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SPECIAL FEATURE

Optimize! Oil, Labor, and Authoritarian Neoliberalism in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

Following the 2014–2015 oil price crisis, service companies in Kazakhstan went through a process of industrial restructuring centered on workforce reduction and a concomitant increase of labor outsourcing. Taking the restructuring – or "optimization" – of state-owned service companies in the region of Mangystau as a starting point, this paper illustrates the heterogenous precarization effects and forms of precarity catalyzed by the process. Taking a multidimensional approach, the paper describes and analyses the effects of precarization in both socio-economic and political terms, as well as the implications for the production of differentiated laboring subjectivities. It situates the ethnographic trajectories of workers within the framework of Kazakhstan's authoritarian neoliberalism, highlighting the punitive and pastoral techniques of goverment deployed in the restructuring of the regional oil complex. In the first part, the article describes how precarization was experienced by workers as "slavery", entailing the loss of social recognition as well as the intensification of economic exploitation and political domination, heightening their exposure to social and bodily vulnerability. The second section looks instead at the workings of a governmental agency in its effort to remake redundant workers into small business owners through the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills and the abandonment of the Soviet "dependency mindset". The third and last section of the article concentrates on the individual trajectory of a dismissed worker joining a multi-level marketing scheme in order to cleanse himself from the bodily and social toxicity of precarized work in the oil industry.

Introduction

"Optimizatsiya is a beautiful word while sokrashchenie (Rus.: 'dismissals') is not," Kuspan remarked to me, referring to the ongoing restructuring of the oil service company where he had worked as a mechanic for the previous twenty years. It was the middle of 2017, almost three years after world oil prices plummeted in 2014, ending the bonanza that fueled Kazakhstan's double-digit economic growth since the early 2000s. As oil prices continued to decrease—bottoming out at around $30/barrel in early 2016—transnational oil corporations readily put on hold their expansion projects in the country, reducing the demand for drilling, construction, and

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transportation services. Thousands of workers were fired by subcontracting companies in order to "optimize" the production process, as corporate jargon put it.

At the time, workers such as Kuspan had been spared from layoffs, and reassured: no dismissals would take place in enterprises belonging to Kazakhstan's national oil company, KazMunayGaz (KMG). Yet, when my fieldwork started in December 2016, the situation had worsened. The collapse of the Russian ruble following sanctions in 2014 —and the slowdown of China's energy demands—contributed to further distress the country's economy for the previous two years. The national currency had lost almost 60 percent of its value, leading Kazakhstan's planners to dip $28 billion into the sovereign wealth fund, Samruk-Kazyna, in order to prop up the *tenge*.[1] Then, as part of its economic restructuring plan, the government announced a massive privatization push in late 2015, including KMG and several of its subsidiaries in the list of companies targeted. Foreign investors met the move with suspicion, though, pointing to the massive debt accumulated by these companies; its causes primarily ascribed to an excessively large and inflexible labor force and the high wages the latter enjoyed. As an article in the local newspaper *Ogni Mangystau* put it: "They say that if you look into the abyss for a long time, then it begins to look at you. . . . Hanging for a long time in Mangystau, the threat of loss-making oilfield service enterprises has become a reality, and the protracted peak of oilfield services by companies part of the KazMunayGaz system threatens to cause the bankruptcy of enterprises, with the result that thousands of people in the region might be left without work."[2] By spring 2017, after the shutting down of the confederation of independent trade unions in January, and the repression of a hunger strike following it, an early-retirement scheme ("soft optimization"[3]) was finally implemented in state-owned oil service companies as well. But Kuspan and other labor organizers could not join it. They had been fired after the strike.

Relying on interviews with oil workers, managers, and social workers collected during eighteen months of fieldwork in 2017 and 2018,[4] throughout the article I describe and analyze how the restructuring produced differential precarious subjectivities. I argue that precarization can be understood as the product of an enduring "symbiotic configuration"[5] of neoliberal reforms and authoritarian statecraft in Kazakhstan—not due to the Soviet legacy or an incomplete transition to the market economy, as some might have it,[6] but by means of the very circulation of petrocapitalist practices, first introduced in the country by transnational corporations (TNCs). Beyond the necessity to protect and reproduce oil capital in a period of financial distress, the optimization of KMG was in fact directed to align corporate practices to those established by TNCs—disjoining the relation between operating companies and service ones, making work contracts more flexible, increasing outsourcing and outstaffing, and substituting trade unions with industrial relations departments—in order for companies to become more attractive for foreign investors. Taking the restructuring of the state-owned oil complex as a case study, I focus on workers' subject-making as a prism for analyzing the transforming relations between labor, oil capital, and the state in Kazakhstan. Besides a few notable exceptions,[7] labor and workers in the oil industry have been an understudied topic. This paper intendeds to contribute to this small yet burgeoning literature.

I find Burak Tansel and Ian Bruff's concept of "authoritarian neoliberalism"[8] appealing for understanding the optimization as an operation of capital protection

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and reproduction relaying on state power, through "1) coercive state practices that discipline, marginalize and criminalize oppositional social forces, and 2) the judicial and administrative apparatuses which limit the avenues in which neoliberal policies can be challenged."[9] Yet, as I show in this paper, the enforcement of the optimization was not solely based on the marginalization and criminalization of workers and trade unionists such as Kuspan, relying instead on a mix of punitive and pastoral techniques and discourses,[10] differentially deployed, and used by a wide range of actors in order to govern themselves and other people. This latter approach is illustrated by the training courses provided by a corporate agency in order to help workers transition away from dependent work in the oil industry. I thus add a proactive dimension to the mainly reactive ones theorized by Bruff and Burak Tansel.

The article is organized as follow. In the first section, I briefly overview the development of authoritarian neoliberalism in Kazakhstan since 1991, linking it to both oil privatizations and the governance of organized labor. I also outline the key differences between TNCs and the national oil companies (NOCs) and its workers on which I focus in the following sections. Then, I move on to the analysis of the experience of those who were excluded from the scheme due their labor activism. Struggling to find employment after their dismissal, Kuspan, Maksot, and Zhambyl[11]—the main interlocutors during my stay in Aqtau—referred to the intensification of economic exploitation in private subcontracting companies as a "return to feudalism" and the making of "slaves" (Kaz.: *quldar*; Rus.: *raby*): no more citizen-workers but mere laboring bodies, forced to accept short-term and low-paying jobs. Inasmuch as they were stripped of job stability, bonuses, social packages, health checks and insurances, workers moved from a condition of "privileged exploitation,"[12] to one of subjection to individual entrepreneurs who relayed on the coercive, judicial, and administrative tools of the state to quell with individualized labor disputes.

The third section deals with the pastoral techniques deployed by an agency of Samruk-Kazyna I call the "Social Adaptation Centre." Based on interviews with its staff in Aqtau—Mangystau's regional capital—as well as on participant observation of the trainings the latter provided, I show how workers were offered psychological support and courses in business management and financial literacy aimed at shedding the "dependency mindset" (Rus.: *izhdivenchestvo*) allegedly inherited by the Soviet welfare state, while re-making them into small business owners and responsible citizens. Alternatively, they too were free to accept lower-paid work in subcontracting companies, after signing up for training programs to improve their skills and qualifications. Either way, workers were taught to embrace "precarity in the entrepreneurial form to be judged, assessed, and measured in and by the market forces."[13] Lastly, I follow Zhambyl—one of the fired workers—as he embarks on joining a multilevel marketing scheme. All three sections illustrate the production and experience of precarity as a "multi-dimensionally complex process,"[14] inflected by technologies of government and subject-making, as well as capitalist strategies of accumulation and exploitation in the oil complex. Under authoritarian neoliberalism, Zhambyl's story encapsulates how precarity can be experienced as political subjection and economic exploitation, as well as an opportunity to be grasped"[15]—as a flight from economic "slavery" and state violence, and toward the dream of "free" neoliberal self-realization.

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Oil, Labor, and Authoritarian Neoliberalism in Kazakhstan

Oil scholarship in Kazakhstan has primarily focused on the circulation and accumulation of oil money, the distribution of revenues, and the institutions and fiscal regimes that mediate them. In different degrees, these studies have espoused the theory—known as "resource curse"—linking authoritarian forms of government to state ownership of natural resources, or to governments' failure to apply free-market reforms to their respective oil and gas industries.[16] More recently, however, anthropological studies have shifted the object of analysis toward the industry itself, focusing on the infrastructures, labor regimes, and forms of expertise that constitute oil operations, and how these provide insights on the "how" of capitalism.[17] This section overviews how privatization in the oil sector has co-produced and consolidated authoritarian neoliberalism, incentivizing the state to police its population against actions that might threaten companies' profits.

After the fall of the USSR, Kazakhstan's government readily endorsed economic policies such as privatization, social spending cuts, and a tax regime favorable to foreign direct investment in order to capitalize on its oil and gas resources,[18] starting with the signing of a production sharing agreement (PSA) with Chevron for the Tengiz oilfield in 1993.[19] As shown by anthropologist Saulesh Yessenova in her work, the US-based transnational corporation pushed the government to speed up the signing of the PSA, avoiding public debate by framing the issue as "a private (corporate) matter to be negotiated directly with the executive branch" behind closed doors.[20] If, as Ian Bruff argues, "authoritarianism can also be observed in the reconfiguring of state and institutional power in an attempt to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent,"[21] then Kazakhstan's PSAs can be understood as technologies through which transnational oil capital ensured the conditions for access to resources by means of closure and insulation, producing authoritarian forms of government in the process.[22]

Kazakhstan's oil privatizations in fact led to a consolidation of power and concentration of wealth around the figure of then-President Nursultan Nazarbayev. The former was achieved through the adoption of a new "super presidential" constitution in 1995, in order to shield the signing of contracts from dissent in the Parliament and civil society. The latter, through the establishment of a state investment committee with Nazarbayev at its head, acting as a gateway for channelling inflowing capital and distributing licenses. The urgency of the deals was highlighted by international financial institutions who stressed how, encumbered by foreign debt and skyrocketing hyperinflation, the government was under the threat of insolvency and social unrest, unless it started to cash-in from the privatization of its oil endowment. However, while TNCs signed deals for the country's largest oilfields such as Tengiz and Kashagan, privatization of Mangystau's oil followed a different direction. OzenMunayGaz (OMG), operating the large yet declining Ozen oilfield, remained under state control and became the kernel of KMG, after the latter was established in 2004. MangystauMunayGaz (MMG)—also operating smaller yet mature fields—was privatized but known to be connected to the then-president's circle, before being re-nationalized in 2009.

Through the years, these NOCs have come to constitute a distinctive "technological zone" of shared practices, procedures, and forms of dealing with labor and oil

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extraction.[23] These companies share a number of characteristics: they are heirs of the Soviet regional oil association (Mangyshlakneft') and its production divisions (NGDUs), and are tied to oil service companies that were once an integral part of them, with which they have an exclusive relationship, making the latter "quasi-internal to the main company, their sole client."[24] Secondly, a national company is often associated with a particularly strong influence of political interests rather than being merely profit-driven; meaning that, on the one hand, differently from transnational consortia, national companies allegedly have a stronger relationship with politicians and "entrepratchiki" (half entrepreneurs and half apparatchiks)[25] and are considered opaque in their accountability, with both hiring and career advancement depending on kin and patronage networks. However, workplace organizations can be articulated more easily in trade unions rather than in TNCs' management-led industrial relations departments; workers enjoy a singular index for the calculation of salaries (*ESOT: edinnaya sistema oplata truda*), as well as substantial social packages; and their employment is deemed more stable—that is, less dependent on the contract-based, precarious, and "modular"[26] modes of functioning of large transnational consortiums and their subcontracting companies.

While authoritarianism has developed in relation to both TNCs and NOCs, organized labor has developed differently in the two "zones." Similarly to other "extraction enclaves"[27] around the world, the Tengiz case is exemplary of how labor in oil extraction has become gradually disciplined and precarized. On the one hand, crew rotation and securitization of the secluded "industrial colony" have obstructed the labor movement and its organization from the onset, gradually leading to the trade union being dissolved under corporate pressure in 2003, substituted by an employer-sponsored association. On the other hand, while the company's workforce shrunk by more than half between 1998 and 2005, the number of workers in subcontracting companies increased threefold, with short-term and low-paying contracts becoming the norm, while a smaller portion of (largely foreign) workers enjoyed relative privileges.[28]

Conversely, Mangystau's oil workers have become nationally renowned for their activism, most famously when riot police opened fire on OMG workers and Zhanaozen residents in 2011, putting an end to a six-month strike in the oil town,[29] one hundred fifty kilometers east of Aqtau. As Kuspan explained to me during one of our conversations: "In order to achieve something, there needs to be a sacrifice, or else they will not hear you. That is what happened in Zhanaozen. People stood there for seven months demanding what they must get. And after [its tragic ending] we started to be treated like human beings." Kuspan's remark hints to the betterment of working conditions in state-owned enterprises following workers' mobilizations: salaries had been raised, those who had been fired during the strike were rehired en masse, and trade unions felt, for a short time, emboldened to negotiate au pair in their relations with management.

These conditions were problematized as a threat to companies' profitability following the price crisis, in particular the weight that supposedly entitled workers and their high wages had on budgets. The price crisis was then an opportunity to rebalance labor-capital relations in favor of the latter with a series of restrictive moves. First, in 2014, a new law on trade unions substantially restricted the activity of independent labor organizations, encumbering them with Kafkaesque registration procedures. The

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following year, amendments to the Labor Code further restricted the instances for declaring legitimate strikes, while favoring individual over collective bargaining in order to make the workforce more flexible and responsive to oil capital's fluctuating operations.[30] In both cases, the effect of these neoliberal reforms has been to reduce spaces for contestation and dissent. What remained to be done was disjoining the entrenched relation that NOCs had with their service companies.

The (Im)Possible Return of Feudalism

The service company where Kuspan worked—Oil Construction Company (OCC)—was established in 2003, by adjoining three service divisions carved out in the mid-1990s from MMG, heir to the Soviet regional production association Mangyshlakneft'. Nevertheless, the relation between MMG and its previous service divisions remained entwined throughout the years, with the latter continuing to be quasi-internal to MMG. A visual manifestation of such a relationship is displayed inside the MMG museum at the Zhetybay oilfield, opened for the fifty-fifth anniversary of Mangystau oil in 2016. There, beside dioramas of the oilfield, ampules with oil samples, a reconstruction of a 1960s workers' barrack, and the miniature of a pump-jack, one can observe a whole wall dedicated to the three companies (see Figure 1).

Until they were re-nationalized in 2009 (MMG) and 2011 (OCC) respectively, both companies were considered "closed" ones with a "vague and mysterious ownership."[31] As early as 1998—two years after its privatization—reports began circulating that members of the Nazarbayev family had acquired interests in MMG. Then, in 2002, the government's residual 30 percent interest was sold to a group identified as Ansell Development, registered in the Virgin Islands and also suspected to be

Figure 1. Showcase of ANS's companies at the MMG museum in Zhetybay, July 2017

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connected to Nazarbayev's circle.[32] The following year, OCC was privatized in its turn, retaining control of a range of important activities such as construction, transport, and maintenance services, which it offered to its sole "new" client, MMG. OCC was rumored to be controlled by Timur Kulibayev—Nazarbayev's son-in-law—through the umbrella company AktauNefteServis until this too was renationalized in 2011,[33] two years after the ownership of MMG had passed to a joint-venture between KMG and China's CNPC. The nationalization was going to create a "synergetic effect" between the operating company and the service ones, the press reported at the time.[34]

The period between 2003 and 2011 was remembered by workers as a chaotic era. Maksot—a now dismissed fifty-six-year-old welder and trade union activist—underscored how he did not even know where the company's offices were located during that period, and how local bosses did not treat them as "human beings" (Kaz.: *adamdar*), but as "slaves" who could not dare to demand anything. Several of the workers emphasized the sheer coercion and arbitrariness involved in extracting labor power, the absence of workers' entitlements and rights, and the carelessness showed by management in regard to their health and safety. Zhambyl, who started working for the company in 2003, remembered it as a time when order (Kaz.: *tartip*) had disappeared, workers did not receive kefir nor protective work clothing as remedies against health hazards, and did not even know "what a collective agreement was."

Now, the dismissal of workers and their transfer to emerging private companies raised suspects over the possible privatization of the state-owned service companies, bringing to mind the effects of the privatization of the oil sector in the mid-1990s. As Kuspan put it during one of our conversations: "When all countries are going forward, it is not possible for Kazakhstan to regress. Going back to the old feudalism (Kaz.: *burnghy feodalizmge*) is not something which suits this era." The idea that the remaking of social and property relations through privatization would constitute a return to feudalism is not new in former Soviet countries. Anthropologists Caroline Humphrey and Katherine Verdery have both used it to understand the constitution of emerging state forms and power relations during and soon after the demise of socialism. For Humphrey, writing during the fragmentation of the planned economy in the wake of the USSR's undoing, enterprises were being "run in a personal way almost as 'suzerainties' by local bosses,"[35] resulting in uncertainties as to where law and government resided. Similarly, for Verdery, privatization was comparable to the "parcellization of sovereignty," which Perry Anderson had previously identified as one of the characteristic features of the late "feudal mode of production."[36] In this light, in the early postsocialist years, privatization involved, besides the redistribution of property from the state to new private owners, also what Verdery calls "the privatization of power, meaning the arrogation of formerly central instruments of rule—especially coercion—by lower-level actors."[37]

Kuspan's evocation of a link between privatization and feudalism did not refer to the early postsocialist years though, when oil functioned as a "bargaining chip" (Rus.: *razmennaya moneta*) for meat and dairy products, and workers received rationing tickets in place of salaries.[38] Instead, the timeframe for the "parcellization of sovereignty" was placed between his company's establishment as a private entity in 2003 and its later nationalization in 2011, concomitantly with the strikes ending with the already mentioned shootings in Zhanaozen. Moreover, differently from the

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1990s, privatization was not a weird-sounding word subject to jokes, nor was it considered an alien policy bringing a "systemic derangement" and a crisis of recognition to hitherto established relations and assimilated value standards[39]; neither was it readily associated to, or experienced as, a "chaotic mode of dispossession."[40] On the contrary, it was a well-known project, whose effects were part of workers' recent memory.

Precarity-as-slavery

As in the mid-1990s, the return of feudalism via privatization was linked to the transformation of persons,[41] specifically the (re)making of "slaves" (Kaz.: *quldar*; Rus.: *raby*): no more citizen-workers but mere laboring bodies. Exiting the *state* oil industry was understood as a negative "graduation of citizenship," to say it with Aihwa Ong,[42] anticipating a future of short-term, low-pay jobs in private companies taking up contracts that had been previously awarded to state-owned ones. Precarity-as-slavery, then, entails a sense of lost recognition and social integration in labor's relation to the state,[43] as well as the arbitrariness held by bosses to have workers' labor power and time at one's disposal. Rather than referring to unfree work conditions in a regime of parcelized sovereignty, as it was in the early postsocialist years, in this connotation "slavery" came close to the Latin meaning of the word *precarius*, as in "obtained by entreaty," with workers having "to beg" in order to receive—as alms—jobs and better working and living conditions, in exchange for their availability to be at the bosses' complete disposal.

Jeanne Féaux de la Croix notices how slavery is mentioned with anger and contempt in the Kyrgyz village where she conducted fieldwork, referring to work arrangements within systems of patronage framed as fictive kinship, "where more senior or wealthy 'relatives' employ poorer 'brothers and sisters' for uncertain rewards and some form of protection."[44] Similarly, the late Maksat Dosmagambetov—one of Zhanaozen's most outspoken activists—recalled in an interview how, before 2011, employers and management involved workers "in doing housework, caring for livestock, cleaning," "swore at them," and "treated workers like slaves."[45] A similar remark was also made by Kuspan, who noticed how casual workers in subcontracting companies were hired back informally in order to build their bosses' houses while still wearing their previous work uniforms, with the tag numbers of the villas' junction boxes and electric panels revealing their links to oil corporations. Precarity-as-slavery can be said to consist of a condition of servile availability under the constant threat of disposability. As Kairat—a machinist who resigned with the 5/50 program—described his new job for a subcontracting company:

> My employer is not the [state] company anymore but a private company, it is called MobilServis. If you want something, you cannot approach OCC. If you approach MobilServis's management, they say not to ask for anything. They say: "A request can be made only from our side, because you need us." If you want to go, go away. There are people who can replace you.

Rather than being counterposed to an abstract freedom, "slavery" was thus understood as an instantiation of dependent work; a variation of what Moulier Boutang

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calls "bridled labor," i.e., wage labor minus "the freedom to create unions and the right of association," which constitute "the conditions for unforced forms of employment."[46] Precarity-as-slavery thus describes a politically induced condition resulting from the faltering of social and economic networks of support in the workplace, the extraction of labor power through extra-economic means, and a heightened exposure to injury, violence, illness, and death. The new "suzerains" would be unconcerned with employment stability, decent salaries, and the provision of a set of protections against the toxic materiality of working in oil extraction. Kairat continued:

> There will be no social package for workers. You are aware about the climate conditions and ecology here. When we were working we had a vacation once a year. We would visit Saryagash or any other resort and sanatorium. But we won't get anything like that anymore. We will just survive and have food for our children. That is what they intend to do. That all is not beneficial for Kazakh people. What about the future? I have daughter and sons of your age. What will happen in their time? How can they live a worthy life if they will work this way?! (Kaz.: *Osylai jumys istese, kalai dostoio omir sure alady*). Will they live on a day-to-day basis thinking about how to put food on their table?!

Exiting the state oil industry was thus considered a debasement of life conditions also physically, bodily. Exposed to paints fumes, daring ecological conditions, and heavy machinery, working in the oil industry was part of the construction of a muscular masculinity that, however, necessitated health check-ups and insurances, as well as vacations to sanatoriums, in order to be sustained.[47] Special clothing too, as well as dairy products—traditionally considered to have detoxing properties—would not be provided anymore; and more importantly, could not be asked for, denoting once again the descent to a condition of one-sided dependency with employers, as well as the exposure to health and safety hazards, which expressed their disposability, their abandonment, their being pushed away from a livable life. Slavery was the product of an asymmetrical bond that made workers into beggars who would go from contingent contract to contingent contract in order to merely survive. Conversely, belonging to a state company formalized labor relations in a framework that afforded appeals to citizenship—rather than kin—during disputes; that is, workers felt that by working for a national company they were entitled to make claims based on the national wealth—i.e., oil—they were contributing to generate, making the relationship with management one of corporativist interdependency and shared participation in the national project.

From Dependency Mindset to Entrepreneurial Precarity

For the adaptation center in charge of retraining workers, ideally the optimization would produce a different kind of subject—one "freed" from the subjection of dependent labor with the help of a parastatal agency. When the implementation of the early retirement scheme started in spring 2017, a series of activities, consulting sessions, and trainings were organized by CAC in Aqtau. Entrusted by the national holding Samruk-Kazyna with supporting workers' "social adaptation" (*sotsialnaya*

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adaptatsiya) to the new reality, the center was heir to a previous institution: the Center of Social Partnership, a research institute created after the Zhanaozen events with the aim of collecting thorough information on social issues in conflict-prone, remote areas with the intent to "better police the population,"[48] as well as monitoring job satisfaction among workers of state enterprises and the connected risks of labor unrest.

The program was presented as a social project helping people going through a "process of transformation," as Aigul—one of the young members of the team, put it. Coming from the NGO sector, Aigul worked as a self-styled psychologist, strong of her previous experience in working face to face with the population, and of being native to the region. This last quality was important, she said, inasmuch as she understood well what it meant living in an oil region and the reason for workers' attachment to their jobs: "It is my region and my people. These people worked in one enterprise for many years, with ten or fifteen years' experience. They cannot imagine anything else except working in the oil industry. They have been freed (Rus.: *osvobozhdenniy*) and they cannot understand how to live further." The initial anger and refusal to accept the new condition was justified, said Aigul. Dismissed workers were going through a critical moment, which made them akin to "neurotic citizens," i.e., subjects whose conduct arises from, and responds to, fears, anxieties, and insecurities, rather than being based on calculating rationalities.[49] The project consisted first in making people understand that "life does not consist only of *that* work," while successively retraining them through courses in financial and computer literacy, business skills, English, and CV writing.

For Bolat, CAC's director and founder, the role of the center was directed at dismantling the pairing of state paternalism and workers' "dependency mindset," both considered legacies of the Soviet system. Indeed, similarly to public discourses during the Zhanaozen strike six years earlier, workers were stigmatized for their "culture of parasitism, reckless reliance on outside subsidies, greed, large appetite for easy money, and inability for hard work and self-development"[50]; a discourse that has widely accompanied practices of neoliberal restructuring in the former Soviet Union, where the worker-hero has been substituted for the entrepreneur as the new model citizen.[51] As Bolat put it:

> People expect always something more. The portrait of the average worker who is being dismissed these days is the following: "I was released and I must be given a job. They have to give me a job." People here expect a lot of things and, as you know, large expectations cause large frustrations. We created this office to prevent that.

Beside prevention, CAC's staff tried to actively shape a sufficient, calculating, responsible, autonomous, and unencumbered subject, as part of the independence-era "practice of governing 'through freedom,' i.e., through teaching people how to independently achieve their 'interests' […] in the framework of the market economy."[52] Yet transforming workers into entrepreneurs was no easy task. Of the approximately three thousand who had "voluntarily" retired, only around one hundred were following courses at CAC's. The rest had largely spent their

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compensation to repay accumulated debts and mortgages, buy or renovate their houses, address health problems, and fund their children's education.

Workers' reluctance to engage in business was, however, considered a legacy of Soviet paternalism. "We do not have [doing business] in our blood (Rus.: *v krovi etogo u nas netu*)," as Aigul put it. Working in the oil sector had allegedly spoiled them with relatively high salaries compared to their job qualifications. After all, they were not proper oil-workers (Rus.: *neftyaniki*) —such as geologists, petroleum engineers, and drillers—but *nefteservisniki*: locksmiths, drivers, mechanics, and construction workers serving the oil industry yet undeserving of salaries that would reach four hundred thousand tenge (around seven hundred dollars) compared to a national average of half the amount. As Bolat put it: "We do not say it directly, but we try to deliver the message that they are overvalued (*pereotseneny*)." Yet, workers were reluctant to accept the job positions that CAC found them as an alternative, since the latter would pay less than a fourth of what they previously earned for the same work, this time for the private outsourcing companies stipulating cheaper service contracts with the oil corporations.

The devaluing of workers' labor and the stripping of their supposed entitlements was justified by reference to global practices on which national companies had to model their own. Malik, human resources manager in one of the service companies, said:

> Foreigners focus upon making business, not on collective agreements or ESOT. If there is some work, you will be given money and salary. If there is no work: sorry, we cannot do anything. Foreigners usually orient themselves on one business activity, for instance transport service. And they will only do that. Do you understand? They will not hire cleaners, plumbers, cooks and others as staff members. Such unqualified people also get high salaries in compliance with ESOT. What the company is doing is getting rid of unnecessary workers, and I think they are right. Only transport workers will be left and will get high salaries, the rest will be hired through outsourcing or outstaffing and will receive small salaries. I think this is how it is done in the world.

The unified salary index (ESOT) enjoyed by all workers in state-owned enterprises was also considered an outdated legacy of Soviet paternalism, although it was introduced following the Zhanaozen tragedy in 2011 in order to minimize workers' grievances on wage disparities by homogenizing salary calculations. For the supporters of the optimization, this move had been a step back from the adoption of a profit-driven capitalist logic, where workers who worked harder and showed the intention of improving were rewarded monetarily and could uphold career advancement, while the lazy majority would be hired contingently according to company workloads. The role of the state was not to guarantee job security, but to create the conditions for self-improvement so that unsatisfied workers could attain better conditions by acquiring new skills. Failing to do so was a confirmation of their laziness and incapacity for self-development, a confirmation of their previous overvaluation and their infantile stubbornness. The intention of eradicating paternalism notwithstanding, a state paternalist logic was driving the very conception and implementation of the project. As Bolat stated: "these people cannot be expected to look for better jobs

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by themselves," but had to be guided, stirred, and pointed towards them; in order to build trust with these " citizens and clients," CAC's staff had to keep up with them "as with our own children."

As the optimization went further during 2018, the local press published a series of articles showcasing ready and willing, virtuous workers making adequate provision for the reconstruction of their human capital in order to transition successfully from dependent labor—and a dependent mindset—to forward-looking entrepreneurship:

> Since 1995, he worked in Oil Transport Corporation LLP as an excavator driver (*mashinistom-ekskavatorshchikom*). Last December, he quit voluntarily and repaid a bank loan with the monetary compensation he received. Now he is engaged in the acquisition and registration of a plot of land on which he plans to open a livestock farm where he will breed poultry and cattle. At the same time, Sadirbay Taubaev is undergoing a training course on the basics of entrepreneurship and business. This is necessary, he said, in order to run his business competently (*gramotnogo*) and properly (*pravil'nogo*) in the future.[53]

Workers such as Taubaev were upheld as models of responsibility, not only in regards to their families but also toward their former company and the state. The project of turning workers into entrepreneurs aimed at creating similar subjectivities who, by becoming financially independent and responsible, could participate in "helping the state" rather than being a burden for it. The attainment of a new stability in the future passed necessarily through a process of responsibilization and the acquisition of skills that would turn former oil workers in "patriotic entrepreneurs,"[54] linking neoliberal ethics to the social obligation of building the nation.[55] The other side of the coin, however, was the marginalization of "irresponsible" labor activists.

Cleansing from a Toxic Industry

Kuspan, Maksot, and Zhambyl had been among the most active and visible workers during the last strike before the implementation of the 5/50 program. Already in October 2016, organized by their independent trade union, they participated in a hunger strike at the MMG fields of Kalamkas and Zhetybay. Both the regional *akim* Aidarbayev and KMG director Mynbayev visited the Kalamkas field to negotiate, promising an end to outsourcing and stop the optimization. Strong off their partial victory, oil workers around the region started to discuss the unification of working groups and trade union organizations in a Unified Coordination Center (Rus.: Edinyi Coordinatsionnyi Tsentr), whilst anticipating a coming "persecution of activists, from forgery of drugs [possession] to transfer to another workplace, or bribery in the form of promotions and bonuses."[56] Then, in January 2017, the expected happened: facing an increasingly hostile and restrictive environment—especially after the promulgation of the new law on trade unions and the Labour Code[57]—an administrative court in the city of Shymkent ruled in favor of the dissolution of the Kazakhstani Federation of Independent Trade Unions. Workers at Oil Construction Company in Aqtau entered another hunger strike, this time ending with its leaders arrested, the participants fined, and those identified as "instigators"—like Kuspan, Maksot, and Zhambyl—fired.[58]

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In the following months all three tried unsuccessfully to appeal their dismissals in court, while becoming progressively marginalized by their former colleagues who feared their own exclusion from the now inevitable implementation of the optimization program. Concomitantly, with the appearance of articles on successful transitions to entrepreneurship in the local press, I started noticing job ads stuck on the entrance doors of apartment blocks and on street light poles. These were targeting directly those who had been dismissed through the 5/50 program (see Figures 2 and 3). I asked Maksot what he thought about them, and whether he was considering calling. He felt anger and disillusionment at what he considered an unjust and painful experience, and had thus decided not to look for jobs that offered ignoble working conditions. Among these, mattered chiefly the impossibility of forming workplace organizations, a condition that signified the descent from the status of citizen-worker to that of a "slave." As he told me after lastly signing up for unemployment benefits:

> When you work on a contract basis, you will be completely dependent upon the employer (Kaz.: *Kontraktmen jumys jasagan kezde, jumys beruhige taueldi bolasyn*). And it is not possible to have a trade union with outsourcing. How can you live without saying what you think, protecting your rights and demands as a citizen of this country? How could we call that life? (Kaz.: *Ol omirdi qalai atauga bolady?*)

Maksot's wife started to work at the laundry of a kindergarten, earning thirty thousand tenge per-month, and together with Maksot's son was sustaining him. Zhambyl, on the contrary, divorced and hosted by a relative in Aqtau, had to make it on his own. During a meeting I had with all three of them, Zhambyl said he did not bother himself with the dismissal anymore, he was not interested in any laws now and didn't care about the state, even if it would disappear (Kaz.: *Quryp ketse de maghan baribir*). The exhausting court appeals and the frustrating calls for solidarity were distracting him from the multilevel marketing company he recently joined.

Figure 2. Job ads. On the top lefthand side: "We hire (former) oil workers." Aqtau, May 2018

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Figure 3. Job ad. "Oilmen! Were you laid off with the program 5/50? Call us, we are hiring!" Aqtau, May 2018

This was a pyramidal scheme, Kuspan told him, skeptical. Zhambyl said he could not do anything else: he had been living at his sister's for a while but could not any longer, nor did he want to go back to Beineu, his native village. He noticed, with the others nodding, that they would not be offered jobs due to the stain left on their workbooks as a consequence of the strike. In fact, Kuspan too had been encountering problems in finding new employment: "people agree to give you a job but then change their mind the next day," or they just look at the workbook and keep silent. The only work Zhambyl had been able to find was as a contract-less security guard at the city port. But not for long. He decided it was time to change his mindset.

Zhambyl's vision of the future became, quite suddenly, one where everyone would earn for oneself: "There are dismissals all over Kazakhstan, enterprises are being shut down. The only work available for people is at construction sites or as security guards, although it pays very little. Our political system does not think about people, I realized that while I was at the commission where they confirmed our dismissal." His decision to join a resale networking company was due to the wish of cleansing himself from the bodily and social "dirtiness" of dependent labor for the state, as well as recovering from the feeling of abandonment and marginalization he had suffered after the strike:

> I feel lost as a result, do you think it is easy for me? I need to rescue myself and so I calm down by reading these books, continuously. But when I come face to

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face with those…Those who want to dominate me. They want to make a slave out of me (Rus.: *Oni khotiyat sdelat' iz menya raba*). That's why my nerves my health got worse. I tried to calm myself down, but it was still very hard. I did not have any money, they [management] did not allow us to go inside the company and stopped talking to us like human beings. They blamed us all the time. I felt abandoned (Rus.: *broshennym*). I drank for three months. I felt better after drinking and only then could go to sleep.

For the following months, Zhambyl was haunted by negative thoughts and was "very angry at the state." He maintained that anger and worries affected his capacity to concentrate on resales, impacting on the confidence he needed to enlarge his network. But he had to go to court and battle, becoming nervous and irate. He started reading motivational books to calm down and—since entering the Tiens networking company—studied the life of businessmen such as Robert Kiyosaki and Donald Trump, their path to wealth and their philosophy: "A person who does not risk will not drink champagne," he would say. He reckoned that, since he had already taken risks which did not bring anything positive, it would not hurt to try being a businessman. He changed his clothing too: he now wore a suit—white shirt and red tie, smart black pants and belt—and held a folder stuffed with promotional material and leaflets propagandizing the miraculous effects of the company's products: "Simply put, this is *my* business. In MMG you will do what they ask you to do. But here, I can leave my work anytime I want. I even can stay home." It was not only a desire to become rich that pushed Zhambyl into multilevel marketing, but a desire to become autonomous while forging new relationships of care and support after the marginalization following his dismissal.[59] He tried to attract people who had "escaped"[60] the oil industry with the 5/50 program, because they had money but did not know what to do with them—Bolat was of the same opinion on this. When I showed the job ads I collected, he was confident they had been posted by people engaged in multilevel marketing. As the optimization continued, Zhambyl foresaw that more and more people would feel disappointed with dependent labor and turn to "business":

With dependent labor (Rus.: *sistema naiemnogo truda*) people cannot earn much money. For example, I worked for twenty-five years as a hired worker and as a result I do not have anything. I would get my salary and spend it. But in business you have to work for four-five years and then you will have a stable income. The main thing for us is that the person realizes this, people with a business mindset (Rus.: *biznes myshleniem*) stay with us. They create a variety of such ads, and I also have tons of these. At our office there are active people, but also those who do not want to work and go away. But I cannot go away as no one hires me and I do not have another choice. I could do more side jobs, but I care more for my health. Since I came to the company I feel much better. Before I would get medical treatment two or three times a year. I would go to sanatoriums and hospitals. I would often get injections. But now my health is stable. Because I earn some money and get products for myself.

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> My health became much better: I am pulling myself out of this hole (Rus.: *ya vykarabkaius'*).

He would stroll around the city sticking ads to attract former oil workers, but it was difficult to find committed people. Most of them, Zhambyl thought, were *negativshchiki* and angry, suspicious that they were being deceived by networking marketing as well: "They say they poisoned my mind and turned me into a zombie (Kaz.: *olar senin miyndy ulap tastagan, zombie qylyp tastagan deidi*). But I say I am not a zombie, because I tried these products myself and my health improved." Working for Tiens meant cleansing himself also bodily, from physical as much as political dirt. The pollution at the oilfield, Zhambyl maintained, made human blood become thick, this leading to different diseases that needed diluents such as vodka or injections at sanatoriums. "It is a kind of death to work in this way" (Kaz.: *Osylai jumys jasau da, bir olim goi*)," he said, pointing to how many workers would not even reach retirement age or die few years after. He joined Tiens also to invest in his health. He drank vitamins and health supplements, advertising them as having miraculous effects, after trying them first: eye-drops improved his eyesight, toothpaste healed his tonsils and burns. Differently from his previous company, in the current one they had "health," not only in physical terms: his current business was "clean" (Kaz.: *taza*), in comparison to the former one, also in moral terms. He was trying to establish relations considered honest and pure, where his own pursuit of wealth and meaning would be based on making other people's lives healthier. Moreover, it was a clean business because it was a "free" one, meaning it fed from the desire to be completely detached from the state: the company did not pay taxes, and neither did its resellers; and differently from traditional businesses, these did not need to have much money in order to build or buy a shop, neither would they need protection—a "roof" (Rus.: *krysha*) —in order to run it, nor had to bribe officials or police officers.

By the end of 2018 Zhambyl had done little progress in recruiting people and earning money from his business though, starting to make me notice a mismatch between his expectations and the current outcomes, as it is commonly found in multilevel marketing.[61] Nevertheless, he continued to work in what he called side jobs to share rent for a former *dacha* in the outskirts of the city with two other men. He continued reading motivational and business books to keep learning how to become rich independently and in a clean way: "What I have been observing in the company," he said during our last meeting, "is that people join this company when they are full of emotions—I realized it just recently myself—and after they leave. But I did not. I stayed, because I am patient."

Conclusion

Through Zhambyl's trajectory in the aftermath of the hunger strike and his dismissal, I have described the ambivalence inherent in the production and government of precarity under neoliberal conditions; that between "being governed by others and self-government, as well as the ambivalence in self-government—between servile making-governable and refusals that aim to be no longer governed."[62] That is, in his experience coexist the repression of labor activism and a refusal to subject oneself

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to exploitation cum domination, while trying to create new relations in place of those that crumbled. Moreover, trying to take flight from the oil industry, Zhambyl's unconcluded trajectory speaks of the desire to overcome the precarity of body and relations, which were always already part and parcel of what is often considered as one of the most secure and privileged employment conditions in Kazakhstan: working for the *state* oil industry.

As this article has illustrated, different precarious subjectivities were produced by the restructuring of the oil complex in Mangystau region, in the western part of Kazakhstan. The optimization was premised on a mix of, on the one hand, punitive and coercive practices—such as the repression of trade unions, the marginalization of activists, and the adoption of a neoliberal labor code—and of pastoral ones—like skills improvement trainings, management classes, and psychological consulting—on the other. For CAC's staff, the precarious conditions in which newly dismissed workers found themselves was an object of concern that needed to be controlled in order to avoid social conflicts, while fostering the axiom that losing employment stability was a leveling down of oil workers' privileges to those of other working people who might have never enjoyed it. The process to overcome precarity was identified as one of self-remaking and perspective self-governing, which would nevertheless keep on the background a conception of working life as inherently—one might say ontologically—precarious.

For workers, on the other hand, precarity was identified with the production of lack,[63] both bodily—in terms of stripped protections against health and safety hazards—and socio-politically, inasmuch as they would not be able to organize to improve their labor conditions. In other words, they envisioned the production of "unfree" laboring subjects excluded from active citizenship, i.e., "slaves." Yet, rather than contemplating their work life as one of once—and now compromised—life-long stability, people like Maksot, Zhambyl, and Kuspan considered their work trajectories to have moved along a continuum of being more or less precarious: they knew well they had never been completely secured from injury and dismissal, exploitation, and domination.[64] They had been quite used to the different techniques that, as I have argued, characterize authoritarian neoliberalism in Kazakhstan.

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4. During this time, I was based in Aqtau, sharing a flat with a research assistant, Laura Berdikhojayeva. The vast majority of the interviews for this paper have been conducted together, either in Kazakh or in Russian. Laura's help has been paramount for translating from Kazakh and subsequently transcribing the interviews. I am also grateful for the many insights that emerged from our daily conversations and for her commitment to the research. Fieldwork was supported by the Innovative Training Network "Caspian," funded by an MSCA grant of the European Union in the context of Horizon 2020 (Grant agreement no: 642709).
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