

Introduction

Not so very long ago the historical literature on workers, working classes, and labor movements in the modern Middle East was distinguished mainly by its sparsity. A number of Soviet scholars had, it is true, addressed these subjects; but the scholarly value of much of their work was diminished by the necessity of conforming to Stalinist dogma and the Soviet foreign policy of the day, and little of even the best Soviet research was translated into either Middle Eastern or Western languages.

Historians outside the Soviet bloc were in general not much interested in Middle Eastern workers and labor movements. In the Arab countries, Turkey, and Iran, historians were for a lengthy period preoccupied with other issues, notably European encroachment and domination, the emergence of their countries as nation-states and ongoing struggles for independence, and they did not produce much work of the kind that would later be characterized as "social history." In the United States, and to a lesser extent Western Europe, modernization theory long reigned as the dominant paradigm in historical (as well as sociological) writing on the Middle East in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This approach depicted intra- and interelite conflict as the primary motor of social change and therefore displayed little interest in the circumstances, perceptions and activities of subaltern groups. The result was a dearth of scholarship on working-class formation in the Middle East, the emergence and evolution of labor movements, and various forms of worker identity and action within and outside the workplace.

This neglect of workers and their history by both Western and Middle Eastern historians, rooted in the perception that workers did not constitute a distinguishable social group, had not played (and were in the future unlikely to play) any significant role in political or economic life, and therefore did not merit much attention, may not, perhaps, seem all that surprising. After all, for most of this century and in all the countries of the Middle East, wage workers employed in large enterprises

have constituted only a minority of the urban working population and an even smaller proportion of the population as a whole, whose great majority has until recently consisted of peasants. Moreover, labor unions and workers' movements in the Middle East seemed to play a less significant and autonomous role in their countries' political and economic life than some of their counterparts in Western Europe or even the United States. It was, therefore, relatively easy for historians to avoid paying serious attention to workers and labor history without feeling that they were neglecting something important.

However, this neglect may also have been a product of the conviction—widely shared among historians—that it was inappropriate or even counterproductive to apply class analysis to the modern Middle East. As a framework for identity and action (whether individual or collective) in the Middle East, class was traditionally seen as very much subordinate to religion, ethnicity, tribal affiliation, village solidarity, regional origin, and so forth. A certain "Middle Eastern exceptionalism," a product of the lingering (and interacting) influence of both modernization theory and certain strands of Orientalism, was at work here. Historians of the Middle East tended to take it for granted that whatever its utility for understanding other regions, class was at best irrelevant and at worst distorting when used as a category of analysis for Middle Eastern societies past or present, and this assumption also helped stifle the development of Middle Eastern working-class history.¹

In sharp contrast to the preceding period, the last three decades or so have witnessed the publication of a substantial body of research on Middle Eastern labor history. Several factors have contributed to this development, though to varying degrees and in different ways in each country of the region. For one, industrial development (often state-sponsored) enlarged the size and social weight of the working class, leading indigenous and foreign observers to take greater note of it and spurring a new interest in its origins and evolution. In addition, in the 1960s intellectuals in the Middle East were influenced to an unprecedented degree by Marxist (and, more broadly, socialist) ideas, prompting reconsideration of the ways in which their countries' histories had traditionally been written and a new interest in the working class.

Contemporary political debates within the left—for example, the challenge that various "New Left" groups in Iran posed to the Tudeh party—also prompted new writing on working class history. In Turkey, the establishment of parliamentary democracy after the 1960 coup made

possible the emergence of a legal Left that sought through historical research and writing to construct for itself a usable past, based in part on the struggles of Turkish workers. In that same period, regimes in several Arab countries were espousing "Arab socialism" or Ba'athism as their official ideology, which helped open the way for historians to begin the process of retrieving the histories of subaltern social groups, including workers, and incorporating them into reworked historical narratives. These new narratives moved away from the narrowly conceived political and diplomatic history emphasizing the actions and personalities of rulers and statesmen that an earlier generation of historians had produced. Instead, they portrayed "the people" (one component of which was the working class) as the prime subject and object of national(ist) history. The upshot of these and other factors was publication by historians in the Middle East of important work on workers' history that, whatever its limitations in retrospect, nonetheless opened up the field and laid the groundwork for further research.

The turn in the 1960s of a younger generation of historians in Britain, the United States, and (in somewhat different ways) Western Europe to "social history"—a phenomenon that was of course connected with the radical upsurge of that decade—also ultimately led to special attention to the history of Middle Eastern workers. One of social history's main thrusts was the recovery, through the practice of "history from below," of the stories of groups that had been largely left out of the conventional narratives: workers, women, the poor, members of minority groups, colonial subjects, and so forth. Several of the younger historians who began research on Middle Eastern workers' history in the later 1970s (myself included) were originally inspired by the example of E. P. Thompson's classic *The Making of the English Working Class*, first published in 1963, which emphasized the self-activity of English workers as shaped by their own culture and experience.

The accumulation of a substantial literature on the history of labor movements and working classes in various countries of the Middle East prompted the convening of the workshop at which all but one of the chapters that make up this volume were originally presented as papers. It seemed like a good idea to bring together some of the scholars who had been doing research in the field of Middle Eastern working-class history—mostly from the United States, since unfortunately not enough funding was available to bring many scholars from the Middle East or Europe—to take a comprehensive look at the work that had been done

so far and explore some of the theoretical issues that bear on this field. The workshop, sponsored by Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, was entitled *Middle East Labor and Working Class History: Concepts and Approaches*, and it was held in April 1990.

Among the questions we hoped would be addressed in the papers presented at the workshop and in the ensuing discussions were the following:

- How did indigenous workers, labor activists and political leaders, indigenous and foreign scholars, colonial officials, and others implicitly or explicitly conceptualize and define the working class and the labor movement?
- How did these conceptualizations reflect and structure different processes of class formation, labor organization, and individual and collective action?
- How did these conceptualizations implicitly or explicitly involve issues of gender, relationships with other social groups (artisans, peasants, etc.), and the roles workers have played (or have been seen as playing) in broader national histories?
- How did the formation of working classes and labor movements in Middle Eastern countries subject to European political or economic influence or domination resemble or differ from ostensibly analogous processes elsewhere in the region, in the "Third World" and beyond?
- To what extent are concepts and categories drawn from Western European, African, Asian, or other contexts appropriate and useful for understanding working classes and labor movements in the Middle East?
- How useful are cultural, structural and other modes of interpretation in Middle Eastern workers' history?

Our broader goals in organizing this workshop were to facilitate comparisons across national boundaries in the region and to help Middle Eastern labor and working-class history (and Middle Eastern history in general) escape its relative isolation from methodological and theoretical debates in the broader field of historical study. We were especially eager to foster discussion of how current debates on the question of representation and the utility of discourse analysis might bear on our research and writing on Middle Eastern workers' history.

As is usually the case at such events, there was not enough time for all the issues that surfaced to be fully discussed. But I think it is fair to say that the participants came away feeling that the workshop had been valuable and that the dialogue begun at Harvard should be continued elsewhere. In the interim, participants revised their papers for publication in this volume, and one additional contribution (that of Kristin Koptiuch) was solicited.² I believe that these essays will be seen to stand on their own, but also to interact in interesting ways. By way of introduction, I would like to discuss some of the broader issues raised by the study of workers, working classes, and labor movements in the Middle East and consider how these essays address them.

I will begin with two questions that are implicitly posed by the very title of this volume. First, does it make sense to take the Middle East as our unit of analysis? Second, have “workers” in Middle Eastern countries actually constituted a distinct social group with a history of its own that can legitimately be taken as an object of inquiry?

The first question might be posed more clearly by asking what artisans and workers in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Ottoman Damascus and Istanbul—the locales covered in this volume—actually had in common with each other, other than the facts that most of them were nominally Muslims and that the places in which they lived and worked have in the last century come to be categorized as parts of the “Middle East”? By structuring the field in this way, are we not doing violence to the lived experience of the objects of our research, the workers and labor activists in their various locales? Should we not instead confine ourselves to those smaller political or cultural units that would seem to possess some more direct or obvious relevance or meaning for those whose histories we are trying to write?

This has not, at least until recently, seemed a problem to some historians, who have simply assumed that the Middle East, including Iran, Turkey, and the Arab lands of the *Mashriq* (and sometimes even North Africa as well), possesses such a high degree of cultural unity that in all of the countries that compose this vast geographic region working-class formation and worker activism (among many other things) were significantly shaped by the same set of cultural patterns, often subsumed under the rubric of “Islam”. This is of course a central premise of much of Orientalist discourse, but it surfaces in scholarly studies operating from within modernization theory as well.

By way of example we might consider *Social Forces in the Middle East*, edited by Sydney Nettleton Fisher and published in 1955.³ This volume consists of chapters on various social groups ("The Nomads," "The Villager," "The Bazaar Merchant," "The Entrepreneur Class," and so forth), originally presented as papers at a 1952 conference on The Near East: Social Dynamics and the Cultural Setting sponsored by the Social Science Research Council and held at Princeton University. Although E. A. Speiser's effort to provide the volume with a theoretical framework explicitly rejects the idea that the Near East is a viable "fundamental unit" and instead argues that the region is composed of many distinct "ethnemes," the other contributors seem to have taken no notice. The chapter on "The Industrial Worker," for example, simply abstracts workers in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, and Saudi Arabia into "'the worker' in the Middle East," makes some very broad generalizations and has little to say about history. That the Middle East constitutes a plausible unit of analysis is assumed rather than argued.

Alternatively, one might seek to ground the coherence of the region in the ways in which the histories of the working classes and labor movements in each of the various components of the Middle East were in the modern period influenced (if in different ways and to varying extents) by many of the same (largely exogenous) processes and forces. Among the most important of these processes was the integration of the region into the capitalist world economy, a development that in the nineteenth century directly affected the Istanbul guild members and Anatolian miners and railwaymen whose activism Donald Quataert explores, the Damascus weavers of whom Sherry Vatter writes, and the Egyptian artisans I discuss.

Throughout the twentieth century as well, indeed up to the present moment, working-class formation, identity, and activism in Iran, Turkey, and the Arab states has in large measure been shaped by the complex and changing ways in which those countries' economies have been articulated with the world economy: witness for example the profound effects on Egypt's economy and society (and thus on the character of social conflict, including worker activism) of the massive migration of Egyptian workers to the oil-producing countries of the Persian Gulf in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ One might also point to the ways in which the historical development of the entire region, and the character and orientation of its workers' movements, have been profoundly affected by the threat or reality of European (and later American) hegemony.

The essays in this volume on Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey certainly incorporate into their analyses the ways in which workers' struggles were often bound up with broader national struggles against foreign influence or control.

I would suggest, however, that such attempts to portray Middle Eastern workers' history as a legitimate field by virtue of the region's common culture, or of the similar historical processes to which its various parts have been subjected, are bound to be unsatisfying. The region's cultural diversity will not allow for much more than superficial generalizations of little help for concrete historical analysis. Nor will an abstract and ahistorical "Islam" provide much of a common basis: the diversity of practices and discourses understood by Muslims as "Islamic" is striking, and in any event those practices and discourses can never be detached from local contexts, which vary widely across space and time.

As for treating the region as a single entity by virtue of the common transformations that its components underwent over the past two centuries, we might note that working-class formation and labor movements in Africa, Latin America, and Asia (not to mention Europe and North America) were also profoundly influenced by changing relationships among the various components of an increasingly integrated world economy, and much of the rest of the world outside Western Europe and North America was, like the Middle East, subject to foreign political or economic influence or control. Why, then, should we compare Egypt and Iran, rather than Egypt and Nigeria or Iran and China?

We may therefore have to take a different tack and simply acknowledge that the Middle East as it has come to be defined is an entity of relatively recent invention with no internally or externally generated essence that endows it with coherence. (The same is of course true of Africa, Latin America, and Europe, though the power/knowledge matrix within which each of these geographic entities was constituted differed significantly.) Whatever its origins, the Middle East today exists as an entity with substantial effectivity in the world, reproduced through contemporary geopolitical discourse and practice. It is a legitimate entity because it has meaning for many people, within the region itself and outside of it, however that meaning was originally produced. And for better or worse, Middle Eastern studies has been institutionalized as a distinct academic field, and within it modern Middle Eastern history.

Prevailing disciplinary and institutional structures and rules may sometimes constrain us to operate within the framework of these fields. This is, I think, acceptable so long as we remember that these are historically constructed rather than natural entities and remain vigilant to the dangers of slipping into essentialism. From this perspective, then, Middle Eastern working-class history has as much claim to be a distinct and legitimate field as African, Latin American, or for that matter European working-class history—on all of which there is an extensive literature. At the same time, we will want to make every effort to transcend disciplinary boundaries and see what can be learned from comparisons between working classes and workers' movements in Middle Eastern countries and those in countries outside the region. The essays in this volume by the two discussants at the Harvard workshop, Edmund Burke, III, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, are very helpful in this respect, because they explore how some of the theoretical and historiographical issues raised at the workshop and in this volume relate to recent trends among historians of working classes in Europe, the United States, and South Asia and more generally to current debates within the humanities and social sciences.⁵

This brings us to the second question I raised earlier: can we speak of "worker" as a significant form of identity and "the working class" as a coherent historical agent, or as coherent object of historical study, in Middle Eastern countries? As I noted earlier, classical Orientalism and modernization theory generally suggested (whether implicitly or explicitly) that the answer to this question was "no," whereas the conventional paradigm of Middle Eastern labor history left the question unasked, taking it for granted that the answer was an unequivocal and self-evident "yes." That paradigm, largely informed by an economistic and positivist version of Marxism, began from the premise that, in each of the Middle Eastern countries, capitalist development brought into being a new category of wage workers and that by virtue of their social location those workers would over time tend to acquire greater class consciousness, to act more like a coherent working class pursuing its own specific interests. From this perspective, the working class was deemed to exist as an entity defined by its objective position within the structure of capitalist society, and its members' consciousness was seen as having been determined primarily by their experience of (and struggle against) subordination, exploitation, and oppression in the workplace.

In recent years, developments within the Middle East as well as new intellectual trends in a variety of fields have led many of us to question this paradigm and seek other ways of approaching Middle Eastern workers' history. Many of the essays in this volume manifest a sense that much of the literature has dealt with workers and working classes in an essentialist and reductionist manner. For example, some implicitly or explicitly question the portrayal of the working class as a homogeneous entity whose members all share the same perceptions, outlooks, and aspirations by virtue of their common social location. There is also a widespread (though by no means universal) rejection of the privileged status that much of the literature has traditionally accorded to one (relatively small) segment of the working class—industrial workers employed in large factories—who have been defined a priori as the core and natural vanguard of the working class and workers' movement.

Several of the essays also criticize what they see as the pronounced teleological character of much writing on workers and labor movements. Workers and working classes have, they suggest, been made to play a set role within a narrative of historical process whereby capitalist development produces a growing and ever more conscious working class, which is ultimately destined to achieve the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a postcapitalist social order. This teleology has imparted to a good part of the literature on Middle Eastern workers the same "peculiar property" that Margaret Somers has identified as characteristic of studies of European working-class formation:

Rather than seeking to explain the *presence* of radically varying dispositions and practices, they have concentrated disproportionately on explaining the *absence* of an expected outcome, namely the emergence of a revolutionary class consciousness among the Western working class. . . . Why is it that the standard problem to be explained in class analysis is how to explain not what is or has been empirically present, but rather the failure of people to behave correctly according to a [Marxian] theoretical prediction?

Studies of class formation, Somers adds, are "rooted in an *epistemology of absence*."⁶

The contributors to this volume have responded to the problem in different ways. The essays by Sherry Vatter and Donald Quataert, which seek to situate workers and workers' struggles in their cultural

and political contexts, might be read as proposing something of a Thompsonian “culturalist” alternative to the conventional paradigm’s excessively “structural” focus. Assef Bayat advocates a similar agenda in his critique of the historiography of Iranian workers, emphasizing the importance of consciousness and culture while insisting that objective class position not be lost sight of. In the same vein, Marsha Posusney’s detailed study argues for the usefulness of the “moral economy” paradigm in explaining Egyptian workers’ behavior while stressing the importance of both ideological and structural factors. Feroz Ahmad’s essay investigates the growth of class consciousness in the Turkish working class and activists’ struggle to build an independent and militant labor movement, from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I through the 1980s.

Ellis Goldberg’s essay takes a somewhat different tack by proposing a way of understanding why labor movement organization and class consciousness vary so dramatically over time and space. Rejecting both the conventional Marxian political economy and Durkheimian political culture approaches, Goldberg suggests that Egyptian workers’ behavior can best be understood through the prism of one variant of “rational choice” theory. His essay turns the conventional wisdom upside down by arguing that it was workers rather than employers who in the 1930s and 1940s were seeking to make the large textile factories at Mahalla al-Kubra in Egypt more productive and “rational.” In fact, he suggests, these employers used labor so inefficiently that owners of small weaving shops seem paragons of capitalist efficiency by comparison.

In an effort to push the the break with essentialism and teleologies even further, a few of the essays in this volume draw on poststructuralist theory. Though poststructuralism has been understood and used in many different ways, in general this approach can be said to insist that language is constitutive rather than reflective of what we habitually characterize as “external reality” and to take a particular interest in the ways in which the social production of meaning is inextricably bound up with systems of power. With respect to workers, this suggests a focus on workers’ discursive as well as material practices, and on the representations through which “worker” as subject position, working classes as historical subjects and objects, and narratives of labor and national history have been constructed.

Thus Kristin Koptiuch analyzes the conditions under which, within a specific historical conjuncture, the artisan (and petty commodity

production generally) came to play certain roles within both Western and Egyptian discourses on the Egyptian economy and society. My own essay explores representations of workers and the working class in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Egypt and various narratives of labor history; and Joel Beinin analyzes the premises, contexts, and consequences of the debate within the contemporary Egyptian Left over the meaning of the popular protests that swept Egypt in January 1977 and, more generally, of Egyptian workers' history. In his investigation of the formation of the Iraqi working class and of the ways in which various political forces have represented its history, Eric Davis draws on the work of the Italian Marxist activist and thinker Antonio Gramsci, whose effort to develop what might be characterized as a nonessentialist and nonteleological Marxism has certain affinities with the poststructuralist project.⁷

Clearly, the contributors to this volume are not all of one mind as to how the history of workers in the Middle East should be approached. I see this multiplicity of viewpoints as a strength rather than a weakness, because it may help provoke the kind of vigorous debates about theory and method of which this field is very much in need. However, despite the very real differences among us, elucidated by the discussions at the workshop itself, I think it can be said that all the essays in this volume are in a sense revisionist, because whether through explicit theoretical contention or through pathbreaking empirical work they contribute to the ongoing effort to critique and rethink the premises of Middle Eastern working-class history.

One such premise, addressed in several essays, is the sharp dichotomization of artisan and worker. The Middle Eastern artisan is conventionally depicted in the literature as a relic of the past, essentially "traditional," static, and unchanging, bound by the narrow horizons of the small workshop, the family, the allegedly moribund guild, and the urban neighborhood. As a social stratum the *artisanat* would seem to have no future: it is doomed by capitalist development, mechanization, the development of new patterns of consumption and new marketing systems, and so forth. By contrast, the worker is generally portrayed as quintessentially "modern," as a person (normatively male) who is freed of all the old constraints (including property) and is now a member of a new and growing social class employed in large mechanized enterprises wherein he (*sic*) and his fellow workers are exposed to new influences and may acquire that flexible and adaptive personality which

modernization theory posits as the hallmark of the modern individual or (alternatively) that proletarian class consciousness which certain variants of Marxism have imputed to the working class.

In this volume this dichotomization is problematized in several ways. Sherry Vatter presents a case in which “premodern” crafts workers in Damascus seem to be engaging in a “modern” form of struggle and criticizes the privileging of industrial workers, whereas my essay argues against the imputation to workers in large enterprises of a purely “modern” subjectivity. After all, it is clear that both “artisans” and “workers” in Middle Eastern countries often lived in the same neighborhoods, partook of a common culture, and engaged in similar activities, and for long periods it would seem that neither they themselves, nor the society in which they lived, distinguished clearly (or at all) between “artisans” (or “craftsmen”) and “workers” in the modern sense.

Donald Quataert addresses a related point by showing the continuities between Ottoman guilds and unions, highlighting the need to refrain from essentializing what has been seen as the quintessential form of “premodern” artisanal organization, the guild, by treating it as a unitary and unchanging thing. Guilds clearly varied in form, content, and meaning not only over space but over time; they were not necessarily static and tradition-bound, nor were they internally unconflicted. The guild form seems to have disappeared in many Middle Eastern countries during a certain period, but in some cases the new unions that arose among workers—some of them actually crafts workers or even petty proprietors whose trades had not much earlier still been organized in guilds—may have taken on (at least initially) some of the same meanings, as well as some of the same functions, as the defunct guilds.⁸

Kristin Koptiuch usefully extends this discussion by noting that although capitalist industrialization did lead to the demise of some crafts industries, it also gave birth to new ones, while yet others survived by finding new roles in a changing economic system. Those employed in small workshops continue to this day to play a very important role in urban economic and social life in the Middle East; indeed, Koptiuch argues, the petty commodity production sector in effect subsidizes the wages of workers in larger, more mechanized, and heavily capitalized enterprises by providing cheap goods and services, and it also contributes to the ideological reproduction of capitalist hegemony.

Clearly, then, it will no longer suffice to use uncritically the categories produced by census officials and treat those classified as having

been employed in “large” enterprises, which may have had as few as ten or a dozen employees, as “workers” subject to some abstract logic of the capitalist workplace, while ignoring or dismissing those employed in small workplaces as irrelevant precapitalist vestiges, all without much concrete investigation into the labor processes and relations of authority that actually prevailed in those workplaces, large or small. Such investigation may well show significant differences between the large factory and the small workshop, but it may also show important similarities.⁹

Problematizing the artisan/worker and guild/union dichotomies so widespread in the literature opens the way to reconsideration of another important issue, raised most explicitly by Sherry Vatter but implicit in some of the other essays as well. Historians, Vatter argues, cannot remain only “within the factory gates.” That is, they cannot assume (as has often been the case) that workers’ consciousness is formed solely or even mainly within the workplace. She insists—and I believe most if not all of the other contributors would agree—that to make sense of the lives of working people one must locate them in their broader cultural, social, and political contexts. After all, workers (like all of us) are deeply embedded in many overlapping social matrices and enact many different cultural roles, all of which help shape consciousness and behavior within as well as outside the workplace. This reality makes it problematic to impute a specific consciousness to workers, or explain their actions, solely or mainly in terms of their relationship to the means of production, though that is certainly one important factor.

This cultural embeddedness has an impact on the practice of working-class history in many ways. For example, throughout this century many (if not most) members of the urban work force in the Middle East (and throughout the Third World) have been recent migrants from the countryside who have often retained significant connections with their home villages and reproduced some of the discourses and practices of peasant life in their new urban environments and even within their new places of work. They therefore cannot be reduced to “instant proletarians,” suddenly possessed of a “pure” working-class consciousness (whatever that might be) the minute they enter the factory gates. From another angle, new means of mass communication—the print media, radio, television, the audiotape player, and the video cassette recorder—have exposed all segments of society to a commodified popular culture, affecting identities and dispositions both within and outside the

workplace in complex ways. And even at the level of individual workers' life trajectories, many people who for some period of their lives are factory workers have also—serially or even simultaneously—engaged in petty trade or craft work or some other occupation.

It is also obvious that workers (and therefore the processes of working-class formation and the forms and content of labor activism) have never been insulated from local and national politics. On the contrary, workers and workers' movements in the Middle East have been deeply involved in, and profoundly influenced by, political struggles in which nonworker conationals have also participated, whether those struggles were directed against foreign domination (Egypt, Iraq), a despotic and unjust regime (Iraq, Iran), antilabor economic policies (Egypt), or for democracy and workers' rights (Turkey). In the Middle East as elsewhere, workers' consciousness, movements, and struggles have been inextricably bound up with these larger political, social, and cultural contexts and cannot be understood apart from them.

This is a point brought home once again by the Iranian revolution of 1978–79, which whatever one thinks of the regime that it brought to power surely ranks as one of the great popular uprisings of this century. As Assef Bayat's essay shows, the new Islamic-populist discourse that emerged during the revolutionary conjuncture both articulated and constrained Iranian workers' grievances and sense of identity, while the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic regime have greatly affected worker activism and organization. Chakrabarty develops this point theoretically by criticizing the tendency to oppose "religion" (or "ethnicity") to class- or interest-based solidarities. In a closely related argument he also questions historians' treatment of the state as external to society and argues that class formation is inextricably bound up with state formation.

Yet another aspect of this same problem unfortunately receives little or no attention in this volume. This is the question of gender. In this regard, these essays for the most part share the bias of labor history as a whole: "workers" are assumed to be male, and the working class, its struggles, and its history are essentially about men. Yet we know that from the very beginnings of industrialization in the Middle East, in small workshops as well as in large enterprises, women have been a significant proportion of the work force. Even if women workers have generally played a relatively minor role in organized manifestations of collective action by workers—though further research may compel us to discard

that assumption—historians cannot simply ignore the presence of women in the workplace. Nor can we ignore the ways in which male and female workers' consciousness was profoundly (and differentially) shaped by the discourses of gender that pervaded these (and all other) societies, and the practices in which those discourses inhered. The task of recovering and interpreting the lives and struggles of workers in the Middle East also requires exploration of how gender relations shaped, and were shaped by, class and other social relations (including religion, ethnic or national identity, and so forth) in specific and concrete ways. This vitally important project of bringing gender into Middle Eastern workers' history has only just begun.¹⁰

This volume's insufficient attention to gender notwithstanding, the contributors do seem to agree that historians must range widely outside the factory gates, starting from the premise that the category "worker" overlaps, intersects, and interacts with many other social categories; that workers' identities are as multidimensional and contingent as everyone else's; and therefore that workers' consciousness or behavior is the product of many determinations. This is not to say that what goes on within the workplace is unimportant; it is, however, to insist that it cannot be uncritically posited as the sole or even primary factor in shaping consciousness and behavior. Joel Beinin sums up one of the key thrusts of this volume when he argues that historians must treat Middle Eastern working classes as heterogeneous ensembles of many different groups shaped by a wide variety of influences and possessing differing perspectives and interests. This in turn suggests that we need to pay greater attention to differences, complexities, and discontinuities, seeing working-class identity as always complex and contingent and working-class action as always overdetermined.

These essays also seem to be in agreement that our narratives of Middle Eastern workers' history cannot and should not be forced to conform to some perceived norm derived from a certain narrative of European workers' history—especially because (as both Terry Burke and Dipesh Chakrabarty point out) that narrative, and the metanarrative of modernity that underpins it, are themselves facing powerful challenges. This means respect for the historical specificity of each and every working-class and labor movement and the abandonment of all teleologies, whether derived from a bankrupt modernization theory or from a positivist version of Marxism. Aristide Zolberg has usefully characterized "exceptionalism" with regard to national variations in both

the structure of capitalism and the forms of working-class consciousness, organization, and action as a “false problematic;” and we might profitably apply this insight to the study of Middle Eastern workers. “Capitalism became flesh in a variety of forms,” Zolberg notes,

and each of these disparate incarnations functioned as a distinctive experiential matrix for the workers it called into life. Given the multifarious character of industrial capitalism, it stands to reason that the working class emerged concomitantly as an array of disparate groups subjected to different conditions and hence inclined to respond in different ways. Since differentiation was a key aspect of the process that governed the formation of the western working class, variety was a constitutive element of its eventual character.¹¹

This formulation might be improved upon, I think, by emphasizing two further points. First, class formation is not something that “happens” once and for all to produce a working class with a fixed character. It is rather an open-ended, ongoing process, as classes are constantly remolded by changing economic, political, and cultural forces. Second, variations among workers *within* a single country may be as significant as variations *among* different countries. For example, local circumstances may make workers at one enterprise or in one industry or area more militant, organized or politicized, or active in different ways than those employed elsewhere. Moreover, although class solidarity may provide a basis for common action at the local level—in the neighborhood, at a single workplace or within a specific city or region—it is usually more difficult to achieve and transform into effective action at the national level. With these provisos in mind, we can certainly agree with Zolberg that to the question “How many exceptionalisms?” the appropriate response is “As many as there are cases under consideration.”¹²

It is also worth noting that many of these essays exhibit a heightened concern with language and representation. In Donald Quataert’s discussion of the language of protest used by Ottoman workers, in Feroz Ahmad’s discussion of the changing terms used in Turkey for “worker” and “class” and his presentation of the slogans Turkish workers carried on their banners during the spring 1989 strike wave, in Assef Bayat’s analysis of the changing terminology by which “worker” has been denoted in Iran, and elsewhere in this volume as well, we can see a new kind of attention to the complex systems of meaning, manifested in language, through which people understand and define themselves, their society,

and the world. This attention to discourse, to representation, is not a substitute for investigation of the ways in which identity and action are powerfully shaped by the process of capital accumulation and the specific environments in which people live and work; it is complementary to it or better yet an inseparable part of the same project of inquiry.

As several of these essays make clear, the writing of history also inevitably poses the problem of representation. The deployment of different categories, paradigms, periodizations, and narrative strategies will yield different stories about the past, each of which will in turn have different consequences for the present. Moreover, in the Middle East as elsewhere, the past is an important political battleground, as Eric Davis demonstrates in his discussion of the Iraqi Ba'thist regime's rather crude efforts to promote a version of Iraqi working-class history that erases the historic role the Iraqi Communist party played in building the Iraqi labor movement and magnifies the Ba'th party's own rather modest contribution. But beyond the question of blatant manipulation and distortion, representation remains an epistemological issue which historians must confront.

The critique of essentialist and teleological representations of the working class implicit or explicit in many of these essays evinces a recognition that we must try to be aware of the premises and consequences inherent in our own choice of categories and narrative strategies. Yet however much we try to make those categories and narratives complicated, contingent, and provisional, we must in the end still relate some relatively coherent story about the past, keeping in mind that it is to a large extent through the stories we tell about and to ourselves and others that much of human social life is represented and grasped. Moreover, however important it is to problematize and deconstruct categories to further historical understanding, we must remember that in specific conjunctures people (ourselves included) often do define themselves in terms of some essence (for example, as workers, Egyptians, Muslims, women, African-Americans, Americans, citizens demanding their constitutional rights, people endowed with human rights, etc.) and act collectively as relatively coherent historical subjects. These categories are "real" because at times people act as if they are real: they (we) live through these identities, see them as manifesting a sense of self and community as well as a set of interests, and sometimes even die for them. Nor can we afford to simply jettison experience and agency, whether individual or collective: these categories can and should be subjected

to critical theoretical scrutiny, but they nonetheless remain the frameworks within which people usually understand their own sense of grievance and self-interest, as well as their beliefs, decisions, actions, and histories.

In other words, there may be an inevitable tension between our commitment to an antiessentialist epistemological stance and the deconstruction of stable categories and identities, on the one hand, and on the other, our commitment to retrieving, reconstructing, and making coherent the stories of actual working people and their struggles, fashioned into a narrative of working-class history. But perhaps we can try to see that tension not as debilitating but creative. In an admittedly “against the grain” reading of the work of the *Subaltern Studies* “school” of historians of India, Gayatri Spivak has identified what she terms a “strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.”¹³ In the writing of Middle Eastern working-class history as in other fields, there may be no alternative to a similar strategy. At the very least, though, this imposes on us a responsibility to be aware of and explicit about the assumptions and methods that underpin our choices and to recognize that, as several of these essays demonstrate, the writing of history must go hand in hand with historiographical critique and theoretical contention.

With all this in mind, I would suggest that to the question of whether Middle Eastern working classes constitute coherent historical subjects and legitimate objects of inquiry we can respond with a properly nuanced and contingent “yes.” It is true that labor history has too often essentialized the working class and cast workers in a starring role in a historical drama written by others. Yet as the essays in this volume and a fairly extensive literature demonstrate, it is also true that over the past century workers in Middle Eastern countries have struggled to defend their interests and achieve their goals; they have at times seen themselves as members of a distinct working class and acted on that basis. The literature also shows that collective action by workers—“spontaneous” resistance, organized protests, strikes, the formation of labor movements, tacit or formal accommodations with employers and the state, etc.—has had a significant impact on the political and economic life of several Middle Eastern countries.

The fact that the “languages” through which workers expressed their identity and articulated their grievances were not always purely “proletarian” in the classical Marxist sense but were inflected by many

discourses (nationalism, religion, craft, local origin, etc.) only strengthens the argument that one can in fact speak of class in this context; for precisely the same is true even of those working classes in the most developed capitalist countries that are usually held up as the norm. Class, and the working class as an historical agent, is there to be found in modern Middle Eastern history. Worker resistance and activism in many forms have been facts that employers and governments have had to take into account; we should expect no less of historians.

It has lately been suggested that the growth of Islamist movements in various parts of the Middle East in recent decades once again "proves" the irrelevance of class as a category of social analysis in this region: instead, a dehistoricized and abstract "Islam" is taken to be the sole authentic component of consciousness in the Middle East. I must confess that this approach makes no sense to me. I noted earlier that several of the contributors to this volume insisted that Middle Eastern workers and workers' movements must be studied in their cultural context, which of course includes Islamic discourses and practices. It seems to me that the converse holds as well: although Islamist movements must not be reduced to their class dimension, they cannot be understood unless one takes that dimension into account and situates them in the context of the social, economic, cultural, and political changes that the countries of the region have undergone over the past few decades.

That the working class remains a significant social agent is evidenced by the struggles of Egyptian workers Marsha Posusney and Joel Beinon document and by Assef Bayat's analysis of the role Iranian workers played in the struggle to overthrow the Shah,¹⁴ as well as by recent reports of worker protest from various places in the Middle East and North Africa. Mired in a profound economic and social crisis, and under unrelenting pressure to restructure their economies in accordance with the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund, regimes across the region have hesitated and equivocated for fear of popular reaction, and perhaps especially of worker reaction. However the current crisis unfolds, members of the urban working class broadly defined are likely to continue to have a role to play, whether as workers under their own banner or as a component of other groupings that will nonetheless be infused with the energy of working-class grievances and demands.

To insist that the working class (conceived in this nonessentialist manner) may remain an actor on the stage of history may seem ironic, perhaps even perverse, in light of the recent collapse of the regimes

in eastern and central Europe that claimed to rule on behalf of the working class. At a time when many people seem to take it for granted that all human relationships should be subordinated to the logic of the market, it may seem equally strange to be devoting a volume to Middle Eastern working-class history and insisting on the continuing utility not only of class analysis but of some of Marx's (and Marxism's) insights into the workings of capitalism, insights which are to be understood not as dogma but as contributions to critical social thought.

I can say in response only that I (and, I would venture to say, most if not all of the other contributors to this volume) do not believe that history has come to an end just yet. Capitalism has certainly shown itself to be more dynamic, flexible, productive, and protean than most of its nineteenth century critics could have imagined. Yet as we approach the twenty-first century, we also have continuing evidence of capitalism's profoundly contradictory character, manifested most brutally in the economic and ecological devastation afflicting much of the Third World but visible also in the extreme disparities of wealth and power and the grave social crisis increasingly evident even in the most economically and militarily powerful capitalist country of them all.

Class remains a salient dimension of social life everywhere, and not least in the Middle East, whose peoples continue to struggle to overcome the traumas of underdevelopment, tyranny, national and social oppression, patriarchy, and war. Class analysis as a way of understanding these societies therefore also remains salient, obligating us to pay close attention to the grievances and struggles of working people in the Middle East and continue our efforts to retrieve and understand their past.

Notes

I would like to thank Joel Beinin, Melinda Fine, and Robert Vitalis for their helpful comments on drafts of this Introduction.

1. See Joel Beinin, "Class and Politics in Middle Eastern Societies," *Comparative studies in Society and History* 28, no. 3 (July 1986): 552-557.

2. At the workshop Salim Nasr presented an extremely interesting and valuable paper that reflected on the character and evolution of the Lebanese labor movement, before but especially during the civil war that tore that country apart beginning in 1975, and discussed the efforts of trade unionists to build a broad-based coalition of the forces of "civil society" that could effectively oppose the "war system" and those

who benefitted from it. Unfortunately, he was unable to revise his paper in time for inclusion in this volume. The paucity of solid research on Lebanese trade unionism remains a serious lacuna in the literature, and I very much hope that Salim Nasr's essay will be published sometime soon.

3. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

4. The volume edited by Edmund Burke, III, *Global Crises and Social Movements: Artisans, Peasants, Populists, and the World Economy* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1988), is an important effort to locate specific social movements in their global context.

5. A useful model for comparative work is *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), which includes two or three essays apiece on France, the United States, and Germany, with attention to the case of Britain as well, framed by two theoretical-comparative essays written by the editors. But see also Margaret Ramsay Somers, "Workers of the World, Compare!" *Contemporary Sociology* 18, no. 3 (May 1989): 325-329, for a critical review of Katznelson and Zolberg.

6. Somers, *ibid.*, p. 325; emphases in the original.

7. Readers may find Dipesh Chakrabarty's recent study *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989) useful and provocative, especially Chapter 7.

8. On this question see also Ellis Goldberg, *Tinker, Tailor, and Textile Worker: Class and Politics in Egypt, 1930-1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

9. In this connection see the essays collected in *The Historical Meanings of Work*, ed. Patrick Joyce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

10. A number of recent works touch on this topic and provide useful bibliographies; see, inter alia, Judith Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Nadia Hijab, *Womanpower: The Arab Debate on Women at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). Linda J. Nicholson's *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) provides an insightful theoretical framework through which to approach this question. On both gender and labor history, see also Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

11. Katznelson and Zolberg, *Working-Class Formation*, p. 433.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 455.

13. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 13, emphasis in the original. In this connection see also Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?" *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

14. See Assef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran: A Third World Experience of Workers' Control* (London: Zed Books, 1987).