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

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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),¹ mirror themselves in discourse and produces realities.² 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

¹ 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.

² 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.³ Second, the workers' contribution to the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime was unique, because they were able to economically “paralyze the state apparatus.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

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

⁴ 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.

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

⁶ 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*,⁷ 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.”⁸ 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

⁷ The process of making workers’ situations precarious in terms of labor contracts, as well as living conditions.

⁸ 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,”⁹ 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

⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.

¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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).¹² 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*.¹³ 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

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

¹² SAVAK is abbreviation of Sāzeman-e Ettlā'āt Va Amniyat-e Keshvar (Organisation of Intelligence and National Security).

¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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

¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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 Moghadam 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ However, Moghadam'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

¹⁵ See Val Moghadam, "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.

¹⁶ Val Moghadam, "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.

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

lens of the subaltern classes.¹⁸ 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 20th century,¹⁹ and on oil workers’ grievances, subjectivities and politicization in the 1979 Revolution.²⁰

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.²¹ 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

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ In

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

²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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 Tabaqeh: 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.

²⁴ 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;

²⁵ 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-4BesdXwAiZDvmkkIyScibFnE>

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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.

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

²⁷ 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.”²⁸ 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.”²⁹ 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,

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

²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.”³¹ In notebook 10, Gramsci writes that “the fact of language is in reality a multiplicity of facts more or less organically coherent and coordinated.”³² 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

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

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

³² Ibid. Q10, §44, 1330-1332.

groups claiming to represent the masses.”³³ 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.³⁴ Gramsci referred to this fundamental step as “awareness of duration”, which is to be “concrete and not abstract.”³⁵ 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.³⁶ This complex convergence will be made clearer in the second part of this dissertation. Drawing on Gramsci, Foucault wrote that power

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

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 146-7.

³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹ On the other hand, applying the dictum “where there is power, there is resistance,”⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ 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.

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

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

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

⁴² 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 20th 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.⁴³ The country, during the late Qajar era, was fragmented both geographically and socially.⁴⁴ Only a fifth of its territory was urbanized.⁴⁵ It was in Tehran that the first Iranian trade union was created in 1906, through the endeavors of the Koucheiki print shop workers.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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- kārgarān-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.⁴⁸ During Reza Shah's era, which is remembered for its expansion of bureaucratic state apparatus and the first nationalist project of industrialization,⁴⁹ 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

⁴³ 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.

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

⁴⁵ Bharier, *Economic Development in Iran 1900-1970*, 3-5.

⁴⁶ Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 1-3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 6.

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ As Cronin argued, the demonstrations revealed that a combination of discourse and strategies were in play.⁵¹ 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.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ 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

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

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² *Ibid.*

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

⁵⁴ Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, 173.

⁵⁵ 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.”⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ Workers were violently repressed after a confrontation between the crowd and the army that had tried to arrest labor leaders.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ The Tudeh supported demands for the redistribution of wealth, job security, higher pay, and significantly contributed to the cause of social justice.⁶² By then, the Communists

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

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 220-221.

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

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

⁶⁰ 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

⁶¹ Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 51-53.

⁶² 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.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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

⁶³ Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 132.

⁶⁴ 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,⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ Furthermore, in some cases, SAVAK officials ran the unions, as Bayat documented.⁶⁷ As the official workers' paper *Rastakhiz-e Kārgarān* reported, these organizations undertook pro-regime demonstrations, and provided welfare services and benefits.⁶⁸ 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 –⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

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.⁷² 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

⁶⁵ 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.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 204.

⁶⁸ Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, 203.

⁶⁹ 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.

⁷⁰ 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.

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

⁷² 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.⁷³ Already in the early 1970s, he acknowledged the Ayatollah Khomeini's popularity among the masses and his "chances for success."⁷⁴ The Sāzman-e Mojāhedin-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."⁷⁵ Their membership rapidly increased. According to Behrooz, the Muslim Mojāhedin 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.⁷⁶ In 1975 the Marxist Mojāhedin faction established, from the Muslim Mojāhedin, the Peykār organization.⁷⁷ Both the Fedayān and the Marxist Mojāhedin 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.⁷⁸ 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

⁷³ 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.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 53

⁷⁵ See Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojāhedin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 1-40.

⁷⁶ Behrooz, *Rebel with a Cause*, 70.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 70-73.

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

cultural factor per se.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ 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.”⁸¹ 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.⁸² 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.⁸³ 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.

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

⁸⁰ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: the Iranian Mojāhedīn*, 163-169.

⁸¹ Behrooz, *Rebel with a Cause*, 72.

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

⁸³ 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.