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Chapter One: Introduction

In February 1922 the tanners of Kashan wrote a petition to the Iranian Parliament, henceforth the Majles, in which they complained about excessive taxes and their deteriorating business. In their supplication, the tanners referred to the gap between ‘high politics’ and their own humble concerns in the following words:

To the deputies of the sacred Majles, may God empower its pillars,

Our opinion as the helpless members of the tanners’ guild and of the felt-capped [kolay-namadi] and the ordinary people in general who are involved in trade and agriculture is that the honourable deputies and the ministers of the country should not only deal with foreign affairs but they should also pay attention to domestic issues. Political debates make sense to the clergy and to the wise men who enjoy dealing with such matters but as the common folk we lack that capacity.¹

It is as if the tanners were addressing later generations of historians. Iranian history-writing has, for a long time, been haunted by elitist perspectives and a top-down approach which stemmed from several causes two of which, I believe, are of particular importance. The first is the modernization paradigm which suggests that from the 18th but especially the early 19th century onwards, such Middle Eastern countries as Iran and the neighbouring Ottoman Empire entered a modernization process in which they adopted European military and administrative technologies as a solution to their military and administrative problems. Modernization served in this respect as an umbrella term used with a variety of different measures, the realization of which depended primarily on high-level politics. In such narratives the aspirations of the ruling classes and their projects were overemphasized, while ordinary people were considered important when and as much as their paths crossed with those of the elites. To put it differently, ordinary people arouse interest only when they were involved in major political processes. For the case of Iran, the Iranian Constitutional Revolution can be cited as an example. For instance, guilds, as major manufacturing and social entities, attracted the attention of historians for the period between 1905 and 1909,

¹ LMDCIP. d4/k49/j24/2/p62, “The complaint of the tanners of Kashan”, 4 February 1922. For the documents LMDCIP the numbers refer to the following: ‘d’ the parliamentary term; ‘k’ the folder where the documents is found; ‘j’ the file which contains the document; and ‘p’ the term from Emphases here and in any of the petitions used in this work are mine unless stated otherwise. Following an official request issued in 1935 to the countries with which it had diplomatic relations, ‘Iran’ became the generally accepted name of the country and ‘Persia’ fell into relative disuse. Yet, throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth the use of Persia was commonplace. In this chapter and other I use Iran and Persia interchangeably.

because of their active role in the making of the revolution, their representation in the First Majles, and the role they played in the civil war which was fought from 1908 to 1909 between Mohammad Ali Shah and the constitutionalists.² Nonetheless, with guilds no longer represented in the Majles starting in 1909, due to the new electoral law which was produced in 1909 and which abolished class-based representation, attention to guilds noticeably vanishes after this date.³ The second factor which, I believe, paradoxically reinforced a top-to-down perspective on Iranian history is the Iranian Revolution of 1979. To many, the revolution came as a surprise which called for an explanation. Attention was mostly paid, in the subsequent literature, to political parties, organizations and collective movements which arguably contributed to the making of the Revolution in various ways. When ordinary people were addressed, their experiences were often dealt with within the framework of revolutionary history, which resulted in the revolutionizing of Iranian historiography. Unsurprisingly, therefore, much of the scholarship on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909 in the post-1979 period often strove to explain the ‘roots’ of the revolution which took place in 1979.⁴ One has the impression that at least from the Tobacco Protest (1891-1892)⁵ until the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iranian history steadily progressed towards the Revolution that

² The electoral law produced for the first elections in 1906 specified the following six classes (*tabaqat*) of the electorate who were to send to the Majles a certain number of deputies to serve for two years: Princes and the Qajar tribe; mullahs and theology students; the nobility; merchants; landholders and smallholders; and guild members. E. G. Browne, *The Persian Revolution, 1905-1909*, London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1966. 355. Among the 160 deputies 26 percent were guild elders while 20 percent were clergymen as opposed to 15 percent of merchants.

³ The following study is a notable exception: Hojjat Fallah Tootcar, “Social and Political Activities of Guilds and Artisans from the Iranian Constitutional Revolution to the Rise of Reza Shah, 1906-1925.” PhD diss., (in Persian), Tarbiyat Modarres University, 2003. Based on numerous primary sources Dr. Tootcar cogently deals with the activities of the guilds during this period by also referring to the relationship between guild members and the broader Iranian working class.

⁴ The following are only a few and well-known examples: Abrahamian, Ervand. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982; Said Arjomand, (ed.). *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam: Essays on Social Movements in the Contemporary Near and Middle East*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984; Nikki Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. At times even when the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was not the main concern, links were established between this revolution and previous historical developments. For instance, writing in 1996 Janet Afary makes, in the Introduction to her seminal work, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, the following observation: “The Legacy of the Constitutional Revolution and the fight between [Shaikh Fazlullah] Nuri and the constitutional forces, is alive to this day. Ayatullah Khomeini, upon coming to power in 1979, declared Nuri the ideological father of the Islamic Republic and made every effort to rehabilitate him”. *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy and the Origins of Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.

⁵ In 1890 Naser al-Din Shah granted a complete monopoly over the production, sale and export of all Iranian tobacco to a British subject, Major Gerald Talbot, for fifty years. The concession triggered a series of protests, some of them rather bloody, which took place in various cities of the country until the concession was finally abolished early in 1892 with a cost of £ 500,000 to be paid as compensation to the company which the government borrowed from the British owned Imperial Bank as the first Qajar foreign loan. This protest is regarded in much of the literature as a ‘prelude’ to the Constitutional Revolution. Ann K. S. Lambton, *Qajar Persia*, London, I. B. Tauris, 1987 P. 223.

was its ultimate destination, and that the developments which took place in between functioned as the components of the revolutionary machine. We need to de-revolutionize Iranian history and focus on its other aspects which did not necessarily and directly relate to the revolutions.

The insufficient attention paid to the experiences and perceptions of ordinary people may also result from a lack of sources, or their inadequacy. Social historians, particularly those who work on the Middle East, who venture to wrestle with questions regarding the experiences of ordinary people face many challenges from their source material, for the obvious reason that their subjects hardly leave an extensive trail of documents. In order to overcome this problem, many historians either choose not to risk such an adventure, or rely on sources recorded by those who were hostile, or at best indifferent, to the concerns of ordinary people. Or else, the uneven attention paid to the lower classes in Iranian history-writing could have possibly emanated from a controversial understanding of social history. It is tacitly, and somehow legitimately, claimed that social history can only be written if and when other histories, namely political and economic, have been sufficiently studied. However, I think it is truer to the dynamic of history to recognize social history as a method of writing about the past rather than categorizing it as an autonomous branch of the historian's craft. In other words, the history of any period is better understood when due attention is paid to social developments. Since the past was at least as complex as the present we should reconsider the previously held dogmatic and clear-cut division of history into political, economic, military, and social spheres, and so on, and should instead try to produce a more comprehensive narration of the past. This is certainly easier said than done, but it is worth trying.

Thus, my main aim in this research is to present a social history of Iranian industrialization and labour by referring, *inter alia*, to the textile industry and as such to enrich the scholarship on the period. I do so based on the petitions sent by workers which provide insights into the various dimensions of workers' perceptions and experiences that remained understudied in the existing literature. Thus, for instance instead of discussing structural political and economic developments at length, I try to examine how ordinary people, particularly the labouring people, perceived and participated in these processes. Further, especially in chapters 4 and 5, which deal with industrialization and labour issues respectively, I use petitions to present a rather complex engagement and interaction between the state and the society. Throughout the work but particularly in Chapter 5, petitions are used for questioning the validity and the scope of the narratives which almost invariably focus on formal labour organizations and

collective labour actions in investigating how workers coped with labour-related and other problems. By doing this I intend to enrich the existing scholarship on Iranian history by restoring the agency of those people who have so far remained peripheral to the main concerns of history—to get them out of the ‘waiting room of history’.⁶

Some Theoretical Considerations

When I set out to investigate the history the Iranian workers during the period under study, I encountered on more than one occasion the following perplexing question: ‘did any workers exist in early twentieth century Iran?’ Apparently, the question had its origins in a narrow understanding of “worker” and its reduction to factory labour exclusively. It was suggested that workers could only become subjects of historical inquiry if they were employed at factories, or else once they gained visibility by participating in labour organization and collective action. But I gradually realized that this misunderstanding was also caused by erroneously equating labour history with that of leftist movements—in Iran, and elsewhere. Supposedly, the Iranian modernization trajectory, which started in the 19th century and continued into the twentieth, resulted in the establishment of a state machine which imposed capitalist relations upon a passive and recipient society. This establishment was politically and economically hostile, or at best oblivious, to the interests of the wider population as it protected those of a small, privileged group. It was due to leftist parties and organizations that the deadlock was solved and state’s authoritarian tendencies were mended.⁷ Many studies of labour history promoted this idea in one way or another. This tendency was also the main reason for the incomparably higher attention paid to labour in the post-1941 period, when communist and socialist organizations were strongest in Iran. Paradoxically, by positioning

⁶ This metaphor, as I have encountered it so far, has been used on several occasions albeit in different contexts. It was used, for instance, by Tarik Zafer Tunaya, the famous Turkish historian, as a book title, *Medeniyetin Bekleme Odasında* (In the Waiting Room of Civilization), which was published in 1989. Interestingly enough the metaphor was used, in the same year, by the German playwright, Heiner Müller who used it of the ‘Third World’. See: Amit Chaudhuri, “In the Waiting-Room of History”, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 26 No. 12 · 24 June 2004. pages 3-8 (<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n12/amit-chaudhuri/in-the-waiting-room-of-history-last> access 2.2.2015). More recently and in a closer context to my usage, however, the metaphor was used by Dipesh Chakrabarty to describe how J. Stuart Mill, the 19th century British philosopher, consigned Africans, Indians and other ‘rude’ nations to an ‘imaginary waiting room of history’. See: D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Political Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8. For further discussion on the metaphor in Turkish literature see: Meltem Ahiska, *Occidentalism in Turkey: Questions of Modernity and National Identity in Turkish Radio Broadcasting* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 38.

⁷ A similar teleological argumentation can also be observed in the nationalist and Islamist historiographies.

the struggle against the state's pervasive power at the official level, i.e at the level of formal politics, no space was left for informal politics and everyday forms of resistance.⁸

Consequently in addition to many puzzling questions, I am mainly preoccupied with three basic issues. First of all, I wonder how Iranian workers came to see themselves primarily as workers since 'workerness' was one of the several identities and affiliations that people had.⁹ What Katznelson observes for the French, American and German cases is true for non-Western cases as well. That is to say much of the variation between different working-class experiences 'consists of variations in the ways working people, confronting changes in the conditions of life [...], mapped and interpreted these changes at the level of dispositions'.¹⁰ This process can only be investigated by dealing with the discursive formation of the Iranian working-class as has been done for other working-classes, but which is insufficiently addressed in the existing literature.¹¹ Thus as Dipesh Chakrabarty remarks, "an analytic strategy that seeks to establish a 'working class' as the 'subject' of its history must also engage in the discursive formation that makes the emergence of such a subject-category possible."¹² The delineation of workers' discursive formation is or should be an indispensable part of any labour history but especially in non-Western contexts, for the following reason. Without due attention paid to how, in a particular non-Western context, workers—the 'flesh-and-blood human actors'¹³—came to perceive themselves as such, one not infrequently has

⁸ Barbara Misztal defines informality as "a form of interaction among partners enjoying relative freedom in interpretation of their roles' requirements." Barbara A. Misztal, *Informality: Social Theory and Contemporary Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 8. James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985) provides a good illustration how everyday forms of resistance work among the weak groups. The book is a thoughtful and informed study of the social, economic and political relations and conditions of a Malay rice growing village in Kedah. Yet for years it stood as a landmark not only in South-East Asian or peasant studies but also in working class studies especially in understanding class consciousness.

⁹ I took 'workerness' from Zachary Lockman, "Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899-1914," *Poetics Today* 15, not. 2 (1994): 157-190. Here 161.

¹⁰ Ira Katznelson, "Working-Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons", in *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, Ira Katznelson & Aristide R. Zolberg, (eds.) (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986), 18.

¹¹ Touraj Atabaki's following article is a notable exception: "From 'Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker): Recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 84, Fall 2013, pp. 159-175. By concentrating on oil workers employed in the Iranian oil industry in the south Atabaki attempts to trace the development of workers' self-consciousness as to their 'workerness'. For two other studies, on Egypt and Turkey, which stress the importance of the discursive making of the working class in the Middle East see: Zachary Lockman, "Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899-1914," *Poetics Today* 15, not. 2 (1994): 157-190; Yigit Akin "The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics in Early Republican Turkey: Language, Identity, and Experience", *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 54, Issue S17. 167-188.

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History in Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 6.

¹³ Scott, James, C., *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985), 43.

the impression that ‘worker’ is used as a cumbersome, author-imposed concept. It is as if the Western European trajectory is universally applicable, and the concept of worker denotes the same meaning irrespective of the socio-cultural, linguistic, political or economic variables which not only determines the course of the workers’ struggle but also their self-perception.¹⁴ To avoid these pitfalls and to challenge an objective understanding of class, the discursive formation of the Iranian working class should be adequately addressed. In short, as Katznelson succinctly puts it, ‘class is discursive’.¹⁵

Secondly, I want to go beyond the traditional concerns of what is known as ‘old labour history’ whose focus was on organized labour and labour institutions as well as on workers’ collective actions.¹⁶ While I was aware of the fact that even such aspects of Iranian labour remain understudied, the existing literature, despite its significant contribution to our knowledge of the subject, fell short of answering some basic questions which had preoccupied me. In much of the literature on Middle Eastern labour history a teleological role is attributed to the working classes. It is explicitly or implicitly claimed that workers in such countries as Iran, Turkey, or Egypt, as elsewhere in the world, acted as a progressive force in markedly reactionary political settings. It is further argued that workers would almost inevitably reach a point where they would overthrow the obsolete and exploitative productive relations for a just and egalitarian substitute. In this classical Marxist approach, factory workers, more than any other workers, were supposed to be the agents of this revolutionary mission. This not only resulted in what D. Quataert calls ‘the factory orthodoxy’,¹⁷ which refers to the excessive and disproportionate attention given to factory labour, but also distracted attention from those

¹⁴ I use “the Western European trajectory” only to refer to the familiar Eurocentrism problem and to an assumed universal model which portrayed factory workers as the agents of industrialization. Otherwise I am aware that such an unvarying model fails to describe even the diverse Western European experiences. In Europe too as a rule the development from artisanal labour to factory labour and the resulting development in the self-perception of workers took place gradually. For example, in his seminal work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson challenges the established idea that factory workers were the “eldest children of the industrial revolution” and instead suggests that they in fact were ‘late arrivals’. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London: V. Gollancz, 1963. 193. William H. Sewell, too, makes a similar observation for France. He argues an important ‘consequence of the French pattern of industrialization for French class formation was that artisans rather than factory workers long remained the overwhelming majority of the French industrial workers’. Sewell, “Artisans, Factory Workers and the Formation of the French Working Class, 1789-1948”, in *Working-Class Formation*, Katznelson & Aristide (eds.), 49. Various chapters in this jointly edited volume describe the varying Western experiences in the making of working-classes and their discursive formations.

¹⁵ Ira Katznelson, “Working-Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons”, *Working Class Formation*, Katznelson and Aristidi (eds.), 34.

¹⁶ For a discussion on old and new labour history see: Marcel van der Linden, “Labour History: the Old, the New and the Global”, *African Studies*, 66, 2-3, August-December 2007, pp.169-180.

¹⁷ Donald Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993. 14.

aspects of labour history which did not necessarily relate to this mission. Evidence attests to the fact that ‘there has never been a working class with revolutionary consciousness in the fullest and most demanding sense of the term’.¹⁸ Motivated by my own methodological and analytical unease with such a teleological reading of labour history, this study employs the new labour history approach and is informed by a Thompsonian conception of the working class and its formation. Thus, instead of overemphasizing organizational developments, collective labour actions as well as political debates and leadership emphasis is put in this study on contextualizing workers’ struggles. The strength of Thompson’s approach for the current study stems from the fact that, to quote Meiksins-Wood, ‘it is capable of recognizing, and giving an account of, the operations of class in the absence of class consciousness’.¹⁹ Attempt was made, therefore, to seek the formation of the Iranian working class in more than merely objective and structural processes. In other words, class formations should be sought in circumstances when ‘men and women live their productive relations and experience their determinate situations, within the “assembly of social relations”, with their inherited culture and expectations, as they handle these experiences in culturally-specific ways’.²⁰ From my own understanding of social history I aim to show how this process worked in the Iranian context.

The third issue with which I am preoccupied is the establishment of a proper link between the workers’ agenda and political processes. I needed to relate workers’ experiences to the state, and vice versa, without necessarily suggesting a tug-of-war between the two. My experiences show that for the most part workers chose to avoid direct engagement with the state, at the central as well as local levels, unless they regarded it as necessary for their survival. Thus, I had to find a way to describe this cautionary engagement without suggesting either a blind political quietism or an imaginary revolutionism. This proved to be more complex than I initially assumed. In traditional labour historiography, formal labour organizations such as trade unions and syndicates have long served as a conventional means to link labour issues to politics, with politics being narrowly defined in such narratives. According to this narrow view, politics is what takes place within the government and state departments in which only politicians, government officials and members of the political parties participate. Thus, being

¹⁸Ira Katznelson, “Working-Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons”, *Working Class Formation*, Katznelson & Aristidi (eds.), 7.

¹⁹ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 79.

²⁰ E. P. Thompson, “Eighteenth Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?”, *Social History* 3 (2) May 1978, p. 150. Quoted in Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 80. Emphases are in the original.

a political actor simply required partaking in this predefined sphere as deferential participants to ensure its working, or as revolutionary actors to topple it. In either case, a dubiously narrow understanding of politics is the result.²¹ Alternatively, in connection with such a view of politics and the state, in some studies on the social history of labour, labour issues are virtually split off from political processes in order to claim an autonomous space for working people. By overemphasizing shop floor experiences or regional dimensions of labour without relating either to the broader range of working class experiences and political developments, labour is confined to an artificial cell which is almost entirely cut off from the outside world. It is as if the controversial state model is reproduced on a smaller scale in which the factory manager or the governor of a town acted as the supreme authority. Either of these approaches, I believe, needs to be challenged.

Furthermore, my impressionistic view of the erroneousness of looking at the state in Iran, as elsewhere for that matter, as, in Migdal's words, 'a stand-alone organization with firm boundaries between it and other social forces' was reinforced as I delved further into the experiences of working people.²² I argue instead that state-society relations in Iran were mutually transformative.²³ As far as state-society relations are concerned much of the existing literature on the first four decades of twentieth century Iranian history seems to suggest a clear-cut rupture between the pre- and post-1925 periods. Arguably while the first period is characterized by a freer political atmosphere tainted with a marked economic backwardness, the second period witnessed a rather repressive political environment which was accompanied by impressive economic growth. Such a clear-cut periodization is, needless to say, not without problems. Seen through the lens of working people, if the first two decades of the twentieth century were characterized by ever-increasing foreign economic domination, the economic policies adopted during the 1920's and 1930's made rapid industrial development a priority and paid insufficient attention to the working and living conditions of the workers. In both periods, however, workers negotiated their interests, in one way or another, with the ruling classes.

²¹ The reduction of labour struggle to a uniform labour movement can lead to quite problematic conclusions as that of Floor who argues that the primary goal of the Iranian labour movement 'was the *destruction* of imperialism and capitalism'. *Labour and Industry in Iran* (Washington: Mega Publishers, 2009) 30. (Emphasis added). Such a teleological role attributed to organized labour does not only miss different types of labour actions but also significantly obscures, if it does not altogether dismiss, other forms of labour activism. This point will be discussed below.

²² Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying how States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 250.

²³ *Ibid.*, 254.

From the beginning to the end of the period investigated in this study, the Iranian state remained open to negotiating with workers and with other social movements. However, the nature of this negotiation did not remain unchanged, nor did working people pursue unvaried interests and agendas. Generally speaking it is safe to suggest that from 1906 to the late 1920's the Iranian state was willing to regard formal labour organizations and collective labour actions as forms of negotiation while throughout the 1930's they were effectively suppressed and banned. Yet informal labour organizations and non-organized labour actions continued to exist.²⁴ For instance, throughout the period under study, the state encouraged and welcomed workers' petitions as yet another and more controllable form of negotiation. Also, in some cases while a group of workers were concerned about immediate labour-related problems, such as wages and unfavourable working conditions at their worksite, others could pursue more far-reaching and fundamental agendas such as siding with the wider working-class throughout the nation, or toppling the political establishment which they regarded as reactionary and exploitative. Jonathan Zeitlin touched upon part of this problem when he argued that 'the future of labour history should be sought in its redefinition as the history of industrial relations, understood as the changing relationships between worker, trade unions, employers and the state'.²⁵ To this one should also add civil society, which workers were a part of. For such a redefinition, labour historians should not only be more receptive to new theoretical orientations but should also get used to employing new types of documentation including those whose compilers 'were not deliberately and consciously recording for posterity'.²⁶

Petitions, as the principle sources of this study, belong to this type of documentation, and they have helped me to overcome, if only partially, the aforementioned problems. By using petitions I describe the discursive formation of the Iranian working class, in order to provide a

²⁴ "Formal" and "informal" are used in this work as analytical tools although the distinction between the two, as Van der Linden argues, is not always entirely clear. Based on Tom R. Burns and Helena Flam. *The Shaping of Social Organization: Social Rule System Theory with Applications* (London [etc.]: Sage, 1987) he makes the following remarks about the two types of labour organizations: "Some scholars think that an organization needs written rules to be "formal", but this would imply illiterates cannot constitute a formal organization. We might say that an organization becomes more formal, when it defines more specifically who is a member, and who is not; which *activities* are appropriate (useful and legitimate), and which are not; which *resources* are appropriate (useful and legitimate), and which are not; which *motives and purposes* are appropriate for actors to have, and which are not; which *outcomes* are appropriate, and which are not; in which specific *contexts* (when, where) the organizations' activities are or are not to take place." Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Towards a Global Labour History* (Brill: Leiden, 2008), 11 footnote 17.

²⁵ Jonathan Zeitlin, "From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations", *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. XL, 2 (1987), 159-184. Here 178.

²⁶ Jim Sharpe, "History from Below," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 30.

social history of Iranian textile labour and to discuss workers' relations with the state. Written by working people, as others, to the Majles and to other central and local authorities, petitions offer a genuine opportunity to trace the development of workers' self-perceptions, as well as an uninterrupted channel in state-society relations. Thus, before going into the use of petitions for the current study firstly a theoretical discussion of their use-value will be provided.

Blurring the Boundaries: Petitioners and their Addressees

To the Sacred Majles may God Empower its Pillars,

Before we begin our petition we entreat the retainers of the President of the Majles, may God make his power endure, and the honourable deputies to read this petition loudly in the Majles and to pay due attention to the situation of these craftsmen. Admittedly the purpose for the establishment of this national regime and the basis of the constitutional system is to attain the means of security and welfare for all as well as to obtain advantages and dispose of disadvantages to Iranians. This can only be obtained by making laws for the good of the country and for providing peace and revenues to people from which the general populace will benefit without discriminating between various crafts therein. You should not forget the principle of egalitarianism (*mesdaq-e vaqe'-e mosavat*). As shoe makers we have always made sacrifices and become forerunners for the establishment of the sacred constitution while at the same time we have, in the last years, significantly developed our craft and made our handiwork far more beautiful and attractive. However, in return for our efforts, some of the deputies totally disregarded this craft in their debates concerning the use of native fabrics and home manufactures and they were oblivious to our craft and showed a humiliating attitude towards us. Their pretext was that home-made shoes hurt and injured their feet [...]. Of course our words are about a number of deputies who wear foreign shoes and not those who from the beginning of their lives wore home-made shoes. In the meantime we urge those deputies who did not help us to study history in order to see what the Japanese Emperor did and said. You should have already heard that the Emperor, Mikado, declared that until shoes were produced in his country he would go around barefooted which he really did for a while until shoes were produced in his country. This is what great men and persons who are interested in promoting and developing a nation do. We would like to gain the attention of you gentlemen and request that you pay attention to native shoes like you did to native textiles. In this way we request that you add an article about native shoes to the supplement of the law, and promote this craft too.²⁷

Petitions can be defined as “demands for a favour or for the redressing of an injustice directed to some established authority”.²⁸ Petitioning, both in its written and verbal forms, is a

²⁷ LMDICIP. d4/k25/j12/p14, “From the Shoe-Makers”, 4 March 1923.

²⁸ The definition is taken from: Lex Heerma Van Voss, “Introduction”, *International Review of Social History* 46, Supplement 9 Petitions in Social History (2001): 1-10, here P. 1. The volume contains many articles on the use of petitions for studying social history. For instance, in “Voices from Among the “Silent Masses”: Humble Petitions and Social Conflicts in Early Modern Central Europe” Andreas Wiirgler discusses the use of collective and individual petitions for research on social conflict. In early Modern Europe while Cecilia Nubola deals in “Supplications between Politics and Justice: The Northern and Central Italian States in the Early Modern Age” with petitioning as a ‘privileged form of communication between subject and authority’ in early modern Italian states (p. 36). Also, in “The Power of Petitions: Women and the New Hampshire Provincial Government, 1695-

universal and centuries-old tradition which acted as a major channel between the rulers and the ruled in Iran as elsewhere.²⁹ Attending the petitions has been considered throughout the centuries as indispensable to just kingship. Many of the issues which people could not be openly express could be addressed through petitions. As such, petitioning served as ‘a privileged communicative space’.³⁰ There are several reasons why ruling elites took notice of

1700” Marcia Schmidt Blaine analyzes female agency by examining ‘the rights associated with petitioning, the procedure involved, and the variety of applications for petition use’. (p.57) while Oleg G. Bukhovets analyzes in “The Image of Jews in Byelorussia: Petitions as a Source for Popular Consciousness in the Early Twentieth Century” ‘the attitudes towards Jewishness’ (p.173) in Byelorussia where Jews made up to 54 percent of the urban population.

²⁹ Petitions remain an underexploited source in the Middle Eastern historiography in general and in Iranian history writing in particular. Yet, there are a number of good studies which analyse petitioning and petitions or else use them as their source material. The following are the works which I located: Irene Schneider, *The Petitioning System in Iran: State, Society and Power Relations in the Late 19th Century* (Wiesbaden: HarrassowitzVerlag, 2006). Focusing on 19th century petitions from Iran Schneider deals in this study with petitions sent between 1883 and 1886 to The Council for the Investigation of Grievances (*Majles-e Tahqiq-e Mazalem*) founded in 1882. As Schneider also points out some of these petitions had previously been published in Fedirun Ademiyet and Homa Natek, eds. *Efkar-e Ejiemai va Siyasi-va Eqtesadi dar Asar-e Montasher Nashodeh-e Dowran-e Qajar* (Essen: NimaVerlag, Essen, (n.d). Mansoureh Ettehadieh Nezam-Mafi also has an article which focuses on The Council for the Investigation of Grievances: Mansoureh Ettehadieh Nezam-Mafi, “The Council for the Investigation of Grievances: A Case Study of Nineteenth Century Iranian Social History”, *International Society for Iranian Studies* 22, no. 1 (1989): 51-61. On the Constitutional Period I have come across two articles both in Persian: Ali Tatari, “Bar rasi-ye Jayghah-e Arizehdar Pajuhashha-ye Asnadi”, *Payam Baharestan* 2, no. 4 (2009): 465-476; Siavash Shohani, “Ghozari bar Arayez-e Eanat”, *Payame Baharestan*, 2, no. 3 (2009): 315-329. While Tatari analyses petitions in terms of their place in conventional documentations categories Shohani investigates demands, financial and otherwise, as a specific type of petitions; in “From Amaleh (Labour) to Kargar (Worker): recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry”, Atabaki also uses petitions especially to discuss workers’ self-perception.

³⁰ ‘A privileged communicative space’ is taken from D. Zaret, “Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion in the English Revolution”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 101 (1996), pp. 1497-1555. Here 1512. Quoted in Ken Lunn & Ann Day, “Deference and Defiance: The Changing Nature of Petitioning in British Naval Dockyards”, in Lex Heerma Van Voss, ed., *International Review of Social History* 46, Supplement 9 Petitions in Social History (2001): 131-150. Here 132. Petitions are sometimes dealt within a perspective of popular protest of which the following edited volume is a good example: *Popular Protest and Political Participation in the Ottoman Empire: Studies in Honor of Suraiya Faroqhi* Eleni Gara, M. Erdem Kabadayi and Christoph K. Neumann (eds.) (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2011). In “Coping with the State’s Agents “from Below”: Petitions, Legal Appeal, and the Sultan’s Justice in Ottoman Legal Practice” Eyal Ginio examined the petitions dated between 1694 and 1768 from Salonica to demonstrate how Salonicans used petitioning to further their interests. Also, in “Popular Protest and the Limitations of Sultanic Justice” Eleni Gara investigates the popular protest which occurred in Veroia in 1627 among a groups of Christians and shows how the petitioners successfully involved with the official discourse which presented the sultan as ‘protector of the common people and guarantor of justice’ (p.103). More importantly in “Petitioning as Political Action: Petitioning Practices of Workers in Ottoman Factories” M. Erdem Kabadayi examines workers’ petitions in order to questions the general understanding of strike in the literature and calls to widen our perception of what constitutes labour resistance (p. 66). For this, he *insightfully examines Ottoman workers’ petitions from late nineteenth century. Kabadayi’s PhD dissertation* (“Working for the State in a Factory in Istanbul: The Role of Factory Workers’ Ethno-Religious and Gender Characteristics in State-Subject Interaction in the Late Ottoman Empire”, Munich University, 2008) is also mainly based on petitions of the workers at Feshane Factory which was one of the earliest Ottoman state-ownrd factories. Gorkem Akgoz too bases her investigation of an early Republican state factory on workers’ petitions. See: “Many Voices of a Turkish State Factory: Working at Bakirkoy Cloth Factory, 1932-1950”, Ph.D Dissertation, Amsterdam University, 2012. As for the Egyptian case: Juan Ricardo Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt’s ‘Urabi Movement* (Princeton,N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), which deals, especially in chapter 2, with this movement of the late 19th century based on petitions; John Chalcraft “Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on

the opinions brought forward by petitioners. Two reasons are of particular significance. Firstly contemporary statesmen were informed through petitions about the opinions and feelings of the general population which even the most authoritarian governments took seriously.³¹ Petitions sent directly to the central authorities, especially, provided central governments a chance to by-pass local intermediaries and to take action, before a source of popular distress, which might have been swept under the rug by local administrators who wanted to avoid putting their posts at risk, turned into overt acts of resistance. Secondly, there was always the threat of a revolt if a justified demand went unattended to. “The right to petition thus worked as a safety valve.”³² If petitioning provided people with the opportunity to express their demands and grievances it at the same time enhanced the legitimacy of the rulers. After the Constitutional Revolution in Iran this privilege was claimed by the nascent parliament as the new basis of legitimate power.³³ The number of petitioners, as well as spectators, pouring into the newly established parliament was so high that Seyyed Hasan Taqizadeh, a deputy and a leading constitutionalist, commented: “here not even *rowzeh* can be recited”.³⁴ During Reza Shah’s reign, too, petitioning remained an encouraged practice. Thus upon his rise to power Reza Khan unsurprisingly made the following declaration: “I am obliged to look after the oppressed and to liberate them from the oppressors. I will permit all my countrymen to bring their complaints directly to me and to request redress directly from me.”³⁵

A typical petition presented to the Majles starts with a display of respect to the authority in question often in a rather obedient and deferential language. Then the petitioner introduces

the Eve of Colonial Rule” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 37 (2005), 303-325. This study discusses how during the 19th century Egyptian peasants engaged with the Ottoman rulers.

³¹ Van Voss, “Introduction”, 4.

³² K. Tenfelde and H. Trischler (eds), *Bis vor die Stufen der Tbrons. Bittschriften und Beschwerden von Bergarbeitern* (Munich, 1986), p. 14. Quoted in Van Voss, “Introduction”, 4.

³³ Mansureh Ettehadiyeh Nezamafi, *Majls va Intikhabat* (Tehran: Nashr-i Tarikh-i Iran, 1996), 23.

³⁴ Feridoun Adamiyat, *Idi`uluzhi-yi Nahzat-i Mashrutiyyat-i Iran*, (The Ideology of the Constitutional Movement) (Tehran: Payam Press, 1977), 371. *Rowzeh khani* is a ritual sermon often organized, particularly within Shiite communities, with the participation of large numbers of people recounting and mourning the tragedy of Karbala incidence of 680 AD where one of the grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad, Hosayn the son of Ali, was murdered along with some of his family members and supporters.

³⁵ Habib Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, Syracuse (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 12. This held true for such countries as Turkey too. For a discussion on petitions during the Republican years in Turkey see: Yigit Akin, “Reconsidering State, Party and Society in Early Republican Turkey: Politics of Petitioning”, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 39 (2007), 435-457. In this article by using petitions sent to the Republican Turkish Party by people from various social groups Akin discusses state-society relations in Turkey and powerfully challenges the established view of an imposing state against a passive and recipient society. For a comparative analysis of the petitions from Iran and Turkey during 1930s as sources of social history see: Serhan Afacan, “Devletle Yazismak: Turkiye ve Iran Sosyal Tarihçiliginde Dilekceler” (*Corresponding with the State: Petitions in Turkish and Iranian Social History*), (in Turkish), *Turkiyat Mecmuasi*, Vol. 21/Spring, 2011, pp.1-29.

himself or herself, a part which at times provides detailed information as to petitioner's environments and social as well as political settings in which he or she lived. This part usually provides historians invaluable information which can help reconstruct many of the details regarding the lives and working conditions of workers. This part is followed by the statement of the request or complaint in question. In order to prove the accuracy of their claims the petition sometimes includes a supporting document called a Letter of Testimony (*Esteshhad Nameh*). This could be a letter from a prominent person, a leading merchant, governor, a cleric etc., or a photograph which was infrequently used as a testimony to demands for financial aid due to physical disability.

Workers' petitions almost unexceptionally employ a carefully balanced wording sophisticatedly stated so as not to outrage the authorities in question, while at the same time making the point sufficiently clear. During the constitutional period workers often referred to the merits of the constitutional regime and the sacrifices they made for its realization while after Reza Shah's coronation in 1925 they use a rather patriarchal language by emphasizing the protective role of the Shah over his people as well as his supremacy as their just King and father. Similar to Chalcraft's remarks about Egyptian peasants, Iranian workers too 'made strategic use of the figure of the just ruler and lodged sometimes assertive appeals to the rule of law and new and old rights in a dangerous and power-laden context'.³⁶ For their conflicts with their managers or factory-owners or for their complaints about local authorities they apparently knew how to draw the Shah or the Majles into their disputes, though they were not always successful. Yet, in some cases petitioners did not hesitate to use rather sarcastic language. In other cases workers use decidedly aggressive wording, such as the above-quoted petition of shoe-makers dated 1923 that criticized "the law for the use of national clothes" (*qanun-e este`mal-e albaseh-e vatani*) passed by the Majles in February 1923. The law made it compulsory for all state employees, including the military, to wear clothes produced using native fabrics, and of Iranian make. Shoe-makers were disappointed by being left out of the law, and they sarcastically put this point in their petition. The petition, which is only one example of this sort, most clearly shows how skilful labouring people were in their discursive engagement with rulers. They were apparently disappointed by the privileged position given to the textile industry, but at the same time clever enough to not accuse all deputies, by distinguishing between those who wore native shoes and who did not. We see sometimes that these kinds of petitions were sent anonymously, but this particular one, and several others,

³⁶ Chalcraft, "Engaging the State", 304.

had tens of stamps on it. Apparently, the authoritarian Pahlavi government tolerated such criticisms as long as they did not turn into outward collective action. Thus, workers' petitions call for a reconsideration of the boundaries between state and society as well as to rethink the limits of the authoritarian nature of the state in Iran, as elsewhere.

Petitions provide first-hand information about many of the details of workers' lives and living conditions which can rarely be found anywhere else. They also display the changing self-perceptions of workers and their changing attitudes toward the ruling classes. But there is a reliability problem involved in petitions. Since petitioners' top priority was to ensure responses to their cases they may at times use dissimulation. That is to say, petitioners may manipulate certain facts and 'adjust' them to fit their cases. Thus, petitions should always be cross checked by other sources, official and otherwise.

A Brief Assessment of the Current Literature on Iranian Labour History

Among the existing studies of this subject, Willem Floor's *Labour Unions, Law and Conditions in Iran, 1900-1941* is the most important work in English.³⁷ By using a wide range of primary and secondary sources in various languages, Floor cogently describes labour organizations, strikes, unions and the Parliamentary discussions regarding labour regulations in Iran. He also touches upon such labour issues as working hours, occupational safety and health as well as wages and costs of living. Floor's study is particularly important for providing an ample analysis of the situation of various industries in Iran between 1850 and 1941 and the attempts at industrialization especially during the 1930's. For example, he discusses in detail Iranian craft industries, the challenge posed to them by European ready-made imports as well as the factories which have been erected in different periods. However Floor does not dwell on the discursive formation of the working class and bases his analysis on a deterministic conception of class formation and a predefined class consciousness. Thus, unsurprisingly Floor's workers tended to fall short when it came to acting as a class. For instances he remarks: 'the workers in general had neither the time and energy, nor the understanding and capability to organize labour activities let alone a labour movement'.³⁸ Thus according to him it was the Marxist intelligentsia who 'considered labour problems as

³⁷ Originally published in the Occasional Paper Series of the Centre for the Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies of the University of Durham in 1984 this work was published in 2009 in a single volume with three other studies of the author: *Labour and Industry in Iran* (Washington: Mega Publishers, 2009).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

being an integral part of the socio-economic and political system'.³⁹ Paradoxically, although Floor makes repeated references to non-factory workers, which as he admits outnumbered factory workers, he does not recognize the same diversity when it comes to the labour movement. Floor seems to attribute a teleological role to the Iranian working class and to the labour movement whose 'primary aim', he argues 'was the *destruction* of imperialism and capitalism'.⁴⁰ Floor's study provides an ample top-down analysis of Iranian labour by also emphasizing regional differences and similarities. His book continues to be an influential and pioneering study in the field.

Habib Ladjevardi's, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran* is another study which should be mentioned.⁴¹ This ten-chapter volume is primarily concerned with the post-1941 period and only the first chapter, The Genesis of the Labour Movement, deals with the period prior to 1941. As is clear from its title, the book is mainly concerned with organized labour. Ladjevardi, too, overstates the political aspects of labour and labour organizations and leaves hardly any room for other and non-confrontational forms of labour struggle. Yet, Ladjevardi not only overemphasizes the role of the labour organizations but also seems to disregard non-organized labour and the workers who did not participate in collective actions. It is mainly for this reason that he draws the following conclusion about the period between 1906 and 1941: '[...] without political power – as exercised in independent trade unions- the workers could not influence the content of economic and social reform programs nor could they ensure that they would receive their appropriate share in the fruits of progress.'⁴² This analysis is based on a recognizably reductionist perception of politics as well as on a narrow understanding of labour struggle.

Mention should also be made of two studies written in Persian, namely, Farhang Qasemi's *Sandikalism dar Iran* (Trade Unions in Iran 1905-1941);⁴³ and Jalil Mahmudi and Naser Sa'idi's joint study, *Shuq-e Yak Khiz-e Boland* (Towards a Subtle Rise).⁴⁴ Qasemi's study, like those of Floor and Ladjevardi, mostly deals with factory-based organized labour but he too, like Floor, touches upon such important issues as nutrition, sanitary conditions and wages. Mahmudi and Sa'idi's book consists of seven chapters along with an introduction and a conclusion. Although they refer to extra-factory labour more often, their work is also

³⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 30. Emphasis added.

⁴¹ Habib Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, Syracuse, N.Y : Syracuse University Press, 1985.

⁴² Ibid., 27.

⁴³ Farhang Qasemi, *Sandikalism dar Iran* (Paris: Bonyad-e Musaddeq, 1985).

⁴⁴ Jalil Mahmudi and Naser Sa'idi, *Shuq-e Yak Khiz-e Boland*, 44, Tehran: Qatreh, 2002.

another example of the old labour history paradigm written from an institutional perspective. Neither in these two studies nor in the other two mentioned above can we hear the voices of the labouring people of Iran. When workers do appear it is almost exclusively in the programs of leftist parties and organizations or in the lists of demands of striking workers. At any rate, they provide a solid groundwork upon which new studies dealing with previously understudied aspects of labour and using previously unexploited new sources can be undertaken.

The Focus of the Study

This study deals with the social history of industrialization and labour in Iran from the inception of the Constitutional regime in 1906 until the end of Reza Shah's reign in 1941. Along the way, special attention is paid to the textile industry and textile workers. This study aims to show how workers negotiated their demands and grievances with the state and how petitioning functioned as the main channel of this interaction and negotiation. Although references are made throughout the study to workers who were employed in various industries, emphasis is placed, to the extent possible, on the textile industry. This was the largest manufacturing sector, both in terms of the total output and the workforce involved, in Iran, and it remained so well into the twentieth century. With the exception of the nascent oil industry in the south, the textile industry was among the most developed industries in Iran. Also, the textile industry provides a suitable case to study and question the process of transformation from craft industry to factory-based manufacturing. Although formal labour organizations and organized labour activities are discussed in this study, unlike in much of the existing literature on Iranian labour history, emphasis is put on informal types of labour organizations as well as on labour which was not organized in the format of unions. Also, workers' self-perception and their perceptions about and engagement in political and economic processes are dealt with in this study.

The periodization of this study calls for justification too. The starting point was defined by the source material used in this work, namely, petitions. Although petitioning, both written and verbal, was a centuries-old and accepted tradition in Iran, it was with the opening of the First Parliament in 1906 that it was established as a legal right and received relatively systematic treatment. The decision to end this research with the forced abdication of Reza Shah in 1941 stemmed from two interrelated reasons. First, the political, social and economic landscape in

the post-1941 period was recognizably different from the period prior to it. Roughly from 1906 to 1925, Iran remained a non-industrialized country, but workers, as well as other classes, enjoyed relative freedom, while from 1925 until 1941, things started to develop in the other direction. Thus when Mohammad Reza Shah replaced his father in 1941 Iran had made significant progress towards industrialization, but more than a decade had passed with highly authoritarian policies which left little, if any, space for open protest and collective labour action. However the post-1941 period witnessed an immense proliferation of political and labour organizations. It is because of the great quantity of sources produced by and about the organizations and movements which flourished during this period that it happened to attract the greater part of attention from historians who concentrated on Iranian labour history. And this constituted the second reason to stop at 1941.

The Plan of the Study

The study consists of four chapters. Chapter-2 presents an historical background of the 19th century, insofar as it relates to the period investigated in this work. Here, mention is made of the reform movement which mainly started in the military sphere as a reaction of successive defeats at the hands of Russia, but then extended, in the following decades, to include the political, economic and social spheres as well. The economic and social aspects of the reforms are particularly emphasized here. It is argued in this chapter that the popular support for the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 was due to epidemic diseases, famines, unpopular economic policies of the Court as well as stifling foreign economic domination. A coalition of merchants, tradesmen, craftsmen, religious groups and intellectuals were responsible for the uncompromising movement against arbitrary Qajar rule. This was most clearly reflected in the Tobacco Protest of 1891. The significance of this protest for labouring people stemmed from the fact that the craft workers experienced or witnessed for the first time the possibility of affecting the Government's policies through resistance.

Chapter-3 deals with an overview of the period extending from the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 to the end of Reza Shah's reign in 1941. Here attention is especially paid to the emergence of a new political community in Iran, particularly among labouring people, in its shifting forms. In the First National Assembly opened for the first time in country's history in 1906, six classes (*tabaqat*), including guild members, were represented in the Parliament. Their parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activities are discussed in this chapter. The class-

based election system was abolished before the elections for the Second Parliament in 1909. This however did not mean the end of the participation of the labouring people in the making of the political community in Iran. To this end, mention is also made of petitioning a peculiar channel of state-society interaction in Iran from the Constitutional Revolution onwards, although petitioning as such had been a centuries-old established tradition in the country. Also, the failure of the constitutional experiment in 1911 and the emergence of authoritarian modernization within about a decade are analysed from a grassroots perspective. In the main, it is argued in this chapter that, disillusioned by the constitutional experiment's failure to provide employment, establish security and form a national economy with minimum foreign influence, Iranian subaltern groups, along with other classes, had become receptive to a strong, though not necessarily despotic, state. The steady rise to power of Reza Khan from 1921 until his coronation as the Shah in 1925 partly met some of these expectations. However his uncompromising centralization policies claimed the previously more or less autonomous realms from which Iranian subalterns made their living with little state intervention. Combined with the mechanized factory-based economic policies from the mid-1925s on, Iranian subalterns increasingly felt uneasy with the new regime and enjoyed almost no betterment in their living and working conditions.

Chapter-4 examines Iranian industrialization between 1906 and 1941. It first analyses popular perceptions of economic development and reactions to foreign ready-made imports. Following this, Iranian industries until the industrial leap-forward of 1903s are discussed by emphasizing small-scale and artisanal industries. The tension between promoting the craft industries and introducing factory-based industrialization is referred to in the chapter. It then discusses the factory-based industrialization which started in the late 1920's and gained unprecedented speed during the 1930's. Along the way, however, attention is paid to how workers, as well as other classes, were involved in this process and how they perceived industrialization policies. Throughout the chapter, emphasis is put on the textile industry, while other industries are also mentioned when relevant. Chapter-5 deals with the discursive formation of the Iranian working class and labour issues. The chapter first examines how workers came to see themselves primarily as workers and how they gradually developed a language of their own. Following this discussion, such issues as the nature of Iranian labour, labour legislation and working and sanitary conditions are also discussed in this chapter. Throughout the chapter not only central politics, but also provincial politics are considered. In the process, attention is paid to workers' impact on and reactions to the labour policies

adopted by the state. Chapter 6 contains some concluding assessments and suggestions for further research.