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**The Intricacies of Oil, Racial Capitalism, and  
Colonial Cultures in Abadan: Contested Visions  
for Iran's Post-Colonial Future, 1931-1951.**



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## **The Intricacies of Oil, Racial Capitalism, and Colonial Cultures in Abadan: Contested Visions for Iran's Post-Colonial Future, 1931-1951.**



Figure 1. 'Iranian Flag raised above Abadan Refinery, 24 June 1951.' Source: ARC78148, BP.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Now that by God’s will, and through the attempts of the deputies of the two Houses, the country’s national resources have been restored, we all feel confident that if this overflowing wealth is utilized properly, our nation will be enabled to enjoy a prosperous and comfortable life, and in line with the progressive nations, accomplish its duty in contributing towards universal civilization.”<sup>1</sup>

- Prime Minister Mossadegh’s Message on the Radio, 30 April 1951.

These were the words of the newly appointed Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, addressing the Iranian nation over the radio, celebrating the successful passing of the Oil Nationalisation Bill on 29 April 1951. This legislation nationalised the southwestern province of Khuzestan’s oil resources, which had previously been in the hands of the British-owned entity, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC).<sup>2</sup> It expelled the British company, granting the Iranian government authority over its oil industry for the first time in the twentieth century. In his message, Mossadegh envisioned that Iran’s autonomy over its national oil resources would be the basis for modernity and Iran’s future prosperity. In this way, it provided a watershed moment for decolonisation, with the historian Christopher Dietrich framing this event through his conceptualisation of ‘resource nationalism,’ advocating for future studies to incorporate the struggle for national economic resources into decolonial studies.<sup>3</sup>

Over the previous fifty years, Khuzestan had been subjected to British capitalist rule, stemming from the 1901 D’Arcy Concession. This agreement between the Iranian state and the AIOC (formerly the D’Arcy Syndicate) established British hegemony in the region by securing a special privilege to carry out operations for oil throughout the Persian Empire (except the five northern provinces under Russian control).<sup>4</sup> When oil was struck on May 26,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Prime Minister’s Message Broadcast on the Radio’, *Ettlā’āt*, 30 April 1951, ARC71838, BP Archive, University of Warwick (BP).

<sup>2</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern US-Iran Relations*, (New York: The New Press, 2013), pp. 74-75.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich, Christopher, *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonisation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Persia D’Arcy Concession, 1901’, ARC4681, BP.

1908, British activities would radically transform the Iranian landscape.<sup>5</sup> Abadan, surrounded by key local and global transportation routes of the Karun River, the Bahmanshir River, the Shatt-al Arab River, and the Persian Gulf, was chosen as the central hub of operations.

Following the construction of an oil refinery in 1909, the AIOC implemented a racialised structure to oil capitalism in Abadan.<sup>6</sup> Article 12 of the D'Arcy agreement required the British to employ Iranians as their source of unskilled labour, but left them free to fill their technical positions.<sup>7</sup> As such, they recruited staff from British India, especially those from the Burma Oil Company, who had proficient experience in navigating the modern machinery of the Rangoon Refinery.<sup>8</sup> With skill being a key determinant, the AIOC classed Indians above Iranians.<sup>9</sup> Here, a racialised labour hierarchy was born in Abadan – involving British and European staff at the top, Indians as 'second-class', and Iranians at the bottom. This also reflected the AIOC's urban housing project, placing Iranians and Indians in separate enclaves of the town, primarily in Abadan Town and the Bahmanshir area, respectively. In their designs, the British effectively utilised the refinery as a barrier to separate themselves from the rest of the workforce (Figure 2). With this racial capitalist structure consolidated by 1920, Churchill's decision to fuel the British navy with oil and the government's majority stake acquisition of the AIOC in 1914 placed a greater reliance on oil production.<sup>10</sup> As the base of AIOC operations in Khuzestan, this work will centre Abadan to uncover the company's strategies of power to maintain British racial capitalist rule.

Between 1931 and 1951, the AIOC imposed social measures of control in Abadan to ultimately capitalise on the country's vast oil reserves. The 1920s saw the beginning of this social

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<sup>5</sup> *Naft Magazine*, March 1929, ARC176312, BP, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Naft Magazine*, July 1931, ARC176326, BP, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> 'Persia D'Arcy Concession, 1901,' ARC4681, BP.

<sup>8</sup> Touraj Atabaki, 'Far from home, But at home: Indian Migrant Workers in the Iranian Oil Industry,' *Studies in History*, 31.1 (2015), p. 86.

<sup>9</sup> For favouring Indian workers due to skill, see Memorandum for Jameson, 'Abadan-Operation and Maintenance,' 3 January 1940, ARC68063, BP.

<sup>10</sup> Reza Mortaheb, 'Building the petro-polis: oil capitalism, imperialism, and the making of Abadan, 1908-1933,' (unpublished doctoral thesis, New Jersey Institute of Technology, 2020), p. 151.



## Literature

### Racial Capitalism Historiography

This dissertation seeks to fill a key gap in racial capitalist historiography. The historian Eric Hobsbawm was the first to mark colonialism as a globalising agent of capitalism.<sup>13</sup> From here, British Marxist historians connected the role of empire to the development of capitalism and its implications for race.<sup>14</sup> The concept of ‘racial capitalism’ emerged in 1970s South Africa, where scholars and activists tackled apartheid, a system where race and capital were deeply intertwined.<sup>15</sup> Later, Cedric Robinson coined and popularised the term in 1983, uncovering the deep histories of the unity between race and capital.<sup>16</sup>

Today, scholars have developed this theory to explain how racialism and capitalism merged, highlighting the coercion and productivity in capital and its forms of exchange.<sup>17</sup> For one, Michael Adas has contested that scientific and technological measures of human worth and potential in the industrial era informed and permeated Western thinking on colonial issues, including racism.<sup>18</sup> Offering a more radical view, Justin Leroy and Destin Jenkins argue that capitalism relied on the exploitation of race.<sup>19</sup> According to Gargi Bhattacharyya, “Racial capitalism is a way of understanding the role of racism in enabling key moments of capitalist development – it is not a way of understanding capitalism as a racist conspiracy or racism as a capitalist conspiracy.”<sup>20</sup> However, scholarly discussions of racial capitalism have primarily

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<sup>13</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: An Economic History of Britain since 1750*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> For British Marxist historians, see Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714*, (London: Routledge Classics, 2002); Eric Hobsbawm, ‘The Crisis of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century,’ *Past & Present*, 6.1 (1954), pp. 44-65. For discussions on racial exploitation in capitalist systems, see Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800*, (London: Verso, 2010); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Hall, ‘Racial Capitalism: What’s in a Name?’, *History Workshop Journal*, 94 (2022), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Ralph and Maya Singhal, ‘Racial Capitalism,’ *Theory and Society*, 48.6 (2019), p. 857.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Justin Leroy and Destin Jenkins, *Histories of Racial Capitalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 1-5.

<sup>20</sup> Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of reproduction and survival*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd, 2018), p. ix.

focused on Africa and the United States, with no works focusing on British rule in Iran to date.<sup>21</sup> Building upon the conceptual framework, this dissertation will address this gap within the literature by examining British rule in Iran through the lens of racial capitalism.

### Colonial Cultures Historiography

This work will also intervene within the colonial culture literature by exploring British cultural strategies of power in Abadan. The cultural turn in the 1970s was pivotal, with Edward Said and his magisterial work *Orientalism* linking culture and colonialism for the first time.<sup>22</sup> His iconic text, alongside pioneers such as Frantz Fanon, inspired historians to investigate colonial power and its cultural forms.<sup>23</sup> With this imperial turn from the 1990s, scholars such as Nicholas Dirks, Frederick Cooper, Ann Laura Stoler, and Nicholas Thomas have all stressed the importance of recognising colonialism as a cultural project of control.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, David Cannadine and Kathleen Wilson highlighted that the British Empire was a social configuration that affected the most quotidian aspects of everyday life.<sup>25</sup> As such, decolonial studies transitioned beyond the narrow model of decolonisation by political sovereignty to highlight that decolonisation incorporated all aspects of colonial rule.<sup>26</sup> Recently, John M. MacKenzie's seminal work on colonial cultures, drawing on formal and informal British colonies, has significantly argued that innovations in cultural, social, and racial contexts are paramount to understanding their imperial and decolonial processes.<sup>27</sup> In this way, this dissertation seeks to contribute to the literature by analysing British colonial cultures in Iran for the first time.

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<sup>21</sup> On racial capitalism in Africa, see Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalisation of the New South*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). For US discussions, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (London: Verso, 2010); Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of how our Government Segregated America*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. By Constance Farrington, (London: Penguin Classics, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas B. Dirks, *Colonialism and Culture*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> David Cannadine, *Orientalism: How the British Saw their Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. xviii; Kathleen Wilson, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire 1660-1840*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion on the cultural aspect of decolonisation, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> John M. MacKenzie, *A Cultural History of the British Empire*, (London: Yale University Press, 2022), p. xiii.

## Iran Historiography

In writing this dissertation, I aim to contribute to the body of historiography on Iran. This literature has long acknowledged that oil nationalism was part of decolonisation. Indeed, Mostafa Fateh wrote the first history of the subject in 1956 in his 'Fifty Years of Iran's Oil,' which discussed it within a broader framework of an awakening of the East and the struggle from Western control.<sup>28</sup> There have also been studies in the field of international history that have focused on Cold War dynamics and other histories from the perspective of oil companies, examining negotiations between the AIOC and the Iranian state.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, earlier histories written by Iranian historians have been most influential, providing valuable insight by integrating Persian sources into their methodology.<sup>30</sup> Notably, many of these works have recognised that oil nationalisation must be understood in a global context, with some drawing parallels to other anti-colonial movements.<sup>31</sup> However, there has been a tendency for methodological nationalism within these works, situating oil nationalisation within a linear tradition of struggle.<sup>32</sup> This approach risks essentialising mass movements and omitting particular historical contingencies, which can lead to a Whiggish and teleological reading of history. Whilst these works have been valuable in situating Iran within the context of decolonisation by focusing on state and corporate actors, they have often marginalised the experiences of Iranian workers and the contested space of Khuzestan's oilfields.<sup>33</sup>

Recent publications have filled this gap by re-centring labourers and Khuzestan in Iranian history. Touraj Atabaki was the first historian to write about Iranian labour in the British oil industry in 2013. His pivotal work highlighted the direct role that Iranian labourers played in

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<sup>28</sup> Mostafa Fateh, *Panjah Sal Naft-e Iran*, (Tehran: Elm, 1956).

<sup>29</sup> For example, in the field of international history on oil nationalism and Cold War dynamics, see William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). From an oil company perspective, see J. H. Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company: Vol. 2, The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928-1954*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> For English-written histories, see Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran: Updated Through 1978*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979); Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalisation and Its Aftermath*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992). For Persian written histories, see Fouad Rohani, *Tarikh-e Melli Shodan-e San'at-e Naft-e Iran*, (Tehran: Jibi, 1973).

<sup>31</sup> For example, Abrahamian connects it to the anti-colonial movement in India in Abrahamian, *The Coup*, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Elm starts his work with the 1872 Reuter Concession (which gave the British businessman Reuter privileges in Iran's economic infrastructure) in *Oil, Power, and Principle*.

<sup>33</sup> Exemplified in *Ibid*.

shaping oil nationalisation from below.<sup>34</sup> Studies by Rasmus Elling, Kaveh Ehasni, Reza Mortaheb, Elisabetta Bini, and Stephanie Cronin have all explored the racialised division of labour in British oil operations and their influence on the events leading to oil nationalisation.<sup>35</sup> Mattin Biglari's recent work has marked the coloniality evident in Abadan's company town, insisting that Iran must be explored from a global approach to be understood as decolonisation.<sup>36</sup> Building upon this pivotal new strain of literature, this dissertation will make a key breakthrough by exploring Iran through the scope of racial capitalism and British cultural strategies of power. It will also contribute by investigating the role the AIOC's racial capitalist domain played in shaping decolonisation and envisioning Iran's future.

## Methodology

This dissertation will base its analysis on the company's BP Archive. BP's decision in 2001 to open parts of its resources to the public has enabled the recent turn in Iranian historiography, enabling scholars such as Atabaki and Ehsani to write social histories of Iranian labour in Khuzestan. By reading against the grain, these historians have interrogated these groundbreaking sources to demonstrate the role of oil workers in shaping decolonisation and their subjugation to colonial rule, also exploring what they may omit or unintentionally reveal from a colonial perspective.<sup>37</sup> In this way, analysing the AIOC's company archives is an extremely valuable exercise, allowing this study to uncover the British cultural strategies of power in Abadan and the influence of British capitalism on contested visions of national imaginaries and post-colonialism in the Iranian Press.

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<sup>34</sup> Touraj Atabaki, '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*, 84 (2013), pp. 159-175.

<sup>35</sup> Rasmus Elling, 'On Lines and Fences: Labour, Community and Violence in an Oil City,' in *Urban Violence in the Middle East*, ed. Ulrike Freitag et al. (Berghahn Books: 2015); Kaveh Ehsani, 'The social history of labor in the Iranian oil industry: the built environment and the making of the industrial working class,' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2014); Mortaheb, 'Building the petro-polis'; Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini and Kaveh Ehsani, *Working for Oil*, (Springer International Publishing AG, 2018); Stephanie Cronin, 'Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46.5 (2010), pp. 699-732.

<sup>36</sup> Biglari, *Nationalising Oil*.

<sup>37</sup> Atabaki, 'From Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (worker)'; Ehsani, 'The social history of labor.'

However, as a colonial institution, methodological issues surround the construction of the BP archive. Tony Ballantyne's discourse on colonial knowledge and power has recognised that we, as historians, must understand how colonial knowledge production – the content produced out of colonisation – served to help administer colonial management.<sup>38</sup> As Andrew Barry and Antoinette Burton point out, colonial archives, such as BP, acted as 'technologies of imperial power.'<sup>39</sup> As such, historians must equally consider what they do and do not include to understand the significance of colonial archives.<sup>40</sup> In this way, analysing BP sources from its colonial construction will enable this study to highlight AIOC's methods of power in their attempt to control the Abadan population.

As a company archive rather than a state archive, we must recognise an oil corporation's transparency as a recognisable effort to affect public perceptions.<sup>41</sup> Oil corporations assume the power to determine what is made visible, public, and apparent in their public-facing archive and, equally, what is not.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has criticised colonial archives steeped in racial and colonial prejudice of the time, rendering them incapable of truly encapsulating the "subaltern" voice.<sup>43</sup> Whilst this work will not be able to recover Abadani voices from the colonial perspective of the BP archive, it will significantly incorporate how those Iranian workers shaped events on the ground and captivated the nation's imagination in Tehran.

In the first part of this study, I will analyse BP sources as valuable evidence of the AIOC's cultural projections of power. Chapter 1 will primarily concentrate on the company's *Naft*

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<sup>38</sup> Tony Ballantyne, 'Colonial Knowledge' in *The British Empire: themes and perspectives*, ed. Sarah Stockwell, (Malden: Blackwell Pub., 2008), pp. 177-197. For example, Cohn recognises that the British government in India relied upon colonial knowledge to govern effectively in Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Barry, 'The Oil Archives' in *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas*, ed. Hannah Appel et al., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 95-108.; Antoinette Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Mona Damluji, 'Oil Media Archives' in *Petrocinema: Sponsored Film and The Oil Industry*, ed. Marina Dahlquist and Patrick Vonderad, (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

*Magazine* to reveal the subjection of the Iranian population to British Fordist measures. This magazine was a company-issued publication for its European staff in Abadan, informing them of worldwide company news and locally in Iran. Michael Heller and Michael Rowlinson contest that corporations can be envisioned as imagined communities, where a sense of community is created through textual media.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, the *Naft Magazine* attempted to foster an *esprit de corps* amongst its employees. As such, this magazine is a valuable source in analysing the dissemination of British cultural measures in Abadan.

Chapter 2 will concentrate on the Tehran Press Summaries from the company's archive to reveal the contested nature of national imaginaries within the Iranian Press. These sources were driven by the AIOC's initiative in the early 1940s to translate any Persian sources relating to the company. Yet, we must be careful when examining these sources, as they have been selectively translated and taken out of their full context. Still, this adds an invaluable body of analysis, enabling this work to incorporate translated Persian sources to explore the diverging ways Iranian intellectuals in Tehran perceived Abadan to Iran's sovereignty and development.

Ultimately, this work will adopt an integrated micro-global historical approach to connect the particular contingencies of Iran's case within a global context. Aziz and Kiechel have called for historians to implement this approach to decolonial studies in order to understand colonialism's all-encompassing nature.<sup>45</sup> Drawing upon connective and comparative analysis, this dissertation will discuss Iran within broader themes of British colonialism and decolonisation.

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Heller and Michael Rowlinson, 'Imagined Corporate Communities: Historical Sources and Discourses,' *British Journal of Management*, 31 (2020), p. 752.

<sup>45</sup> Zaib un Nisa Aziz and Charlotte Kiechel, 'Global History and Decolonisation: A Moment of Possibility, a Call for Integration,' *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 14 (2023), pp. 39-47.

## **Structure Outline**

**Chapter 1 – Colonial Cultures in Abadan:** This chapter will illustrate how the British engineered Fordist measures in the form of colonial cultures to preserve their racial capitalist rule in Abadan, connecting Iran to broader themes across the British Empire.

**Chapter 2— National Imaginaries and Oil Nationalisation:** This chapter will explore the competing visions of Iran's post-colonialism, focusing on the perceptions and events in Abadan to situate Iran in the global narrative of decolonisation.

## CHAPTER 1: COLONIAL CULTURES IN ABADAN

From the 1920s, Fordism became the defining principle of AIOC rule. Antonio Gramsci's foundational analysis on Fordism observed that "inquiries by industrialists into the private lives of workers and the inspection services created by some industrialists to control the 'morality' of workers are necessities of the new method of work."<sup>46</sup> In this model of industrial capitalism, the dominant class secured hegemony by presenting its worldview as universal, shaping everyday norms and ideologies.<sup>47</sup> Building upon this framework, Erik de Bier has insisted that Fordism played a crucial role in stabilising the workforce through welfare-oriented programmes that bound workers and their families to the company.<sup>48</sup> These paternalistic policies were designed to prevent labour unrest and improve workers' motivation and productivity, all under the guise of 'benefitting' staff.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, Fordism sought to maximise workers' participation and efficiency by managing their private lives.

In Abadan, the AIOC's introduction of Fordist measures was designed for the security and prosperity of its imposed racial capitalist state. Initially, these strategies targeted the top of the hierarchy, fostering the cohesion of British and senior management in the 1920s. The opening of the Gymkhana club for the AIOC's British and European staff served as a centre for various social events and leisure time.<sup>50</sup> The club introduced sports played in Britain to the Abadan landscape, including football, cricket, tennis, swimming, and hockey.<sup>51</sup> In the *Naft Magazine*, the company repeatedly promoted its sports programmes to its employees "for the maintenance of good health and *esprit de corps*."<sup>52</sup> These social measures were intended to foster unity and a common corporate bond between its senior staff. Once instilled in the top tier of operations, corporate cultural measures were extended throughout the organisational hierarchy.

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<sup>46</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. 2*, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 215.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, pp. 215-220.

<sup>48</sup> Erik de Bier, *Capitalist Workingman's Paradise Revisited: Corporate Welfare Work in Great Britain, the USA, Germany and France in the Golden Age of Capitalism, 1880-1930*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-16.

<sup>50</sup> For an example of events at the Gymkhana Club, see *Naft Magazine*, March 1929, ARC176312, BP, pp. 41-46.

<sup>51</sup> *Naft Magazine*, March 1926, ARC175258, BP, pp. 42-44.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

The opening of the new Iran club, *Basgah Iran* (Figure 1.1), in July 1931 marked a pivotal moment in the AIOC's strategy of power, now targeting Iranians in their broader Fordist projections. At the club's opening, the *Naft Magazine* commented that it "would not only prove of the greatest social benefit to those for whom it had provided, but could be regarded also of benefit to the community in general."<sup>53</sup> In promoting physical fitness for industrial workers, the club's sports programmes were vital to encourage Iranian workers to maintain peace and foster that corporate culture.<sup>54</sup> Introducing "modern games, such as are popular in Europe," allowed the company to develop the discourse of Iranian progress under the banner of 'modernity.'<sup>55</sup> Football, tennis, swimming, and athletics were most popular amongst the Iranian population, and the company provided seven sports trophies for labourers to compete for each year. There were even certain occasions when British and Iranian staff interacted in the sporting arena, for example, participating in or attending swimming galas and football matches.<sup>56</sup> By disseminating British cultural sports, Fordist measures were intended to mitigate any disruption to production, seeking peace and collaboration within the workers' environment. With clubs created for separate ethnicities of the workforce, including a club for its Indian workers, it also strengthened the racial stratification of the British capitalist structure. Whilst considered welfare programmes in the company's magazine, British sports programmes in Abadan were ultimately designed for AIOC control.

Since the imperial turn in historiography, sports have been discussed within British cultural strategies of rule. Brian Stoddart has suggested that dominant British beliefs, such as conforming to social behavioural standards, were transferred to colonised subjects through sports.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, sport can be envisaged as a powerful but informal social institution that can establish shared attitudes and beliefs whilst enhancing the social distance between rulers and

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<sup>53</sup> *Naft Magazine*, July 1931, ARC176326, BP, p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> 'Importance of Physical Fitness to Industrial Workers,' *Naft Magazine*, May 1933, ARC176331, BP, p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> *Naft Magazine*, March 1930, ARC176318, BP, p. 35; *Naft Magazine*, March 1939, ARC135669, BP, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> 'Services and Amenities – Pamphlet Published by Abadan in reply to local attacks on the Company's Organisation and Activities,' 31 December 1946, ARC12604, BP, p. 12; For swimming galas, see *Naft Magazine*, August 1939, ARC135674, BP, p. 14; For football matches between the Gymkhana Club and Basgah Iran, see *Naft Magazine*, March 1940, ARC233031, BP, p. 17

<sup>57</sup> Brian Stoddart, 'Sport, Cultural Imperialism, and Colonial Response in the British Empire,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30.4 (1988), p. 651.

the ruled.<sup>58</sup> This was particularly true with the deployment of cricket in the British West Indies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cricket, in the West Indies, as elsewhere, was considered one of the primary vehicles for transferring the appropriate moral code, where the M.C.C. (Marylebone Cricket Club) in London acted as the supreme lawmaker of behavioural standards, just as similar bodies did in other sports.<sup>59</sup> Here, cricket helped demarcate social boundaries, where racial segregation policies were reinforced by establishing separate clubs.<sup>60</sup> Equally, cricket promoted core 'British' values of discipline and teamwork, attempting to maintain smooth British rule through encouraging such colonial cultures.<sup>61</sup> Despite cricket being seldom played by Iranians in Abadan, sports in this way played a valuable role in protecting British capitalism. Rather than a formal colony under the sovereignty of the British Crown, sports programmes in Abadan were aimed at preserving the racial oil capitalist structure, and must be seen within the wider cultural strategies of British hegemony.

British extra-curricular activities within its education services elevated similar cultural values. For example, after introducing Iranian apprenticeship schemes in the late 1920s, which provided hands-on experience in artisan and technical work in the oil industry, the company established an Apprentices' Hostel in November 1932 to accommodate those who came to Abadan from the northern provinces.<sup>62</sup> At the Apprentices' Hostel, the AIOC provided an extensive sports organisation with football grounds, tennis courts, and an indoor swimming pool.<sup>63</sup> In his seminal study, James Mangan argues that colonial education served as a vehicle to export the "games ethic," the ethos of British values through the medium of sport.<sup>64</sup> Like the sports programmes held at the clubs, these activities were designed to engage youthful Iranians in a British culture that would sustain the company's operations.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 652.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, pp. 658-659.

<sup>60</sup> Brian Stoddart, 'Cricket and Colonialism in the English-Speaking Caribbean to 1914: Towards a Cultural Analysis' in *Pleasure, Profit, and Proselytism: British Culture and Sport, at Home and Abroad, 1750-1914*, ed. J. A. Mangan, (London: F. Cass, 1988), p. 232.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, pp. 238-239.

<sup>62</sup> 'Education and Training for the Oil Industry in Abadan,' August 1950, ARC129288\_006, BP, pp. 5-7.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> James A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal*, (New York: Viking, 1986), p. 19.



Figure 1.1. '*Basgah Iran, Abadan.*' Source: ARC36130, BP.



Figure 1.2. '*Abadan Apprentices' Football Ground.*' Source: ARC36152\_608, BP.

The 'games ethic' notion in Abadan mirrored a broader tactic deployed across the British Empire, notably in the case of the informal colony of Hong Kong. With the introduction of the Hong Kong University in 1913, the colonial British government crafted a curriculum and extra-curricular activities designed to impress British cultural values upon its students.<sup>65</sup> Within this extra-curricular programme, the Student Union's Athletic Association and its affiliated clubs, such as football and cricket, were modelled on those back in Britain.<sup>66</sup> This has caused Vivian Kong to insist that this carefully planned university experience functioned to instil an appreciation for British values and ways of life.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, in Abadan, the invention of British sports in educational and welfare programmes disseminated British ideals that reinforced imperial authority under the guise of 'moral development'.

Furthermore, educational services in Abadan were organised for the prosperity and reproduction of AIOC's racial capitalist programme. By August 1950, the company had established twenty-one schools, such as the Razi and Sepehr Schools, and six kindergartens attended by over 12,000 children.<sup>68</sup> While these primary and secondary schools were under the direction of the Iranian Ministry of Education, the company initially introduced them to look after the workers' children during the workday. The AIOC believed that "the worker who goes to his work early in the morning thinks all the time about how his children spend the day, and thus he cannot, of course, accomplish properly the work assigned to him."<sup>69</sup> Schools were actively incorporated into the company's Fordist strategies to increase workers' productivity.

The company's training programmes sought to channel young Iranians into the oil industry workforce. For one, the AIOC's apprenticeship schemes for Iranians from the late 1920s aimed to develop the skills necessary to occupy a position in the oil industry. From there, the Works Training Department assessed the areas where Iranians demonstrated the greatest aptitude and directed their training in a department for that selected trade.<sup>70</sup> More significantly, the

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<sup>65</sup> Vivian Kong, *Multiracial Britishness: Global Networks in Hong Kong, 1910-45*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 100-101.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 102.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.

<sup>68</sup> 'Education and Training for the Oil Industry in Abadan,' August 1950, ARC129288\_006, BP, pp. 14-15.

<sup>69</sup> 'Welfare and Amenities, 1945-1951,' ARC44269, BP, p. 16.

<sup>70</sup> Education and Training for the Oil Industry in Abadan,' August 1950, ARC129288\_006, BP, p. 10.

British opened their Abadan Technical Institute (Figure 1.3) in September 1939 to encourage Iranians to gain degrees for the technical 'expertise' that the oil industry required. According to the AIOC, its principal function was to train young Iranians in Science, Engineering, and Commerce, enabling them to take up technical and commercial positions in the oil industry.<sup>71</sup> Although taking up senior positions within the company seldom occurred, if at all, educational measures aimed to reproduce Iranian workers for the continuation of British capitalist exploitation.

Fordist educational initiatives in Abadan were deeply steeped in British cultural and corporate values. The AIOC notably introduced English-language classes to advance the literacy of Iranians, based on the belief that only literate or semi-literate men could learn the instructions and methods of handling complicated modern machinery.<sup>72</sup> In the early 1930s, the company even established a programme that sent the most promising Iranian students to study at the University of Birmingham, allowing them, in the company's words, "to know more about this country and our people."<sup>73</sup> These measures reveal how the AIOC's rhetoric of 'educational betterment' was not solely about developing Iranians' skills but primarily about producing colonial subjects instilled with British ideologies and norms. In doing so, the AIOC could maintain their perceived superiority whilst reinforcing the social and labour hierarchies of their racial capitalist domain.

Indeed, it has long been acknowledged that education served as a crucial means of colonial knowledge production and control.<sup>74</sup> As a technology of British cultural rule, it shaped everyday norms and reinforced colonial ideologies. In the contexts of British India and Sudan, Gauri Viswanathan and Heather Sharkey have argued that schools were explicitly initiated to maintain British socio-political power.<sup>75</sup> Sharkey, for instance, examines Gordon College in

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> 'Services and Amenities – Pamphlet Published by Abadan in reply to local attacks on the Company's Organisation and Activities,' 31 December 1946, ARC12604, BP, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Naft Magazine*, September 1932, ARC176338, BP, p. 26.

<sup>74</sup> Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*.

<sup>75</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Heather J. Sharkey, *Living With Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Sudan, a public school designed to train elite Sudanese for colonial bureaucratic roles.<sup>76</sup> Modelled on British public schools, with English-language classes, strict formal dress codes and a curriculum infused with British values, Gordon College intended to instil a colonial British culture in its pupils.<sup>77</sup> Likewise, the Doon School in India was instructed to foster British cultural superiority under the guise of modern education.<sup>78</sup> In both cases, education was not just a mechanism of British control but also an active medium to shape understandings of colonial modernity through a distinctly British cultural lens.<sup>79</sup> Education in Abadan, as in the colonial practices in India and Sudan, portrays how the company's strategies were embedded within broader colonial modes of British governance. While Abadan lay outside of formal British rule, these Fordist technologies served to uphold the AIOC's racial capitalist order through the preservation of its cultural authority and framing definitions of modernity.



Figure 1.3. 'The Technical Institute, Abadan.' Source: ARC36130, BP.

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<sup>76</sup> Sharkey, *Living With Colonialism*, p. 40.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, pp. 41-42.

<sup>78</sup> Sanjay Srivastava, *Constructing Post-Colonial India: National Character and the Doon School*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998), pp. 1-2.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 16; Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism*, p. 66.

British Fordist measures in Abadan also extended into the realm of entertainment. When *Basgah Iran* was opened in 1931, its facilities included an outdoor cinema, and every week, new programmes of modern films and newsreels were shown to them from abroad under the company's supervision.<sup>80</sup> The AIOC also built additional cinemas, such as the Taj Cinema in 1944 for its Indian staff and an open-air cinema at Bahmanshir for Iranian labour, showcasing American, British, Indian and Arabic films.<sup>81</sup> Access to these cinemas was racially differentiated, upholding the labour hierarchy between Indian staff and Iranian labour. Still, the AIOC believed cinemas were "one of the most important and popular amenities that can be provided for entertainment, recreation and education of both staff and labour."<sup>82</sup> These leisure spaces were not simply recreational; they were part of the broader cultural and paternalistic strategy of the AIOC, which aimed to maintain a stable and productive workforce by shaping a sense of belonging and development for Iranian labourers.

In his magisterial work, James Burns contests that the cinema was regarded as the most crucial medium of the empire before the Second World War.<sup>83</sup> Examining colonial contexts in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, Burns demonstrates that the cinema was central to everyday life, with British officials utilising film media as a tool for imperial education and propaganda.<sup>84</sup> In Abadan, British films, such as 'The Londoners', projected a similar image of the British metropole as modern to its Iranian audience.<sup>85</sup> In line with British colonial strategies of hegemony, the AIOC's Fordist cinema activities in Abadan were orchestrated to cultivate the narrative of British cultural supremacy, simultaneously protecting British oil production.

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<sup>80</sup> 'Welfare and Amenities, 1945-1951,' ARC44269, BP, p. 16.

<sup>81</sup> 'Description of AIOC Activities in Abadan, 1947,' ARC55806, BP, p. 59.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> James Burns, *Cinema and Society in the British Empire, 1895-1940*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, pp. 2-5.

<sup>85</sup> *Naft Magazine*, March 1939, ARC135669, BP, p. 22.

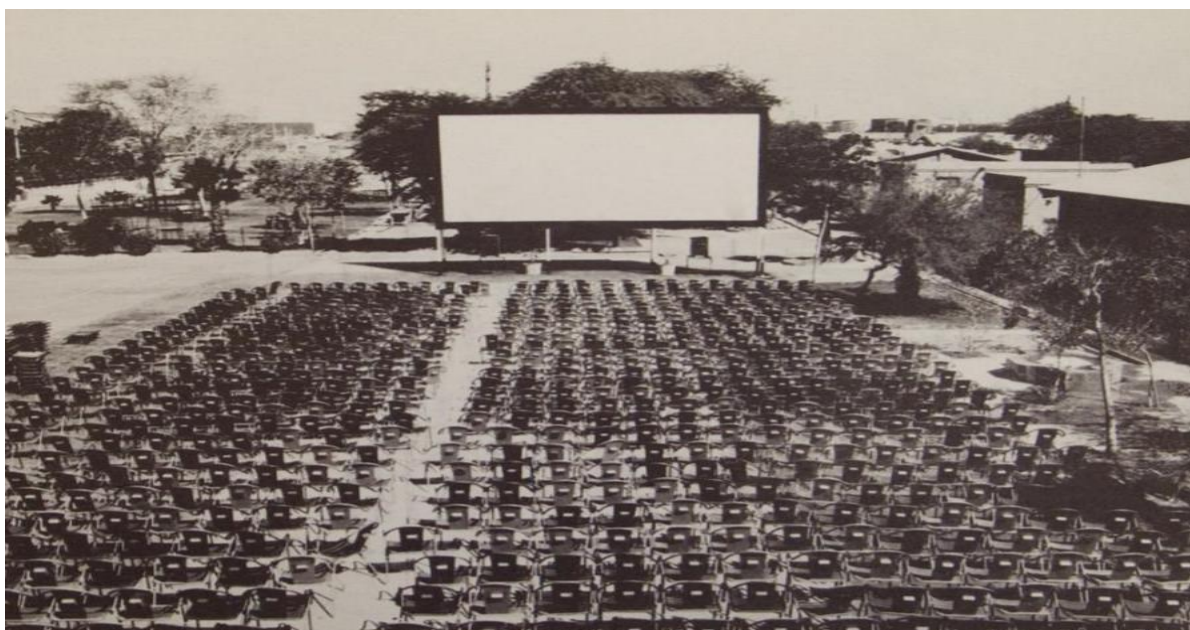


Figure 1.4. 'Outdoor Labour Cinema in 1940s Abadan.' Source: Iranian Petroleum Museum.

The AIOC's increasing entanglement within the social sphere of the Abadan population inevitably meant that its Fordist measures extended to women. In the company's archives, women are rarely mentioned at all, thus made 'doubly invisible' with the gendered operations of oil.<sup>86</sup> Yet, since the 1930s, they have held an essential role in the British maintenance of the racial capitalist order. Firstly, with an increasing number of Iranian families settling in Abadan, the AIOC actively stressed the nuclear family as a way of disciplining its workforce.<sup>87</sup> In this way, there was an emphasis placed on women to maintain the household and reproduce the next generation of labour.<sup>88</sup> In addition to this domestic role, women were also subjected to elements of the company's Fordist cultural and recreational programmes. Though to a lesser extent than men, Iranian women participated in the company's sports programmes, including athletic races and hockey at the *Basgah Iran*.<sup>89</sup> This is important as it

<sup>86</sup> Diane E. Austin, 'Doubly Invisible: Women's Labor in the US Gulf of Mexico Offshore Oil and Gas Industry,' in *Working for Oil*, ed. Atabaki, Bini, and Ehsani, pp. 399-422.

<sup>87</sup> Biglari, *Nationalising Oil*, p. 96.

<sup>88</sup> For a general discussion on Social Reproduction Theory, see Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner, 'Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 15 (1989), pp. 381-404.

<sup>89</sup> *Naft Magazine*, May 1939, ARC135671, BP, p. 30; *Naft Magazine*, July 1940, ARC185519, BP, p. 22.

illustrates that women were also subjected to the same strategy of discipline and British cultural superiority.

More significantly, the AIOC were reliant on Iranian women for their wage-labour work that underpinned the daily functioning of oil operations. Indeed, the company's medical infrastructure in Abadan, providing hospitals and healthcare, depended on women employed as midwives and nurses. This reliance was institutionalised by the company's initiation of the Nurses Training Scheme in the early 1940s and, later in 1949, the opening of The Princess Ashraf Pahlavi School of Nursing for young Iranian girls, reproducing staff for key services.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, it was primarily Iranian women who worked as teachers in kindergarten schools for employees' children, allowing male labourers to increase productivity without concern for domestic responsibilities.<sup>91</sup> In these ways, women played a crucial, if often overlooked, role in preserving the operations of the British racial capitalist system, providing essential labour within the health and education services of the company town.



Figure 1.5. 'Iranian Teachers at an Abadan Children's School.' Source: ARC44269, BP.

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<sup>90</sup> *Naft Magazine*, August 1949, ARC174253, BP, p. 6.

<sup>91</sup> 'Welfare and Amenities, 1945-1951,' ARC44269, BP, p. 16.

From the 1930s, Fordist measures in Abadan were extended and strategically deployed to consolidate British corporate hegemony over its imposed racial capitalist operation. Here, Fordism functioned as a company model to discipline and manage the population – a means of social control through welfare programmes to secure labour productivity and foster a British culture as progressive and modern. Although implemented through a company framework rather than formal colonial rule, exploring Iran through a micro-global lens uncovers how the AIOC's localised tactics fit into wider patterns of British cultural strategies of power. Iran was not an isolated case of British colonialism but a valuable aspect of the British imperial order, maximising oil production.

Yet, these AIOC efforts to control the 'human factor' of operations ultimately proved ineffective by the mid-1940s. Instead, the company's racialised and exploitative social measures in Abadan sparked the formation of a distinct Iranian national consciousness, one that threatened the British company's hegemony over Iran's oil infrastructure. This would be no clearer when the population in Abadan decided to strike in 1946.

## CHAPTER 2: NATIONAL IMAGINARIES AND OIL NATIONALISATION

On 14 July 1946, a general strike erupted in Abadan, posing a threat to the AIOC's existence. The action followed a warning issued the previous day by the Central Council of Federated Trade Unions of Iranian Workers and Toilers (CCFTU) — associated with the communist Tudeh Party — which had demanded reforms by the following morning. These included the dismissal and disarmament of local Arab tribes claimed to be aiding the company, improved pay, and an end to AIOC's interference in Iran's internal affairs.<sup>92</sup> When these demands were not met by the morning of 14 July, a mass strike swept across Khuzestan's oilfields. With more than 65,000 company employees (including Indian workers) joining the action, it significantly halted British oil operations until 16 July.<sup>93</sup>

Several works have examined this pivotal event through the lens of wartime conditions, the role of the Tudeh Party, and urban violence, ultimately linking the 1946 strike to oil nationalisation in 1951.<sup>94</sup> Building upon this scholarship, this chapter shifts focus to how Iranian workers in Abadan, particularly following the 1946 General Strike, became central to the emergence of a national Iranian consciousness. It draws attention to the growing recognition of imperialism in Iran, with the Fordist exploitative measures that Iranians were subjected to increasingly exposed in the press following the strike. British racial capitalism not only led to the first calls for oil nationalisation but also, with its promotion of a superior and modern British culture, ignited competing visions for Iran's post-colonial future.

Iran has had a rich tradition of the press since the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), and was a central pillar of this nationalist struggle against the ruling Qajar regime.<sup>95</sup> Following the inauguration of the Pahlavi dynasty and Reza Shah in 1925, newspapers were initially granted

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<sup>92</sup> Biglari, *Nationalising Oil*, p. 113.

<sup>93</sup> Abrahamian, *The Coup*, p. 19.

<sup>94</sup> Notable examples include Touraj Atabaki, 'Chronicles of a Calamitous Strike Foretold: Abadan, July 1946,' in *On the Road to Global Labour History: A Festschrift for Marcel Van der Linden*, ed. Marcel Van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth, (Boston: Brill, 2017), pp. 93-128; Nimrod Zagagi, 'An Oasis of Radicalism: The Labor Movement in Abadan in the 1940s,' *Iranian Studies*, 53.5 (2020), pp. 847-872. On its violent aspect, see Rasmus Elling, 'War of Clubs: Struggle for Space in Abadan and the 1946 Oil Strike,' in *Violence and City in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Nelida Fuccaro, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 189-211.

<sup>95</sup> Cronin, 'Popular Politics,' p. 710.

some freedom to criticise the AIOC in their publications. Yet, by 1930, the consolidation of the Shah's increasingly authoritarian rule and the country's need for finance resulted in repressive measures against the press.<sup>96</sup> However, by 1946, the media had undergone a social revolution. The wartime Allied occupation and Reza Shah's abdication in 1941 created a power vacuum in which newspapers enjoyed greater autonomy. With Mohammad Reza Shah's accession to power, this decade saw a significant shift in ideology, with political organs, such as the Tudeh's *Zafar* and *Mardom*, emerging as key actors.<sup>97</sup> Biglari has noted that, due to their popularity and circulation, such as the semi-official publication *Ettela'at*, which had a daily circulation between 40,000 and 50,000, we can take these newspapers as a diagnosis for popular feelings in society at the time.<sup>98</sup> In his iconic text, Benedict Anderson stressed how the press was a crucial component in shaping the development of nationalism through advancing the simultaneity of imagination.<sup>99</sup> In this way, the Iranian media played a vital role in shaping and disseminating nationalist sentiments against the company.

Publications from 1946, with some starting before the strike, increasingly centred Abadan and the British racial capitalist system in its national imagination. The Iranian press began to label the British company as "imperialists," pointing to the lack of autonomy afforded to Iranians, as *Jebheh* observed: "Being without any freedom, they can be compared to prisoners sentenced to hard labour."<sup>100</sup> *Irane Ma* commented that "the Oil Kings who have sucked the blood of 15 million people were not even prepared to provide the minimum necessities of life for thousands of Iranian workmen who provide rivers of liquid gold for their masters."<sup>101</sup> Such articles condemned not only the deplorable living conditions endured by the Iranian workers but also the wider exploitation of their labour for the benefit of British capitalists. Newspapers also denounced the AIOC's favouring treatment of Indian workers over native Iranians, who

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, pp. 710-711.

<sup>97</sup> Mattin Biglari, 'Abadan in the National Press during the Oil Nationalisation Movement, 1946-1951,' *The Abadan Times*, 2018. < <https://abadantimes.wordpress.com/2018/04/09/abadan-in-the-national-press-during-the-oil-nationalisation-movement-1946-51-mattin-biglari-abadan-retold/#comments> > [Accessed 26 March 2025].

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>100</sup> 'AIOC Workmen,' *Jebheh*, 20 May 1946, ARC66098, BP. Other notable examples include 'The South is a Colony,' *Zafar*, 4 September 1946, ARC66099, BP; 'Abadan,' *Rahbar*, 14 April 1946, ARC66098, BP.

<sup>101</sup> 'The First Blow to the AIOC,' *Irane Ma*, 27 May 1946, ARC66098, BP.

were left to endure the poorest conditions in their own country.<sup>102</sup> In framing these racialised working conditions as evidence of colonial domination, the press helped mobilise a national imagination based in Abadan.

The Iranian media targeted the deceptive Fordist strategies of the British racial capitalist system as part of their broader campaign against the colonial presence of the AIOC. Despite being promoted under the guise of 'welfare' and 'development,' the press condemned the educational services that deceived Iranians and supported the exploitation of labour. For instance, *Zafar*, writing on the Technical Institute, claimed that "the AIOC wishes to deceive the trainees by granting them worthless certificates with the ulterior aim to exploit the Iranians better than ever before."<sup>103</sup> In this way, the press attacked the company for the reproductive nature of their educational services, implying that Iranians were "compelled to leave school and to take up work in the AIOC in order to earn his livelihood."<sup>104</sup> The press challenged British educational intentions in Abadan, arguing that their training programmes desired to turn employees into "obedient subjects" of the capitalist order.<sup>105</sup>

In exposing the AIOC's cultural strategies of power, the Tehran press contested that their programmes were designed to subdue any formation of a distinct Iranian culture. In terms of education, including English-language classes and extra-curricular activities, a social club at the Technical Institute was initiated, according to *Bashar*, "in order that it might better control the thoughts of the students."<sup>106</sup> In 1946, the company's social Fordist activities were put at the forefront of the national imagination, reminding the population of the imperial tendencies of the company. As such, newspapers deemed the introduction of sports clubs a trick to deceive the population, "which aims at misleading the masses and deviating the wrath of a nation whose life, property and honour have been the victim of a gang of plunderers."<sup>107</sup> Tudeh's *Mardom* explained that: "At the workers' Cinema are shown the funniest Mickey

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<sup>102</sup> 'The AIOC and Iranian Workers,' *Atesh*, 4 April 1948, ARC66102, BP.

<sup>103</sup> 'Issue of Certificates,' *Zafar*, 22 November 1946, ARC66099, BP.

<sup>104</sup> 'Education in Abadan,' *Rahbar*, 15 April 1946, ARC66098, BP.

<sup>105</sup> 'I worked for the AIOC,' *Rahbar*, 19 September 1946, ARC66099, BP.

<sup>106</sup> 'The AIOC and Abadan Students,' *Bashar*, 13 July 1946, ARC66099, BP.

<sup>107</sup> 'Abadan Workmen and Workers Sports Club,' *Nedayi Haqiqat*, 12 February 1946, ARC66098, BP.

Mouse films and pictorial news of the British Empire's strength and power so as to make the workers believe that there is no match for the great power of the British Empire."<sup>108</sup> These newspapers reveal how the press in Tehran positioned Abadan not only as a site of resource exploitation but as a symbolic centre of imperial manipulation, fuelling a national imaginary in which British cultural strategies of power were unmasked as tools of domination rather than development.

The press in Iran, as in other colonial contexts, was vital in initiating and shaping anti-colonial and nationalist developments. In the case of British India, Milton Israel has argued that newspapers functioned as a crucial platform of influence, providing daily visibility to nationalist ideologies.<sup>109</sup> The growth of distinct Indian newspapers, such as *Kesari* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, reflected increasing nationalist mobilisation, critiquing colonial rule and attempting to produce anti-colonial sentiments.<sup>110</sup> Equally, the press in India not only mobilised nationalist thought but also reproduced the logic of colonial modernity in envisioning the post-colonial future.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, as in India, the Iranian press performed a dual role – challenging imperial domination while simultaneously engaging with the very structures of colonialism it sought to resist.

Following the visit of an invited group of journalists to Abadan on 6 April 1947 by the AIOC, the Iranian media began to frame British racial capitalist infrastructure and development efforts as models for Iran's future.<sup>112</sup> In an article in *Eqdam*, the journalist Abbas Khalili wrote the following after his visit: "I must say that Abadan looks like a European city. It is an example of modern civilisation."<sup>113</sup> He believed the AIOC had created the best version of prosperity and comfort, advocating that "we should follow this example if we really wish to ensure our happiness."<sup>114</sup> In the same article, he blamed the poverty of its inhabitants on the Iranian

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<sup>108</sup> 'From Tehran to Abadan,' *Mardom*, 23 September 1947, ARC66100, BP.

<sup>109</sup> Milton Israel, *Communications and Power: Propaganda and the Press in the Indian Nationalist Struggle, 1920-1947*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*; Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*.

<sup>112</sup> 'Departure of Journalists for Abadan in Connection with the Recent Action Taken by AIOC,' *Mehr-e Iran*, 6 April 1947, ARC66101, BP.

<sup>113</sup> Abbas Khalili, 'Travel Notes,' *Eqdam*, 11 May 1948, ARC66102, BP.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*.

people because “we do not know the value of life.”<sup>115</sup> The press often expressed frustration at Abadanis for not knowing how to use such modern facilities. Still, other newspapers were inspired to utilise British capitalism in Abadan as a symbol of what the Iranian nation needed to do to improve.<sup>116</sup> In this way, some shifted the prevailing view of British development in Abadan from a site of colonial exploitation to a source of emulation in pursuing modernity.

From 1949, the Iranian press was increasingly divided over whether Iran could refine and manage its oil resources without foreign assistance. Many newspapers voiced concern that Iranians lacked the technical knowledge to exploit oil, arguing that they required British expertise.<sup>117</sup> The newspaper, *Eqlim*, even supported a supplementary agreement with the company.<sup>118</sup> Yet, most publications in Tehran called for a national oil industry reform, hoping to provide thousands of jobs for Iranians and end the deplorable conditions facing workers in British oilfields.<sup>119</sup> Alongside their criticism of the AIOC, there was also a backlash against the Iranian government for allowing the company to continue its operations without interference, and fears emerged that future national oil policies could replicate similar forms of exploitation.<sup>120</sup> At the same time, public pressure mounted on the state, forcing it to take action to harness Iran’s oil wealth for national progress.<sup>121</sup> This pressure reached a critical point in December 1950, when Dr Shayigan, speaking at a Majles (parliament) session, declared, “we must nationalise oil and get rid of this company.”<sup>122</sup>

From this point, under the leadership of the United Front (a coalition of Iranian nationalist parties) and Mossadegh, widely supported by the public, the Majles was primarily concerned with foreign policy and the reassertion of Iranian sovereignty. They established a National Oil

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> ‘Law Student’s Impressions of Abadan,’ *Saba*, 14 April 1948, ARC66102, BP; ‘At the Oil Fields,’ *Atesh*, 22 April 1947, ARC66101, BP.

<sup>117</sup> ‘Iranians Must Exploit the Oil Themselves,’ *Kayhan*, 12 September 1950, ARC66107, BP.

<sup>118</sup> For examples, see ‘The Southern Oil Company,’ *Paitakht-e Ma*, 15 August 1949, ARC66104, BP; ‘One Way Open,’ *Mellat-e Iran*, 8 September 1949, ARC66106, BP; ‘The Nation is Anxious About the Oil Question,’ *Eqlim*, 18 November 1950, ARC66107, BP.

<sup>119</sup> ‘Formation of an Oil Company,’ *Kushesh*, 10 August 1949, ARC66104, BP; ‘Oil Wells in Qam,’ *Ettela’at*, 12 January 1950, ARC66106, BP.

<sup>120</sup> ‘Natural Resources of Iran,’ *Ettela’at*, 28 February 1950, ARC66106, BP.

<sup>121</sup> ‘Blood and Oil,’ *Mellat-e Iran*, 8 September 1949, ARC66106, BP.

<sup>122</sup> ‘Majles Report,’ *Ettela’at*, 19 December 1950, ARC66107, BP.

Committee in June 1950, appointing Mossadegh as chair, tasked with navigating the nationalisation of oil.<sup>123</sup> Still, the labour movement in Abadan played a vital role in accelerating the legislative framework for nationalisation. In March 1951, triggered by AIOC's wage cuts and mistreatment of Iranian workers, a general strike broke out across Khuzestan, resulting in 12 workers dead and 300 injured.<sup>124</sup> Leading newspapers blamed the AIOC for instigating the strike to undermine nationalisation, enabling them to reassert control.<sup>125</sup> The strike came to a head on 12 April when the military governor ordered military intervention, shooting into the union rallies at Abadan, which sparked violent backlash from the crowd, and 3 British officers were killed.<sup>126</sup> The strike did not end until 25 April, when Mossadegh steered his nationalisation bill through the Oil Committee.

The Oil Nationalisation Bill, passed into legislation on 29 April 1951, was a defining act of decolonisation, reinstating Iran's hegemony over its oil resources. The Tehran Press expressed this momentous occasion as a national celebration of Iran's sovereignty, marking a clear break from imperial control. The newspaper *Shahed* commented: "This paper takes pride in the fact that the Iranian government is controlling Abadan, which has been under British tyranny for the past 50 years."<sup>127</sup> In this way, the case of Iran's oil nationalisation can be situated within the broader history of decolonisation. As Myrna Santiago and Jonathan Brown have argued in the context of Mexico's oil nationalisation in 1938, oil workers were central to nationalisation.<sup>128</sup> In Abadan, the role of Iranian workers and their protests against British racial capitalism on the ground helped captivate the national imagination in the press, leading to widespread calls across the country for Iranian control across Khuzestan. Significantly, Christopher Dietrich has called for historians to interrogate Iran's national struggle for oil into decolonial studies with his conceptualisation of 'resource nationalism.'<sup>129</sup> In this light, Iran's

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<sup>123</sup> Abrahamian, *The Coup*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>125</sup> For example, see 'AIOC Workers' Strike,' *Shahed*, 9 April 1951, ARC71838, BP.

<sup>126</sup> Abrahamian, *The Coup*, p. 68.

<sup>127</sup> 'Iran Rules Abadan Once More,' *Shahed*, 10 June 1951, ARC71838, BP.

<sup>128</sup> Myrna Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labour, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jonathan C. Brown, *Oil and Revolution in Mexico*, (Berkeley: California University Press, 2022).

<sup>129</sup> Dietrich, *Oil Revolution*.

oil nationalisation must be understood as a decisive act of decolonisation that directly challenged and dislodged British capitalist rule.

Yet, while nationalisation expelled the British company, the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) reproduced signs of neo-colonial structures based on the British racial capitalist system. In an ex-company employee's papers, the NIOC board of Directors encouraged British and foreign staff to stay in Abadan and continue their work under the Iranian government.<sup>130</sup> A private letter from Prime Minister Mossadegh to the foreign staff of the former AIOC significantly reiterated the Iranian government's aspirations to make full use of foreign staff, offering the same incentives as the AIOC. Mossadegh stated that "their services should continue under the same terms and conditions with the same salaries, allowances and pensions and every inducement should be offered so that they can carry on with the exploitation of the oil with security and confidence, a matter which is of vital importance both for the Western powers and for Iran."<sup>131</sup> This letter reveals that, while nationalisation was presented as a rupture from colonial domination, Mossadegh's government sought to replicate the expertise and structure of the AIOC, maintaining foreign dominance within a novel nationalist framework. As was the case in India, British colonial rule and its practices left impressions of modernity that influenced the structures of the post-colonial state.<sup>132</sup> In this way, although oil nationalisation has often been interpreted as a decolonial triumph for the Iranian population, these documents suggest that nationalisation from above also preserved elements of the British racial capitalist system.

Ultimately, British racial capitalism and Iranian workers in Abadan stood at the centre of contested visions in the Tehran press for Iran's post-colonial future. On the one hand, particularly following the 1946 General Strike, Fordist measures of the AIOC and their consequent exploitation of Iranian workers were exposed, fuelling a national imaginary rooted in reclaiming Iranian sovereignty in Khuzestan. Indeed, this mounting pressure from the media calling for national reforms, coupled with events on the ground, pushed the

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<sup>130</sup> 'Proclamation by the temporary board of Directors of the National Oil Company,' 25 June 1951, ARC2883, BP.

<sup>131</sup> 'The Prime Minister's Message to the Foreign Staff of the Company,' ARC2883, BP.

<sup>132</sup> Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*.

National Front and Mossadegh to navigate the Oil Nationalisation Bill through parliament on 29 April 1951. On the other hand, some in the press portrayed British racial capitalism in Abadan as a model for national development, arguing that Iran lacked the expertise to manage its oil resources independently. This ambivalence was reflected in Mossadegh's appeal for British staff to remain under the NIOC, reassuring them that British racial capitalist structures would remain in place. Thus, while oil nationalisation must be understood as a pivotal moment of decolonisation from British capitalist rule, it also reproduced impressions of colonial modernity and embedded forms of neo-colonial structures in Iran's post-colonial trajectory.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation has analysed the cultural strategies of power employed by the AIOC from 1931 to maintain its racial capitalist order. Labelled modern and progressive by the company, these practices were part of a broader colonial project that sought to sustain British control. This study has also examined how such strategies in Abadan directly caused competing visions and implications for Iran's post-colonial development in the Tehran press, which not only led to decolonisation but also reproduced colonial and capitalist modernity.

From the opening of the *Basgah Iran* in July 1931, the AIOC introduced Fordist measures to sustain its hegemony over Iranian workers and the population in Abadan. As Gramsci's discussion has shown, Fordism was a capitalist model through which corporations regulated all aspects of workers' quotidian life.<sup>133</sup> In this context, the AIOC's programmes, under the guise of 'development' and 'welfare,' were designed to reproduce compliant unskilled labour, foster unity among the workforce, and maximise production. Through leisure clubs, sports programmes, educational services, and entertainment facilities, as seen across the British Empire from India to Hong Kong, the company implemented Fordist measures for the social control of Abadan. These services extended to women, playing a crucial role in the maintenance of daily oil operations, not only as a disciplining force for Iranian workers but also in their roles as teachers, midwives and nurses. Indeed, Fordism worked to entrench labour discipline and British cultural supremacy. In this light, the AIOC's Fordist measures must be seen within British cultural strategies of control across formal and informal colonies.

This dissertation has also stressed how those characteristics of AIOC's racial capitalism in Abadan gave rise to competing national imaginaries surrounding Iran's post-colonial future in the media. Catalysed by the workers' action on the ground, especially from the 1946 General Strike, the press increasingly turned to the company's exploitative and deceptive Fordist policies to articulate a nationalist vision for sovereignty. From 1949, Tehran newspapers, alongside the vital role of oil workers, amplified calls for oil nationalisation, driving the

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<sup>133</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*.

government to instigate action to expel the British. The passing of the Oil Nationalisation Bill on 29 April 1951 marked the culmination of Iran's national struggle for resource nationalism, connecting it to Mexico's oil nationalisation in 1938 and the global context of decolonisation. Yet, those same Fordist structures and developments also inspired reproductive ideals of colonial modernity, with some in the press viewing it as a source of emulation for Iran's future. This ambivalence became clear when the NIOC's establishment in Abadan exhibited continuities with the hierarchies of the racial capitalist system that decolonisation had ostensibly aimed to resist.

Ultimately, a micro-global historical lens has enabled this dissertation to map Iran onto global discussions of British colonial rule and decolonisation. AIOC Fordist measures in Abadan reflected British cultural strategies of power across its empire, positioning Iran as a critical, yet often overlooked, node in the global British order. In this way, oil nationalisation must be discussed within broader decolonial studies, highlighting the national struggle for economic resources and how it could reproduce notions of colonial modernity and neo-colonial capitalist structures for Iran's post-colonial development. Thus, this study has demonstrated that Iran must be analysed within a global context to appreciate its colonial and post-colonial processes.

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