The Oil Worker as Figure:
Disfigurations of Labor and Racialisation in Modern Iran

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Introduction

On 18 September 2022, only two days after Jina Amini's state murder, the Council for Organising Contract Oil Workers Protests (COCOWP) released its first statement against gender-based violence: "Today, the heightening of the circle of repression and the brutality of the regime's murderers has put society under rebellious and revolutionary circumstances. This highlights the urgency to unify our actions and put our solidarity into practice to abolish these hellish circumstances."[1] On 10 October 2022, contract oil workers in the Assaluyeh petrochemical complex put radical solidarity into practice by announcing the beginning of a strike campaign "in support of the people's widespread protests."[2] This marked the first wave of strikes part of the Jina Uprising, a movement that was ignited in response to the state murder of Jina Amini and opposed the Iranian regime.

Located in southern Iran, Assaluyeh is home to a significant portion of the country's oil and gas infrastructure. As the nearest land point to the world's largest natural gas fields, Assaluyeh hosts major port complexes, processing plants, and refineries, creating a constant demand for labour that has, historically, been satisfied by racialised, and ethnically Persian migrant workers from across the country as well as the indigenous Arab populations from the across Iran's southern regions. In one of the six videos of the Assaluyeh strike, published on 10 October, one worker introduces himself as "the voice of Assaluyeh" and chants "*Long live Iran*! *Long live Lors, Turks, Kurds, Arabs and Bakhtiyari's!*"[3] By expressing solidarity with various racialised groups, this worker highlights, not only the intersection of labour oppression and gender-based violence, but also the process of racialisation underpinning labour discipline in Iran's energy sector.[4]

Disproportional though it may be, the public perception of oil workers' particular demand for regime abolition circulated and gained more traction than any other protestor demographic; as if the oil worker is the *true* working-class subject whose insurrectionary demands are unanimously granted revolutionary status. This widespread sentiment exposed the predominant image of oil workers, not only as the primary subject of labour politics but also their primacy of (figurative) place in what

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[1] Council for Organising Contract Oil Workers Protests (COCOWP), 'Statement Condemning Mahsa Amini's State Murder,' *Telegram*, 18 September 2022. An English translation is available on Instagram courtesy of *Jina Collective*.

[2] Council for Organising Contract Oil Workers Protests (COCOWP), post on official Telegram channel, 10 October 2022. An English translation available on Instagram courtesy of *Jina Collective*.

[3] Galan Ooja (@GalanOoja2020), *X* post (28 January 2022).

[4] In the context of this thesis and contemporary Iran, I understand racialised groups as those non-Persian communities whose marginalisation by the centralist state has historically served interconnected political and economic ends.

I call the Iranian revolutionary imaginary; an imaginary marked by a shifting collective desire for radical political change.

It is within this field that I situate the concept of *conjunctural imaginaries* by which I mean the historically specific ways in which different political futures are desired and represented by the oppositional publics. Representations of the oil worker *as* figure shift and are, thus, invested with revolutionary potential based on the determinations of each *conjunctural imaginary.* Building on Stuart Hall's theorisation of the conjuncture as a temporary but structurally determined alignment of political, economic, and ideological forces, I understand these imaginaries as shaped by the labour politics of Iran's energy sector and animated during moments of intensified crisis. I argue that conjunctural imaginaries find expression in the representational life of the oil worker. The near-unanimous elevation of the oil worker's recent strike to the level of national rupture — regardless of ideological orientation and the workers' conditions — demonstrates how certain historical determinations consolidate the image of the oil worker as uniquely revolutionary. By tracing the temporal formation and transformation of this image, this thesis explores how conjunctural imaginaries operate as reflections of, and responses to, the volatile relationship between labour, race, and capital in modern Iran.

This thesis revolves around the oil worker not only as a central and persisting figure within Iran's revolutionary imaginaries but also as a contested field, over whose representation a vast variety of political actors have struggled throughout the country's history. Reading the oil worker as both a figure and a field implies working analytically with various representational forms of the oil worker, such as newspapers, films, and literature as well as historical discourses of state-building and capital-formation in Iran. The impetus for such an inquiry is none other than the COCOWP's statement with which this thesis began. Compared to the scale and duration of the contract workers' strike that began on 10 October 2022, oppositional Iranian groups unanimously, if perhaps disproportionately, responded with joy; indicating that the current imaginary treats the oil worker as a key revolutionary subject. This, however, begs the question: how did the oil worker come to occupy this central position, historically? By navigating the oil worker's representation in written as well as visual discourses as a representation of various revolutionary imaginaries, this thesis clarifies the political ends each of these representations serves and to what extent they unveil the prevailing revolutionary desires and ideological contradictions of their respective conjunctures.

Additionally, examining representations of oil workers in media and literature vis-à-vis questions regarding political economy and processes of racialisation helps clarify the status of this figure beyond fading revolutionary momentums, such as the 2022 Jina Uprising. My analysis focuses on both textual and visual representations of the oil worker across a range of objects. These include British propaganda cinema, colonial documents, nationalist newspapers, the literary genre of oil fiction, and academic literature on labour movements and capitalism in Iran. By reading these various representations alongside each other, this thesis traces a genealogy of the figure of the oil worker from its emergence to the 1960s, in order to engage with the shifting conjectural imaginaries in which this figure has continued to be embedded and to offer a history to the current wave of workers' insurrections.

Centring two revolutionary moments — the initial representations of oil workers up until the nationalisation period and the White Revolution in the 1960s — I argue that the figure of the oil worker is shaped both by labour insurrections, particularly strikes, and by processes of racialisation that inform nationalist petro-imaginaries. These dynamics construct the oil worker as the singular subject of labour politics, portrayed either as a mythical revolutionary or as a passive victim of economic hardship. I focus my analysis on these two revolutionary instances because they mark significant shifts in the figuration of the oil worker in relation to processes of racialisation in Iran.

This thesis consists of two chapters, each examining distinct but interconnected historical moments in the figuration of the oil worker. Chapter One traces the origins of the oil worker and conceptualises what I refer to as the first major shift in its representation following the success of the oil nationalisation campaign in 1951. Drawing on a comparative analysis of early visual and textual archives — including propaganda films commissioned by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) and classified correspondence between colonial officers in southern Iran and administrative centres in London and Tehran — I juxtapose the colonial construction of the obedient, productive worker with the disobedient, politicised, communist worker. What is at stake in this contrast is not only the production of diverging representations of labour but also the entanglement of racialisation, colonial surveillance, and infrastructural imaginaries in shaping the oil worker as a figure of political possibility or threat. Through an infrastructural reading of these representations, I argue that the oil worker's relationship to the material and aesthetic contours of oil infrastructure — derricks, pipelines, storage tanks, access roads — illustrates both the endurance of this figure and its continuous reconfiguration within a political economy that has become increasingly resistant to labour unrest.

This chapter concludes by analysing illustrations of oil workers published by the nationalist newspaper *Shurish*, through which I trace the transformation of the oil worker from colonial subject to emblem of postcolonial nationalism. Here, I argue that the racialised tropes deployed by the AIOC to construct an Iranian labouring subject — often implicitly referring to the peoples of the south — persisted in nationalist media following nationalisation. The erasure of the oil worker's race and communist politics became a necessary precondition for integrating this figure into dominant narratives of Iranian national identity, thus disciplining racialised populations into what Touraj Atabaki calls a capitalist labour force of compliant national subjects.[5]

Building on the arguments of the first chapter, Chapter Two situates the oil worker within a broader political-economic framework, revealing the structural conditions that have both underpinned and constrained those shifts. Drawing on the concepts of racialisation and internal colonisation, this chapter challenges the absence of Arab labour in dominant discourses on Iran in general, and Khuzestan in particular. Khuzestan is a province in the southwest of Iran, home to the majority of the country's oil infrastructure. Until the early 20th century, the region enjoyed a degree of autonomous governance under Arab leaders and was commonly referred to as Arabistan, reflecting its predominantly Arab population. Following the centralising policies of Reza Shah in the 1920s and 1930s, the region was formally integrated into the Iranian state, and the name Arabistan was officially replaced with Khuzestan. Throughout this thesis, while I may occasionally reference the broader southern region of Iran, my primary focus is on the racialisation of the Arab population of Khuzestan, or historical Arabistan, in particular.

This chapter begins by examining the early years of the oil industry — the production of the first Iranian working class in the oil fields — which was an era that coincided with the consolidation of the Iranian state. This initial section explores the formation of the labour force and Iranian subjectivity in the context of the emerging Iranian state and the transition from colonial to postcolonial rule in the south. The chapter, then, turns to the White Revolution of the 1960s, focusing on its central program of land reforms and what Asef Bayat identifies as the emergence of a new working class. Concentrating on the southern region, the chapter concludes by demonstrating that, unlike other parts of the country where a new industrial working class developed, the south of Iran saw the

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[5] Touraj Atabaki, 'From *Amaleh* [Labor] to *Kargar* [Worker]: Recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry,' *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 159–75.

rise of vast surplus populations. This demographic shift facilitated the social engineering of the region, transforming it from a predominantly Arab area into a largely non-Arab territory.

These two chapters are connected both analytically and temporally, forming a genealogy that moves between representational regimes and material conditions. Together, they respond to a contemporary moment: a recent wave of oil worker strikes in southern Iran whose slogans, demands, and modes of resistance sparked this project. These present-day insurrections, marked by their intensity and the racialised nature of their repression, led me to investigate the longer histories of labour struggle, racialisation, and capitalist subsumption in Iran. While this thesis is rooted in mid-twentieth-century archives, it is equally animated by the urgent questions raised by the contemporary conjuncture.

Literature Review

Given the political impact of oil worker strikes in Iran and oil's continuing domination of the country's GDP, the oil worker not only appears in a vast number of cultural objects but pervades all of the contemporary scholarship on modern Iran. The Iranian oil worker has also appeared in seminal book-length studies on the global oil complex, more generally, and in the field of Energy Humanities, in particular.[6] In regards to labour in the oil industry, scholars such as Asef Bayat, Stephanie Cronin, Khosro Shakeri, Peyman Jafari, Mohammad Maljoo, Haideh Moghissi, Saeed Rahnema, and Ervand Abrahamian have written extensively on the rise and fall of labour movements since the early twentieth century up to our present. Shared among these scholars is the claim that the bulk of research on labour in Iran focuses on the height of union organising and communist militancy in the late 1940s and early 1950s.[7] In sum, every canonical book on contemporary Iranian history includes a section on the labour insurrections of this period.[8] While less research has been done on oil workers since 1979, left-leaning economists such as Mohammad Maljoo have researched labour in the oil industry after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) while others, such as Stella Morgana, unpacked the Islamic Republic's discourses on labour ever since its establishment in 1979.[9]

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[6] Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

[7] Asef Bayat, 'Capital Accumulation, Political Control and Labour Organization in Iran, 1965–75,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 2 (April1989): 198–207.

[8] Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (NewHaven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

[9] Stella Morgana, "'Precarize' and Divide: Iranian Workers from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Green Movement" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 31 March 2021), and Mohammad Maljoo, 'The Political Economy of the Oil Industry's Labor Force in Postwar Iran,' *Rah-e Kargar Workers' Blog*, 4 August 2012.

Despite the importance of these contribution, the most impactful studies of Iranian oil workers' lives and imaginaries have been conducted by researchers such as Atabaki, Peyman Jafari, and Kaveh Ehsani, whose research focuses on the social histories of labour in the Iranian oil industry. I refer to these scholars as the School of Social History. The School of Social History situates its findings against established misrepresentations of the oil worker in the field of Energy Humanities as well as studies of capitalism in Iran. Firstly, these scholars point to Timothy Mitchell's misrepresentation of Iranian oil workers in his seminal book *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*.[10] In *Carbon Democracy,* Mitchell argues that, contrary to coal workers in the United Kingdom of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth century, oil workers around the globe never succeeded in achieving substantial political changes due to the industry's infrastructural resilience to various form of worker sabotage. The School of Social History critiques Mitchell, arguing that Iranian oil workers' political victories — especially in the context of the 1951 oil nationalisation movement and the 1979 Revolution — practically refute this claim.[11] Secondly, the School of Social History offers an alternative to narratives regarding Iranian capitalism, which erase labour by over-representing processes of capital accumulation vis-à-vis Iran's national bourgeoisie.[12]

In addition to representations within political economy and national history, the oil worker has also been represented in films and literature and taken up in scholarly fields that revolve around the analyses of cultural objects. For example, the oil worker is a reoccurring character in the propaganda films commissioned by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), and therefore also a figure of study for scholars such as Mona Damluji who analyse the construction of modernity in these films.[13] The oil worker is also the protagonist of a variety of novels and short stories that belong to the Southern School of Fiction, a Persian literary genre also referred to as Oil Fiction.[14] In fact, one of Oil Fiction's sub-genres is Worker's Literature and revolves exclusively around the lives of oil workers. Examples of this sub-genre are the works of Farhad Keshvari and Ahmad Mahmood. In

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[10] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011).
[11] *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*, eds. Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini, and Kaveh Ehsani, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing/PalgraveMacmillan, 2018).
[12] Kayhan Valadbaygi, *Capitalism in Contemporary Iran: Capital Accumulation, State Formation and Geopolitics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024), and Mohammad Maljoo, *Hidden Plunder: Expropriation of Labor through Inflation in Iran* (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 2020).
[13] Mona Damluji, 'The Oil City in Focus: The Cinematic Spaces of Abadan in the Anglo−Iranian Oil Company's *Persian Story*,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no.1 (2013): 75–88.
[14] Niloufar Nematollahi, "'Oil Is Not Extracted Easily, Our Lives Are Sacrificed for It': Iranian Oil Fiction," *Kunstlicht* 42, no. 3–4 (2022): 75–88.

From Oil to Story: The Impact of Oil on the Literature of the South, literary scholar Shabnam Hatampour offers a comprehensive collection of the novelists who have written in this sub-genre, as well as all other forms of oil fiction.[15] Moreover, Roya Khoshnevis' research on representations of petroleum in Persian literature and in a selection of films by Ebrahim Golestan, offers an additional glimpse into fictional and aesthetic representations of labour in the south.[16]

Missing from this scholarly field, however, is any critical attention to the conjunctural alignment of fossil fuel infrastructure, the political economy of the state, and the determinant (and non-identity) of labour in the energy sector. This is because the literary and film scholarship on the oil encounter in the south of Iran tends to focus on the concept of modernity but fails to incorporate capitalism as an analytical category. In the scholarship that follows this approach, the categories of modernity, capitalism, and colonialism are often used loosely and interchangeably. This tendency reinforces universal narratives of fast-paced modernisation under British colonialism following the discovery of oil, but fails to ground the selected aesthetic mediations within the complex political dynamics from which they emerged. More importantly, this approach conceptualises modernity, and thus colonialism, as phenomena of the past, sidelining endocolonialism in contemporary Iran, and in the south more specifically.[17]

Analyses of films and literature emerging from the oil encounter as well as the School of Social History and related literature on labour in Iran, exclude endocolonialism and the processes of racialisation that have shaped the socio-political realities of Iran's oil rich regions from the beginning of the twentieth-century to the present. This literature, thereby, sidelines racial capitalism as the foundation of Iranian capitalism and the subsequent disciplining of the country's first capitalist labour force in the context of the oil industry. Whereas, scholars such as Ahmad Mohammadpour have conceptualised racialisation and endocolonialism, or internal colonialism, as integral to the construction of Iranian nationalism, Mohammadpour's research exclusively focusses on Kurdistan and does not explain the realities of racial capital in the oil-rich, indigenously Arab, regions of the south

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[15] Shabnam Hatampour, *From Oil… to Story: Examining the Impact of the Oil Industry on Southern Iranian Fiction* (Tehran: Zayim Publications, 2020).
[16] Roya Khoshnevis, "Crude Oil and Its False Promises of Modernization: Petroleum Encounters in Modern Iranian Fiction". (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 16 December 2021).
[17] Iman Ganji and JoseRosales, 'Iran's Khuzestan: Riots Against the Suicidal State,' *LUMPEN: A Journal for Poor and Working-Class Writers*, no. 11 (Summer–Autumn 2022).

of Iran.[18] The indigenous Arab population of Iran's south is an understudied topic. One of the few scholars who has extensively researched this community is Aghil Daghagheleh. However, Daghagheleh's work does not study Arab labour in specific.[19]

Throughout this thesis, I draw extensively on all of the scholarship listed above while simultaneously aiming to offer an alternative understanding of oil, racial capitalism, and labour in Iran. In reading a vast range of representations of the oil worker, I aim to reach beyond narratives of fast-paced modernisation under British colonialism and the fixed, singular, Iranian subject by focusing on the co-construction of class and race in Iran.

[18] Kamal Soleimani and Ahmad Mohammadpour, 'Life and Labor on the Internal Colonial Edge: Political Economy of Kolberi in Rojhelat,' *British Journal of Sociology* 71, no. 4 (2020): 741–760.
[19] Aghil Daghagheleh, *Indigenous Refusal: Arab Minority and the Formation of the Modern State in Iran* (PhD diss., Rutgers University, October 2023).

Chapter One: The Origins of the Oil Worker as Figure

> And in the *howze*[20] Arezoo spoke. When night fell, it was as if the Behmanshir river grew louder, more restless. As if the palm trees whispered secrets, and the acrid scent of oil, gas, and burning palms thickened in the air.[21]
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> Arezoo said, "All over the country, they spread rumours, promising work, good wages, houses, a better life. And so people, from every corner, leave behind their homes and livelihoods and come here, chasing that promise of decent work and decent food. But the moment they set foot on this soil, they realise it's nothing like what they were told. When the number of people grows, they can do whatever they want with us. The more hands there are, the lower the wages. If one person refuses to work, there are ten more, starving, desperate, willing to endure twelve hours of labour a day for a single meal."[22]

Introduction

In *The Indigenous Boy*, a short story by the prominent oil fiction writer Ahmad Mahmood, the character of Arezoo represents the oil worker's most enduring figuration to date, as both the primary subject of labour politics and a key figure in the revolutionary imaginary.[23] Even though many of those who reacted with joy to the 2022 Jina Uprising oil strikes may have never read Mahmood, the oil worker as figured in Arezoo, nevertheless, resurfaces in the imaginaries of those who oppose the status quo. I begin this chapter with Mahmood's Arezoo, a fictional strike leader whose uncommon name means 'dream,' and precisely because he represents the oil worker *as* the symbol of a revolutionary dream.

Beginning with Arezoo, this chapter traces the emergence of the oil worker, its transformation into a highly politicised figure, and its evolution into a central subject of revolutionary imaginaries, particularly following the successive strikes that led to the nationalisation of Iranian oil in 1951. The analysis of the oil worker during this period is concerned with the representational strategies used to narrate the rise of the oil worker as Iran's first capitalist labour force. Following this conjunctural reading of Arezoo as the personification of the oil worker as the revolutionary subject *par excellence*, this chapter proceeds to trace the genealogy of this figure: from his first public depiction in colonial films as the obedient native worker — standing in stark contrast to his portrayal in Mahmood's short stories and in "Top Secret" colonial correspondences as a dangerous threat — to his eventual refiguration as a vessel for Iranian nationalism. This final transformation, however, came at the cost of disfiguring the oil workers' racialised dimensions.

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[20] *Howze* was a local cell of the Tudeh Party, Iran's communist party, operating in the oil city of Abadan.

[21] Ahmad Mahmoud, *Gharybihā va Pisaraki Būmy* [The Strangers and the Indigenous Boy] (Tehran: Moin Publisher, 1991), 176

[22] *Ibid*, 189-190.

[23] Mahmoud, *Gharybihā va Pisaraki Būmy*, 196.

In order to grasp how the oil worker entered popular narrative representations, I engage with visual media and popular culture, as well as colonial documents produced between 1942 and 1953. The analysis follows the figure's emergence through a parallel reading of multiple sources: Mahmood's depiction of the 1942 oil strikes in *The Indigenous Boy* (1971); telegraphs exchanged between British colonial officers in London, Tehran, and southern Iran in 1946; the propaganda film *Oil from Khuzestan* (1948); and illustrations published by the pro-Mossadeq nationalist newspaper *Shurish* [Revolt] (1951-53).

The portrayal of the earliest struggles among competing ideologies in the early years of the Iranian oil industry — British colonialism, Iranian nationalism, communism — is clarified by reframing the figure of the oil worker as a central motif of Iranian political life. This reframing demonstrates that this motif both encapsulates a broader archive of workers' resistance and registers the simultaneous ideological battles over the right to claim the oil worker as proper to their respective discourses; battles that testify to the figure's emergent importance in modern Iran. This chapter seeks to trace this alternative archive as a counter-discourse that is integral to the organization of conjunctural imaginaries in Iran.

That said, the counter-archive in question is the result of my own labours. What I am presenting here is thus a counter-archive, one that I am actively constructing in this chapter. It is an archive that demands attention to the relationship between energy infrastructure, state building, and labour in Iran. In constituting and examining this archive, the figure of the oil worker emerges in both the aesthetic and historical records as more ambiguous, and thus analytically unsettling, than what dominant discourses readily claim.

The gathering and reading of this archive lays the groundwork for an argument regarding the particular mediations of race and class as being vis-à-vis energy structures and state building in Iran. This counter-archive also contains frictions against nationalist narratives, revealing glimpses of communist hope that have been largely forgotten or erased by today's revolutionary factions. Recovering such moments of historical forgetting and erasure, thereby, suggest that today's labour struggles — e.g. contract oil workers in Assaluyeh — have an historical precedent and that the figure of the oil worker, central to the nationalist imaginary today, draws its strength from earlier communist and racialised figurations.

The Birth Of The Oil Worker As Revolutionary And The Communist Dream

Set in 1942, *The Indigenous Boy* is told from the perspective of Shahru, a son of an oil worker, who narrates his observations of British colonial presence and workers' resistance in the oil city of Abadan. The reader follows Shahru as he roams the streets of the racially segregated oil town, moving between the banks of the Behmanshir river, his British love interest's house in the Bowarda neighbourhood, and the *howze* meetings in the workers' slums. *The Indigenous Boy* includes elaborate descriptions of oil workers' strikes in the lead up to the the 14th National Consultative Assembly elections, which serve as the story's historical and narrative bookend.[24]

The Indigenous Boy emerges against the background of Mahmood's entangled communist political beliefs and his experience of working-class life in Khuzestan. Like Shahru, Mahmood was the son of a worker. He spent his formative years under the shadows of palm trees and oil derricks. Entering high school at the peak of the political movement leading to the nationalisation of Iranian oil in 1951, Mahmood joined the *Tudeh* Party [Communist Party of Iran]. After the 1952 British and U.S.-led coup against Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosadeq, and the subsequent criminalisation of the *Tudeh* Party, Mahmood was incarcerated and later exiled to Bandar Lengeh, a port city also located in the south of Iran.[25] Mahmood is a pioneer of *Maktabe Dastan-Nevisi-ye Jonoob* (The Southern School of Fiction), also known as Oil Fiction. Originating from southern Iran, both the form and themes of this literary genre emerge from the tensions between the infrastructures introduced to the region through British colonialism and the indigenous ways of life.[26]

Together with other authors from the south of the country — e.g. Farhad Keshvari, Nassrollah Samadzadeh, Nader Ebrahimi, Ruhollah Shariati, and Hassan Abdollahi — Mahmood channeled his lived experience of working class life, communist organising, and political oppression into his writing. This literary success marked the beginning of a new chapter in Persian Oil Fiction and workers' literature.[27] Drawing on Hasan Mirabedini's analysis of this genre in his seminal book on the literary history of contemporary Iran, *A Hundred Years of Story Writing*, Shabnam Hatampour argues that although the first examples of Persian workers' literature appeared as early as the 1920s, the genre only matured when *southern* Oil Fiction writers began infusing this literary form with their

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[24] Mahmoud, *Gharybihā va Pisaraki Būmy*, 196.
[25] Khoshnevis, "Crude Oil and Its False Promises," 86.
[26] Shabnam Hatampour, *From Oil... to Story: The Oil Industry's Impact on Southern Iranian Fiction* (Tehran: Zayim, 2020).
[27] Here, Persian refers to the language and not the ethnicity.

embodied experiences of working class life in the region. Prior to the appropriation of workers' literature by writers such as Ahmad Mahmood, and during the early waves of Marxist and socialist thought in 1920s Iran, authors such as Sadegh Hedayat had already attempted to depict working class life. However, due to their distance from the lived realities of the country's emerging working class, these earlier stories amounted to little more than imitative renditions of the genre as it existed in the Russian and English literature they had read.[28] Thus, it was only with the emergence of writers such as Mahmood that Persian workers' literature began to distinguish itself as a genre. For the first time in Persian prose, these oil stories not only articulated their protagonists' sense of connection through class and class antagonism, but also conveyed a deep sense of belonging to the specific geography and lived reality of Iran's southern regions. In other words, they succeeded in capturing the particularities of labour, place, and struggle in southern Iran.

Mahmood's literary style is, first and foremost, characterised by harmonious descriptions of southern Iran's nature and oil infrastructure. For Mahmood, "the pungent smell of date groves and the scent of gas and oil" are intertwined while "the flare tower's mouths spitting revolting flames" appear, entangled with the Gulf and the pitch black sky.[29] Mahmood's integration of oil infrastructure into the indigenous landscape of the south aims to display workers' deep knowledge of, and power over, oil. For Mahmood, the pipelines, derricks, flare towers, and oil belong to the workers of the south, just like the land, the Gulf, the river, and the mountains. In *The Indigenous Boy,* workers figure as those who intimately live with, and master, oil. That is to say, the worker, here, is figured as the proletarianised populations of southern Iran that have succeeded in taming the infrastructural monsters created by colonial forces.

That said, how does Arezoo figure in *The Indigenous Boy*? Arezoo first appears in a *howze* meeting where he gives a speech about the colonial oil company's false promises to improve workers' living conditions as directly connected to the upcoming parliament election. With a voice that is "raspy yet soothing" and a masculine and strong willed personality, Arezoo is a natural born leader with a political consciousness and strong sense of justice in leading the masses in their struggle against colonial oppression.[30] In her analysis of *The Indigenous Boy,* Roya Khoshnevis claims that Mahmood's

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[28] Shabnam Hatampour, *From Oil... to Story: The Oil Industry's Impact on Southern Iranian Fiction* (Tehran: Zayim, 2020); Hassan Mirabedini, *Sad Sāl Dāstān-Nevisi dar Irān* [A Hundred Years of Story Writing in Iran] (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2009).

[29] Mahmoud, *Gharybihā va Pisaraki Būmy*, 171; 176.

[30] Mahmoud, *Gharybihā va Pisaraki Būmy*, 176.

choice to narrate the story from the perspective of a child symbolises the workers' lack of understanding about the particularities of their oppression.[31] Contrary to Khoshnevis, I argue that it is primarily through the character Arezoo that Mahmood portrays the oil worker as society's most politically aware and potentially revolutionary subject. For Mahmood, the oil worker is perhaps the *only* figure in the fabric of Iran's diverse society who displays a profound understanding of the entanglements of colonialism, capitalism, and oppression. The choice to narrate workers' strikes from the perspective of a stunned child only adds to the oil worker's mythical figuration as *the* revolutionary subject *par excellence*. The image of the stunned child, here, does not represent the oil worker's consciousness but Iranian society at large; a society that was perplexed by oil workers' consciousness and organisation in a period that various scholars have marked as the height of labour militancy in Iran. For Iranian society, Arezoo and his kin were truly something out of a *dream*.

The Persian Situation: The Oil Worker As Threat to British Life And Property

Arezoo, it should be noted, is the fictional representation of actual oil workers from Masjid Soleyman, Abadan, Khoramshahr, Aghajari, Ahwaz, etc., whose affiliation to the *Tudeh* Party and their successive strikes began threatening the British governance of the south to an unprecedented extent in the 1940s. Even from the most cursory engagement with "Top Secret" telegraphs sent by colonial officers during this period, these cables are everywhere marked by the echo of Arezoo's voice. Contained in these correspondences are references to a threat that is largely expressed in terms of "British anxiety" over the destruction of AIOC's infrastructure and the subsequent disruption of oil flows. Now, whereas Mahmood describes workers' relation to oil infrastructure as harmonious, these colonial correspondences portray oil workers and their frequent strikes as a danger to AIOC's colonial installations. Reading these colonial-era cables alongside Mahmood's fictional representation of strikes suggests that, prior to taming the monsters born from oil infrastructure, workers had to disrupt the flow of oil for years.

The remaining correspondences from 1946 depict oil workers *either* as the subjects of bad living conditions *or* as "a threat to British lives and property"[32] — the latter being a reference to oil workers' disruption of oil infrastructure as well as outbursts of worker violence against colonial officers. Moreover, these reports describe the "Persian Situation" as "extremely precarious," and emphasise the importance of protecting "the Company's installations for a longer period, to enable the produc-

[31] Khoshnevis, "Crude Oil and Its False Promises," 87.
[32] The National Archives (TNA), FO 371/52714, Foreign Office: Political Departments: General Correspondence, 1946.

tion of oil to be continued."[33] Equally important is the fact that every individual telegraph sent from the south of Iran to the British Foreign Office in London from this period includes one section on workers' living conditions and another, more elaborate, section on "strikes and other manifestations of disorder" that are, according to the author, "very carefully prepared by *Tudeh* organisers."[34] These reports mark the emergence of the oil worker as a politicised subject colonial officers feared can no longer be controlled by "the Oil Company."[35]

The politicisation of oil workers is also visible in reports dated after the 1946 strike held on May Day of that year. Thus, in the subsequent years, the oil worker was no longer represented as a mere victim of bad living conditions, but as a *Tudeh* Party member "with a hand in organising [strikes]."[36] One of many telegraphs "on the *Tudeh* Party organisation in the south" — sent from the British Embassy in Tehran to the Foreign Office in London, dated for 29 May 1946 — estimated the number of *Tudeh* Party members among oil workers as upwards of 7000 and stated that workers who refused to join the [*Tudeh*] Party were beaten up by fellow "workmen."[37] As we learn from this report, the oil worker is no longer the passive victim of impoverished living conditions and unfair wages but appears as a political leader in their own right, capable of organising strikes that threaten the interests of the Oil Company itself. Moreover, *Tudeh* members are now described as "masters of the situation," while strikes in the wake of May Day (1946) are portrayed as "small [if] annoying" but occurring almost every day.[38] The report continues:

> The latest strike [with an estimated participation of 500-600 workers] in the Distillation Plant was well organized. Single man pickets were placed at each door leading into the Time Clocks and all D.P. men entering the Refinery were quietly told to stay out, which they did. Other D.P. employees inside the Refinery left work and walked out. To identify and prevent such picketing is extremely difficult and the Police authorities do not wish to take any action, which might get them into trouble with the Central Government. Certain of the officials, including Colonel Vaghar himself, are now trying to integrate themselves with[in] the *Tudeh* Party in case the next Government and/or Majlis is a leftist Government.[39]

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] The National Archives (TNA), FO 371/52714, Foreign Office: Political Departments: General Correspondence, 1946.
[39] Ibid.

The fear of a possible left-wing government on the part of Iranian authorities is described, here, as a result from the successful displays of communist, oil worker, power and their consistent labour organising — e.g. the picketing actions described above. Doubling the fear of the authorities is the colonial oil company's fear of infrastructural destruction, which is woven into both the fabric of the above report as well as all other telegraphs dating from 1946. Similarly, the fear on the part of colonial oil magnates was itself a result of the central governments increasing *inability* to protect "British lives and property;" and not just from any oil worker, in general, but from the unprecedented number of "well organized" workers, no longer connected merely on the basis of shared economic misery but by a sense of shared, two-fold, struggle: against their common condition and against the actors who have a vested interest in maintaining the conditions of worker misery.[40] It is in this very same report, written in light of this elevated oil worker consciousness and orientation toward class-struggle, and oil workers' shift toward communism, that the fear of Iran possibly "following the Mexican example" and nationalise its oil industry emerges for the first time. This fear would reappear in a later telegraph, warning the British Foreign Minister that "the company would very soon have to choose between abandoning their property and bloodshed."[41] What ultimately prompted these reports was the transformation of the oil worker into a properly politicised subject; a transformation that was as much an effect of oil workers' capacity for consistently disrupting the flow of oil as it was a result of their integration into the active membership base of the *Tudeh* Party.

It is against this background that Mahmood's descriptions of workers' relation to oil infrastructure can be read as an attempt to establish themselves as the rightful owners of the means of production; a right they had earned through struggle and on the basis of their belonging to the workers of the south rather than "British property."[42] And yet, it was only after the process of nationalisation that the image of the disobedient communist oil worker — figured in the character of Arezoo and depicted secret colonial correspondences as a worker who struggles over their right to oil, oil infrastructure, and the means of production — would become a mainstream, public, phenomena. Moreover, this figure of the disobedient worker stands in stark contrast to the more common and public representations of labour that, at the time of the strikes of the 1940s, the Oil Company foregrounded in its propaganda films. Seminal among these films was *Oil From Khuzestan* (1948), a

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] The National Archives (TNA), FO 371/52714, Foreign Office: Political Departments: General Correspondence, 1946.

film that was responsible for the first public *figuration* of oil workers *as* "obedient subjects" of the Oil Company.

The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and the Obedient Native

The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) commissioned films that featured some of the first representations of oil workers intended for public consumption. The company's earliest narrated films — e.g., *Oil From Khuzestan* (1948) — functioned as "a short survey of the Company's operations in Iran" and were predominantly distributed among company officials in both Britain and its former colonies.[43] Later films, such as *Persian Story* (1951), however, were intended for cinema-going publics "in England and Iran."[44] In her analysis of *Persian Story*, Mona Damluji claims that "this film constructs the notion of modernity in terms of the visual aesthetics of Westernisation, and thus renders invisible the material and social conditions of Iran's working class that resulted from the development of the oil industry."[45] Additionally, the cinematic construction of modernity in *Oil From Khuzestan* relies on the disfiguration of workers' "material and social conditions."[46] But what exactly is erased in *Oil from Khuzestan*? And what does Damluji mean by "the visual aesthetics of Westernisation"? Or, rather, how is modernity precisely visualised in cinematic representations of oil infrastructure and labour, and to whom is this construct supposed to cater?[47]

Figure 1: Still from *Oil From Khuzestan* (1948)

[43] Damluji, 'The Oil City in Focus,' 80.
[44] Ibid., 82.
[45] Ibid., 79.
[46] Ibid., 87.
[47] Ibid., 79.

In *Oil from Khuzestan,* the oil workers' figuration is peripheral compared to the extensive shots depicting "the infrastructure of pumps and pipelines that brought forth gushing towers of sticky black gold from the barren desert."[48] According to Damluji, depictions of oil infrastructures' unprecedented capacity in conquering and controlling the "inhospitable and barren Persian desert landscape," enables the visual construction of "modernity" as contingent upon extraction.[49] Adding to this, I argue that, for AIOC's films, capitalism is a more expansive analytical category than Westernisation or "modernity." This allows for a broader understanding of Damluji's argument such that the cinematic construction of modernity, grounded on extraction, justified and marked the full integration, not of Iran, but the Iranian south into global capitalism. In the final analysis, the aim of these films is not the construction of an image of modernity. Rather, these films seek to emphasise the centrality of Iran within global capitalism so as to *justify* the colonisation of southern Iran by Great Britain.

But how does the figuration of oil worker square with this colonial oil company's attempted self-justification? The cinematic representation of the "obedient" oil worker relies on their depictions as skilful constructors and operators of oil infrastructure. Seen in this light, depictions of labour's relationship to oil infrastructure can be understood as examples of what Damluji calls "the visual aesthetics of Westernisation."[50] If modernity functions to justify capitalisation through colonialism; and if this modernity is performed by the cinematic representation of oil infrastructure as never interrupted; then, the oil worker's skilled, and joyful, operation of this modern infrastructure is a necessary precondition to justify the continuous disciplining of so-called tribal lay men into productive "workmen" by the colonial Oil Company.[51] In order to portray this disciplined workforce as joyful, labour strikes were cinematically erased in favour of long, silent, shots of workers building, and operating, roads and pipelines for the British Oil Company. These images would serve as proof of the need for colonial extraction given its importance for global capitalism.

The cinematic erasure of strikes denies workers' capacity for potentially disrupting the flow of oil. A potential that, at the time *Oil from Khuzestan* was shot, had already been realised via multiple strikes of which the most wide spread were in 1914, 1929, and 1946.[52] This erasure constructs

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[48] Ibid., 80.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Damluji, 'The Oil City in Focus,' 79.
[51] The National Archives (TNA), FO 371/52714, Foreign Office: Political Departments: General Correspondence, 1946.
[52] Fedaian Minority Organization, 'A Brief History of Working Class Movement in Iran,' fedaian-minority.org (7 November 2019); 'Oil Workers' Strike (Persia),' *UK Parliament: Hansard*, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard. 17 July 1946.

labour as capital's obedient subject. He is eager to operate colonial infrastructure to pump "new oil" from "the Fields," to the Abadan refinery and, finally, "the markets of the world," which actually meant "to London ready for the Royal Navy and the British consumer."[53] In *Oil From Khuzestan*, the construction of what Damluji calls modernity is contingent on the illusion of the colonial subject's obedience, or in Mitchell's terms "the consent of the governed" and is created through depictions of workers' seamless construction and operation of oil infrastructure and the parallel disfiguration of the worker's strikes.[54]

But for whom is this illusion of modernity through obedience constructed? Despite shying away from engaging critically with supposed Iranian audiences in Tehran, the extant scholarship clearly shows how these films were meant to cater to British audiences. As one Khuzestani put it in a 1928 letter to *Ettela'at* newspaper: "In Tehran they show you the beautiful films of the oil operations in the south."[55] The author continues:

> But have these films ever shown the wretched lives of those lowly Iranian workers who for three *qerans* a day toil in highly dangerous conditions and in really heart-wrenching manner? […] Have these films ever shown you the dictatorial manner in which the [British] managers of the southern oil company govern your fellow citizens and push and shove them around and stifle those who voice the slightest complaint?[56]

The authors' emphasis on Tehran, rather than London, is of crucial importance. Contrary to both the films' proclaimed intentions and Damluji's claim, AIOC films do not aim to present "the context of lived space and society in Iran."[57] In fact, these films misrepresent the particular lived space and society of the Iranian south in a conjuncture marked by the contradictions of British colonialism and Iranian nationalism that emerged, in part, as an oppositional force to colonial expansion. Moreover, this conjuncture is shaped by two simultaneous processes of racialisation: the British construction of the single Iranian subject, and the emergence of the Arab and Bakhtiyari subject of the south as perceived other by the Persian Iranians in Tehran, who were not subjected to the entangled processes of labour disciplining and racialisation. These processes of racialisation are largely absent from the scholarship on labour in the south but can be read in AIOC films. In AIOC films, the colonial

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[53] BP Film, *Oil from Khuzestan* (1948). https://www.bpvideolibrary.com/record/63. Accessed 5 September 2025.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Damluji, 'The Oil City in Focus,' 80.
[56] Damluji, 'The Oil City in Focus,' 80.
[57] Ibid., 87.

construction of the Iranian as a British subject was realised through the erasure of the racialisation of non-Persian subjects in Iran. This figuration of the Iranian subject is crucial because it continues in post-colonial nationalist discourses.

Figure 2: Still from *Oil From Khuzestan* (1948)

Through colonial visual tropes, AIOC films depicted the disciplining of racialised people in the south into Iranian subjects of the British Oil Company, which is portrayed as one as the same as the central Iranian state. Therefore, the disciplining of disobedient racialised laymen into a productive capitalist labour force can be read as a process of rendering racialised peoples of the south into subjects of the Iranian state. This process is crucial to Iranian nationalism and the figuration of an ethnically *Persian* nationalist oil worker as apposed to the figure of the racialised communist worker labour that appears across the various, secret, correspondences between colonial officers from this era. Britain's colonial disciplining of racialised Bakhtiyari and Arab peoples of the south into Iranian subjects for the gaze of ethnically Persian audiences in Tehran was constitutive of the emergence of a unified, Iranian, nationalist imaginary.

Against this light, the Khuzestani's urging of audiences in Tehran to see the "heart-wrenching" lives of their "fellow citizens" in the south is a nationalist call for unity against British colonialism that is nevertheless contingent upon the othering of the south's racialised subject and more importantly their right to self-governance.[58] This contradiction materialises in the simultaneous othering of the worker and his portrayal as Iranian. In other words, in order for nationalism to integrate the oil

[58] Damluji, 'The Oil City in Focus,' 80.

worker into its imaginary, the oil worker had to first become Iranian, and secondly, be stripped down of his anti-state communist politics, and this ability to resist oppression. This process is fully realised and made visible in the media of the period between the nationalisation of Iranian oil and the coup against Mohammad Mossdeq (1951-1953). Khuzestani's call to stand up for "those lowly Iranian workers who for three qerans a day toil in highly dangerous conditions" is visualised in the front cover illustrations of the nationalist newspaper *Shurish*, which was published in the same period and displays the emergence of the oil workers as a subject of Iranian nationalism.[59]

Figure 3: Front page of *Shurish* (March, 1951)

Shurish: The Oil Worker As Subject Of Iranian Nationalism

In a 1951 *Shurish* cover, the image of an Iranian worker burning oil derricks announces the oil worker's entrance into the mainstream media, and his simultaneous becoming of a vessel for nationalist ideology. This figuration of the oil worker starkly contrasts his earlier public depictions in AIOC films as the obedient native. The oil worker's torn and patched clothing symbolise what Khuzestani calls "the wretched lives" of those in the south.[60] By pointing a finger towards John Bull, the oil worker shows that Britain and the AIOC are the ones to blame for workers' wretched

[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

lives. Proudly holding the torch he used to set the AIOC's oil derricks alight, the nationalist oil worker in *Shurish* is no longer the joyful operator of oil infrastructure, but its destroyer. As the derricks burn, John Bull's disembodied face weeps powerlessly over the loss of his precious Company and Iranian oil. John Bull's head, hovering over the burning derricks, transforms oil infrastructure into a symbol of British colonialism, or in other words an example of "the visual aesthetics of Westernisation," that according to *Shurish*, must, and can only, be destroyed by the anti-colonial nationalist Iranian.[61]

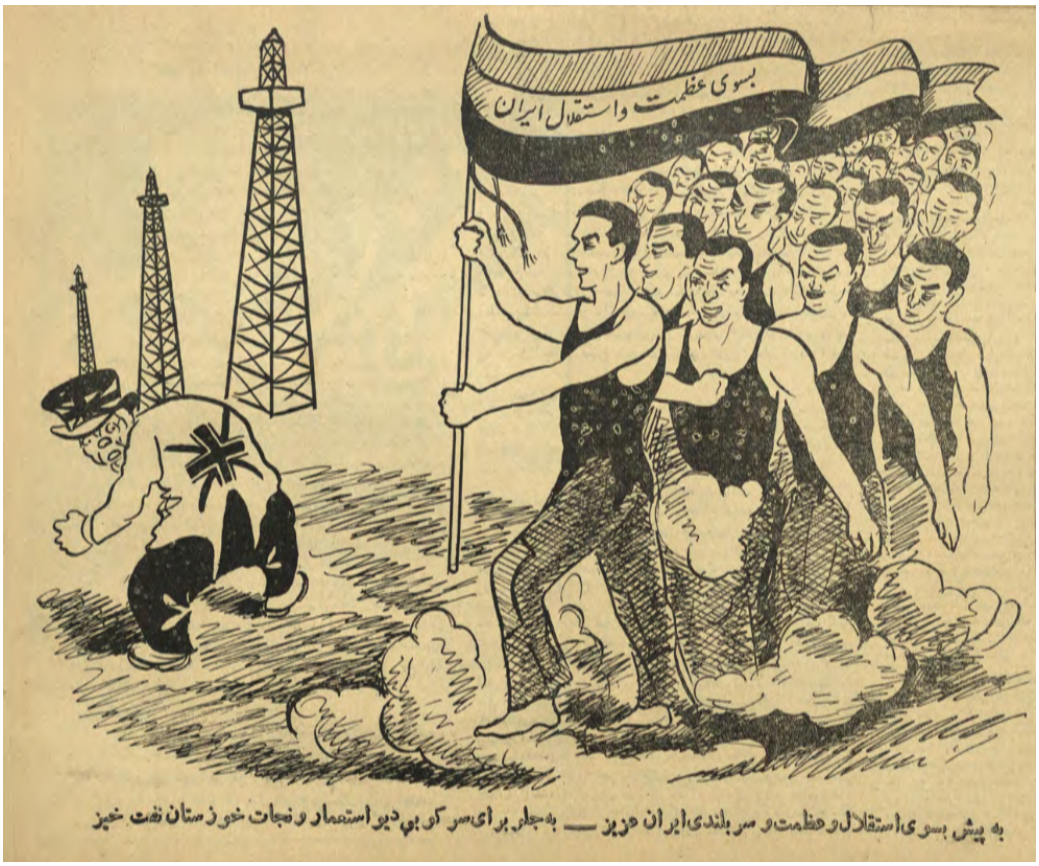

Figure 4: Front page of *Shurish* (June, 1951)

The chioce of *Shurish*'s illustrator to write "Iranian" unto the workers' shirt was perhaps made to counter the *othering* of the southern subject, common at the time and prevailed among Tehran's nationalists. In *Shurish*, the oil workers' Iranianness is not only made clear by writing the word "Iranian" on his clothes; this identity is visualised by depicting the worker as ethnically Persian. In another *Shurish* cover illustration, published on 3 June 1951, a wave of seemingly Persian men march underneath an Iranian flag which instead of the Lion and Sun emblem, reads "Towards the great-

[61] *Shurish* (Tehran, 1951), 72. luna.manchester.ac.uk. Accessed 5 September 2025.

ness and independence of Iran."[62] Three oil derricks stand monumentally on the background as the determined Persian men drive John Bull away. Similar to the previous *Shurish* illustration, the derricks are depicted in proximity to John Bull, displaying their symbolising of British colonialism. The Persian men are not portrayed in industrial working gear but with patched trousers and bare feet holding symbolic rather than industrial tools, such as the Iranian flag. Their wretched attire and determined looks contrast John Bull's suit, hat, and shoes as well as his fearful expression. The caption underrate the illustration reads "Towards the independence, greatness, and exaltation of dear Iran. Frontwards for the suppression of the colonial monster and saving oil-rich Khuzestan."[63]

The overlap of the categories Iranian and Persian in *Shurish* illustrations unveils that the AIOC's disciplining of predominately Arab and Bakhtiyari peoples into a capitalist workforce was necessary for the transformation of these people's into subjects of Iranian nationalism. If fact, nationalists in Tehran only cared to integrate oil workers of the south into their anti-colonial nationalist discourse due to oil workers' power in executing their political will through strikes. In other words, oil workers had to become part of the nationalist discourse because the struggle against British colonialism was depended on their strikes. They could, however, only become part of the Iranian nationalist discourse if they were depicted as Persian and therefore, *the same* as their fellow citizens in Tehran.

Conclusion

This chapter constructed a counter-archive of the oil worker to trace the earliest shifts in workers' representation within the context of Iran, focusing on the period between 1942 and 1951. By analysing how the relationship between oil workers and oil infrastructure was depicted across literature, visual media, and colonial documents, I identified three major shifts in the figuration of the oil worker during this critical decade. These shift indicated the emergence of three categories of oil workers' depictions: **(i)** the oil worker as obedient native; **(ii)** the Communist oil worker; **(iii)** the oil worker as subject of Iranian nationalism. These three figurations not only reflect the changing political determinations of the historical conjuncture this chapter focusses on, but also revealed how, from the mid-1940s onward, various ideological factions recognised the oil worker's political power and began to compete over the right to incorporate him into their respective discourses.

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[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

The chapter also showed that the early politicisation of the oil worker — and his entrance into popular media — was driven by the successful strikes organized by oil workers in the south in the years leading up to nationalisation. These strikes coincided with a mass joining of the Communist Party and a growing capacity for unionisation and collective organization among oil workers. While the Communist Party was the first to integrate the southern oil worker into the core of its political agenda in the early 1940s, the nationalist movement followed later in the nationalisation period.

Before the integration of the oil worker into firstly communism and later mainstream nationalist discourses, the oil worker figured as the obedient subject of British colonisation. As shown by the first public figurations of the oil worker in the propaganda films produced by the colonial oil company, the latter was more invested in showcasing oil infrastructure as a symbol of modernisation rather than in centring the labour that made such infrastructure possible. The oil worker was only integrated into colonial ideology insofar as he appeared as an obedient operator of the infrastructure of modernity. This chapter has demonstrated that the figure of the "obedient native oil worker" was first publicly articulated in colonial oil films, particularly *Oil from Khuzestan* (1948), which prioritised long, admiring shots of infrastructure over depictions of labour. When labour did appear, it was framed to illustrate the colonised subject's consent to British-led modernisation, which I argued was realised through extraction and functioned to justify the south's full integration into global capitalism.

Yet while the British clung to this fictional image of a compliant, smiling worker on screen, reality diverged sharply. Colonial correspondences from the same period reveal growing revolt in the south: oil workers in cities like Masjid Suleiman, Abadan, Khorramshahr, Aghajari, and Ahvaz — many of them affiliated with the Communist Party — were organising mass meetings, pickets, and strikes that drew thousands daily and posed an escalating threat to the British presence in southern Iran.

This contrast between image and reality is also captured in Mahmood's short story *The Indigenous Boy*, where the character Arezoo symbolises the oil worker as a revolutionary subject who seeks not only rights, but control over the very infrastructure he operates. In Mahmood's literary depiction, oil infrastructure is not alien to, but rooted in, the landscape — entangled with palm trees and southern soil, and belonging to the people who inhabit the south. By contrast, in the nationalist newspaper *Shurish*, published in the early 1950s, oil infrastructure is still depicted as a symbol of British colonialism. Here, the worker becomes a simplified and abstracted figure of national resistance. To

serve this nationalist narrative, oil workers were stripped not only of their political affiliations but also of their ethnic and communal identities; they were now represented as ethnically Persian — part of a broader project to fabricate a unified national subject to the Iranian state still in its ascendancy. This fabrication of racial proximity to the centre (Tehran) was intended to foster nationalist sentiment by erasing the racialising processes to which these workers had been subjected in order to be disciplined into a capitalist workforce.

In the next chapter, I turn to the intertwined processes of racialisation, capitalisation, and state-building that underpin the visual and textual representations examined here. I will explore how these processes shaped the historical narratives through which the oil worker has been remembered, and how they continue to influence the political imaginaries of labour and nation in Iran.

Chapter Two: The Oil Worker's Figuration in History And Political Economy

> For local society in Khuzestan, the powerful institution that controls the petroleum resources of this province may have undergone many metamorphoses, from the Anglo-Persian to the Anglo-Iranian, to the National Iranian Oil Companies and eventually to the Petroleum Ministry, but it has always remained an awesome, forbidding, mysterious, and secretive presence that has been beyond local reach and control. For local society this institution continues to appear as a mysterious and alien empire that miraculously extracts local resources and riches and transports them elsewhere without benefiting the local society in any way, aside from the wages paid to its employees. The resulting wealth ends up being accumulated in other locations, i.e. in the distant and alien places where decisions about this local society are also made, be they called London or Tehran![64]
>
> — Kaveh Ehsani

Introduction

How has the oil worker been written into discourses on Iran? In most existing discourse, labour is portrayed as detached from the south — an abstract revolutionary figure without social location, history, or belonging. By contrast, I aim to position the oil worker not only as embedded in the local society of the south, but also as integral to the interconnected processes of state-building and capitalisation that began in the early twentieth century and were, in part, made possible by the labour of oil workers themselves. In this chapter, I thus trace the historical origins of the racialisation processes introduced in the previous chapter in order to situate the oil worker within the complex social fabric of the south.

In the previous chapter, I analysed the oil worker's earliest figurations in literature, printed media, film, and colonial correspondences to conceptualise his emergence and eventual rise to the core of the revolutionary imaginary. I concluded the chapter claiming that the oil worker's appropriation by Iranian nationalism, in particular, was enabled through the disfiguration of not only his communist politics but also the processes of racialisation to which he was subjected. In Chapter 1, I addressed labour's disfiguration in two key ways. Firstly, in my analysis of the film *Oil for Khuzestan*, I demonstrated how labour was disfigured in favour of the overrepresentation of oil infrastructure. Secondly, I showed how the oil worker's incorporation into the nationalist revolutionary imaginary, and his becoming mainstream, occurred at the expense of acknowledging the racialisation he was subjected to.

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[64] 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* 48, no. 3 (2003): 361–399; 368.

I argued that under British colonialism — as evidenced in filmic representations — the disfiguration of the oil worker's lived realities began with the erasure of their communist politics and strike actions from the silver screen. Alongside this, during the British colonisation of the south, the process of racialisation was also initiated as colonial forces grouped all native subjects into the single category of Iranian, while in practice, they maintained clear distinctions between different ethnicities within the refineries — namely, Persian, and Arab. Following the decolonisation of the south in 1951, in order for the oil worker to be integrated into the nationalist imaginary, he also had to be constructed as a subject of the Iranian state. This process — initiated under British colonial rule — was extended and adapted by the Iranian state, rendering the indigenous populations of the south and other ethnic groups not only a productive labour force, but also Iranian subjects. Here, "Iranian" increasingly came to mean ethnically Persian. This layered transformation was enabled through multiple, intersecting forms of disfiguration of which the most important for this chapter is that of racialisation.

In this chapter, I shift focus away from visual and literary representations of the oil worker to examine figurations and disfigurations of the oil worker in academic discourses, or more precisely, historiographies of labour in Iran. I construct a genealogy of labour's representation in the scholarship on the "mysterious and alien" empires that have historically controlled oil, and the workers and local societies who have struggled over the means of oil's production. My contribution lies in reading for the oil worker in discourses on Iran through the conceptual lens of racialisation. This theoretical framing gives depth to the empirical and textual findings presented in the previous chapter.

The concept of disfiguration remains central here. Whereas labour's disfiguration from discourses on Iran and Iranian capitalism has been established successfully, these studies tend to disfigure the racialised dimensions of that labour. Against this backdrop, my research contributes to a number of key bodies of scholarship: first, by interrogating the racial construction of labour under the Iranian state, my work challenges and contributes to the social history of labour in Iran. Second, it contributes to the field of Energy Humanities, which often overlooks the particularities of contexts outside North America and treats Iran as temporally and analytically frozen. Furthermore, I contribute to the emerging study of Arab life in Iran by highlighting not only Arab labour but also the specific function of Arab labour and land for Iranian capitalism. Finally, my work exposes how methodological nationalism — particularly as manifested in mainstream historiography — has its roots in Iranian nationalism whose foundations lay in the historical erasure of non-Persian peoples.

Two historical conjunctures constitute the backbone of this genealogy and are referenced throughout the chapter: Reza Pahlavi's initial reforms (1925–1941) and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's White Revolution (1963–1979). I argue that during these periods, conceptualisations of labour — particularly in relation to capitalist development and racialisation — shifted drastically. These ruptures each mark the emergence of new conjunctures: the first being the formation of the Iranian nation-state and the beginning of the Pahlavi monarchy, and the second being the consolidation of monarchical power following the 1953 coup, up until its collapse in the 1979 Revolution.

The two conjunctures around which this chapter is organised, provide the historical framework for contextualising labour's role in the Iranian political economy. Oil nationalisation marked a peak in labour organising, whereas the aftermath of the 1953 coup brought the violent suppression of the labour movement. I deliberately chose to focus on the conjunctures that preceded and followed the height of labour organising during the nationalisation period as to study the oil worker's figuration beyond instances of revolutionary peak.

I draw on the relatively new concept of internal colonisation in Iran, which I see as foundational to the intertwined processes of state formation and capitalist development, as well as the ways in which the oil worker has been written into Iranian history. The concept of internal colonisation refers to the condition in which a state marginalises to then exploit distinct ethnic, linguistic, or cultural groups within its own borders using structures and logics similar to those of classical colonialism. In the Iranian case, internal colonialism has been used to describe the systematic domination of peripheral regions and non-Persian ethnic groups, particularly the Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs, by a centralised Persian-dominated state. The related concept of endocolonialism originated in Latin American decolonial thought, where it was used to critique the post-independence state which perpetuated colonial hierarchies.[65]

Although Kaveh Ehsani briefly references internal colonialism in a footnote of the article discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Ehsani fails to elaborate on its specific manifestations in the south of Iran. Neither Ehsani nor other scholars studying labour in the Iranian oil complex have addressed the racialisation of oil workers as a central mechanism of internal colonialism, nor the role this racialisation played in disciplining Iran's first industrial labour force — the oil workers of the south.

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[65] Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,' *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215-232.

In the social history of labour in the oil sector, race is not discussed as it relates to different ethnic groups originating from the vast Iranian plateau. Arabs, which have historically inhabited the oil rich regions, are never the centre of the analysis. In his groundbreaking article, 'From *Amaleh* [Labour] to *Kargar* [Worker],' Atabaki briefly acknowledges the presence of Arab labourers among the early clusters of oil workers, but they disappear from his analysis as he shifts focus to the Bakhtiyari labour force.[66] Similarly, Maral Jefroudi, in her research on oil workers during the White Revolution, mentions that Arab labourers made up a significant part of the contract labour force of this period but does not elaborate any further.[67] Daghagheleh is a notable exception when it comes to the study of indigenous Arabs in Iran's oil rich regions. His doctoral research, *Indigenous Refusal: Arab Minority and the Formation of the Modern State in Iran*, explores how Arab communities in Khuzestan experience subalternity and articulate resistance through an indigenous connection to land. However, Daghagheleh does not focus on Arab labour in particular, partly because of his argument that the historical trajectories of land struggles and labour struggles among Arabs in the south have contradicted each other.[68]

My own research, however, is concerned with the racialisation of labour in relation to class formation within the context of an internally colonial state. It is not my aim to discuss identity per se, nor racialisation as a form of identity politics. I seek to distance myself from frameworks that reduce social and political change to identity categories. Instead, I conceptualise racialisation as a structural distortion — an essential disfiguration — on which capitalism's survival depends. While the general disfiguration of labour under capitalism has been explored by scholars such as Ehsani, Atabaki, and Jefroudi, the racialised disfiguration of labour in Iran's south remains critically understudied. My focus is not on state-level ethnic discrimination as it materialises in identity or ideology, but on the specific processes of racialising labour in order to produce and control the workforce, a fundamental necessity for capital.

I argue that the racialisation of the South's indigenous Arab population in particular and their simultaneous discursive and archival erasure from mainstream nationalist discourses is an essential component of the internal colonialism that underlays the establishment of not only a centralised state but

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[66] Touraj Atabaki, 'From *Amaleh* [Labour] to *Kargar* [Worker]: Recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry,' *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (2013): 159–175,

[67] Maral Jefroudi, "If I Deserve It, It Should Be Paid to Me": A Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry (1951–1973) (PhD diss., International Institute of Social History and Leiden University, 2017).

[68] Aghil Daghagheleh, Indigenous Refusal: Arab Minority and the Formation of the Modern State in Iran (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2023).

also capitalism in Iran. By introducing the concept of racialisation to the study of labour in the Iranian oil industry, I aim to not only offer a more nuanced understanding to the question "who were the early clusters of workers in the Iranian oil industry?" formulated by Atabaki, but also lay the foundations to navigate who the contract oil worker is today.[69]

Representations Of Labour And Racialisation In The Early Years

As Daghagheleh states in a footnote to his study on the formation of the modern Iranian state as relating to the Arabs of Khuzestan in particular: "The literature on oil and society in the Persian Gulf, despite delving into the numerous facets of the industry, remains entirely mute regarding its impact on Arab communities or the dynamic interplay between oil and these communities."[70] History's muteness about the Arabs of the south, or more specifically this racialised community's encounter with oil, left its traces in the bulk of texts on labour in the Iranian oil industry as well. For example, in Atabaki's undeniably groundbreaking research on the oil company's disciplining of peasants into oil workers in the early years of the oil company, he strictly focusses on labourers who originated from Bakhtriyari tribes, and withholds from discussing Arab labour, or rather, the bizarre lack thereof.

Atabaki offers an astonishing account of the violent encroachment of capitalism into the everyday lives of peasants, as the oil company disciplines them into subjects of global capitalism. Atabaki argues, that the oil company did so through the introduction of a vast variety of capitalist forms such as not only wage labour but also creating a market in newly established oil cities such as Masjid Soleiman for workers to spend their wages, the promise of comfort acquired at the price of loosing one's freedom of movement, labour discipline through the introduction of modern time measurement as well as physical punishment, and dept as a means to maintain the workforce depended on oil company wages.[71]

In this article, Atabaki also mentions "the ethnical composition of the labour force" and discusses racial segregation, on the work floor as well as in the oil towns, during the early years of the company. However, the ethnic composition he mentions, does not feature Arabs or any other minoritised group situated within the Iranian plateau. It instead, focusses on the racial lines the company drew between White European employees, semi-skilled predominantly Punjabi workers brought to the

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[69] Atabaki, 'From *Amaleh* [Labour] to *Kargar* [Worker],' 162.
[70] Daghagheleh, "Indigenous Refusal," (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2023).
[71] Atabaki, 'From *Amaleh* [Labour] to *Kargar* [Worker],' 162.

south of Iran from Britain's largest colony, India, and the rather general term Iranian workers.[72] Throughout the article, Atabaki uses Persian and Iranian interchangeably to refer to labourers he claims to have originated from the lowest ranks of Bakhtiyari tribes.

But when and how did Bakhtriyaris become Persian, and Persian became Iranian? And how did these equations eventually result in the erasure of Arabs from Iran's labour history? Atabaki's research does not offer any answers to these questions. His brief mention of the possibility of an Arab labour force draws on the words of the British consul in Mohammarah who described the Arabs of the south as "less hard working than any other in Persia."[73] Here, the colonial trope of the lazy native does not only function to establish a hierarchy between the coloniser and the colonised (as in, the Brits and the Iranians), but also reinforces a distinction between the multitude of colonised subjects. Whereas, as history proceeds, more often than not, the vast number of ethnic communities in the south are generalised as all being nothing but "Iranian" — and, as nationalist politician and the governor of Khuzestan from 1979 to 1980, Ahmad Madani, once claimed, "have nothing but Iran on their minds"[74] — the portrayal of Arabs in Atabaki's research, or rather, the lack thereof, exposes that the term "Iranian" is less homogenous as what contemporary historiography portrayals it to be. After a brief mention of Arab labourers, Atabaki proceeds to deny their significance.

If, as is implied by Atabaki, compared to Bakhtriyari labour, the scale of Arabs participation in the labour force is not significant enough to write into the south's labour history, than why does a 1963 report by the American Consulate in Khoramshahr (former Mohammarah) claim that almost half of the oil industry's labour force is Arab? Drawing on this report, Jefroudi claims that even after nationalisation, the conditions of Arabs, who were predominantly "employed as unskilled and contract workers", remained to be the hardest among the workers. Jefroudi proceeds to claim that, constituting roughly half of the labour force, Arabs were "one of the biggest ethnic groups of the local population," if not the biggest.[75] Despite this, only a few Arab staff were present on the Company pay-

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[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 165.
[74] Azari Shahrzaei, Reza. 'A Review of the Rise and Fall of the "Arab Khalq" Phenomenon, 1979–1979,' *Goftogu* Journal, no. 25 (Fall 1999).
[75] Maral Jefroudi, "If I Deserve It, It Should Be Paid to Me": A Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry, 1951–1973 (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2017), 109.

roll.[76] Arab workers' exclusion from official company payrolls lays bare the early entanglements between precarious labour and racialisation.

The U.S report Jefroudi draws on reflects on nationalisation about a decade after British forces withdrew from the south. One of the main pillars of nationalisation was the transition of labour, as well as labour know-how, from British hands to those of Iranians. Referred to as "the *Iranianisation* process of the oil industry", it aimed to not only increase the employment of Iranian labourers, but also, enabled the transmission of knowledge through educational institutions such as the Abadan Institute of Technology.[77] But for which Iranians was this process beneficial? As Jefroudi states, "among 170 full time engineering students at Abadan Institute of Technology," there was only one Arab student.[78] The exclusion of Arabs from higher education not only highlights the barriers they faced to social mobility, but more specifically reveals the oil company's ongoing gatekeeping of knowledge — an intentional strategy to counter the threat of an indigenous takeover of the oil infrastructure.

Moreover, not only the Iranianisation process but also the eventual stopping thereof resulted in the even more dramatic decrease of Arabs workers represented on the company payroll. This, again, raises the question of who is the target Iranian in Iranianisation? Arab workers were however not the only group faced with loosing their jobs due to Iranianisation. As an Armenian worker stated "Armenians are afraid that they might be reduced or even dismissed by Persians" after Nationalisation.[79] This worker's usage of the term Persian, rather than Iranian, shows that for racialised workers, the term Iranian did in fact not encompass them. It instead meant Persians, and Persians only. This Armenian worker's distinction counters Atabaki's interchangeable usage of Persian and Iranian.

Perhaps, the Armenian worker's experience also rings true to that of Arab workers. This shows that the Iranianisation of labour was not as beneficial for all groups which since British colonisation were, on one hand, categorised as Iranian but, on the other hand, did not enjoy the same degree of access to labour, and labour security as, those considered ethically Persian. I, thus, understand Ira-

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[76] Maral Jefroudi, "If I Deserve It, It Should Be Paid to Me": A Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry, 1951–1973 (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2017), 109.
[77] Ibid., 58.
[78] Ibid., 170.
[79] Ibid.

nianisation as not only a term used to describe the post-colonial process of transferring labour from foreign into Iranian hands, but also the simultaneous process of disciplining an ethnically and religiously diverse labour force into Iranian subjects through their exclusion from labour; exclusion which could only be reversed if these racialised peoples *became* Persian.

Regarding the exclusion of Arabs from labour and their perceived distance from Persianness, two crucial points emerge: one concerning language and the other related to the Arab struggle over land. First, against the background of Reza Shah's state building project (1925–1941), the production of Iranian subjectivity can be understood as a top-down effort to bring all linguistic communities inhabiting the Iranian plateau as close as possible to the centralised state's ideal of the Iranian citizen. This proximity to Persianness was predominantly achieved through language reform, that were implemented by the shah's government and its emergent cultural institutions which aimed at implementing the "One Country, One Nation, One Language" policy. Communities that already spoke Persian assimilated more easily, removing significant barriers to their social mobility. In contrast, the language barrier made it considerably more difficult for groups such as the Arabs of the south to assimilate, unlike the Bakhtiyari workforce, who not only spoke Persian but, as a community, were also historically more integrated into the central government apparatus.

A second crucial factor that hindered Arab assimilation and set the Arab labour force apart from other groups subsumed under the homogenising category of 'Iranian' was the Arab struggle over land. As Daghagheleh argues, for indigenous Arabs in Khuzestan, the primary axis of struggle has historically been land, not labour. Drawing on the oil company's annexation of Arab lands, Daghagheleh positions the Iranian central state as a settler-colonial entity whose survival depends not only on extracting resources but also on occupying the territories of minoritised groups, including the Arabs of the south. For these communities, the dispossession of land and the resulting loss of livelihoods as farmers constitute their fundamental historical grievance.[80]

Introducing the concept of refusal into the study of indigenous Arab life in Khuzestan, Daghagheleh complicates conventional narratives of exclusion from labour. He suggests that Arab's lack of representation in the workforce was not only due to the oil company's rejection of their labour, but also because Arabs actively refused to work for the company. This mutual negation offers a more nu-

[80] Daghagheleh, "Indigenous Refusal" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2023).

anced picture: while the oil company undermined Arab existence through land annexation and exclusion from employment, many Arabs resisted incorporation into the oil economy, demanding instead the restoration of their lands and the right to continue their agrarian way of life. This double refusal illustrates a broader rejection of both the state apparatus and capitalism as embodied in the "awesome, forbidding, mysterious, and secretive presence" of the oil company.[81] Through their refusal of wage labour and insistence on land rights, Arabs not only resisted incorporation into the oil industry but also delegitimised the authority of the Iranian state — which I conceptualise as an internal colonial state, and what Daghagheleh identifies as a settler-colonial regime.

Yet, this narrative is not monolithic. Not all Arabs refused labour — some became oil workers, navigating the tension between the industrial world of the oil fields and, what Daghagheleh calls, the structures of Arab tribal life. Still, land remains a defining feature that distinguishes the Arab labour force from other racialised workers. While groups such as the Lors, Bakhtiyaris, and even some Kurds also experienced racialisation within the oil fields, their political and economic struggles were not anchored in demands for the return of ancestral lands. In contrast, for Arab political organizations such as the Saadat Party, land symbolised not only economic survival but the collective rights of the Arab people to self-determination. Land, rather than wages or working conditions, formed the centrepiece of the Arab struggle.[82]

For Arab political organisations, such as the Saadat party, land struggle as the symbol of Arab people's political rights more generally was prioritised over labour issues such as wages. However, it is important to mention that the right to oil resources as well as labour have continuously been mentioned in the demands of different political factions part of the broader Arab movement. For example, "the allocation of oil revenues to the region's development" and "prioritising the recruitment of Arab labour" are mentioned in the 1979 demands of The Arab People's Movement.[83] Earlier examples of demands to secure Arab labour can be traced back to as early as the colonial era. For example, at the beginning of the oil industry, Sheikh Khaz'al, the ruler of Arabistan from 1897 until 1924, requested the oil company to guarantee that a portion of the oil workforce will be Arab. His request was however denied by the AIOC, shortly before he was removed by Reza Shah.[84]

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[81] Ehsani, 'Social Engineering and the Contradictions,' 368.
[82] Daghagheleh, "Indigenous Refusal" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2023).
[83] Reza Azari Shahrzaei, 'Ethnic Tensions in Khuzestan in the Early Years of the Revolution: A Critique,' *Goftogu*, no. 27 (Spring 2000): 195-206.
[84] Ibid.

This divergence reveals the limits of treating racialised labour in the oil industry as a singular or uniform experience. Despite shared experiences of marginalisation and exploitation, the Arab case underscores how the intersection of land, labour, and settler-colonial violence produced a distinct political subjectivity — one rooted not merely in labour rights but in the broader quest for self-determination and territorial sovereignty.

The White Revolution, Land Reform, And Social Engineering

'A white revolution from above to protect the ruling strata from a red revolution from below.' This is how Ervand Abrahamian described Mohammad Reza Shah's reform program, or as the Shah himself referred to it, the "Shah and the people's revolution."[85] Initiated in 1963 — and in the context of the 1953 coup's aftermath and a global rise in oil revenues — the White Revolution was a six-point reform bill that included the nationalisation of natural recourses, privatisation of state factories, introduction of a profit sharing system, women's suffrage, and the establishment of a literacy corps.

In 1953, the CIA and MI6-backed coup consolidated the monarchy by crushing National Front leader and prime minister Mohammad Mossadeq's government.[86] The establishment of the OPEC shortly after in 1960, mounted to the rise of oil revenues, followed by an GNP increase in the 1970s. This provided the state with the required revenue to fund the White Revolution as not only the next step in the monarchy's consolidation but also the last hallmark of Iran's "overdue" capitalisation.[87] As for the consequences of the White Revolution for Iran's proletariat? The post-coup authoritarian regime's suppression is highly visible in its crushing of the labour movement at what has been canonised as its hight.

The late 1940s and early 1950s are perceived as the hight of labour unionism in Iran, both by labour scholars such as Fred Halliday and Ervand Abrahamian as well as mainstream historiographers,

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[85] For more see Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), particularly Chapter 5: Muhammad Reza Shah's White Revolution: 126-158.
[86] Jefroudi, 'Revisiting "the Long Night,"' 176.
[87] Rudi Matthee, 'Iranian Capitalism: Exceptionalism and Delayed Development,' *Capitalisms: Towards a Global History*, eds. Kaveh Yazdani and Dilip M. Menon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 349-380.

such as Abbas Amanat.[88] In the late 1940s, influenced strongly by the Communist Party, Iran's first nation-wide trade union movement was organised under the United Central Council of the Unified Trade Unions of Iranian Workers (CUCTU). Fearing both the rise of communist beliefs among oil workers, in particular, and the trade union's ability to mobilise an unprecedented amount of workers, the state banned the CUCTU in the wake of the 1953 coup and established a number of state sponsored unions that strictly abstained from strikes and other related political activities.[89]

Such was the context in which the White Revolution began. Ironically, however, this state sponsored revolution was marked by a pro-workers "revolutionary rhetoric."[90] In fact, the Shah went as far as introducing himself as a socialist, claiming that "his reforms had abolished 'feudalism,'" thus, liberating women, peasants, and workers. In line with this rhetoric, the number of state-sponsored unions grew from 16 in 1964 to 519 by 1972.[91] The reality of what the Shah referred to as workers' liberation, however, was anything but liberating. By 1959, unions were only permitted to register if they agreed to surveillance by the SAVAK — The State Intelligence and Security Agency established two years prior. Violent suppression of unionisation efforts, followed by the state's establishment of legal barriers to the movement's activities, resulted in the rapid decline of the militancy that characterised both the form (union) and content (worker power) of the workers movement in Iran. The movement's suppression was consummated by a series of reforms. As I argue, the most significant of these reforms vis-à-vis the vantage point of the workers movement itself was none other than the White Revolution's Land Reform Program.

In the history of capitalism as it appears in Iran, land reform's importance lays firstly in its abolition of the country's last "remaining agrarian non-capitalist relations,"[92] and secondly, its subsequent production of what Asef Bayat describes as a *new* working class, which consisted of the peasants who were freed for the land following reform. The state framed its Land Reform Program as bene-

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[88] Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (London: Macmillan, 1979); Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

[89] Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (London: Macmillan, 1979); Maral Jefroudi, "If I Deserve It, It Should Be Paid to Me:" A Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry, 1951–1973 (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2017); Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

[90] Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After, 3rd ed*. (London: Pearson Education, 2017).

[91] Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After*, 3rd ed. (London: Pearson Education, 2017); Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[92] Kayhan Valadbaygi, *Capitalism in Contemporary Iran: Capital Accumulation, State Formation and Geopolitics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024), 45.

ficial for peasants who up until then did not own land and thus cultivated the lands of landlords. Land reform was propagated as the distribution of arable land among those who cultivated it. As Rudi Matthee claims, "until the land reform launched by Mohammad Reza Shah in the 1960s broke the back of feudalism, land and owning it remained the measure of privilege and wealth in the country."[93] Land reform thus aimed to end the concentration of land and thus wealth and power, in the hands of a few landlords.[94]

Contrary to state propaganda's claims, the program aimed to, first, weaken the power of landlords vis a vis the state through the appropriation of their assets — or in other words, the land that figured as the measure of their privilege and wealth — and, second, to free up labour for the national industries that either emerged or grew exponentially in the 1960s. Even though in some cases, land reform succeeded to weaken the power of landlords, many managed to maintain their agribusinesses, mechanised farms, and plantations.[95] As for the peasants, even though The Land Reform Program did provide some with land, fertiliser, and cooperatives, most did not receive anything, and were thus "released" from the lands they had historically cultivated.[96] Land reform therefor, "primarily served as a "push" to get small farmers and farmworkers, who did not benefit from land distribution, to move to industrial centres and join the urban proletariat.

The release of peasants from the land can only be understood in relation to the increased accumulation process, and the subsequent expanding of a commodity marked in 1960s Iran. The survival of this expanding marked was contingent on not only the establishing of a new set of social relations, but also the labour required to industrialise and produce commodities. The new commodity market's two primary needs could thus only be satisfied by means of a "fundamental transformation in the production relations in the rural areas."[97] As such, in rural areas, the altering of production relations through state-initiated uneven land distribution functioned to produce not only a vast number

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[93] Rudi Matthee, 'Iranian Capitalism: Exceptionalism and Delayed Development,' in *Capitalisms: Towards a Global History*, eds. Kaveh Yazdani and Dilip Menon (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[94] Asef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1987); Asef Bayat, 'Squatters and the State: Back Street Politics in the Islamic Republic,' libcom.org (2010); Maral Jefroudi, 'Revisiting "the Long Night" of Iranian Workers: Labor Activism in the Iranian Oil Industry in the 1960s,' *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 84 (Fall 2013): 177.

[95] Maral Jefroudi, "Revisiting 'the Long Night' of Iranian Workers: Labor Activism in the Iranian Oil Industry in the 1960s," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 176–194; Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[96] Ibid.

[97] Asef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1987); Kayhan Valadbaygi, *Capitalism in Contemporary Iran: Capital Accumulation, State Formation and Geopolitics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024).

of landless peasants desperate for labour, but also an army of potential consumers who, now, due to the pressures of a new and expanding commodity marked, relied on wage-labour for their survival.

This, in turn, resulted in what Asef Bayat calls the birth of a *new* urban working class in the 1960s, as apposed to Iran's first urban proletariat. Iran's first proletariat, as claimed by Halliday, was initially formed by "Iranian migrant workers in the oilfields and towns of the Caucasus, in Southern Russia," and later, as Atabaki affirms, in the oil-fields of the south.[98] At the time, oil was Iran's only industrialised sector, employing a relative small number of workers, while the rest of the potential labour force remained to be peasants, cultivating the lands of feudal land lords.[99] The new working class of the 1960s consisted of the peasantry that was now "released" from the land, and supposedly, subsumed into the labour force.

Writing on the new working class of the 1960s, Bayat attributes the non-existence of labour unionism in the long 1960s to the lack of class consciousness among the peasantry turned first generation industrial workers. He then attributes this lack to the bettering of their circumstances as industrial workers compared to their prior occupation as landless peasants, released into the labour marked due to land reform. As such, Bayat claims to counter, what Jefroudi calls, the standard narrative of labour organising in the long 1960s.

This standard narrative firstly establishes the absence of labour organising in the long 1960s after the hight of unionism, to then attribute this lack to the particular kind of state oppression that characterised the aftermath of the 1953 coup. Jefroudi claims that this narrative surfaces in the works of Abrahamian and Halliday. Hinting at the 1979 Revolution, Abrahamian describes the long 1960s as "and interlude before and inevitable storm."[100] In similar vain, Halliday writes "In that year [1953] a long night fell over the Iranian working class, a darkness from which it only began slowly to emerge after the passage of twenty years."[101] Categorising it as the product of "social democratic historiography," Bayat takes an issue with the standard narrative of labour in the 1960s due to its fixation on state suppression.[102] In "Historiography, Class, and Iranian Working Class," Bayat thus

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[98] Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 177.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions,* 165.
[101] Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, 8.
[102] Asef Bayat, 'Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers,' *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories, Historiographies*, ed. Zachary Lockman (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 165–210.

argues that social democratic historiography wrongly assumes that the labour movement is only strong when the state is weak and vice versa.[103]

Despite Bayat's intention to counter the standard narrative, Jefroudi argues that in "Capital Accumulation, Political Control and Labour Organization in Iran 1965-1975" Bayat "falls into this very category that he critiques."[104] Jefroudi claims that, similarly to Abrahamian and Haliday, Bayat assumes the lack of labour organisation in the 1960s and is out to explain it. The only difference between Bayat's work and, what Bayat calls social democratic historiography, is that whereas the former attributes the lack of labour activism to state suppression, Bayat argues it to be due to a lack of "industrial consciousness," which he perceives as prevailing among the new working class. Despite this, according to Jefroudi, Bayat is nevertheless "still preoccupied with explaining the lack of a certain type of labour activism."[105] Here, by "a certain kind of labour activism" Jefroudi means the militant labour insurrections and unionism that characterised the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In sum, Jefroudi demonstrates that, similarly to Abrahamian and Halliday, Bayat's narrative of labour in the 1960s falls under the standard narrative. In 'Revisiting "the Long Night" of Iranian Workers,' Jefroudi sets out to offer a counter narrative to labour's lack of organisation in the 1960s. As such, she argues that despite the undeniable decline in militant organising and the state's tightening of workers' surveillance after the 1953 military coup, in some cases, the Shah's adaptation of a pro-workers rhetoric following the White Revolution, armed workers with the tools to organise collective actions that in fact succeeded to better their labour conditions. She positions her argument against the lack of research on labour organising in the not so militant 1960s — a lack of research confirmed by Bayat — as to demonstrate that labour organising did, in fact, not stop after the 1953 coup, but rather, changed form.

Importantly, Jefroudi formulates her critique of Bayat by debunking what he establishes as the emergence of a new working class, following land reform. In order to do so, Jefroudi draws attention to the south and asks what the impact of land reform was in this region. Did the Land Reform Program actually result in the emergence of a new *oil* working class? While acknowledging the

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[103] Ibid.

[104] Jefroudi does not address Bayat's argument that the working classes' inability to organize themselves stems not only from state control but also from "the rapid process of capital accumulation," as exemplified by the agrarian reforms initiated during the White Revolution and the consequent acceleration of industrialisation.

[105] Jefroudi, 'Revisiting "the Long Night,"' 181.

changing composition of the working class in the 1960s on a national scale and the dramatic growth of urbanisation, Jefroudi argues that contrary to other industries, in the oil sector the reconfiguration of the working class following land reform did not result in the emergence of a new working class *in* the oil industry.

Returning to land reform and the production of a new working class, the freeing of peasants resulted in the freeing up of a new mass of potential labour-power. In their search for labour, these former peasants become wanderers, fluxing into Iran's growing urban centres where the country's emerging industries promised them labour. Even though migration to urban centres had already increased prior to the reform, land reform exacerbated it dramatically. In the 1960s, not only oil cities such as Abadan, but also urban centres in central and north Iran, such as Tehran, Esfahan, and Tabriz experienced major growth due to migration. During 1966-1967 migrants accounted for as much as 50% of the increased urban population.[106]

Even though emerging national industries relied on labour, the amount of migrants in search of employment was excessive to the needs of slowly emerging capital intensive industries. Therefore, while on one hand, urban employment did increase, on the other hand, what Bayat calls, "the informal sector" also expanded.[107] Whereas in some industries in urban centres such as Tehran, the acceleration of capital accumulation did result in the subsumption of some migrants into the workforce, leading to the emergence of a new industrial working class, in other industries and places, such as the oil complex in Khuzestan, accumulation was actually breaking down compared to the colonial era, and therefore saturated with labour.

While the majority of migrants could be absorbed by emerging industries in Tehran (capital) as well as in Esfahan and Tabriz, the reality in Khuzestan was different.[108] Drawing on a rather shallow reading of Afsaneh Najmabadi's research on land reform and social change, Kayhan Valadbaygi argues that the freeing up of labour resulting from land reform was necessary for the development

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[106] Julian Bharier, *Demographic Aspects of Urbanisation in Iran* (Paris: UNESCO, 1972), 58.
[107] Asef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1987), 34.
[108] Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 177; Kayhan Valadbaygi, *Capitalism in Contemporary Iran: Capital Accumulation, State Formation and Geopolitics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024).

of *every* capitalist industry in Iran.[109] However, Jefroudi successfully refutes such claims, reminding us of the fact that this period of Land Reform was characterised by an oil industry suffering from a *saturated* labour market — i.e. suffering from a *surplus* of available labour. As early as the late 1950s, the rate of redundant labour in the oil industry was upwards of 50 percent. Eshani further corroborates Jefroudi's assertion and notes how — in the wake of the 1953 coup — the newly nationalised company had to both downsize and implement a "no-recruitment policy." In other words, the very process that resulted in an increasing mass of surplus populations across the south of Iran began well before the beginning of Land Reform.[110]

Now, given the oil sector's substantial and strategic role within the Iranian economy, it is an industry that, historically, has employed a relatively small portion of the total mass of employed labour-power.[111] The *illusion* of accessible labour that followed from the founding of Iran's oil industry, however, persisted as something other than mere fantasy. Without denying the salience of Jefroudi's and Ehsani's analyses, it remains the case that just as the oil company refused to recruit new workers, migration from across the country to the oil cities of the south continued unabated. But these migrants were not absorbed into the labour force. At the time, the oil sector might have been the country's only industry where the working class was mostly second generation, meaning, the children of the first working class formed in Khuzestan as early as the 1930s and 1940s.[112] It is for these reasons that Bayat's argument regarding the formation of a new working class loses all of its relevance for the context of the oil industry. Therefore, the lack of unionisation in the oil industry cannot be explained by the absence of class consciousness resulting from workers' lack of experience in industrial labour and labour organising. The questions, however, remain: What happened to those who were never absorbed into the labour force? How did this impact the composition of the proletariat in the south at that time?

Rather than becoming a new oil working class, migrants were rendered into surplus populations. Migrants who were confronted with the oil industry's a saturated labour market settled in the unofficial neighbourhoods along the edges of oil cities. Therefore, rather than working in the oil fields,

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[109] Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Land Reform and Social Change in Iran* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 246; Kayhan Valadbaygi, *Capitalism in Contemporary Iran: Capital Accumulation, State Formation and Geopolitics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024), 1.

[110] Kaveh Ehsani, "The Political Economy of Oil and Labor in Iran: The Nationalised Oil Industry and Working-Class Formation, 1951–1979" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2018).

[111] Ehsani, "Political Economy of Oil"; Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*.

[112] Halliday, *Iran*, 177; Jefroudi, 'Revisiting "the Long Night,"' 177.

they began building their urban centres' informal sectors. Thus, rather than the production of a new oil working class, land reform in Khuzestan contributed to the dramatic growth of an already expanding reserve labour force that consisted of racialised and non-racialised migrants who were nevertheless not indigenous to the south.

Migration, importantly, allowed for what Reza Rabei calls the social engineering of the south; which, according to Rabei, distinguishes the racialisation of Arabs from other ethnic groups residing across the Iranian plateau. Rabei makes this point in his critique on an article by Reza Azari Shahrezai about the "appearance and disappearance" of the "phenomena of the Arab people" in the period around the 1979 Revolution.[113] For Rabei, and similar to other Persian intellectuals, Azari's understanding of the Arab people rests on "the Pahlavi dynasty's fifty year long chauvinistic propaganda against non-Persian ethnical groups."[114]

Originally published with *Goftogu Journal* (1997), Rabei summarises his disagreements by drawing an analogy between Azari's understanding of the Arab people and that of "a white South African" writing about "the struggles of that country's black people."[115] For Rabei, Azari's supposed "neutral" understanding, in fact, functions in the service of the "criminalisation of non-Perisian groups."[116] Similar to the South African struggle for liberation and contrary to Azari's belief, Rabei notes, the Arab people's historical expressions of political agency is not some insignificant, short lived, "aimless creation of chaos and example of foreign intervention" but "a struggle against racial discrimination."[117] Rabei's reminder of the *history* of struggle is crucial: the Arab people's struggle against the centralist government is not a phenomena that appeared on the eve of the 1979 Revolution and disappeared shortly after but a struggle that began simultaneously to the establishment of the Iranian state.

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[113] Reza Azari Shahrzaei, 'A Review of the Rise and Fall of the 'Arab Khalq' Phenomenon, 1979–1979,' *Goftogu* Journal, no. 25 (Fall 1999).
[114] Reza Rabei, 'Ethnic Tensions in Khuzestan in the Early Years of the Revolution: A Critique,' *Goftogu*, no. 27 (Spring 2000): 195–206.
[115] Rabei, 'Ethnic Tensions in Khuzestan,' 195.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.

Regarding claims of the social engineering in the south, Rabei explains that by virtue of

> …the creation of job opportunities made possible by oil, the Pahlavi dynasty encouraged and enabled migration from other Iranian cities to Khuzestan. Eventually by refusing to employ Arab workers and even forcing them into early pensions and redemption — for example the two Abadan refineries per year plan — the government altered the population of oil cities, pushing Arabs to the margins and making them more poor than ever.[118]

While plausible, it still remains unclear as to which historical conjuncture Rabei's statement refers. If Rabei was implicitly referring to the period following the 1953 coup, then this understanding of "job opportunities" is irrelevant regarding the oil sector's labour-market; precisely because it was this very period that marked the beginning of the *saturation* of the labour market vis-à-vis Iran's oil industry. Disagreements aside, the salient point, here, is that even though there was less of a scarcity of available labour-power in the oil industry than generally assumed, the *illusion* of employment remained and resulted in the continuation of migration to the south. For Rabei, throughout the Pahlavi's reign, the regime appropriated both the oil industry and the illusions of accessible labour it fostered, thereby incentivising migration from other parts of the country into the majority Arab, oil rich, southern regions. This appropriation, however, did not begin with land reforms — migration to the south had already increased dramatically following the emergence of the oil industry in the early-twentieth-century. Land reform, and the urbanisation that would soon follow, only further incentivised migration and, thus, allowing for the social engineering of majority Arab regions. In 1956, migrants accounted for 50 percent of Ahwaz's and Abadan's population — a demographic shift that followed the national trend concerning the growth of urban centres.[119] By the early 1960s, the indigenous Arabs who historically comprised the demographic majority in southern Iran now accounted for no more than half of the total urban population.

If the oil company was originally hostile to employing Arabs ever since the establishment of the oil industry, this tendency only increased following nationalisation and the subsequent "Iranianisation" of the labour force. The company's dual mechanism of simultaneously denying labour while annexing Arab lands for infrastructure development served as the structural cause for what Rabaei refers to as "[the] pushing [of] Arabs to the margins [of Iranian society] and making them more poor than ever."[120] Despite Jefroudi's claims that land reform did not alter the agricultural structure of Khuzestan, the annexation of agricultural land beginning with the establishment of the company

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[118] Ibid.

[119] Val Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993).

[120] Rabei, 'Ethnic Tensions in Khuzestan,' 195.

continued throughout the period of Land Reform. What is perhaps most striking is the fact that, for other parts of the country where land annexation for developing the means of oil production were not as pronounced, the results of Land Reform were similar to those seen in Khuzestan. In the end, the dispossession of land in light of exclusionary hiring practices amounted to the production of a vast reserve army of surplus labour who were pushed into the slums surrounding the country's then-nascent oil cities.

The period immediately following the era of Land Reform saw **(i)** the increase in the number of migrants seeking of employment in historically Arab regions as well as **(ii)** the increase in the annexation of Arab lands. The singular effect of this dual process was the creation of surplus populations across the Iranian south; the emergence of a mass of peoples structurally unable to, or undesiring of, their formal subsumption into the oil industry and graduate from the wageless existence of surplus populations into the class of waged-labourers whose own-most privilege is that of 'making a living.' Regarding the composition of this southern surplus population: **(i)** primarily consisted of non-racialised and impoverished landless Persians from central Iran; **(ii)** racialised landless peasants from places other than the south and; **(iii)** indigenous Arab farmers dispossessed of their means of subsistence (i.e. land). Not only did former peasants and farmers from racialised groups migrate to Khuzestan due to the promise, no matter how illusory, harboured by land reforms. What is more, even ethnic-Persian peasants in the neighbouring provinces also migrated in search of employment. This shows that the state's rendering surplus of populations does not only proceed along the lines of racialisation but that racialisation and the production of class, or more specifically surplus, are contingent upon each other.

That said, the mechanisms of racialisation that rendered migrants superfluous to Iranian capital are not identical to the means of subjugation employed by the state against the indigenous peoples of the Iranian south. As Rabei argues, the process of social engineering that shaped Khuzestan is *unique* to this region and is only rivalled by the singular relation that binds indigenous Arab peoples' land struggle to the region and their exclusion from the oil labour market. It is for these reasons that indicate the particular manner by which the Arabs of Khuzestan were racialised. In sum, even though many groups have been racialised and minoritised by the Iranian state from its inception, the material impact of these processes differ from group to group and can not be understood without an understanding of racialisation as a variegated process that is, itself, structurally inseparable from the production of classes and surplus populations.

As for Azari: in response to Rabei's criticism, Azari published an article, which charges Rabei for failing to provide sources and in clarifying the particular historical period to which his argument refers to. That said, and even in the absence of direct citations, other extant scholarship supports the existence of both processes of indigenous marginalisation and disfiguration similar to what is implied in Rabei descriptions of "social engineering." For example, in their 2022 article, 'Iran's Khuzestan: Riots Against the Suicidal State,' Iman Ganji and Jose Rosales discuss a 1957 memorandum that compared the social structures of the tribal life of Arab-Khuzestanis to those of the Native Americans, in general, and the Navajo Nation in particular.[121] Authored by an American bureaucrat formerly employed by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs to oversee the Bureau's Navajo Nation division, E. Reeseman "SY" Fryer was one of several US officials sent to Khuzestan: Iran was the first state to receive technical/developmental assistance from the United States' Cold-War era Point IV Program aimed at providing "technical assistance to Third World countries." Fryer's time in Khuzestan was spent preparing a province-wide memorandum — its natural resources, flora and fauna, and, of course, its indigenous peoples — that would form part of the preparations in the lead up to the construction of the Dez Dam. The memorandums conclusions? "Arab Khuzestanis," Fryer writes, "[are] just like the Navajo" insofar as both peoples are, Fryer continues, "*resource primitives* […] *populations that* either *waste* or *do not use resources efficiently, and therefore require technopolitical interventions*."[122] For both the Pahlavi regime and its Western backers, the Arabs of Khuzestan were viewed in the way nineteenth-century European settlers viewed the indigenous peoples of the North America continent: as obstacles to progress rather than as communities with legitimate claims to land, culture, and self-determination.

Conclusion

This chapter analysed the various figurations of the oil worker in the extant historiographic literature on Iran, with a particular attention paid to processes of racialisation. I argued that Arab labour has largely been *disfigured* from historiographies concerning the oil industry. While Atabaki mentions Arabs among the earliest clusters of oil workers in the south, his influential work focuses instead on Bakhtiyari labourers, failing to provide a thorough analysis of Arab labour in a region that was, at the time, predominantly populated by Arab communities. Similarly, Jefroudi notes that be-

[121] Ganji and Rosales, 'Iran's Khuzestan,' 25.
[122] Shima Houshyar, 'Engineering Water: Dams, Modularity, and State Power in Cold War Iran,' *Jadaliyya*, jadaliyya.com. 16 Novemeber 2020. Accessed on 5 September 2025.

fore nationalisation in 1951, Arabs made up the majority of contract workers, yet their names are absent from payrolls. She does not pursue this striking omission further. Drawing on Jefroudi, I argued that the postcolonial policy of *Iranisation*, intended to transfer expertise and labour from British to Iranian hands, in fact benefited only those workers who were Persian or able to assimilate. Bakhtiyari tribesmen had greater proximity to the state, spoke Persian, and were thus better positioned to access opportunities for social mobility within the oil industry. Arabs, by contrast, faced linguistic and cultural barriers and had historically been alienated from the central state, making assimilation — and thus access to employment — far more difficult.

Continuing to explore racialisation, I turned to the White Revolution and argued that, contrary to canonical narratives, the White Revolution did *not* create a new 'oil-working class' in Khuzestan. Rather, the land reforms that were implemented produced a vast population of racialised and non-racialised surplus labourers, enabling a broader process of demographic transformation in the south. Drawing on the work of Najmabadi, Ehsani, and Jefroudi, I showed how, unlike newer industries in Iran, the oil sector was *not* in need of labour during the land reform period; rather, it had been stifled by a saturated labour-market ever since the 1950s. That said, the *illusion* of employment opportunities in the oil industry remained, prompting the simultaneous migration of dispossessed peasants southward and the annexation of Arab lands. Landless migrants — both racialised and non-racialised — from other parts of the country settled in the peripheries of these oil cities and created these cities own informal economies. Contrary to thinkers such as Bayat who suggest the emergence of a new class, it would be more accurate to claim that what emerged was a not a class of waged-labourers but the mass production of unwaged-labour-power — i.e. *surplus populations*.

I concluded the chapter by turning to Reza Rabei's concept of the social engineering of the south. Drawing on Rabei's work, I argued that while various racialised and non-racialised groups were, indeed, pushed into the slums of oil cities, these groups did not undergo the same, identical, racialised process. Following Rabei, I claimed that Arab racialisation is singular in two key ways. First, as per Rabei, the illusion of labour in Khuzestan was strategically used by the Iranian government to alter the region's demographic from Arab to Persian. Second, regarding the Arab population, racialisation has always been inseparable from the relation to the land — for unlike other marginalised groups, struggles against racialisation by Arab Khuzestanis is rooted in their struggle for *both* labour *and* ancestral territory and results in tensions between Arabs vis-a-vis other ethnic-groups.

It is for these reasons that the concept of internal colonialism (i.e. endocolonialism) — wherein racialisation is central to its logic — re-emerged in this chapter as a key analytic, allowing for an examination of the continuities of empire from London to Tehran. My intention, *pace* Kaveh Ehsani, was not to simplistically equate the independent nation-state form with the colonial state and to attend to the salient, structural, continuities between British colonialism and Iranian endo-colonialism. And these structural continuities are nowhere clearer than in the oil company's mode of governance, its relationship to the local population, and in the "fundamental imbalance of power between the local society and the central power."[123]

[123] Ehsani, 'Social Engineering and the Contradictions,' 368.

Conclusion

On October 10, 2022 a road block organised by contract workers in Assaluyeh, Iran, marked the first Jina Uprising strike. Since the ignition of the uprising on 16 September, I had began reading the radical statements, published almost daily by the COCOWP. Reading the workers' calls for action, I waited for a strike. Then finally, on October 10, I was confronted with the first video. Emerging from the dust was a pixelated singular figure, covering his head and face with a dirty kaffiyeh. He reminded me of the oil workers that appeared in the short stories of Oil Fiction writer Mahmood. Set at the height of the labor movement in the 1940s, Mahmood's workers have names such as Arezu (meaning dream), and are determined to struggle for justice. The figure in the video echoed Arezu's voice; chanting slogans of solidarity directed towards protestors all over the country, as well as towards his fellow racialised workers. Figures such as these have become a central motif in all discourses on Iran ever since oil workers proved their control over the liquid streams that fuel modern Iran. This thesis traced the oil worker as a central motif of Iranian political life; a figure more unsettling than what mainstream historiography has made him out to be.

After his first appearance, following the start of the Jina Uprising, suddenly, the figure of the oil worker was everywhere: from the far-right monarchists to the leftists, it seemed as if the only matter all factions opposing the Iranian regime agreed on was oil workers' essential role in realising a revolution. Two instances, that arguably fuelled the most important conjunctural shifts in modern Iran, cause this general sentiment towards the oil worker: the 1951 nationalisation of Iranian oil, and the 1979 revolution. The success of both movements is generally understood as contingent upon oil strikes. However, the October 10, 2022 strike did not result in the success it had aimed for, namely, regime change. It lasted for no longer than 3 days before it was crushed by regime forces and it only encompassed a relatively small segment of the contract labor force.

Perhaps disproportionate in their reactions, the opposition's unanimous praise of the oil workers' strike reaffirmed not only that, in the context of Iran, the oil worker is perceived as the primary subject of labor politics, it also revealed the persistent presence of the oil worker in what I have called the revolutionary imaginary. This brings us to my first argument: Iran's conjunctural imaginaries are expressed in the representational life of the oil worker, past and present. The unanimous attention for the oil worker following the 10 October strike did, however, not necessarily result in a greater understanding of the oil worker today. This prompted me to turn to history and ask: who was the oil

worker, beyond the mythical figure of revolutionary resistance portrayed in the media during the short-lived October 2022 strike? What can the oil worker's representational life, from its early days until the present, reveal about Iran's conjunctural imaginaries? How did he come to occupy the centre of the revolutionary imaginary. And how come, in revolutionary times, he appears as the main figure of resistance, but in times of relative political stability is reduced to a victim of bad living conditions?

In this thesis, I set out to respond to these questions by focusing on racialisation. I argued that the oil worker's figurations are shaped by strikes, and by processes of racialisation that inform nationalist petro-imaginaries. My choice to turn to the history of the oil workers' representation through the lens of racialisation was informed by the slogan "*Long live Iran*! *Long live Lors, Turks, Kurds, Arabs and Bakhtiyari's!,"* which was uttered by the oil workers in the video released from the 10 October strike. This choice was simultaneously informed against the background of an emerging scholarly field that conceptualises the Iranian state, in its current form as well as during the Pahlavi monarchy, as an internally colonial state. Reading the scarce yet compelling recent works of scholarship on the indigenous Arab populations of the South (namely, the work of Daghagheleh, Ganji, and Rosales) and witnessing the realities of the south as shaped by historical forms of racialisation, I was compelled to ask why the question of race has never been at the centre of research on the social history of labor in the Iranian oil industry.

Taking an interest in the relationship between race and labor, I analysed the first public representations of the oil worker in colonial films produced by the AIOC in Chapter One. I demonstrated that in these films, the oil worker's representation as an obedient operator of oil infrastructure in Khuzestan functions to justify the integration of Iran into global capitalism through British colonisation. I also argued that in these films, ethnic differences are erased to transform the oil worker into the singular category of "Iranian native," and the subject of British colonization. Importantly, this marked the beginning of depicting oil workers as solely Persian, despite the majority of Khuzestan's population being Arab, thus confounding the categories 'Iranian' and 'Persian'. On the silver screen, the image of the oil worker differed greatly from the oil worker as figured in the communications between colonial officers of the time. I showed that in these documents, the oil worker appears as a devoted member of the Tudeh Party, and a communist feared by the AIOC. This instance marks the politicisation of the figure of the oil worker and thus the beginning of the battle between competing ideologies (colonialism and communism) over the right to his representa-

tion. I ended this chapter by analysing the appropriation of the oil worker into Iranian nationalism, after oil workers strikes enabled the nationalisation of oil in 1951. Drawing on nationalist illustrations, I argued that the disfiguration of workers' communist beliefs and the erasure of racialisation processes enabled the integration of the oil worker into Iranian nationalism. In other words, despite the contradictions between British colonialism and Iranian nationalism, the British colonial construction of a singular Iranian subject (as apparent in their propaganda films) continued into the post-colonial era, as visualised in the depictions of the Iranian oil worker as consistently ethnically Persian in nationalist media.

The second chapter revealed the structural conditions that have both underpinned and constrained the shifts in the oil worker's representations from subject of British colonialism, to communism, and finally, Iranian nationalism. Whereas the previous chapter navigated representations of the oil worker across printed media, colonial correspondences, and literature, this chapter asked how the oil worker has been represented in historiographies of modern Iran? I argue that in Iranian historiography, the portrayal of the oil worker as an almost mythical figure of revolutionary resistance often comes at the expense of severing him from his social and geographical ties to the south. In this chapter, initially, I focussed on the early years of the oil company and the emergence of Iran's first working class. I shed light on the disfiguration of Arab labor from national historiography as but one example of racialisation. Reading the works of Atabaki and Jefroudi alongside primary sources, I problematised the absence of Arab labourers on company payrolls despite Khuzistan being majority Arab in this period. I then turned to the Land Reforms part of the White Revolution and what Bayat called the emergence of a new, or second, working class. Drawing on Jefroudi, I argued that in the oil rich regions of the south, rather than the emergence of a new working class *in* the oil company, land reform led to the dramatic growth of surplus populations. Finally, I concluded the chapter by analysing Rabei's controversial claim that in the south, the illusion of labor rather than its actual existence, allowed the central government to socially engineer the south from a majority Arab region into a Persian one.

What I presented in these two chapters is but the beginning of a broader research project that can be expanded in various ways. Firstly, reading for racialisation as method can also be applied to more recent cultural objects, such as the workers' statements and strike videos that served as the starting point of this research. Reading for racialisation in present representations of labor could display the present day entanglements of racialisation, precarity and revolutionary action. Today, the most radi-

cal insurrections are organised by racialised contract workers. This approach would also allow for the analysis of labor's transformation under neoliberalisation, which marks Iran's current historical conjuncture, and the impact of the present-day neoliberal division of labor on strike forms such as the roadblock.

Secondly, a historical reading of the relationship between the production of race and labor in Iran reveals Iranian state-formation as inherently contingent on racialisation. This becomes apparent when studying how Reza shah's language reforms disadvantaged ethnically non-Persian oil workers. While there exists plenty of literature devoted to the explanation of these reforms, they do not explain the impact of language reform on labor, and its production of race. For the Arabs of the south, their lack of proximity to the Persian language excluded them from labor and thus the relative social mobilisation enabled by the oil company. Moreover, the anti-Arab sentiments that informed the basis of Iranian nationalism and Reza shah's language reform programs, impacted Arab's access to labor as well. This is but another example that shows the historical specificities of the racialisation of Arabs in particular and the production of race through reform more generally.

Thirdly, this research showed that the survival of Iran's capitalist economy has always been contingent on the racialised labor of oil workers. Despite shifts ever since the establishment of the industry, oil has always remained the country's economic backbone. In fact, oil is the main resource financing the axis of resistance, with Iran as its pivoting point. Could the axis of resistance be understood not only as a transnational military alliance, but also as a capital faction—one that operates alongside the Western-dominated free market, while nonetheless relying on capitalist forms for its survival? If the survival of the axis of resistance as an alliance against Western imperialism and capital faction is contingent upon the exploitation of racialised labor, as a capitalist form and in the context of an internal colonial state, than to what extent can Iran's anti-imperialism be perceived as such?

The contradictions lays in the positioning of the axis of resistance as an opponent of settler colonialism in Palestine and a defender of the oppressed, while it is mainly funded by a state that deploys settler-colonial strategies similar to those used against Palestinians. These include the exclusion of Arabs from the labor market, the demolition of homes, land and water appropriation, the renaming of towns and regions, the destruction of local villages, and the extraction of resources that primarily benefit settler populations—particularly Persians. This is often accompanied by systemic racism

against Arab communities and the prohibiting Arabs to return to their homes. These settler-colonial strategies are historical but continue into the present and are largely unknown. This contradiction can not only be attribute to a lack of research for it is a blind spot for many studying Iran because reckoning with it shakes the foundations onto which Iranian nationalism has been constructed.

These provocations beg for further research on the figure of the oil worker as a motif of political life; an unsettling figure that can shake the foundations of established believes about state-building, the Iranian economy, capitalism, and even the axis of resistance. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, this thesis gathered a counter-archive of the oil worker, in his moments of silent as well as loud resistance, in the brief moments in which his communist desires were realised, whether it be in 1943 when 7000 oil workers gathered in Ahmadabad, or on 10 October, 2022 when only a few oil workers shattered stones unto a rundown road. I gathered this archive to highlight a rich yet actively erased history of worker's resistance and battles over their right to self-representation. I did so as to centre the oil worker not only as a figure that gives expression to Iran's conjunctural imaginaries but also, and perhaps more importantly, as the bearer of a still unrealised political imaginary that will continue to appear in scattered stones on the road, fictional characters such as Arezu, and workers' meetings, no matter their size, until the revolution is realised.

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