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

This paper explores the transformations of the Islamic Republic of Iran's dominant narratives on labor between 1979 and 2009. By analyzing official May Day speeches of this period, it navigates multiple constructions of workers' roles, which were systematically propagated by the IRI's Supreme Leader and president over time. The analysis relies on the following primary sources: from the 1979 May Day sermon, pronounced by Ruhollah Khomeini, to the 2009 speech given by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, together with messages sent by Ali Khamenei, Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami. Showing how workers' role—understood as a collective and distinct group—was gradually minimized, this paper argues that a bottom-up cleaning up process slowly purified May Day. In fact, the IRI progressively neglected workers as (revolutionary) social actors and interlocutors, as it stopped talking to masses and started speaking to middle classes.

Keywords: Iran; Iranian Workers; Labor; May Day; Workers Day; Workers

Introduction

Following its foundation, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), under the guidance of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, began a massive campaign geared to construct a morally guided imaginary of labor as a “religious obligation” and of workers as “holy warriors,” under the auspices of Islam.¹ Integral part of this endeavor was triggering a process of appropriation of May Day, a historical symbol of the secular Left. A new revolutionary meaning was assigned to words, and the International Workers' Day was assimilated to the Iranian calendar: precisely On the 11th of Ordibehesht month as *Ruz-e Jahāni-ye Kārgarān*.² Thus, May Day was absorbed into the

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¹See Morgana, “The Islamic Republican Party in the Factory,” 237–49.

²See Chelkowski and Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution*, 101–250.

Khomeinist discourse and taken under the Islamic umbrella.³ How did this process of absorption work? Which discursive mechanisms were engaged? Specifically, how did the IRI's dominant narrative on labor evolve throughout the years between the 1979 revolution and the 2009 Green Movement upheaval? In fact, the events of 1979 and 2009 represented two crucial moments of collective action within the history of the Islamic republic, but with an enormously different participation of workers. While during the 1979 revolution workers (particularly those from oil refineries)⁴ were able to "paralyze the State apparatus,"⁵ in 2009 they did not take to streets collectively.⁶

The importance of May Day for the government of the Islamic Republic is underlined in the speeches given for the occasion by the country's leadership. In the context of this article, by IRI is meant the dominant discourse articulated and transferred by Iran's Supreme Leader and president over time. Therefore, by analyzing and translating Workers' Day speeches of this period from Persian, this paper navigates labor territory and its multiple constructions propagated by the Islamic republic's leaders. The analysis relies on the following primary sources: from the 1979 May Day sermon, pronounced by Khomeini, to the 2009 speech given by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (president 2005-13), together with messages to workers sent by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (president 1981-89, and then Supreme Guide), Hojjatoleslam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (president 1989-97) and Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Khatami (president 1997-2005). First, to track the process of appropriation of the discourses on labor by the Iranian political establishment, this paper investigates how workers' notion and role were conceived, utilized and re-discussed during the IRI's historical transitions. Second, to contextualize the evolution of the narratives on workers, the analysis tackles ruptures and transformations occurring within the state apparatus' rhetoric in relation to labor. Third, to shed light on the discursive mechanisms through which the official narrative on workers and labor took shape on several layers of discourse, this article illustrates formulations and symbols evoked to animate public sentiment and galvanize collective mobilization. The incorporation of "workers" and "labor" into the Islamic Republic's official narrative meant an incremental dissolution of both concepts as sources of political mobilization. Three discursive developments were central to this: (1) What began as rhetoric, with workers seen as "slaves of God" within the broader group of the *mostaz'afin*—the downtrodden, which the revolution was committed to—developed into the narrative of "produce and consume" for the IRI. (2) A paradigm shift occurred in state discourse: from talking to the masses and urban poor, the Islamic republic began to speak to the middle class and therefore neglected the workers.⁷ (3) A bottom-up *cleaning up* process slowly purified May Day from discourses of class and social justice, as workers' role as (revolutionary) social actors was gradually minimized. Why? Labor

³Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, 1–88.

⁴See Ashraf, "Kālbod-shekāfi Enghelāb," 55–123.

⁵Ashraf and Banuazizi, "The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization," 34.

⁶See Harris, "Iran: Why Workers Aren't Joining the Protests."

⁷See also Harris, "Class and Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran," 2–5.

represented a domain of contending narratives, in other words a site of a discursive war between the IRI and the historical tradition of the Left. In fact, the latter—along with its class rhetoric and slogans on social justice—could have been perceived as a threat to the stability of the Islamic republic.

Discourse as a Tool of Power: Linking Linguistic Constructions and Knowledge

Looking at labor as a realm of discursive strategies within the Islamic republic allows May Day speeches to be analyzed in terms of power relations, as well as interactions between language and power. In fact, discourse is here understood as a tool of power, by which a set of values and beliefs is articulated and circulated. If, as Norman Fairclough argued, discourse is a way for ideology to become evident and to be perceived as “common sense,” a discursive approach is useful to disentangle the different modes of workers’ representations by the IRI’s leaders, who were responding to occasional historical and economic challenges. More specifically, as Fairclough explained, “conventions routinely drawn up in discourse embody ideological assumptions which come to be taken as mere ‘common sense.’”⁸ Thus, it is through the “ideological workings of language” that power is expressed. From a critical perspective, all the official speeches delivered for the *Ruz-e Jahāni-ye Kārgar* are to be interpreted as a representation of political power through political discourse, where actors are engaged in processes that are fully political, and they speak for the state.⁹ Moreover, as discourse is here understood and analyzed as a changing linguistic process, this article will show the ideological shifts within the IRI’s dominant narrative. It will also explain how and why discourse intersected and involved what Fairclough defined as “social conditions” (where the discourse occurs and the wider context).¹⁰ This means that understanding how workers were included in the official discourse and with what consequences, may also reveal a lot more about the dynamics of the state and workers’ interactions/struggles. As Fairclough put it, struggle can be revealed “not only in language in the obvious sense that it takes place in discourse as evidenced in language texts, but also over language.”¹¹ Thus, what becomes relevant here is how discursive strategies were woven to the different imaginaries evoked and how political agents constructed facts through discourse. Moreover, the interaction between practices of language formulation and their premises, values, goals and potential consequences reveal the strategies employed to transform words into calls for action or to legitimize certain political choices. For instance, as will be explained later, while often addressing their interlocutors as “the people,” the Iranian authorities present themselves as problem-solvers, patrons, or agents who can guarantee security and welfare. The concept of *mardom-e Irān*—“people of Iran”—was in fact utilized many times over the years,

⁸Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 64.

⁹See Fairclough and Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis*, 17–18.

¹⁰Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 25.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 73.

carrying different meanings: people as a class, as a religious community, as a sovereign nation.

Therefore, in this article, discourse analysis will start from the construction of labor and workers, to further explore which features or qualities were attributed over time and through which frameworks certain claims were justified and expressed.¹² Then, it will develop along vocabulary and lexicon connections that were used by IRI's leaders in relation to the labor domain throughout the years. Finally, it will tackle the striking features within each May Day speech in terms of contents, relations and subjects: in other words, what is said, the relations of the people involved in discourse and which position they occupy.¹³

Labor as a Manifestation of Allah, Workers as "Warriors" in the Islamic Domain

As this paper is concerned with the discursive representation of workers and labor, a crucial point to start this analysis is looking at the consolidation of the 1979 revolution and the Islamic Republic as a process. This process involved the factory and engaged in the transformation of the worker into a revolutionary *homo islamicus*, framing it within specific ideological patterns and references, which were comprehensible for all those belonging to the revolutionary corpus. The inherent language, logic and premises of the revolutionary discourse as a momentum to chase the shah and establish a new order of things were gradually constructed and readjusted.¹⁴ This was the case with May Day. As the Islamic republic regarded itself as embodying genuine Islam, *Ruz-e Jahāni-ye Kārgar*—starting from 1979—was turned into a site of generation for militant discourses within the Islamic domain. Other political perspectives were de facto marginalized or rendered void by absorption, as for the assimilation of leftist historical symbols, such as those of social justice and class. It is worth dedicating a specific reflection on those narratives here, before starting with the analysis of the first May Day of the Islamic republic. In fact, workers' rights, class struggle and social justice were all parts of the Marxist dominant discourses, which had developed throughout the decades before the revolution. The debate on class championed by the Iranian Left developed within the circles of the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party, formed in 1941, as well as within the guerrilla group and organization of *Fedā'iyān-e Khalq* and the Islamist *Mojāhedīn-e Khalq* that emerged between 1965 and 1971, along with a Mojāhedīn branch, *Peykār* (Struggle), born in 1979 and afterwards with *Rāh-e Kārgar* (Workers' Path).¹⁵ Nevertheless, theoretical approaches and methods of these organizations were different. If the Tudeh Party, since its foundation, presented a program of reforms and claims for workers' rights, demanding redistribution of wealth, insurance and housing—as documented by scholars such as Abrahamian,

¹²See Wodack and Krzyzanowski, *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*, 96.

¹³See Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 46.

¹⁴Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 5.

¹⁵Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, 22–132.

Behrooz, Matin-Asgari and others¹⁶—the 1970s’ Marxist and Islamist guerrilla armed struggle exposed the cause of social justice, framing it in a more radical pattern fully involving the workers’ revolutionary potential. Furthermore, if, thanks to the Marxists’ contribution, the meaning of trade union activism in Iran had already developed in the 1940s, with the 1970s’ urban guerrillas a situation of warfare and public discourse of dissent strongly emerged.¹⁷ Therefore, when the Islamic republic celebrated its first Workers’ Day, the political arena close to workers was diverse and complex. As mentioned above, a discursive war was going on. Overall, the discourse pertaining social justice and class struggle did not belong specifically to Khomeini and his followers.¹⁸

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

Labor is like the manifestation of God, who is in all creatures [*mojudāt*]. Labor is in all the creatures, which were made by hard work. All particles are workers, even atomic particles present in the nature are workers. All the particles of the universe are active and vigilant [...] All workers are right; all are slaves of God; and labor is everywhere, and Workers’ day is not just today.¹⁹

By defining labor as “a manifestation of God,” Khomeini dragged it into the religious sphere. Describing it as a sign of Allah, he attributed dignity to labor, which “is everywhere” as an inherent part of nature. Piety and universality permeated society—here conceived as a bigger factory where workers, *kārgarān*²⁰—were presented as all the natural particles. Hence, everyone could be a worker, a “slave of God,” a Muslim, part of “the” biggest design. Moreover, the Supreme Guide proclaimed that “every day should be [considered] as workers’ day.”

As noted by Asef Bayat in his pioneer *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, what was stirring the crowds in the streets of Iran—according to Khomeini—was a struggle between *mostaz’afin* and *mostakbarin*, oppressed and oppressors.²¹ Workers were cast into this conflict, not as a conscious working class, but within the broader category of the downtrodden. Nevertheless, on the occasion of *Ruz-e Kārgar* 1980, in his annual speech, Khomeini explicitly mentioned the word “class” when addressing

¹⁶See Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 284–321; Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, 48–134; Matin-Asgari, “The Left’s Contribution to Social Justice in Iran,” 255–69 and Rahnama, “The Left and the Struggle for Democracy in Iran,” 250–67.

¹⁷See Matin-Asgari, “The Left’s Contribution to Social Justice in Iran,” 262–3; Vahabzadeh, *Guerrilla Odyssey*, 46–52.

¹⁸See Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 126–88.

¹⁹*Ettelā’āt*, 12 Ordibehesht 1358—May 2, 1979.

²⁰See also Atabaki, “From Amaleh (Labor) to Kārgar (Worker),” 159–75.

²¹Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 77–100.

laborers: “Workers are the most valuable class [*arzeshtarīn tabaqeh*] and the most beneficial group [*sudmandtarīn goruh*] in the society.”²²

Yet he soon specified that “no particular group or specific movement” could ever represent workers’ grievances, as the main goal was to cast workers under the Islamic umbrella and within the broader collectivity of the downtrodden. Hence, this was a strategy to defuse workers (together with some leftist groups such as the abovementioned Fedā’yān, Mojāhedīn and Peykār, who were still active in fueling protests) as a potential threat to the stability of the newborn IRI.²³ Indeed, the rhetoric of the enemy behind the strikes and chaos over the country, mixing with an anti-imperialist narrative, was recurrent in this speech. One year after the revolution was accomplished, Khomeini’s admonishment was dedicated, once again, to ousting “traitors”:

In this audience are also the destructive workers, the ones who, in the name of supporting workers, prevent them working or those affiliated to those who are burning the fields. Workers’ Day does not belong to them and to the enemies affiliated to them. Workers’ Day is the day of burial of superpowers and for independence, in all its dimensions, to give back to the oppressed.

When comparing “the enemies” to “foreign powers” and “arrogant agents,” Khomeini meant the interference in Iranian domestic affairs during the shah’s government.²⁴ In his message for May Day 1981 he went even further, depicting plotters and “counter-revolutionaries” as “enemies of God,” therefore framing them in the realm of “infidels” (*koffar*). It was 12 Ordibehesht 1360 of the Iranian calendar and *Jomhourī-e Eslāmi* when the newspaper run by the Islamic Republican Party went on sale with the following headline, quoting Khomeini: “The ignorant small groups showed with their acts and their words that they are enemies of the people and enemies of God. They are amateur actors in the scene.”²⁵ The subtitle, over a full-page picture, contained a warning for laborers: “Be aware to give your valuable services to our dear nation country. Do not be at the Americans’ service through these groups.”²⁶

Khomeini was probably referring to the Mojāhedīn and Fedā’yān’s urban guerrilla actions occurring on those days. While casting all the different groups of the Iranian Left under the same generic word, *goruhak-hā* (subgroups), the Supreme Leader started a process of suppression of the peculiarities of each organization. The discursive goal of not pronouncing the groups’ names can be described as a tactic of minimizing them within blurring lines, while de facto silencing their actions.

²²*Ettelā’āt*, 13 Ordibehesht 1359—May 3, 1980.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴For more details on the myth and reality of foreign conspiracy, see Abrahamian, “The Constitutional Revolution: The Impact of The West,” in *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 50–68; Abrahamian, “The 1953 Coup in Iran,” 182–215; and Blout, “Soft War,” 212–22.

²⁵*Jomhourī-e Eslāmi*, 12 Ordibehesht 1360—May 2, 1981.

²⁶*Ibid.*

Together with this anger against the enemy, Khomeini celebrated the “noble working class” (which was to be united and far from these groups). Moreover, praising it was to be considered not only as a religious duty, but also “national and public.” In fact, the rhetoric of nationalist unity began to appear along these lines. The reason lay behind the war with Iraq. In fact, stressing nationalist unity had served the goal of raising popular support for those recruited to the war front after Iraqi troops invaded Iran on 22 September 1980. The foreign element was constructed as antagonistic to the construction of the self. By establishing this dichotomy within the discourse, Khomeini outlined the “enemy’s profile as propagandist, despicable, liar, on America’s and Russia’s payrolls”:

[Workers] smashed their powerful fist to the mouth of the wicked and foreigner propagandists, and the internal/domestic scum. They can push back everything, left or right. Today, after two years of this crime perpetrated by these groups depending on foreigners, their hand was revealed. These gangs proved with their acts and their words that they are enemies of the people and of God. They are amateur actors in the scene.²⁷

Khomeini purposely inveighed against all rivals. He established two opposed camps, constructing *the* threat as coming from universities and rationalists: small groups “united against Iran and the Islamic republic.” Gazing closely at the context, it can be argued that he was targeting all those Marxist ideas that were circulating within the universities even before the revolution. The reason for such hatred lay in the fact that, through the Fedā’yān and the Mojāhedīn in particular, Marxist ideas spread within some factories:

Dear workers, brothers, you are serving very hardly for the independence of the country with your hearts, your lives. These groups want to use you for their bad goals and to benefit world’s arrogance [*estekbār-e jahāni*, imperialists]. Be aware that these people are the ones who made universities a battlefield against Islam and Iran.²⁸

During the first years after the revolution, the struggle against the Left within the factories was not a matter of discourse only. There was a real fight going on within and outside the workers’ councils (*shūrā*) that had been established in many factories after 1978 as the outcomes of the strike committees, with the idea of control from below in the factory.²⁹ This conception of bottom-up management of labor issues began to vanish, as the political space for the councils’ radical demands and workers’ participation in management became increasingly restricted.³⁰ A purge of leftist opponents

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Moghissi and Rahnama, “The Working Class and the Islamic State in Iran,” 206–8.

³⁰On the political pressure on the workers’ councils in the immediate aftermath of the revolution see Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 155–60.

among workers started and open warfare was also conducted in the streets, particularly in summer 1980.³¹ This was the beginning of what Nomani and Behdad defined as a slow process of “deproletarianization of labor.”³² Therefore, along with discursive mechanisms of delegitimization of the Marxist groups—such as those mentioned above—repression was widely employed. In fact, between February 1979 and June 1981, a massive operation against opponents was carried out: in twenty-eight months, 497 people were sentenced to death, classified as “counterrevolutionaries.”³³ Another relevant transformation aiming at disempowering workers and gaining bottom-up control of the workplaces loomed within the factories: by 1981, the majority of secular *shuras* were dismantled. In other words, workers’ councils, which in some cases managed the workplaces, were eventually brought under the state umbrella.³⁴ The *Islamic Associations* were established and assumed de facto the discursive control of workers’ organizations. Beyond the Workers’ House, *Khāneh-ye Kārgar*, sponsored by the state, no other independent institution could represent workers.³⁵ However, it was a combination of factors that gradually allowed the Islamic republic to consolidate itself: not discourse alone, nor ideology or repression only. Welfare policies represented one of the IRI’s early preoccupations, as they also constituted a tool for gaining consensus among workers and preventing their discontent and consequently their mobilization.³⁶ At that time, as for the May Day 1981 speech, the discursive strategy was dual. On the one hand, Khomeini was instilling a sense of danger and need for defense, while conveying messages of urgency and anger. On the other hand, he presented the self against the other, so workers as “brothers and sisters,” “great champion people,” “Iran’s dorsal spine [the country’s pillar],” against the enemies:

Brothers and sisters, be aware that your valuable services in our dear Islamic country should not be used for the advantage of America by the hands of these criminal groups. You, the great champion people, be aware that these rationalists [*jire-ye khavār*] are at the service of colonialists.³⁷

Work as a Weapon against Capitalism and Imperialism for the Community of Believers

Along with a discursive process of reframing workers from a “class” to “brothers and sisters” within the broader group of the *mostaz’afin*, Khomeini absorbed the leftist anti-capitalist narrative under the Islamic umbrella, while the IRI began widening

³¹For a more extensive chronology of these events, see Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, 178–84.

³²Nomani and Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran*, 101.

³³Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 181.

³⁴*Shuras* were elective institutions and the post-revolutionary state tried to first reduce their role and then replace them. See Bayat, “Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers,” 205; Bayat, “Labor and Democracy in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” 41–55.

³⁵See Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Authorocracy in Iran*, 251–4; and Bayat, “Social Movements, Activism and Social Development,” 7.

³⁶See Harris, *Social Revolution*, 14 and 31–45.

³⁷*Jomhourī-e Eslami*, 12 Ordibehesht 1360—May 2, 1981.

access to social welfare for those who had been excluded before 1979.³⁸ Indeed, the Supreme Leader's dictum, "One day of you, workers, is more valuable than a capitalist's whole life," framed the narrative of labor within the Islamic republic starting from May Day 1982. The maxim would appear several times in the following celebrations.³⁹ Nevertheless, the core values of this slogan lost momentum over the years, as economic and historical events started changing the IRI's attitude towards capital and production, particularly with the fatigue of the war and its repercussions. The speech of 11 Ordibehesht 1361 marked the end of Khomeini's messages for Workers' Day. He once again warned workers that they should be circumspect and watchful, feeding the rhetoric of a conspiracy: "You won't see any capitalists or those who occupied honorable places [anymore]. Be sure that you do what you can."⁴⁰

If the Imam Khomeini's notice leaped out from the right side of *Jomhouri-e Eslāmi*'s front-page, for the first time a full speech of Ali Khamenei as the president of the IRI took up the opposite side. The headline was eloquent: "The weapon [*salāb*] of workers is labor."⁴¹

For the first time—after almost two years of war with Iraq—the word production, *towlid*, entered the regime's vocabulary, associated with labor as a "moment of prayer." This represented a first important rupture since the revolution. In fact, the country was experiencing a crisis of productivity and the IRI's leaders wanted to take ideological control of this moment, framing labor as a "religious duty."⁴² Likewise, the term martyrdom, through blood (which is immediately connected to the tragedy of Karbala,) penetrated the IRI's discourse on workers: "Working hours are the moments of prayer and the tribute to the martyrs and the poor people and the down-trodden. So, wasting every moment of this work is like invading the rights of poor people and insulting martyrs' blood."⁴³

Another element marked a shift of focus in this speech, as Khamenei clearly mentioned management that was not to be opposed. First, he urged workers to report disorder or "misconduct." Second, he indicated to workers the path to obedience, recommending not to hinder or meddle in managers' activities.

The manager of every factory and small enterprise is directly in charge of making order in every work unit. Workers should be aware of every misconduct and wrong acts or violation, but should not interfere in the management. They [workers] should report every violation.⁴⁴

³⁸Harris, *Social Revolution*, 100–104.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰*Jomhouri-e Eslāmi*, 11 Ordibehesht 1361 – May 1, 1982.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Bayat suggests this interpretation: "The crisis of productivity in industry, along with ideological control by the state of the working class during the war with Iraq, was combined with the government's Islamic ideology to advocate work as a religious duty." See Bayat, "Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers," 181.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴*Jomhouri-e Eslāmi*, 11 Ordibehesht 1361—May 1, 1982.

To eradicate Marxist symbolism from labor and to end the appeal of leftist ideas within the factories, the president: (1) reaffirmed the concept of labor connected to Islam; and (2) specifically blamed those who conceived workers as a working class and not a “*ommat*,” a community of believers:

Workers must look at labor issues through an Islamic perspective. Differences in the expectations and requests should not be the cause of division between various [social] strata and should not damage the Islamic brotherhood. The atheist [*elbādi*] correspondents [*makāteb*] are trying to use these affairs to make workers distinguishable as a class, separated from the community of believers [*ommat*].⁴⁵

Marginalizing Workers' Day: The Path to Economic Liberalization

By the late 1980s, what was propagandized as the day belonging to workers and the downtrodden, *kārgarān va mostaz'afin*, was slowly dismissed as a minor event within the logic of consolidation of the Islamic republic. May Day lost its grandeur in the post-revolutionary discourse. Why? Khomeini died and his modalities of framing class struggle slowly started to be dismissed. The legacies of the war had generated economic problems, as production was low. The leftist threat was not perceived as being as dangerous as it was in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, because a combination of repression and discursive mechanisms had in part isolated it.

The media coverage of May Day decreased. Articles on the annual celebration were often relegated to more modest spaces or at the bottom of front pages. Official speeches were delegated to ministers. *Ruz-e Jahāni-ye Kārgar* 1986 provided an example of this process of transformation. Rafsanjani, at that time speaker of the parliament, sent his message for May Day, which was published on the front page of *Ettelā'āt* on 11 Ordibehesht 1365 (Persian calendar), along with an almost half-page picture standing out under the headline: “Legions of workers for the International Workers Day.”⁴⁶

By evoking an imaginary of war, Rafsanjani associated the notion of laborers' strain to the pain of all those Iranians suffering their deaths on the frontline, while struggling to give freedom to Iran from the yoke of conflict with Baghdad. The Karbala paradigm was kept as a catalyst, as the cult of martyrdom affected the visual discourse through graffiti and posters as well:⁴⁷ “Workers' sweat is combined with martyrs' blood in the way of freedom and love to make the country free.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, what emerged from these words was the discourse of the *uniqueness* of Iran as compared to “other countries,” where hard labor was falling short in giving rewards to workers.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶*Ettelā'āt*, 11 Ordibehesht 1365—May 1, 1986.

⁴⁷See Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*; and Morgana, “The Islamic Republican Party in the Factory,” 237–49.

⁴⁸*Ettelā'āt*, 11 Ordibehesht 1365—1 May 1986.

When Rafsanjani took the helm of the presidency in 1989, it was seven weeks after Khomeini's death.⁴⁹ The war with Iraq had ended less than a year before. The share of the Iranian working class that were employed had declined since the revolution.⁵⁰ The population was rapidly increasing.⁵¹ Rafsanjani named his first cabinet the "*dowlat-e sâzandegi*," the reconstruction.⁵² He "restructured" the Iranian economy, as he tried to stimulate capital accumulation. By implementing new liberal measures, the president attempted to raise productivity and deeply affected the labor market, with inevitable consequences for workers and their bargaining power.⁵³ Without ever labeling his policies "neoliberal" and keeping his narrative aligned to revolutionary slogans, Rafsanjani aimed at increasing investment, improving the rate of employment and Iranian welfare. It can be argued that the Islamic republic effectively customized the dictum "produce and consume." In fact, terms such as "development," "economic production" and "productivity" pervaded the IRI's new discourse. The idea of workers and the working class was utterly reformulated. Neither of the words *tabaqeh* or *mostaz'afin* were adopted to address laborers in the president's message in a meeting with workers' representatives a day before *Ruz-e Kârgar*, but the concept of working stratum, *gheshr-e kârgar*, or working force, *niru-ye kârgar*, entered Rafsanjani's narrative: "Working stratum [*gheshr-e kârgar*] is one of the most loyal social strata: it is loyal to Islam and to the revolution. We appreciate the working force. This day [Workers' Day] has a big value and an important role in the whole world: the public opinion needs to comprehend workers' rights."⁵⁴

As he needed production to rise and dissent to be eradicated—while the reconstruction period was putting the IRI under pressure—Rafsanjani couched workers' rights in a new ideological frame, which was overlooked during May Day speeches until that moment: the legal element. Why? Almost eleven years after the revolution, the Islamic republic did not have a labor law. Although the first draft of a new law was submitted in 1982, only six years later, in 1988, the parliament passed the final version. The text was then ratified in 1989 by the Islamic Consultancy Assembly in 1989, and eventually approved by the Expediency Council in 1990.⁵⁵ Rafsanjani's government sold the approval as one of its achievements, using a collective *we*: "We are working to approve this Labor law and [...] soon a group able to approve a Labor law conforming to the Islamic system will be formed."⁵⁶

⁴⁹See Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 182–3.

⁵⁰Nomani and Behdad, "Labor Rights and the Democracy Movement," 219.

⁵¹According to the data provided by Nomani and Behdad in *Class and Labor in Iran*, "the 1986 census reports a 3.9 percent average annual growth since 1976, compared with a 2.7 percent growth rate in the previous decade." In 1976 the population was reported to be of 33.7 million. See Nomani and Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran*, 65–6.

⁵²Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 56.

⁵³See Maljoo, "The Unmaking of the Iranian Working Class," 47–64.

⁵⁴*Kayhân*, 10 Ordibehesht 1369—April 30, 1990.

⁵⁵See Hashemi, *Negareshi bar Qanun-e Jadid-e*.

⁵⁶*Kayhân*, 10 Ordibehesht 1369—April 30, 1990.

The economic dynamics were changing, and the downtrodden were no longer to be central to the IRI's narrative. In fact, sketching the contours of the myth of success, the president invoked workers' stock options (*sahām*) within the logic of organization and management of the factory, as reported by *Kayhān*.⁵⁷ By then, the control from below period of the *shurā* seemed to be far away. Moreover, years of state-controlled-only unions have passed. Within this context, a group of workers chanted slogans in support of Rafsanjani. This of course represented another discursive strategy and a propaganda move. Yet it also marked a shift from the past: "Workers are awake and they hate West and East," (*Kārgarān bidārand, az garb o sharq bizarand*); "Life to Khamenei and enduring Hashemi" (*Khamenei zende bād, Hashemi payānde bād*); "Hashemi Hashemi, we will protect and support you" (*Hashemi Hashemi hemāyatat mikonim*).⁵⁸ Another change that is worth noting here is that May Day gradually stopped being central to the rhetoric of the IRI, as the social justice and class struggle narratives were no longer useful to Rafsanjani's projects.

Already in that year, Rafsanjani left the floor to Hossein Kamali, minister of labor. Kamali, on the one hand, reinforced the anti-capitalist rhetoric associated with May Day by the Islamic republic authorities, neglecting any form of coercion over Iranian workers.⁵⁹ On the other hand, he presented to workers a future as productivity machines: "Workers should work more for this year."⁶⁰ Sanitizing the discourse of any connection to the leftist realm, Rafsanjani's minister of labor redefined once again the notion of workers and their attributes:

Each move [*harekat*] either of only thought or on a factual level, if it gives a positive result to the society, is defined as labor. Who makes this movement is the worker [*kārgar*]. Who is a worker is and will be a free person [*ensān-e azād*] and a believer [*ba imān*].⁶¹

Upon closer inspection of the speech, the double-layered narrative of anti-capitalism and praise of productivity was maintained to underpin a new argument: produce for self-sufficiency and to reconstruct the country after the war. The revolutionary element resisted more strongly than the religious. Claims of victory and evocation of development and success after "hard work" were adopted as tools of mobilization, because the IRI needed supporters and human resources to reconstruct the country after the war:

Today we should mobilize all the energies of our country because this should be a year of hard work within the plan of production and development for the reconstruction of this country. This should become a slogan for self-sufficiency [*khod*

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

kafāi], because in this way we can make good plans towards an improvement of the country's economic system.⁶²

On May Day 1990, *Kayhān*—among other major newspapers—published Rafsanjani's directives to transform factories into sites of massive production. The religious dimension of discourse again came into sight, through the image of “believers' hands.” It appeared to be far away from the claims for the *mostaz'afin* as expressions of militant discontent, as with Khomeini's first May Day messages: “One of the goals of the Islamic Republic is to give the whole industry of the country into the hands of believers, who are the ones the revolution belongs to.”⁶³

The appeal to the revolutionary realm became even stronger, before escalating into the final motivating formula: more efforts, more production. By that time, the neoliberal motto of the IRI's presidency could be summarized as such: “Wasting energy and time and working less, especially in this situation we are experiencing now, sometimes is unforgivable. It is a pity for the pure blood of martyrs of Islam.”⁶⁴

Furthermore, what is relevant to the context of this paper is that Rafsanjani—while invoking the professionalization of labor and keeping repressed any form of protests or organization in the factories—institutionalizing the cult of hard work as a principle crossing industry, the economy and politics: “Labor is one of the most important principles for economic independence in the industry and in politics [...] Authorities should increase educational and professional quality of workers.”⁶⁵

By 1992, Rafsanjani's economic liberalization policies were launched.⁶⁶ The dynamics of state-labor interactions were again changing, while workers as an organized group almost ceased being addressed in the official discourse. The IRI sided with certain management mechanisms, as the 1990 Labor Law showed: (1) the rationalization of the labor process along with fewer guarantees for workers, with almost nothing for the unemployed; and (2) the introduction of temporary contracts.⁶⁷ Therefore, it can be argued that this whole process could be realized because workers were disempowered and de facto divided through several strategies employed along with discourse.

Progressively, the implementation of these strategies and policies served to strip the concepts of social justice (*edālat ejtemā'i*) and class conflict of their meanings. The following speech from Workers' Day 1994 was part of this process:

The tranquility and wellbeing of workers is one of the bases of social justice in the Islamic republic. In different respects, workers' rights lagged behind and you workers have done a lot to restore your rights [...] The entrance of workers in

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³*Kayhān*, 11 Ordibesht 1369—May 1, 1990.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶See Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 182–3.

⁶⁷See Maljoo, “The Unmaking of the Iranian Working Class,” 47–64.

the factory will improve workers' wellbeing. We should do more to increase workers' shares [*sahām-hā-ye kārgarān*].⁶⁸

Moving from the particular to a broader context, a few disruptions may be isolated. The president was among the oil workers of *Naft-e Pars-e Tehran*. He was speaking to those considered "the best" of the country (*kārgarān-e nemuneh*), waiting to be awarded during the *Ruz-e kārgar* celebrations. In the year he was giving the speech, oil workers received a proposal: to transform their contracts from blue to white collar and take a promotion.⁶⁹ These measures were integrated in a discourse that de facto ended class antagonism.

Obedience to revolutionary and religious instructions served as key elements of discursive transition within this phase of the IRI. Martyrdom as an imaginary of sacrifice and collective defense of the symbols of the revolution served to bridge the divide between a context that was rapidly being liberalized and the overarching ideological pro-*mostaz'afin* narrative that was still in place. In this space of difference, workers emerged as "society's force of production."

Workers had a fundamental role in the reconstruction period after the imposed war [*jang-e tabmili*] and the revolution belongs to them. Iranian workers followed the line of revolution and the line of Imam [*khatt-e enghelāb va khatt-e emām*] and with their small salary, they defended the symbols of the revolution.

Martyr workers are proud in front of God. Without any slogan, we are trying to solve the main problems of the country [...] Production is the basis of the economic independence of the country and we will try to invest correctly, in order to increase it.⁷⁰

Eventually, workers were advised how to behave better in the factory and outside it: "Keep your attitude to work with responsibility and respect."⁷¹ This last sentence, while officially promoting the maintenance of a certain etiquette, also reinforced a top-down characterization of the IRI's narrative that went along repression and increasing legal insecurity of labor. The restrictive articulation of workers' code of behavior in the workplace challenged the reality of unrest that erupted all over the country during Rafsanjani's presidency. Between 1991 and 1994, the IRI experienced a series of protests against the government's neoliberal agenda. Workers' unrest intensified, along with that from the urban poor.⁷² Grievances were a reaction against inflation and its effects on wages and purchasing power. After years of pursuing an agenda meant to liberalize the currency market, the *riāl* had dropped from 1,800 to

⁶⁸*Salam*, 11 Ordibehest 1373—May 1, 1994.

⁶⁹Rahmani, "Chera'i va mo'zalha-ye taghir-e sharayet-e kār-e naftgarān," 53–65.

⁷⁰*Salam*, 11 Ordibehest 1373—May 1, 1994.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²Bayat, *Street Politics*, 97–9.

3,200 to a dollar. In 1994, Rafsanjani did not pronounce his official message for *Ruz-e Kārgar*. As a strategy to neutralize recent outbreaks of protest and to reduce once again the importance of May Day, the Supreme Leader Khamenei gave his May Day speech in 1997, merging Workers' and Teachers' Day into one moment.

The Islamic-Iranian Rhetoric of Cultural Liberalization Addressing the Middle Class

The process of dissolution class struggle and social justice narratives and needs was almost completed, despite the real economic crisis that Iran was experiencing. The Islamic republic was about to re-modulate its discourse towards the masses and particularly on the middle classes,⁷³ which re-emerged during Rafsanjani's two-term presidency. Mohammad Khatami won the elections in 1997 and he opened a new phase for the IRI, where the Islamic discourse merged with that of national identity.⁷⁴

The Labor Party—connected to the *Khāneh-ye Kārgar*, Worker's House—supported the president, together with technocrats and intellectuals.⁷⁵ The spirit and tone of official rhetoric transformed. Words such as downtrodden (*mostaz'afin*), the world's arrogant people (*estekbar-e jahāni*) and martyrdom (*shahed*) left room for concepts such as participation (*moshārekāt*), dialogue (*goftogu*) and civil society (*jāme'eh -ye madani*). Workers were dispersed in this latter and broader group by being addressed as *jāme'eh-ye kārgari* (workers' society) or working force (*niru-ye kārgar*). The term *tabaqeh* class completely disappeared from May Day speeches. Progress and production became recurrent in the new reformist narrative, resembling "creativity."

We should arrive at a mentality and a new definition of our mission [*resālāt*], to trek a new path. I am expecting that the labor sector and creativity of workers may make a better use of facilities and tools and with savings can strive for a better condition, to strengthen the economy of the country [...] We can change the oil economy and turn it into economy without oil [*eqtesād-e bedun-e naft*]. This step needs a lot of determination from everybody. We are at a level of consolidating civil society [*jāme'eh-ye madani*]. We need a lot the participation of all the people.⁷⁶

The call for participation was exalted by the repetition of "we" as an inclusive pronoun expressing closeness and sense of belonging. It also mutated into a direct message against any potential class conflict between workers and managers, as workers began

⁷³See Khosrokhavar, "The Iranian Middle Classes," 13–70.

⁷⁴Holliday, "Khatami's Islamist-Iranian Discourse of National Identity," 1–13.

⁷⁵Other supporters of Khatami's campaign were, as Abrahamian wrote in *History of Modern Iran*, 185–6, "Society of Militant Clergy—an offshoot of the Association of Militant Clergy; the Islamic Student Association; ... the Kargozaran-e Sazandegi (Construction Executives)—a party formed recently by Rafsanjani; Zan (Women), a newspaper edited by Rafsanjani's daughter; the semi-legal Liberation Movement; and the Mojāhedīn Organization of the Islamic Revolution—a circle of intellectuals and technocrats radical in economic policies but relatively liberal in cultural matters."

⁷⁶*Salam*, 10 Ordibehesht 1377—April 30, 1998.

to be addressed as *jāme'eh-ye kārgari*: “No factor for the society of workers [*jāme'eh-ye kārgari*] and for production is worse than contrasts existing between the working force [*niru-ye kārgar*] and management.”⁷⁷ Laborers were labeled as “the axis of life [*mover-e hayāt*] of our society,” and glorified as “the most revolutionary, the most indefatigable.” For the first time in post-revolutionary Iran, the national dimension strongly entered May Day speeches, as workers were defined as “patriots.”

The importance of the labor sector in the development and progress of the country is crucial. Labor and workers are the axis of life [*mehvar-e hayāt*] of our society. Two elements have been fundamental in history: thought [*āndishe*] and labor built the civilization, as they are the origin and pride of societies.

Furthermore, while giving “progress of economy” equal footing with “safety from perils and dangers,” Khatami devoted the last sentences of his message to a general labor “justice” (*edālat*), without referring to social justice and or class conflict.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, compared to Rafsanjani’s mandate, the new president was not concerned exclusively with a metamorphosis of markets and a relaunch of the Iranian economy. He led Iran to a cultural turn where—together with words such as “democracy” (*demokrāsi*) or “equality” (*barābari*)—a renegotiation of spaces was carried out. Within this frame of new practices, labor activism found its channels to develop.⁷⁹ Yet the formal legal framework and general overview of the phenomenon did not change substantially, as formal and informal networks of control over workers’ activities were kept in place.⁸⁰ For instance, over Khatami’s presidency, Worker’s House continued to be under the Islamic Left, as part of the apparatus.⁸¹

Conservative factions exploited Khatami’s attitude towards civil society and the intellectual middle classes to gradually attract the support of those masses that had been neglected by the liberal discourse. Additionally, the Supreme leader Khamenei, on May Day 1998, reaffirmed his support to the *mostaz'afin* and to labor as a “religious duty” for economic independence.⁸² As Iran was experiencing an intellectual opening to western ideas, Khamenei warned workers and teachers against secular and anti-revolutionary “enemies” who were exploiting culture in order to allegedly manipulate them: “Today enemies just have no way and you workers, together with teachers and all the people, should pay attention and be aware. [...] Enemies are using culture to surround us, so they use media, newspapers, magazines and TV against our revolution and its concepts.”⁸³ Within this context of political acrimony, it is interesting to note how Khatami struck back. The day after, the

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹This argument is based on several in-depth conversations with academics and former activists I conducted between July 2017 and May 2018 during my fieldwork in Tehran.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran*, 145–6.

⁸²*Ettelā'āt*, 12 Ordibehesht 1377—May 2, 1998.

⁸³Ibid.

president—attending a meeting with teachers—sent a powerful message to those with a conservative view of the society: “We cannot think that every cultural belief coming from the past is sacred and [we cannot think] that someone who has a critical point is unreligious or a foreign agent.”⁸⁴

Despite this example of potent tenor in presidential rhetoric, Khatami’s agenda of “political development”—meant to empower “civil society” and to boost “citizen participation”—referred to a heterogeneous group of people and was not framed in terms of class.⁸⁵ This was one of the reasons why Khatami’s liberal understanding of the Islamic republic overlooked workers in terms of specific collectivity.⁸⁶

Strikes and scattered workers’ collective actions broke out all over the country between the end of 1997 and early 1998.⁸⁷ One year later, on May Day 1999, president Khatami used his words to encourage workers—once again—to boost Iran’s economy. The same neoliberal narrative, overlooking social justice for the sake of cultural reforms and “progress” was taking shape: “Our economy needs evolution and progress. [...] We need to take a fundamental step further for the economy [...] we experienced drop of incomes of the government because of oil prices. Prices decreased in terms of exports.”⁸⁸

This presidential speech revealed a significant detachment from the past. In fact, several layers of discourse are involved: tone, structure and goals. They mark a paradigm shift from the invincible Islamic republic, whose authorities so far had never openly admitted to being in trouble or always blamed an “enemy”: “We should not lie to people. [We should] not mention positive aspects and exaggerate them. I must admit that we have some problems. Salaries are low, our health system does not work efficiently enough, but we strive with honesty and trust to cope with and solve these problems.”⁸⁹

Although talking on *Ruz-e Kārgar*, Khatami effectively spoke to a broader audience of “workers, investors and producers.” It was to an even larger group, “the people,” that he addressed his demands for more efforts in the spirit of the triad “production,

⁸⁴*Ettelā’āt*, 13 Ordibehesht 1377—May 3, 1998.

⁸⁵On Khatami “citizenization of society” and how civil society “expanded” and “public society was relatively liberalized” under his administration see Holliday, “The Legacy of Subalternity,” 917–33.

⁸⁶As reported by labor activist Majid Tamjidi, under Khatami the a “new system of management was institutionalized by: concentrating on elimination of collective bargaining agreements; division of large production centers into smaller units; handing out hiring and production contracts to outside contractors; reduction of inventory, production based on presold orders; non-coverage of workers in small workshop from Labor law protections (effecting millions of workers); drastic increasing of temporary work contracts and “white signature” contracts (contracts in which workers sign an unwritten contract, whose details are determined by the employers as they see fit) In the context of vast unemployment many retreats were imposed on workers. In this period non-payments of wages, sometimes going back a year or two, became an ordinary phenomenon and a norm.” See IASWI, “Neoliberalism in IRI, a Brief History.”

⁸⁷See *Kār* (Majority), “Hezārān Kārgar-e Goruh-e San’ati-ye Melli E’tesab Kardand,” 2 and *Kār* (Majority), “Shish tan az Kārgarān E’tesabi-ye Goruh-e San’ati-ye Melli Dastgir Shodand,” 1–2.

⁸⁸*Ettelā’āt*, 11 Ordibehesht 1378—May 1, 1999.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

entrepreneurship and investment” that emerged as new contours of the factory in the IRI’s narrative. All these components were woven together into an inclusive “we.”

These problems are solvable with the noble character of people and the mutual trust between governors and people [...] If we can, in the next ten years, we can be able to create more employment and a great part of our problems will be solved. Production does not mean only to work [...] production, beyond labor, is also entrepreneurship and investment.⁹⁰

While Khatami’s approach kept the same spirit as during the first term, in his second term labor issues gradually disappeared from the front pages. Particularly the reformist newspapers, founded after Khatami’s election, such as *Khordād* or *Moshākerat*, largely overlooked social exclusion and social justice.⁹¹ *Ruz-e kārgar* slowly lost its centrality for the IRI’s leaders, as social justice and class struggle almost abandoned the grievances of the reformists, deemed as not functional for the Republic at that moment. Furthermore, while the space for labor activism widened, it stayed on a level of informality, as the repression of workers’ protests did not really stop.

Justice, the Allegiance of “the People” and Repression: Ahmadinejad’s Contradictions

Give revolution back to the downtrodden, the benefits of oil revenues to “the people,” social justice to urban poor: with these key promises Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the elections in 2005 against former president Rafsanjani, after the reformists had held the reins of the government for eight years. Social justice (*edālat-e ejtemā’i*) was a recurrent theme in the president’s narrative, even though over his first term the space for political activism was massively eroded, as strikes were met by suppression and arrests.⁹² Unpaid wages and unemployment, following years of privatization, had exasperated laborers whereas Ahmadinejad’s loyal followers took control over the Workers’ House.⁹³

As will be argued later in this paragraph, an evident contradiction between reports and historical chronicles on the one hand, and the discourse in favor of “the people” on the other, loomed under the *populist* new dimension of the IRI.

Talking to both workers and teachers on *Ruz-e kārgar* 2006, Ahmadinejad proclaimed workers (together with educators, thus not as a distinct group) “the next priority of the government,” as *Ettelā’āt* put in the headline on its front page.⁹⁴ The order of priorities utterly shifted in his narrative, where “unity” of “the people” and work, along with loyalty/faith, replaced the core role of the *religious* dimension.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹On how reformists almost ignored topics regarding social inclusion and labor as well, see Sadeghi, “The Politics of Recognition,” 15–19.

⁹²See Maljoo, “Worker Protest in the Age of Ahmadinejad,” 30–33.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴*Ettelā’āt* 11 Ordibehesht 1385—May 1, 2006.

The role and position of workers in the development and progress of our country is crucial. Without labor and struggle, no nation achieved honor [*efte-khār*]. Unity, work and faith are three important elements to win: without them, we go nowhere. Our aim is to dry all the roots of unemployment in the country and we will create job opportunities and good atmosphere for our youth.⁹⁵

Leaving behind the official narrative of entrepreneurship, social issues and unemployment permeated Ahmadinejad's rhetoric: "Solve the economic problem and create job opportunities is the absolute goal of my government. Our government is here for workers and it is honored to be at your service, dear workers."⁹⁶

Always addressing "the people," the reproduction of a discourse focusing on dangerous enemies, seen as a threat to Iran, became instrumental to justify the government's problems as "obstacles" created by others.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, the historical context showed a discrepancy between Ahmadinejad's words, constructed facts and reality. First, the ostentatious solidarity with workers: between January and February 2006 hundreds of bus drivers, striking in Tehran, were severely repressed and arrested.⁹⁸ Second, the imaginary of a government "at workers' service" was at odds with the evidence of "blank contracts," according to which laborers—overwhelmed by unemployment due to high inflation rate—de facto were compelled to abandon their grievances regarding wages, working shifts, etc.⁹⁹ Furthermore, in the same year, it is relevant to note what Iran Khodro workers wrote in a letter to the Annual Conference of the International Labor Organization, lamenting the lack of labor rights and independence:

The Iran Khodro Company, with over 30,000 workers, has no labor organization of any kind. Why does the Labor Ministry not give the Islamic Labor councils, which the Iranian government itself recognizes as legal labor organizations, the permission to create legal labor organizations, when over 3,000 of us employed in it are devoid of any labor organization?¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Amnesty International, "Iran: Up to 500 Tehran Bus Workers Imprisoned for Planning Strike."

⁹⁹See Mather, Mather, and Tamjidi, "Making Cars in Iran," 9–21; and the story told to *Sedāy-e Kārgarān* by a worker: "We Iranian workers have no job security. In jobs that ought to be permanent we work on a temporary and daily work basis. They force the workers to sign a blank contract so that whenever the boss wants he can throw us out. We temporary workers are not entitled to unemployment benefit," *ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁰Iran Khodro Workers, "Letter to the Annual Conference of the ILO," *Etehadchap* website, cited in Mather, Mather, and Tamjidi, "Making Cars in Iran," 20. Translation in English available at IASWI <https://www.workers-iran.org/letter-by-three-independent-iranian-labor-organizations-to-the-annual-meeting-of-ilo/>

As a harsher economic crisis was looming, sources of discontent spread throughout factories and labor units.¹⁰¹ On May Day 2007 Ahmadinejad urged workers to increase production, phrasing it as a request driven by the will to “develop” and “build the country.”¹⁰² Opening his speech, he stressed labor and toilers as the most important elements for structuring a country: “Workers build the foundations of the society, the future of the country and establish a happy life in the society. We have progressed in this direction, but we have not reached a desirable position yet.”¹⁰³

Then the president concentrated on encouraging production and pushing laborers to work more: “If we want to build the country we need to work. Today we are experiencing tremendous global transformations, and we are seeing that the world is rapidly evolving. Focusing on Iran’s development, we are obliged to build our country.”¹⁰⁴ In order to achieve his goals, Ahmadinejad reproduced the logics of belonging, by listing three key factors that allow a country to progress, such as (1) unity, (2) faith and (3) justice:

To build a country, the first elements are unity and sympathy. If a nation has all the wealth, but it is not united, labor results will not be achieved. Faith and trust in God are the second factor, as a country that does not believe will be lost [...] In addition to the fair distribution of opportunities, justice brings prosperity and security and contributes to a country’s political and social sustainability. Nothing will be done without justice.¹⁰⁵

Moreover, through a process of *othering*, the president dissolved the notion of class division, by referring to “employers, managers and all the people of Iran”¹⁰⁶ as all being part of the nation (*mellat*).¹⁰⁷

Therefore, workers became instrumental resources of propaganda, in a precise historical moment when the IRI was suffering economic difficulties because of western sanctions.¹⁰⁸ The president de facto inserted workers into the broader category of human beings. This means that workers reappeared as the most important audience for the president compared to Khatami’s times, but not as a class, despite Ahmadinejad’s official rhetoric portraying him as the workers’ protector.¹⁰⁹

Characterizing relations between workers and employers, Ahmadinejad stimulated and supported the idea of an “atmosphere of empathy.” Thus, he denied and de facto erased any chance for class struggle, by remarking that

¹⁰¹See Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*, 89–130.

¹⁰²*Mehr News*, 11 Ordibehesht 1386—May 1, 2007, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/478654/> کارگران-غیردولتی-های-بنگاه-هستند-جامعه-قشر-عزیزترین-کارگران (accessed August 22, 2018).

¹⁰³*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

The employer should sacrifice himself for his worker, and the worker should not be hostile to the employer. If the atmosphere of empathy that exists is strengthened, it can put even forward and progress ten times faster, because there are both resources and talent in our country.¹¹⁰

Housing was the only workers' demand mentioned in this presidential speech, as better conditions had been requested for years within and outside of the factories. Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad chose to procrastinate on this topic and shift the responsibility to single ministries. Why? This bureaucratization of labor issues served as a tool to defuse a social mechanism that was about to explode.

Conversely, praising workers in May Day speeches, ignoring strikes, while practically repressing spaces of freedom: this was the three-sided strategy adopted by Ahmadinejad towards the end of his first term. While reiterating the concept of loyalty to his government, in May Day 2008, the president used Khomeini's phrase ("*Ruz-e jabāni kārgar* is everyday"). At the same time, he sketched once again the contours and definition of the worker as a human being:

Every day is worker's day and in the realm of creation everything comes from labor. Man becomes useless and workplaces degenerate without work. The realization of any goal and purpose requires work and effort. Without work and effort, even very small material goals are not possible to realize. Therefore, a great nation needs efforts to achieve its goals. The honorable worker is a human being and a vibrant person, and there is nothing created which is more beautiful than work and constructive effort. Workers are the most loyal, most enthusiastic and most persistent in the society.¹¹¹

Along with applauding production and productivity, Ahmadinejad combined a strong criticism of capitalism. He described labor "as a social act carried out for the perfection of the society":

The productive work of the community is the best and most beautiful act of righteousness, and all the movements that a nation performs [at work] in its lifetime and history are in the interests of the community and useful to the people [...] Within the capitalist thought and the domination of labor, the concept of organizing all affairs is used to fill certain pockets.¹¹²

Hence, the president disentangled his criticism of capitalism by: (1) presenting the worker and the employer on a "complementary" level and not framing this relation as class driven;¹¹³ and (2) rediscovering the Islamic dimension and interpreting

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ahadinejad website, 11 Ordibehesht 1387—April 30, 2008.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³On the transformations of the workers as a class and their bargaining power in post-revolutionary Iran see also Kheirollahi, *Kārgaran bi Tabaqeh*, 1–75.

workers' behavior towards managers through a three-dimensional lens including *the populist, the Islamic and the revolutionary*.

In the Islamic and humanist culture of our country, the worker and the employer are complementary and mutually supportive, and there should not be distance between them. Workers are followers of the idea of pure Islam and the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. As during the revolution and throughout the war, the working community has always been prominent in work, production and creativity.¹¹⁴

Ahmadinejad's resentment against the capitalist organization of work reached its peak in the speech pronounced three days before *Ruz-e Kārgar* 2009, almost a month before the Green Movement demonstrations. As the 12 June elections were looming, the incumbent president was concerned to broaden his basis of consensus, by promoting a "culture of labor" against a "culture of capitalism." He recalled the imaginary of workers and employers as "parts of the same system":

Our first mission is building the country and Iran can become a model society [...] In a situation where capitalism is in a dead-end road, the only way to live is to follow the big ideals of the Islamic Revolution. Within a capitalist system, pleasure is the final goal, so discrimination, aggression, poverty and distance between classes are all natural, and we see the results in today's world. This is a dead-end road. [...] Workers are the cornerstone [*mehvar-e sākhtan*] of the country.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

Processes of discourse formation are based on a set of rules that allow certain statements to harmonize themselves within a specific context. As this article has showed through a critical discourse analysis of official May Day speeches drawing from Fairclough, since 1979—when Khomeini founded the Islamic republic on his interpretation of the Islamic government—the IRI's narrative on labor profoundly transformed. Formulations and symbols employed to mobilize consensus changed over the thirty years to 2009, as they followed shifts of context, historical events and economic sources of concern. This paper has argued that workers' role as social and revolutionary actors was gradually minimized according to a systematic pattern reproduced by the IRI. This scheme effectively connected the discourse of May Day messages to the premises, values, goals and possible consequences that were related to it and meant to legitimize certain political choices. This analysis focused on three main dimensions of this process, which were shown to be eloquent: (1) the shifts connected to the concept of labor, largely downsized in terms of being an

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵*Mehr news*, 8 Ordibehesht 1388—April 28, 2009. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/868165/>
بازنشستگان حقوق افزایش برای دولت - تلاش شود - اصلاح باید کار قانون

instrument of mobilization and a trigger to collective action; (2) the terminology employed to address workers, from the downtrodden to tools of productivity; (3) the role of May Day as a part of the broader IRI's rhetoric, utterly marginalized to leave room for a more (neo)liberal narrative.

(1) Concerning the first realm, labor was framed differently over the years. Particularly in the immediate aftermath of the revolution and while Khomeini was alive, it was defined as “a manifestation of God,” as “Almighty God is the origin of labor.” Labor was reconstructed as opposing the paradigm of capitalist exploitation. Concurrently, since the Iran-Iraq war loomed over Iranians' survival, labor started to be associated with words such as an “effort,” “a duty” and a tool to increase “production.” In fact, it was almost two years after the beginning of the war that then president Khomeini mentioned the word “production,” *towlid*. In that context, production was associated with labor, conceived as a “moment of prayer.” Nevertheless, only in the 1990s with Rafsanjani's *Dowlat-e sāzandegi* (government of the reconstruction) did the dictum “produce and consume” enter the IRI's discourse, along with a more neoliberal terminology: “development,” “economic production,” “productivity,” “privatization.” Aiming at justifying the calls to raise workers' productivity, Rafsanjani linked growing production to self-sufficiency, security and future success after “hard work.” The road to individualism started to be paved in these years. Furthermore, after 1997, with president Khatami a new phase for the IRI began as the Islamic discourse was woven together with that of national identity. Labor was cast as a component of the society, which was instrumental—through production—to the cultural progress and the “creativity” of a nation. The new president, beyond boosting markets like his predecessor, led Iran to a cultural turn where words such as “democracy” (*demokrāsi*), “equality” (*barābari*) and “dialogue” entered the public debate. Production beyond labor—according to Khatami—was also entrepreneurship and investment. Yet the new reformist era did not effectively entail any benefit for labor. Indeed, workers' issue, both under Rafsanjani and Khatami, were largely overlooked. This was one of the reasons that allowed Ahmadinejad to take the presidency in 2005. Social justice (*edālat-e ejtemā'i*) was a recurrent theme in the new president's narrative, together with populist slogans pledging to give back oil revenues to “the people,” and solve problems of unemployment. Ahmadinejad cast labor as a crucial “priority for the government.” His narrative developed along three main lines: building the country, encouraging production and pushing laborers to work more. An anti-capitalist spirit permeated Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, despite evident contradictions with his policies and his government's repression of labor actions.

(2) A second dimension investigated the shifts in terminology and meanings in official May Day speeches while addressing workers. In Khomeini's view, a priority of the Islamic republic was counter-reacting to “plotters” and “enemies of the revolution.” Workers were then cast within a struggle between *mostaz'afin* and *mostakbarin*, oppressed and oppressors. They were conceived as part of the downtrodden under the Islamic umbrella and not as a specific class. Khomeini referred to *kārgarān* as “brothers and sisters,” “great champion people,” “Iran's dorsal spine.” Moreover, in the mid-1980s, when Khomeini was president, he specifically blamed those who

attributed to workers the notion of class and not that of an *ommat*, a community of believers.

With the *sāzandegi* era, Rafsanjani reformulated the meanings connected to the word *kārgar*. As explored through this paper, neither the word *tabaqeh* nor *mostaz^ʿa-fin* were employed, as the concept of working stratum, *gheshr-e kārgar*, or working force, *niru-ye kārgar*, entered the IRI's official lexicon. Once more, Khatami's cultural turn took the official discourse even further. Terms such as downtrodden (*mostaz^ʿa-fin*) or martyrdom (*shahed*) left room for the concept of civil society (*jāme^ʿeh-ye madani*). Workers were considered as belonging to this broader group. Ahmadinejad presented himself as the president willing to “give to revolution back to the *mostaz^ʿa-fin*” and to “the people of Iran.” Without looking at workers as working class, he dispersed them into the broader category of “indefatigable human beings,” “vibrant people.”

(3) Engulfed within the discourse of post-revolutionary Iran aiming at neutralizing a perceived threat coming from the historical left-wing and Marxist groups, May Day was gradually minimized. In fact, once the process of absorption of Marxist symbols removed the perception of a danger, which was connected to the protests threatening the stability of the IRI, *Ruz-e Jahāni Kārgar* was gradually dismissed, although still celebrated. In fact, starting from the late 1980s, official speeches lost their function of mobilizing workers against “counter-revolutionaries” in the factories. At the end of the 1990s, May Day celebrations did not occupy big headlines and no longer stood out on every front page, as they were more often delegated to ministers. In the new millennium, as the IRI reinvigorated the revolutionary rhetoric, which was imbued with social justice, a sharp contradiction emerged since every spontaneous bottom-up demonstration was prohibited and severely repressed.

Following the three abovementioned dimensions, a paradigm shift marked the history of the Islamic republic as the IRI tried to combine, without success, revolutionary rhetoric with the “produce and consume” narrative. Therefore, by chasing economic progress, while prohibiting independent unions and restricting activism, the Iranian authorities de facto neglected workers and mainly addressed middle class needs. While appropriating the symbolic importance of social justice and class conflict from the rhetoric of the Left in the first place, and subsequently overlooking these narratives, a top-down *cleaning up* process slowly purified May Day. Eventually, this resulted in erasing social justice from the top priorities of the Islamic republic.

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