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

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## 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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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.

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<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, Clark 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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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>

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<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

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<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.

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<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

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<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 respond, 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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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.

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<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.