paese Sera

Rāh-e Kārgari

New York Times

Salam

The Guardian

Time

Washington Post

**Official documents and reports**

Amnesty International. "Iran: Up to 500 Tehran bus workers imprisoned for planning strike."  
Accessed, 3 Feb 2006. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/iran-500-tehran-bus-workers-imprisoned-planning-strike>.

First Five-Year-Development Plan. Tehran, 1989.  
<http://www.maslehat.ir/Contents.aspx?p=17e0f3f3-5988-4069-a89b73ad17f87e9d>

*Iran Data Portal*. "Labor Force, Employment by Industry Sector (1956-2011)."  
<https://irandataportal.syr.edu/labor-force>. Accessed 29 February 2019.

Labor Law [Qānun-e Kār]. 1990. Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare.  
<https://rkj.mcls.gov.ir/fa/moghararaat/ghavanin/ghanoonkar>.

Labor Law. Miscellaneous provisions. English translation  
<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WEBTEXT/21843/64830/E90IRN01.HM#c12>.

Labor Law. Amendments as approved on 27 January 2003 [7 Bahman 1381]. *Majles*.  
<http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/%20show/122666>

Law on Islamic Councils of Labor [Qānun-e Showrāhā-ye Eslāmi Kār]. *Majles*. Available at  
<http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/91022>.

International Labour Organization (ILO), Freedom of Association and Protection of the right to  
organize Convention 1948 (no. 87).  
[https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P1200\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312232](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P1200_INSTRUMENT_ID:312232).

Discussion on Convention 111 on discrimination in the workplace (2000).  
[https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/fr/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P1300\\_COMMENT\\_ID,P13100\\_LANG\\_CODE:2555743,en](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/fr/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P1300_COMMENT_ID,P13100_LANG_CODE:2555743,en)

"An Employment Strategy for the Islamic Republic of Iran" (2003).

Report No. 346 (2007), available here

[http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:50002:0::NO::P5002\\_COMPLAINT\\_TEXT\\_ID:2910267](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:50002:0::NO::P5002_COMPLAINT_TEXT_ID:2910267)

“Qānun-e Nezām-e San‘ati” (1990)

<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/91489/106120/F205386805/IRN91489.pdf>

Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, E-visa types.

[https://evisatraveller.mfa.ir/en/request/visa\\_types/](https://evisatraveller.mfa.ir/en/request/visa_types/). Accessed 21 May, 2018.

### **Websites**

Asr-e nou

Akhbar-e rooz

Alborz

Donyā-e-Eqtesād

Ettehādechāp

Ettehādchāp Kārgari

Facebook

IASWI

Jacobin

Jadaliyya

Kaleme

Lobelog

Meidān

Naqd-e Eqtesādi

Ofros

PBS

WordsWithoutBorders

Youtube

## SAMENVATTING

Was *agency* van arbeiders de drijvende kracht achter veranderingen in Iran tussen de Revolutie van 1979 en de Groene Beweging van 2009? En zo ja, onder welke voorwaarden? Hoe heeft het discours rond ‘arbeid’ de machtsrelaties in deze periode veranderd? Welke processen en factoren vormden het denken van en over arbeiders in Iran in termen van klasse, sociale rechtvaardigheid en solidariteit? Deze vragen waren het uitgangspunt van dit proefschrift.

Dit proefschrift analyseert politieke veranderingen en sociale transformaties in Iran tussen 1979 tot 2009, met bijzondere aandacht voor discursieve verschuivingen en transformaties in hegemonische relaties. De arbeiders waren cruciaal voor het succes van de Revolutie van 1979, maar in 2009 waren zij afwezig als collectieve kracht. In dit proefschrift wordt onderzocht wat deze afwezigheid verklaart. Het proefschrift laat zien dat – afgezien van staatsrepressie – de structurele en discursieve processen die leidden tot de zogenaamde ‘precarisatie’ van arbeiders, een actieve rol van arbeiders belemmerden.

Aan de ene kant marginaliseerden juridische, economische en sociale factoren de arbeiders. Aan de andere kant weerspiegelde de verschuivende context het officiële discours van de Islamitische Republiek Iran (IRI) en pogingen om de macht te consolideren. Als gevolg daarvan hadden de arbeiders in 2009 geen goede middelen voor de opbouw van solidariteit of het vormen van allianties tussen klassen, zoals de arbeiders van 1979 die wel hadden. Discoursen en structurele factoren waren met elkaar verweven. Structuur en *agency* waren twee kanten van dezelfde medaille.

Wat draagt dit proefschrift bij aan Iraanse Studies, Midden-Oosten Studies en het onderzoek naar arbeid? Dat is vooral de aanpak, zowel methodologisch en theoretisch. In de eerste plaats, is er het onderzoek naar taalgebruik door en over arbeiders, dat bestudeerd wordt door middel van een analyse van krantenberichten, (overheids)publicaties en juridische documenten, en door interviews met arbeiders, voormalige activisten, geleerden en juridische experts, uitgevoerd in Iran door de auteur. Ten tweede, combineert dit proefschrift een bottom-up met een top-down perspectief om de

verschillende constructies van ‘arbeid’ in de loop der tijd te identificeren. Ten derde onderzoekt het proefschrift de processen van *precarisatie* buiten het economische of juridische domein, door de discursieve verschuivingen en hun verbanden met de zich ontwikkelende politieke context nauw te volgen.

Theoretisch gezien, wordt in dit proefschrift gewerkt met Gramsci’s concept ‘hegemonie’, en de nadruk daarbinnen op het evenwicht tussen dwang en toestemming. Het is ook gebaseerd op Fairclough’s discoursanalytische methode, die eveneens gebaseerd is op Gramsci's werk. Binnen dit kader openbaart taal zich als instrumenteel voor het begrijpen van de dynamiek van hegemonische relaties, zowel in dominante vertogen, zoals die werden verspreid door de IRI, als in de vertogen die van onderaf vorm kregen.

Dit proefschrift is opgedeeld in acht hoofdstukken. Hoofdstuk 1 bespreekt de methodologische aanpak, en reflecteert op de uitdagingen en risico's van het doen van veldwerk in Iran, vooral naar arbeid. Het gaat ook in op mijn positionaliteit als onderzoeker en de coping strategieën, die ik heb gebruikt. Verder legt het uit hoe ik mijn onderzoeksvragen beantwoord.

Hoofdstuk 2 analyseert de interviews die Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, die de stichter van de Islamitische Republiek zou worden, gaf aan buitenlandse journalisten in aanloop naar de revolutie, tussen oktober 1978 en februari 1979. Het verklaart en contextualiseert de discursieve en politieke strategieën waarmee Khomeini probeerde om de hegemonische stem van de anti-Shahbeweging te worden, terwijl hij zijn potentiële concurrenten in diskrediet bracht. Het hoofdstuk laat zien dat Khomeini’s discursieve dubbelzinnigheid deel uitmaakte van zijn succes.

Hoofdstuk 3 beschrijft de Revolutie van 1979 vanuit het perspectief van de arbeiders, door middel van een analyse van hun slogans en uitspraken. In lijn met Ideeën van Gramsci, laat het zien dat protesten spontaan ontstonden, maar dat ze vervolgens vormgaven aan klassenbewustzijn.

Hoofdstuk 4 kijkt vanuit een top-down perspectief naar de officiële toespraken ter gelegenheid van de viering van 1 mei in de periode 1979 tot 2009. Het analyseert de verbanden tussen taal en de betekenis van arbeid voor de Islamitische Republiek. Het hoofdstuk laat zien dat de IRI



systematisch heeft geprobeerd om arbeiders onder de staatsparaplu te bregen, terwijl tegelijkertijd klassenconflicten werden vermeden.

Hoofdstuk 5 bespreekt dezelfde periode, maar vanuit een bottom-up perspectief. Het analyseert de weg van de arbeiders naar verzet, door eerst uit te leggen hoe activisme ontstond in de Islamitische Republiek, en vervolgens te analyseren waarom het kon overleven. Theoretisch bouwt het voort op Gramsci's analyse van de concepten van collectief *bewustzijn* en *tegengedrag*. Dit hoofdstuk laat zien dat staatsrepressie niet verhinderde dat arbeiders zich konden uiten. Andere factoren droegen bij aan de verzwakking de arbeidersbeweging. Het hoofdstuk beschrijft de strategieën die door de IRI werden gebruikt om verzet van onderaf te verzwakken. Het beschrijft de neoliberale draai van de jaren '90, in het “wederopbouwtijdperk” dat begon na het einde van de oorlog tussen Iran-Irak. Het hoofdstuk presenteert een analyse van twee kranten dicht bij de regering (*Iran* en *Hamshahri*). Het richt zich op de nieuwe waarden, die van boven naar beneden doorsijpelde in de Iraanse samenleving. Dat leidde uiteindelijk tot een vervreemding van arbeiders. Het beleid werd nooit "neoliberaal" genoemd, maar de IRI hoopte wel op grotere productie en economisch succes, en dat leidde tot een mythe over winnaars en het verheerlijken van concurrentie. Hierdoor werd een proces van *precarisatie* en marginalisering van de arbeiders in gang gezet.

Hoofdstuk 7 legt een verband tussen de top-down en bottom-up benaderingen. Het laat zien hoe en waarom de kloof tussen sociale groepen groter werd tijdens de hervormingsperiode (1997-2005), en vooral na de ontwikkeling van, wat Gramsci noemt, “culturele hegemonie.” Het hoofdstuk benadert arbeid met behulp van Gramsci's notie van het maatschappelijk middenveld en een reformistische zoektocht naar de rechtsstaat. Het probeert uit te leggen waarom de thema's arbeid en sociale rechtvaardigheid verdwenen uit het officiële discours, en hoe op die manier de weg werd vrijgemaakt voor de toe-eigening van deze onderwerpen door de enige arbeidsorganisatie die was toegestaan, het Arbeidershuis. Het Arbeidershuis speelde een dubbelrol in de relaties tussen staatsmacht en arbeiders. Aan de ene kant, handelde het in het belang van de arbeiders, maar aan de andere kant werkte het hen tegen.

In hoofdstuk 8 wordt het ontstaan en de ontwikkeling van de Groene Beweging van 2009 nagegaan. Het onderzoekt de relatie tussen enerzijds de groene activisten – die de ‘erfgenamen’ waren van een staatsdiscours dat eind jaren negentig was begonnen – en anderzijds de leden van de informele arbeidersbeweging en gewone arbeiders. Dit hoofdstuk laat zien dat in 2009 solidariteitsnetwerken te zwak waren en er geen verbinding tussen de verschillende klassen ontstonden. Een proces van precarisatie – gestuurd door structurele en discursieve factoren -veroorzaakte deze mislukking. De paradox is dat datzelfde precarisatieproces er ook toe had kunnen leiden dat alle Iraniërs zich achter een strijd voor sociale rechtvaardigheid zouden scharen, zoals dat gebeurde tijdens de demonstraties van 1978-1979, die tot de Revolutie leidden. Dat gebeurde echter niet om redenen zoals hierboven toegelicht.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

M. Stella Morgana was born on 21 May 1984 in Catania (Italy). She holds an MA in “Middle Eastern Studies” from *Leiden University*, where – between 2015 and 2016 – she wrote a thesis on Iranian workers and state power in post-revolutionary Iran. In 2006 she earned a BA in “Islamic Studies” from the *University of Naples L'Orientale*, where she graduated with a thesis on Iran’s legal approaches to the opium trade. Stella completed two post-graduate diplomas in 2007 and 2013: one in “Journalism and Foreign Affairs” from *LUISS University of Rome* – with a thesis on conscientious objection in Turkey – and one in “Reporting from Crisis Areas” from the *University of Rome Tor Vergata*. Before starting to trek the academic path as a doctoral researcher at Leiden University, she worked as an editor, website manager, and freelancer for almost ten years – from 2007 to 2016. Walking away from journalism, she dedicated the following years – first with her MA and then with her PhD – to study the history of contemporary Iran. Between the beginning of 2017 and the end of 2019 she lived and conducted extensive field research in Iran, where she studied Persian at Dehkhoda Institute – University of Tehran. In 2019 and early 2020 she was visiting scholar at *Tarbiat Modarres University of Tehran* and *SOAS University of London*. Her academic articles have been published in the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES)*, *Iranian Studies*, *IRAN- Journal of the British Institute for Persian Studies*, and are forthcoming in *International Labor and Working-Class History (ILWCH)*, as well as in an edited volume published by Cambridge University Press. Her commentaries appeared in *Middle East Institute*, *The Conversation*, *Huffington Post US*, *Left*, *EastWest*, *il manifesto*. She has been an adjunct lecturer of “History of Contemporary Iran” at *Leiden University* in the academic year 2020/2021. In the same year, she started teaching “The Middle East: History, Politics, Economics” and “Comparative Politics of North Africa” at the *University of Amsterdam*.