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ROUNDTABLE

# "Produce and Consume" in the Islamic Republic: The 1990s Myth of the Winner in the Iranian Public Sphere and Its Impact on Workers

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"Produce to Solve Iran's Problems."[1] "Boost Production to Exit This Labyrinth of Difficulties."[2] "A New Road [different] from the Past" has to be taken.[3] "Big Successes of Our Economy."[4] Iran's "New Goals Are: Development, Growth, Efficiency."[5] "We Should Promote Industrial Research."[6] "The Youth Looking for a Job Needs To Be Skilled to Succeed."[7] If newspapers are sites for the public sphere and give any indication about the top-down narratives in Iran, the mantra behind these headlines was certainly "decide, produce, and succeed." Since the early 1990s, the dominant discourse within the Islamic republic de facto customized the dictum "produce and consume" (*tulīd va maṣraf*). Although Iran's path toward liberalism has been "tortuous," when Hashem Rafsanjani took the helm of the presidency in 1989 the myth of the winner in a competitive society began to take shape.[8] During the reconstruction era (*sāzandigī*) after the Iran–Iraq war, a new narrative boosting domestic production, fostering the idea of impressive career growth, and promoting recognition of talents began to permeate the Iranian public sphere.

The top-down rhetoric was framed along the following lines: liberal market economy, consumer culture, opening to the international arena. It paved the way for social dichotomies such as classy and luxurious (*bā kilās/luksī*) versus poor, cheap, or provincial-kitsch (*bī kīfyat/javād/dihātī-khaz*). Government policies, meant to rehabilitate the Iranian economy after the destruction of the eight-year war with Iraq (1980–88), emphasized the production imperative. The process of rationalizing productivity as the only way to achieve national growth fully appropriated the public space, and the labor realm in particular, so that it eventually imbued Iran's social relations and narrowed the political space of workers. The dominant discourse, through newspapers and advertisements, sketched the ideal profile of success as belonging to those who dared, planned, and worked hard.[9] As Fairclough has shown, class relations deeply affect discourse; on the one hand they determine it, and on the other they are reproduced in discursive practices. What is therefore the connection between classes and discourse? It is a mediated one, Fairclough argues, and the Iranian case is exemplary in this sense.[10]

Indeed, with a money-oriented discursive strategy permeating the public space, during the years of the Rafsanjani presidency the Islamic Republic gradually institutionalized the hunger for success and addressed the new middle class. Within the context of encouraging rivalry and praising the

[1]*Kayhān*, 24 May 1993 (3 Khurdād 1372).
[2]*Irān*, 26 July 1995 (4 Murdād 1374).
[3]*Kayhān*, 23 May 1993 (2 Khurdād 1372).
[4]*Irān*, August 1995 (Murdād 1374).
[5]*Irān*, 8 August 1995 (17 Murdād 1374).
[6]Ibid.
[7]*Irān*, 9 September 1994 (18 Shahrivar 1373).
[8]Ahmad Ashraf and Ali Banuazizi, "Iran's Tortuous Path Towards Islamic Neoliberalism," *International Journal of Culture, Politics and Society* 15, no.2 (2001): 237–56.
[9]See *Kayhān*, 22 May 1993 (1 Khurdād 1372) and 14 September 1994 (23 Shahrivar 1373); *Irān*, 1, 8, 13 August 1995 (10, 17, 22 Murdād 1374), 25 July 1996 (4 Murdād 1375), 30 December 1996 (10 Dey 1375), and 9 January 1997 (20 Dey 1375).
[10]Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, (New York: Longman, 1989), 40–42.

accomplishment-based culture, a crucial shift occurred: the political space was emptied of the collective element and replaced by the rhetoric of the individual, eager to compete. The above-mentioned process occurred hand in hand with two major transformations: the glamorization of the neoliberal subject, such as the successful individual, and the dismissal of 1979 revolutionary slogans promoting social justice. On the one hand, the winner—understood as both consumer in the international arena and the wealth producer—entered the public space of competition. On the other hand, the figure of the worker as "the revolutionary oppressed" was marginalized in public discourse, that is, in news headlines, slogans, images, and advertisements. Hence, an alienated worker emerged as a product of the neoliberal discourse, trapped in a domain of social stigmatization. Beginning in the 1990s and throughout the 2000s this created conditions for the erosion of working class political centrality, detachment of the working class from the neoliberal subjects, and practices of blaming and isolating those victims of increased inequality.

How did the public space change? What were the mechanisms employed to boost the thirst for progress? How and why, on the path to economic liberalization, were workers marginalized from the dominant myth of the winner? Along what lines did the new generation of economic success take shape?

## Marginalizing Workers

When Rafsanjani, previously Iran's parliamentary speaker, obtained nearly 95 percent of the votes cast in the July 1989 presidential election, the Iranian news agency *IRNA* announced the results in triumphal tones.[11] It was less than two months after Khomeini's death.[12] The country was slowly getting back on its feet after a devastating war that had deeply compromised its economy. The reconstruction era had started with a five-year development plan implementing neoliberal measures (without ever calling them as such) to boost productivity, efficiency, and growth and aimed at encouraging private capital, stimulating new investments, reforming currency exchange rates, and reducing oil dependency and state-controlled economic sectors. Although the appetite for productivity and success was pervading public spaces, the notion of labor—and of workers and the working class—was deeply transformed. During official speeches, interviews in the newspapers, and in public discourse, the expression "working class" (*ṭabaqih-i kārgar*) almost disappeared. It was replaced by the concept of "labor force" (*nīru-i kārgar*) or "labor stratum" (*qishr-i kārgar*).[13] In Rafsanjani's words, workers represented the "country's force of production" (*nīru-i kār va tulīd kishvar*) and "had a fundamental role in the reconstruction era after the war imposed by force" ( *jang-i taḥmīlī*); "therefore, the revolution belongs to them." Likewise, he added, they needed to be educated because "this increase in education will raise production."[14]

As Workers' Day became marginalized throughout the 1990s, its media coverage and its public echo decreased. What made the headlines over the years were Iran's economic performance and new national goals. Whereas words such as progress (*pīshraft*), production (*tulīd*), successes (*muvaffaqyat-hā*), development (*tusʿih*), and growth (*rushd*) began to dominate the front pages of newspapers such as *Irān* and *Hamshahri*, workers (here understood as a group with specific grievances and demands) were almost absent from the government-filtered public arena. As new sections for technology and state-of-the-art products found room in the newspapers as well as in the growing advertisement section (i.e., smart and foldable cars, digital cameras, new sensors to prevent accidents, a special Japanese device to prevent falling asleep while driving, and a mode of GPS technology), news about rising social inequalities, inflation, and general discontent among lower classes occupied very little space, if any at all.[15] In fact, between the end of 1991 and 1995, protests and expressions of dissent erupted against Rafsanjani's neoliberal agenda, cuts in subsidies, and wage decreases.[16] Yet coverage of such events faded away. One of the

[11] *Reuters*, 30 July 1989.

[12] Ervand Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 182–83.

[13] *Kayhān*, 30 April 1990 (10 Urdibihisht 1369). See also M. Stella Morgana, "Talking to Workers: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad: How the Islamic Republic's Discourse on Labor Changed through May Day Speeches (1979–2009)," *Iranian Studies* 52, no. 1–2 (2019): 133–58, doi:10.1080/00210862.2019.1599713.

[14] *Salām*, 1 May 1994 (11 Urdibihisht 1373).

[15] *Irān*, 26 July 1995 and 16 August 1995 (4–25 Murdād 1374); *Hamshahri*, 29 June 1996 (9 Tir 1375).

[16] *Kār-o-Kārgar,* 2 January 1992 (12 Dey 1370), 7 October 1993 (15 Mihr 1372), and 4 August 1996 (14 Murdād 1375); "Violence Spreads in Iran as the Poor Are Evicted," *New York Times*, 1 June 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/01/

few exceptions was in the summer of 1995, when *Iran* reported on workers' demonstrations all over the country, dedicating only a few lines at the bottom of a page of the economy section. Another interesting case occurred at the end of 1996, when, for the first time, the Ministry of Labor explicitly mentioned non-wage-based activities (*faʿālyat-hā ghiyr-i dastmozd*) as a potential solution to reduce unemployment. This last case actually constituted a first step toward the debate on short-term contracts and labor precarity.[17]

## Constructing the "Successful" Through a Culture of Competition

By following the historical trajectory of the pursuit of success, growth, and progress through the permeation of headlines and advertisements, it is possible to track the above-mentioned ruptures and transformations occurring in the official discourse. The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), from the *sāzandigī* period onward, moved its focus from the 1979 revolution's downtrodden (*mostaž̊afin*), including workers and poor cast under the Islamic umbrella, to the new middle classes. This shift profoundly enlarged the socio-economic divide and affected the already "precarious lives" of ordinary Iranians, particularly those who could not participate in the social climbing race.[18] When Rafsanjani thanked his voters for their renewed trust after his reelection in June 1994, he also expressed his full intention to "give answers to the needs and problems of the people."[19] What he meant by "the people" became clear when he described the perfect pattern of the ideal citizen: hardworking and dedicated to the production mantra, oriented toward independence and eager to develop specialized skills.

Thus, social worth began to be measured with numbers and data, as well as financial fulfillment and personal achievements. At the end of July 1995, *Iran* went to press with a front page that praised industrial sector successes: "403,000 people are working in Iranian industry." The article added that "the most developed sector is the food sector, which consists of 78,595 factories"; in the whole country "12,432 factories are considered big, with more than 50 employed workers" and "more than 1,308,000 families are participating in the economic activities."[20] Pictures of men working with heavy machinery and looking forward accompanied the article. A few months later, an article proclaimed that "forty-eight plans are ready to improve the production all over the country."[21] Development was not in tandem with other key concepts belonging to the 1979 revolution and the labor realm, such as social justice. For example, "Iranian Industrial Sector: Eight Million Tons Produced, 100 Million Dollars of Products Exported. In 1373 [1994], the Production of Oil Products Reached 35 Percent" and "Iran is Among the Ten Most Productive Countries in the World Oil Sector."[22] In the same year, the government-aligned newspaper quoted the president encouraging the boost in domestic production, announcing "Ninety Billion in Capital To Be Invested in the Electronics Sector" and suggesting a road map to development that had to pass through industrial companies and production companies as well as national and international transportation.[23] Hence, electronics were constructed in the public space as a distinctive sign of progress, perfectly overlapping, in the context of this rhetoric, with job security and individual success: "Ninety Billion Rials Invested in the Industry of Electronic Screens," and "25,000 New Job Positions for Experts."[24] Furthermore, the culture of competition was spreading with the establishment of prizes, races, and awards for exemplary individuals and new entrepreneurs: "Tax Waiver Announced for 117 New Activities."[25] As previously noted, the choice of pictures to accompany the articles followed the

world/violence-spreads-in-iran-as-the-poor-are-evicted.html. See also Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 97–99.

[17]*Irān*, 2 August 1995 (11 Murdād 1374) and 24 November 1996 (4 Azar 1375).

[18]See Shahram Khosravi, *Precarious Lives: Waiting and Hope in Iran* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 11–12, 214.

[19]*Kayhān*, 14 June 1994 (24 Khurdād 1373).

[20]*Irān*, 24 July 1995 (2 Murdād 1374).

[21]*Irān* and *Hamshahri*, 1 August 1995 (10 Murdād 1374).

[22]*Irān* and *Hamshahri*, 23 August 1995 (1 Shahrivar 1374).

[23]*Irān*, 26 July 1995 (4 Murdād 1374).

[24]*Irān*, 28 July 1995 (6 Murdād 1374).

[25]*Hamshahri*, July–August 1995, (Murdād 1374). See also Fariba Adelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran* (London: Hurst, 1999), 139–60.

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same line of reasoning. Photographs depicted industrial or scientific settings, including machines, computers, and advanced technology. In commercials, visuals aimed to persuade. Hence, a new relation began taking shape between the addresser (the IRI) and the addressee (the winner, the new neoliberal subject).[26] Moreover, the hunger for progress was evident in a conscious strategy to imbue and appropriate the public discourse with exhibitions, such as a fair aimed at "showing the progress of the country," held in autumn 1995.[27]

Planning for a neoliberal industrial future was the refrain of Rafsanjani's second term (1993–1997), which was structured around eight main goals: increasing industrial exports to 4.5 billion dollars; raising the average value-added growth to 6 percent; increasing the specialized labor force (*nīru-i insānī mutikhaṣiṣ*) to 15 percent; an annual growth of economic efficiency (*rushd-i sālyanih bahrih varī*) up to 3 percent; increasing expenses for research and development to 1/5 percent of the value of the increase in the industrial sector (*afzāyish-i hazinih-i taḥqīghat dar ṣad arzesh-i afzāyish-i bakhsh-i sanʿatī*); raising the proportion of the added value of industrial production by 2 percent (*afzāyish-i nisbat-i arzish afzudih bih tulīdatī sanʿatī*); improving production standards by 15 percent (*afzayish-i istāndārd*); and increasing industrial production, capacity utilization, and the growth of trade levels and upgrading industrial quality (*afzāyish-i tulīdat-i sanʿatī, bahrih bardārī az ẓarfyat-hā, behbud-i tirāz-i tijārī va irtiqay-i kifyat*).[28]

## Youth and the Neoliberal Project

The daily media provided a perfect setting through which to spread the myth of success. Therefore, although the adjective "new" was abundantly used for contrast with the past, the youth—or the 1980s generation, born during the revolution and the war—were bombarded with these messages. The inner existence of a successful youth was essential to the broader picture of a developed country. Essays and analyses on young Iranians "looking for a job" and "the necessity for specialized training" multiplied, emphasizing IT skills, progress, growth, and success.[29] The neoliberal project did not address the lower classes or young workers who were willing but unable to study or who had no chance to become entrepreneurs. The lower classes were overwhelmed by a politics in which their existential meaning within the IRI's dominant framework was directly incorporated into the "produce and consume" dictum. In this dimension, the "new" entrepreneur or engineer represented the bridge between the new achievement-oriented government policies and the factories of the working class. The universities as public spaces were transformed into effective tools of discursive intervention. Indeed, news about the increasing numbers of students in the Iranian public universities systematically appeared throughout the 1990s under Rafsanjani's rule. Relying on a young, educated, and specialized population projected success. Constructing the myth of the winner through young Iranians operated as a symbol of progress to wave at home as well as abroad. In fact, Iran was trying to open up to the international arena after years of economic isolation: "Big Successes of Iran in the International Market," proclaimed *Iran* in September 1995, referring to an export trade to Europe that had reached six billion dollars.

## Connecting Spaces: Normalizing Middle Classes Through Urban Transformation

This essay has explored connections between the language used in newspapers (here understood as sites for the public sphere) and the process of glamorization of success within the broader context of Iran's power and labor relations. A crucial link in this chain was *Hamshahri* (Fellow citizen). Published by the Tehran municipality beginning in 1992, the newspaper projected throughout the 1990s the public transformation plan carried out by Rafsanjani's administration. "Tehran's Population Will Increase to 20 Million," a headline from January 1997 read. Iran's capital represented a field of action for the new

[26]Mohammad Amouzadeh and Manouchehr Tavangar, "Decoding Pictorial Metaphor Ideologies in Persian Commercial Advertising," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2004): 147–74.

[27]*Irān* and *IRNA*, 2 August 1995 (11 Murdād 1374).

[28]*Irān* and *IRNA*, 8 August 1995 (17 Murdād 1374).

[29]*Hamshari* and *Irān*, August 1995 (Murdād 1374), December 1996 (Azar 1375), January 1997 (Dey 1375), and May 1997 (Urdibihisht 1376).

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neoliberal subjects as well as the heart of the reconstruction economy. Transformation in the public spaces of Tehran over the course of the 1990s, under mayor Gholamhossein Karbashi, founder of *Hamshahri*, profoundly impacted social relations. If overpopulation statistics were particularly worrying during the first five-year economic plan (1989–94), the Rafsanjani/Karbashi solution was soon put forth: the new administration decided to focus on construction.

The business of construction made its appearance as a new refrain for solving housing scarcity. An ambitious plan of urban renewal boldly transformed the capital, and headlines fostered this narrative: "A New Plan for the Housing Sector," "New Development Construction Policies," and "Forty-Eight Percent Rise of Private Capital in the Construction Sector."[30] Most of these plans were concentrated in the northern area of Iran's capital, falling short of addressing overpopulation in the southern neighbourhoods. In 1999, Ehsani described the socio-geographic discrepancy between the two areas, with a developed and rich north juxtaposed to a lower-working-class south deemed "over-crowded, hotter and more polluted, with smaller lots."[31] With huge investments in urban planning, the direction followed over those years was not that of leaving the poorer districts of the south behind. Rather the strategy was to provide new urban spaces, fashioning the south as a reflection of the north.[32] Although sharp distinctions of class and status diminished, these spaces fully mirrored the myth of success and began to normalize the social modes and practices belonging to the middle, bourgeois, and new entrepreneur-oriented classes. Within this discursive flow, no place was left for any working-class-focused political plan. Therefore, what would later appear in the streets during the 2009 Green Movement, reflecting a profound class distance between those protesting and an almost absent working class, was the fruit of a process started in the 1990s.

[30]*Hamshahri, Kitab-i Sāl 1375 and 1376* (Tehran: Hamshahri, 1999). See also *Irān*, 13 August 1995 (22 Murdād 1374), 1 January 1997 (12 Dey 1375), and 26 August 1997 (4 Shahrivar 1376).

[31]Kaveh Ehsani, "Municipal Matters: The Urbanization of Consciousness and Political Change in Tehran," *Middle East Report* 212 (1999), 22–27.

[32]Ibid., 24.

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