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

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CONCLUSION

Some journeys may have two beginnings, depending on what one considers the point of departure and what the end point. One can merely follow the chronology of events or, instead, go backwards. The journey undertaken by this dissertation started conceptually with a series of questions that required movement in both directions. It has traveled through time, navigating the encounters, confrontations and breakdowns that occurred within and beyond the Iranian labor realm between the 1979 Revolution and the 2009 Green Movement. On the one hand, this study has analyzed the evolution of discourses in the context of hegemonic relations by following a chronological timeline. On the other hand, the impetus to begin its exploration stemmed from the absence of workers as an organized group in 2009. In this sense, this work has tracked back to the origin of particular dynamics and power relations that manifested in the Green Movement. It has attempted to comprehend how certain transformations that unfolded in the streets in 2009 emerged historically. Furthermore, it has sought to understand whether the agency of labor represented a driver for change through the events of 1979 and 2009.

This dissertation represents the first scholarly attempt to tackle political changes in the Iranian labor realm from 1979 to 2009 through the lens of discursive shifts and transformations in hegemonic relations. It demonstrates that – beyond repression – precarization processes, both structurally and discursively, prevented workers from being the linchpin of grassroots politics in post-revolutionary Iran. The absence of workers as a collective force in the 2009 events contrasting with their crucial presence as a collective force in 1978-1979 is best understood in a context of legal, economic and social marginalization. This context mirrored in the IRI's main discourse, hindering the development of solidarity building mechanisms and cross-class alliances, but did not alter the way workers' agency was expressed.

This work constitutes a timely contribution to the field of Iranian Studies, as it expands the study of labor in Iran by including workers' words and words on workers, beyond mere economic factors.

Future authors in the fields of Middle Eastern Studies and Labor Studies might profit from this research for two main reasons. First, this work has combined both a perspective from above and an approach from below to contribute to the identification of the multiple constructions of labor and workers over time. Second, it explores the processes of *precarization* beyond mere economic or legal dimensions, by following the discursive shifts and by connecting them to the structural factors that led to the weakening of grassroots politics in Iran through deradicalization.

The Gramscian conception of hegemonic relations, with its balance between coercion and consent, have been key to addressing the above-mentioned issues. Indeed, relations of power and domination shaped the processes through which workers expressed their role in terms of collective thinking and solidarity-building. Language, by conveying shared values and meanings, was instrumental both for the dominant narratives spread by the IRI and for the discourses taking shape from below. Although – as Gramsci argued – hegemony does not solely belong to the ruling apparatus, this dissertation has shown that the IRI did not consolidate itself in the labor realm purely through coercion. This work has demonstrated how discourses and structural factors intertwined. In fact, top-down strategies concerning labor and workers’ bottom-up responses both mirrored and contrasted with each other in post-revolutionary Iran.⁸¹⁶

Most academic research concentrates only on constraints and repression and depicts the IRI as an omnipotent entity. However, this approach erases people’s agency. As this study showed throughout its chapters using a bottom-up perspectives (chapters 3, 5 and 8), in the case of workers two crucial elements emerge. 1) Repression does not represent the only factor that may silence or block acts of resistance. 2) Workers may lack formal connections and long-term goals. They are discouraged and alienated by several sources of power within society (family, friends) and public discourse. This reflection is not meant to minimize the role of the IRI’s control and repression of forms of activism that might constitute a threat to its stability. This work tried to push the academic

⁸¹⁶ See Morgana, “Precarious Workers and Neoliberal Narratives in Post-revolutionary Iran,” *Middle East Institute*.

critique and debate forward, by giving a broader picture of Iran's complex – though not exceptional – reality. Indeed, looking at the country through a historical lens helps avoid the risk (and fallacies) of trapping facts inside the cage of the present, while – at the same time – starting from a present-day issue (or the most recent one).

When, how and why did the discursive shifts and transformations in hegemonic relations occur? The dynamics of language and discourse went hand in hand with political confrontations, and generated both intended and unintended consequences. Here it is worth retracing the crucial stages of these shifts. As chapters 2 and 3 showed, the charismatic figure of Ayatollah Khomeini managed to cast workers under his umbrella not through any religious path, but mainly due to his political stance as a leader. During the making of the 1979 revolution, oil workers in particular, by following Khomeini, made a political and strategic move. At that time a discursive war was going on within and beyond the factories, involving the crucial legacy of the Left for the labor movement. Workers not only paralyzed the economy, but contributed to advancing political demands against the monarchy. Their consciousness as a cohesive group gradually matured along with their strikes, throughout the months between the end of 1978 and the Revolution day. When they joined the massive demonstrations, workers shared slogans and goals with the other groups on the streets. They did not merely walk alongside. They were able to build weak – yet important – cross-class alliances that were the fruits of family connections, political contacts established with Leftist groups and intermittent links with the student movement.

Once the Islamic Republic was established, another struggle for hegemony began, as the discursive war had not stopped. Beyond coercion, the discursive battle for consent in the labor realm was fought over social justice. While Khomeini was still alive, the IRI engulfed the class language championed by the Left by absorbing it into the Islamist discourse of the *mostaz'afin*. Thus, it sanitized the anti-capitalist struggle in the factories and defused any potential revolt against the management. This discursive strategy accompanied a massive purge of Leftists and the dismantling of the secular workers' councils, which were replaced by an Islamic counterpart. Concurrently, the

Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) had already started, looming over the lives of Iranians. It brought death, destruction, and massive economic disruption. During the 1980s these factors inevitably impacted the labor realm, as discourses over workers adapted. The narratives of workers as “God slaves” and “martyrs” of the cause spread along with the rhetoric of “labor as a religious duty.” Boosting production was presented as a structural need, and it was exploited by the ruling apparatus, as it became a tool of political intervention. By being institutionalized in the discourse of the post-war era – the so-called *sāzandegi* (reconstruction) – *produce and consume* became a mantra. Spreading from the top, it aimed to reach the new generation. It eventually circulated more generally in the social body.

Since the 1990s, two main factors, beyond actual repression, contributed to narrowing workers’ political space: first, neoliberal narratives and policies; and second, specific legal measures.⁸¹⁷ Both of them involved the economic and political structure, but – as chapters 6 and 7 demonstrated – became interwoven with discourses that addressed the new middle classes, rather than embraced workers and the needs of the labor realm. While the economy needed investment, capital and productivity, top-down discourses strengthened citizens’ individual participation, drifting away from the rhetoric of collectivity and dismissing social justice as a core element of the IRI’s discourse. Within this context, the implementation of the newly approved Labor Law soon carried the seeds of labor flexibilization and *precarization*. Short-term contracts narrowed wage earners’ space for labor protection, excluding workers *de facto* from severance benefits, paid leave, etc. More broadly, these measures made it almost impossible for workers to share the same workplace, and thus to develop common grievances. Hence, by making the labor realm precarious, fixed term and blank daily contracts contributed to the fragmentation of the processes of solidarity building among workers. They hindered collective bargaining, despite Khatami’s attempts to facilitate the codification of workers’ independent unions in early 2003. Nevertheless, it was a losing battle on

⁸¹⁷ Ibid.

the legal and political front, at least from a top-down perspective. In fact, the battle from below had never stopped. As chapter 5 showed, workers kept protesting both for their economic needs, and to a more limited extent, for their rights to collectively and freely organize.

In this regard, this research has challenged the idea that the emergence of workers' actions and new subjectivities relied on state mechanisms of repression versus concessions. Instead, labor activism in Iran evolved systematically between 1979 and 2009, and the top-down/bottom-up confrontation never ceased, although it was extremely fragmented. Along with repressive acts constraining the opportunities for expressions of workers' agency, and legal measures undermining collective bargaining, labor suffered from a broader process of *precarization*: it led to deradicalization. This latter should be understood through the Gramscian prism of *acting politically*, which entails consciousness, room for *manoeuvre* and *awareness of duration* that have been used throughout this analysis. How did that happened? By delegitimizing the Left, appropriating collective celebrations such as May Day, and casting social justice under the IRI's umbrella, the ruling apparatus successfully sanitized radical ideas. The alternatives proposed, since the 1990s, de facto discredited political activities beyond the IRI's apparatus, as acting *politically* was identified either with the system or with dangerous activities that might be subject to repression. Although Khatami attempted to enlarge the spectrum of participants in socio-political life and a limited space for criticism was created, workers largely remained outside of his focus. Economically, his presidency followed the path pursued by Rafsanjani, and his understanding of civil society crystallized with an individualist citizen-centered dimension. Thus, the children of the Revolution – the generation born during the 1980s – represented Khatami's main interlocutors. They had experienced neither the enthusiasm and solidarity of 1979, nor the eight years of war as adults, nor the early days of the Islamic Republic permeated by both political struggles and repression. Leftist ideas and radical understandings of class, social justice, and collective actions were too extreme or equated for most of the new generations with the IRI's dominant narrative.

The paradoxical tendency of this deradicalization process emerged in 2009. As chapter 8 discussed, the Green activists that the bulk of the Leftist organized workers labeled as “rich,” “neoliberal” and fundamentally “devoid of political belonging,” did not only challenge the political system. They looked for a lost language of revolt. With their support for Mousavi and their civil rights requests, they attempted to articulate their contestation politically. Beyond repression – this dissertation argues – their limits and their failures were purely political. In fact, the Green Movement fully embodied the product of the contending narratives championed by the IRI. On the one hand, it opposed for the first time since the 1979 Revolution an elite that had disfigured the dialectics of politics in its essence. On the other hand, it did not have the political stance and strength to radicalize the movement towards the Left, in order to include social justice among its core demands. The real nature of the disconnections between unofficially organized labor activists and the Greens was not economic, nor should it be ascribed to the misleading dichotomies of rich versus poor, or liberal with Mousavi versus workers/the backward poor with Ahmadinejad. The breaking point was political. This is not to conclude that the Greens demonstrated indifference to politics. On the contrary, the Movement exposed the absolute relevance and necessity of politics.

Ultimately, another paradox within the paradox emerged, as the missed opportunity to trigger cross-class alliances and solidarity-building mechanisms lay precisely in precarity. The Green Movement could have embraced social justice as one of its slogans. It could have seized the chance to mobilize against the *precarization* processes that had already overwhelmed a large segment of the silent Iranians in the 1 million march in June 2009. Yet, it did not. The practices and discourses of politics established by the neoliberal order had gradually transformed the meaning of politics itself. The Green Movement brought to light the outcomes of a decades-long process that involved structural and discursive factors. The structural factors may explain the transformations occurred in the streets only if presented as inextricably connected to the discursive shifts, through a process of interaction that involved different actors: the workers, the IRI’s leadership, the evolving society that eventually emerged in 2009. A key factor to explain not only how the role of workers changed, but why it has

changed is “precarization.” While turning into more precarious subjects through temporary contracts and eroded legal rights, workers became more vulnerable. Their opportunities to unite and organize decreased. Discourse mirrored workers’ marginalization in reality, while the IRI began to praise the middle classes, which were fundamental to economic recovery and functional to the new image of Iran.

The absence of workers as a collective force in the 2009 events, contrasting with their crucial presence as a collective force in 1978-1979, is to be understood within a context of discursive as well as socio-economic *precarization* (and consequent *marginalization*). These dynamics prevented the development of solidarity-building mechanisms and cross-class alliances, but did not fully erase workers’ agency. However, the compression of politics gradually manifested in the compression of society, whose inner components of plurality and unity were canceled as a result, both from above and from below. Eventually, workers as a broader group of precarious subjects were left behind. “Precarized” and, ultimately, divided.