

Time to Go Back or Forward? Checking the Relevance of the Proletariat/Precariat Dichotomy in the Iranian Political Economy

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Abstract

Thanks to the popular literature on the global expansion of neoliberalism, the concepts of *Precariat*, *Precarity*, and *Precariousness* have been accepted, in both the academic and the public spheres, to describe the essence of contemporary labor relations. This critical turn, however, has not sufficed to discredit traditional left concepts like *Proletariat* and *Class Conflict*. The turn has not yet provided the context for a decisive theoretical shift. The advocates of the orthodox Marxist framework have cast doubts on the significance of contributions made by such neologisms. Using a combination of qualitative methods, including participant observation, problem-centered interviews, and focus groups, this study has gone beyond the proletariat/precariat dichotomy to explore the lived experience of Iranian temporary workers. Based on the results, the precarious workers in Iran cannot reduce their demands to distributive fairness because their productive redundancy is the result of both precarian and proletarian moments. The supplementary themes of Marginality, Invisibility, and Centricity are also useful to explain the mechanisms through which the Iranian subalterns are dealing with precarity.

Keywords Proletariat · Precariat · Precarity · Marginality · Centricity · Invisibility · Political economy

Introduction

The precariat, according to Standing (2011: pp. 10–14), suffers from a lack of security in various domains like the labor market, employment, skill reproduction, and representation. Standing adds elements of crisis in career and identity to claim that what is felt by this emergent class is not similar to that of the proletariat. He then takes his arguments beyond labor relations to put the precariat in the category of *Denizens*, people deprived of some fundamental citizenship rights. Such brutal deprivations reinforce the inequalities in corporate environments. While *the* precariat has to deal with the limited denizen entitlements, privileged groups like *the salariat* and *the elite* enjoy higher levels of participation in both their corporate and public lives. This “even worse than the proletariat” image

has had responses in the critical literature. Seymour (2020) finds it too negative, with little objective results in addressing specific class interests. Frase (2013) accepts the concept as just a “conditional” description. Wright (2016) denies the class distinction of the precariat. Jonna and Bellamy Foster (2016) associate it with the long history of the “reserve army of labor.” White (2018) refers to extreme cases of precarious jobs in the introductory period of the capitalist mode of production to disagree with the uniqueness of the precariat. He considers the current stage of capitalism as the climax of an incremental trend of reserve army production. Sproll and Wehr (2014) focus on the groups in the population, e.g., women and migrants, whose experience is absent in mainstream discourses on precarity. Worse cases happen in non-Western countries where additional factors, at national, local, and sectoral levels, might be missed by reasoning on the roots and mechanisms of *precarization*. Betti (2016) takes a post-colonial stance to regard the precariat as just another product of a north-centric approach that intentionally hides the racial and gendered history of precarious work in the Global South. Scully (2016) traces the experience of precariousness in the historical Southern work to remind us that the golden age of the welfare state is also a Western invention, a figment in deep contrast with the traditions of the repressive state in the colonial past of the South. Siegmann and Schiphorst (2016) fill the

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gap between Informal and Precarious by a framework of intervention based on the intersection of the global hegemony of neoliberalism and the process of marginalization experienced by workers in developing countries. The principles suggested by the Council of Global Unions (CGU) are also helpful in resisting the prevalence of precarious jobs, e.g., principles of equal treatment, well-documented contracts, health protections, time limits, and the right to be unionized (Serrano, 2014). However, the experience of precarity in developing countries is far from these ideals.

The surprising revolutions of the Arab Spring were known to be rooted in rampant precarity (Herrera, 2017). Considering the precariat as an evolving concept, Standing replaces the conventional class-based analysis with a relational viewpoint to include social, political, economic, and cultural factors (Fig. 1). Based on his arguments, the precariat could be differentiated from the other social classes by extreme labor/life instability (Standing, 2014b: p. 3; Standing, 2014d: p. 1); deprivation of fundamental citizen rights (Standing, 2012a: p. 590; Standing, 2012b: p. 2; Standing, 2014c: p. 971); exclusion from the welfare frameworks (Standing, 2012a, 2014c: p. 970); alienation from the means of production (Standing, 2014c); distributive demands (Standing, 2014a: 121; Standing, 2014c); and transformative reliance on deliberative democracy (Standing, 2011: pp. 180–181; Standing, 2012b; Standing, 2014a: pp. 291–292).

Standing’s theoretical flexibility has inspired us to assume the inadequacy of the Precariat/Proletariat duality. Our research develops its questions based on a dialogue between two different approaches to the experience of precarity in Iran. While the first approach is known for an inviolable focus on the proletariat as the protagonist of social revolutions, the second tends to incorporate diverging concepts, like the precariat, to contribute to the literature on Iranian political economy.

The Proletariat Above All

Khosravi (2022) praises the *Workers’ Council* as the achievement of the proletariat to defend its legitimate social and economic rights. He then talks of the state as a superstructure

doomed to vanish, as the state, in contrast with the democratically administered councils, would perpetuate the capitalist mode of production. Pishro (2021) defines the *Commune State* as the core of the proletarian social revolution. As the central subject of socialist strategy, the proletariat should stick to the consultative structures of democratic decision-making as the compass with which the revolutionary changes would not lose their class-based directions. Mohseni (2022) comes with a paradoxical question of the right ways of staying loyal to the historical promise of hegemony for the proletariat and respecting the other social movements without tolerance for the current orders. So, the hegemonic bloc would dedicate the pioneering role to the proletariat as the supreme moral and intellectual force that makes contingent alliances with the other progressive movements to realize socialism. Maleksha (2022) warns about compromising the revolutionary leadership role of the proletariat for a coalition with the reactionary proponents of a forged pluralism. Based on these instances of orthodox readings of the Iranian political economy, the proletariat is the only legitimate concept to address the experience of subordination in the bourgeois society. Not surprisingly, the Gramscian literature has had little effect on this conception. While Gramsci tried to redefine the left political project to make it more accustomed to the contemporary notions of democracy, the previously mentioned images of the proletariat are still intact in edifying the proletariat as the superior class of the future.

But Also the Precariat

According to Abrahamian (2018: pp. 550–553), in the years leading to the 1979 revolution and despite modern appearances and the establishment of welfare plans and apparatuses, urban poverty was rising in the main cities of Iran. During the 1960s, the GDP index started to grow, but then it was manipulated by the state to hide the rising inequalities in all regions of the country. Extensive waves of migration resulted in various types of unemployment, and the promises of industrialization were nullified by the prevalence of merchants, smugglers, and speculators. Ashraf and Banu-Azizi

Fig. 1 Standing’s framework on the distinct characteristics of the precariat

Characteristics of the emergent class of Precariat	Extreme labor/life instability
	Deprivation of the citizen rights
	Exclusion from the welfare frameworks
	Alienation from the means of production
	Distributive demands
	Reliance on deliberative democracy

(2014: p. 192) do not deny the late participation of industrial workers in the last stages of the revolution. However, the urban poor and rural migrants, as the particular strata sympathetic to the apocalyptic mission of Khomeini, had a distinctive role in capturing the battlefields for the revolution. They were especially helpful in leading the street riots and strengthening the revolutionary bloc with the element of violence. Abdollahi (2020: p. 129) goes into detailed statistics on the distribution of constant capital and realized employment in the 1970s to claim that the capital-intensive paradigm adopted by the large industrial enterprises left a majority of middle and small ones behind with low productivity and labor-intensive agendas. The result was a return to the chaotic years of the 1950s (ibid. 152); the state lost its clues on the relationship between industrial investments and the rising population of the unemployed. The bureaucrats took steps forward to intervene, while the welfare policymakers had no plan for the millions left out of those developmental phantasies (ibid. 226–227). Raisdana (2021: pp. 288–292) rejects the revenue-oriented approaches to the high unemployment rate in Iran. Instead, he calls for a focus on the priority of job creation. Following the implementation of structural adjustment policies, new sectors of the country's population went through bitter experiences of displacement, beggary, felony, addiction, and prostitution. So, the national resources should be allocated to revive the foundations of a labor-based order. These instances of unorthodox approaches to the Iranian political economy do not oppose proletarian praxis, but leave some room for recognizing the various experiences of precarity. Their narratives on the marginalized colonies of impoverished people concur with Standing's definition of the precariat.

Methodology

The orthodox and unorthodox readings of the Iranian political economy have had a peaceful coexistence in the decades after the 1979 revolution. The orthodox have considered any uprising of the subaltern as a proletarian movement, and the unorthodox have had their back and forth in listening to the proletarian voices and vocalizing the precariat. This research is a result of developing a more specific account of the extent to which these different approaches might be practically relevant in transforming the lived experience of the Iranian subaltern. The narratives on the experience of precarity had to be vocalized in this research, both individually and collectively.

We used an *abductive* strategy which, according to Blaikie (2007: pp. 8–10), is the appropriate choice for inspecting the everyday language, notions, motives, and understandings of the social actors and then converting them to relevant technical concepts and themes of social sciences. So the abductive

strategy involves an exploratory study leading to a theory based on the lay concepts extracted during the research.

We considered data triangulation by diversifying the fields and sources (Flick et al., 2004: p. 178). Employing snowball technique to make a group of research subjects, we interviewed colleagues and students to gradually find new participants. The final group was composed of 32 participants with different social and economic backgrounds who attended all phases of the research (Table 1).

To have a methodological triangulation, we used a combination of participant observations, problem-centered interviews, and focus groups. Focus groups, by definition, are used to articulate and then critically challenge the normative assumptions of the participants (Bloor et al., 2002: pp. 4–5). After the individual interviews in which every interviewee developed her/his account of precarity, the two focus groups came to review all those reflections in a dialectical manner.

We intentionally omitted the data gathered, and the themes suggested, through the snowball interviews, to respect the voices of those who joined us later. We also kept the number of our sociologist fellows down¹ to make sure that the lay concepts found during the research would have the least of the familiar tone of social sciences. After finalizing the list of participants, we had an introductory meeting to have the first round of observations. Following the meeting, we did individual interviews. Then we held two focus groups to review and develop the questions asked during the problem-centered interviews (Fig. 2; Fig. 3).

As for the research problem and questions, we focused on a phenomenological approach to prioritize the meanings made and given by the participants. Hence, we assumed our complementary roles in asking about the main qualities of participants' precarious jobs, the insurance plan they were qualified for, the everyday concepts and keywords they used to address precarity, the problems they had with their jobs, and the policies they suggested to fight precarity.

Findings

The Reserve Army of Labor and Exploitation

From the start of the first meeting, we expected the orthodox participants to be more active in defending their class-based understandings. They did more than that by focusing on the redundant concept of precariat. The other participants, however, were keen enough to pick what seemed to be relevant. The existence of reserve army of labor and the unstoppable

¹ The proponents of orthodox Marxism stayed through the last steps to help us continue the critical dialogue between the concepts of Precariat and Proletariat.

Table 1 The research participants

Maggie, 39, sociologist, Tehran	Dia, 37, steel company worker, Ahvaz	Lyra, 44, agency worker, Varamin	Lio, 45, project worker, Mahshahr	Hedy, 42, part-time nurse, Tehran	Maya, 36, engineer, Tehran	Fiona, 37, agency work medical assistant, Tehran	Mira, 38, anthropologist, Yazd
Leno, 40, retailer and procurement officer, Arak	Macho, 38, capital market analyst, Tehran	Eti, 32, service provider, Tehran	Dalo, 33, agricultural engineer, Qazvin	Sid, 40, engineer, Tehran	Zora, 37, teacher, Tehran	Lubo, 41, marriage advisor, Qom	Judy, 38, sociologist, Mashhad
Shon, 39, engineer, Tehran	Lona, 38, part-time researcher, Tehran	Nino, 24, custodian, Tehran	Nara, 34, freelance welfare researcher, Tehran	Sam, 39, software developer, Isfahan	Keil, 40, welfare expert, Shiraz	Teno, 40, elementary school teacher, Tabriz	Meg, 34 sociologist, Tehran
Mona, 37, sociologist, Tehran	Ela, 37, anthropologist, Tehran	Nina, 28, physicist, Shahr'e'Rey	Sieh, 32, part-time art worker, Baluchistan	Eba, 43, simple construction worker, Islamshahr	Bela, 26, part-time secretary, Semnan	Liam, 38, environmental activist, Isfahan	Jade, 33, organizational mentor, Tehran

process of exploitation were acknowledged by almost all of the participants:

There is always pressure from those who are ready to replace you quickly. So your bargaining power decreases continuously. You should prioritize the principle of saving your spot. The exploitative power comes from this alloy; You are officially silenced and there is nothing to lessen the pressure of this slavery-like situation. You should remember that any reference to the legal considerations would amount to negative points on your personal records. (Maggie)

The Hope for a Global Rise and Victory

The emphasis on an orthodox class-based explanation had its own limits. Keil tried to give an erudite account of the maximized exploitation, but it just startled some of the participants:

It is a simplification to say that we are being deskilled because this country is under global pressure to keep the national economy exposed to the destructive effects of commercial and financial capital. It just exonerates the agents of this situation. (Dia)

Following the tension over the global explanations, the collective hopes of the orthodox were also vetoed. Liam did her best to present a global version of “optimism of the will,” but the experience of some participants was against that:

We respect your dream of a collective withdrawal by developing countries. We respect your wishes for a radical change in our lives. Yet, you are attacking our concrete and situational hopes this way. You do not help us to be active in making this better. Your valuable knowledge on how they raised the energy prices is appreciated here, but we pass this prescription of long-term misery. (Lyra)

In response to the pessimism expressed by almost all participants, the orthodox tried to be more empathic by attacking the neoliberals whose ideal situation would be “to have an army of free workers dispatched to the fields of work and then transferred to eat and save energy for the next day” (Teno), but the reactions were quite surprising:

Here I am representing the workers whose actions create profit. So we have some practical sense of the neoliberal policies. Here, but, you see people who differ from us regarding their absence in profit creation. If we express grief on our exclusion from insurance plans, they are living a worse kind of exclusion. I have my memories of eating and sleeping soon to save energy for another day of ultimate exploitation, but they have had no similar experience. (Lio)

Fig. 2 Four pillars of research methodology

Abductive Strategy	Methodological Triangulation	Data Triangulation	Objectivity and Reliability
•To inspect the motives and understanding of the social actors •To develop a theory based on the lay concepts emerged during the research	•Participant Observations •Problem- Centered Interviews •Focus Groups	•Research subjects found through snow-ball technique •Final Patricipants with sufficiently diverse social and economic backgrounds	•Omission of data from the exploratory interviews •Analytical focus on the final meetings, interviews and focus groups •Intentionally limited number of participants with sociological backgrounds

Hope and Despair

The observations of the first meeting went beyond the best of our imaginations. The participants not interested in orthodox leftism did more than just qualify the positions expressed by their rivals. They used their break-time to make stronger cases. The orthodox were quite eloquent due to their reliance on a well-set paradigm. On the other front, however, there were various positions with potential conflicts and some common features. A rival paradigm per se was needed to keep that evolving front from falling apart:

We are witnessing very different positions here, because this is the society they, the orthodox, try to reduce to a war between two fronts. So we should not be ashamed of this diversity. Still, we should be more convincing by converting this variety to a number of good arguments. If we put all these differences in just two categories, we should come up with the categories that cannot be easily incorporated into their class-based understanding. (Hedy)

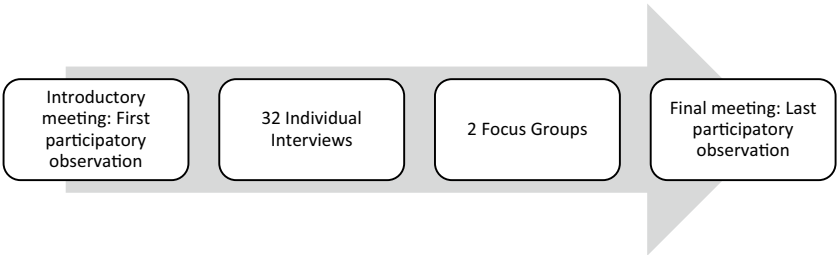
Upon their return, the unorthodox tried to be more specific in pointing out what they had missed in their cohesive arguments. The ambiguous role of the state was one, to begin with. The unorthodox were against the minimalism on the games played by the state. Some arguments, at least, were needed to explain that minimalism. Another caveat was on the differences between the global capitalists and their Iranian counterparts. The orthodox were also silent on the characteristics

of the Iranian welfare system. Besides, the dysfunctionality of welfare measures in Iran had just the same class-based answer in the orthodox paradigm. In short, the united front of the orthodox was apparently strong, but it faced a transmissibility crisis in analyzing the objective practices of people who do not start their days by reviewing the orthodox narratives on the eternal conflicts between social classes:

We admire your poise in theorizing the world, but we, the people engaged with the malevolent experience of poverty, should have a place in your theories. While I have insurance difficulties with my employer, here you see people who long for the position I am having. Here we also see people who have not had a chance to receive the overly debated minimum wage. Your image of society is too abstract to see these details. According to that image, a central battle is going on in society and none of what is happening around is noteworthy. On this side, we are paying for the broadening of those margins. Right up until this moment, you have not considered any of the details we addressed here. They are not worthy of your attention yet. (Maya)

In this third-world country we are already subalterns in terms of citizen rights. I asked about the acceptable behavior of the state, and the answer was the one I had received before. Something is not right here. I live under certain legal, governmental, social, and cultural settings. Where are these elements in your theoretical arguments? We are not, and we should not be, inter-

Fig. 3 Four steps of data gathering



ested in scholastic debates on how the world could be a better place. I accepted to be in this research because I needed to understand why I am becoming so insignificant in this society. I was not like this ten years ago. The more I did to live better, the less I succeeded in keeping what I had. Why should I care for your lectures on how a global factor affects my life? (Fiona)

Social Narratives on Precarity

The dialogues on the irrelevance of a global left orthodoxy were instructive to focus the individual interviews on the local capitalist order. The local order was in partial agreement with the Western paradigm and yet distinctive as well due to the particular relations between the social, political, and economic features. The lay concepts developed through this stage could help portray the experience of precarity in Iran.

The Ceaseless Shine of Familial Privileges

One of the constant themes in the individual interviews was the strong effects of familial conditions. Several interviewees emphasized the essential role of a “strong family” in providing the preliminary requirements of a continuous success:

In a weak family, you could spend years of no self-confidence while your parents play the role of impartial observers. On the contrary, a strong family gives you two or three scores before all the games. (Mira)

Based on the arguments made by the interviewees, the social conditions have had a reverse effect in the case of familial calculations. That is, not only have the modernized relations failed to weaken the familial ties, but those ties have found new recognition due to their ubiquitous functionality. In particular, the interviewees saw a rise in the independent economic roles of families in the current Iranian society:

A good family can guarantee you a minimum self-sufficiency. Any small personal business in this country would be much more justifiable than dealing with an employer. In such a business, you will have bargaining power. The Iranian markets have become ruthless. You would need such an independent factor to defend yourself in times of crisis. (Leno)

The protective element of these arguments reflects a social phenomenon. A modern advanced economy is expected to be reliable and consistent. The Iranian economy, however, has lost the qualities essential to such consistency:

For those who have enough possessions to save themselves from the risks resulted by consecutive economic shocks, the project and short-term jobs are still an

option; They might choose it to have their own plans for work, travel, and reading. (Macho)

So a strong family is a supporting unit of vital possession and for staying independent from what is going on in the national economy:

I wish I had a family to support me in a business. I never had a bureaucratic character. It is an option for conservative people who can hide their personal lives. You just own two apartments in this city and never think of a bureaucratic job. You are the Boss then. All the banks will be at your disposal. You can add to your possessions year by year. (Eti)

The Shrewd

Deep feelings of inferiority are not limited to the deprivation of fundamental possessions. The winning positions in such a national economy are not distributed haphazardly. The shrewd, the winners of different games of profiteering, the interviewees repeatedly said, possess special qualities:

I have a shrewd friend who liquidated his little factory in 2019 and, right before that huge inflation, bought several fertile lands in northern Iran. The profit he has made is unbelievably higher than the best he could have made in that factory. (Dalo)

So, *the shrewd* have the brain to live in accord with the rules of the game in this economy. They do not study humanities to become useless graduates with no chance for decent employment (Meg and Mona). The shrewd are interested in disciplines like finance, law, economics, or management. They finally find their right spots in this backward economy (Meg). The shrewd do not start campaigns to fight the commodification of health and education. On the contrary, they are agile in grabbing their shares in these anti-society policies (Mona).

The Adapted

The reactionary tendencies of the economy, though, impose additional costs on those who want to fight for advanced developmental changes:

Every day, I review by myself that we are mainly deprived of development in this country. That is why I am not that interested in traditional concepts like exploitation. In most cases, I see no sign of work overload or the pressure to maximize productivity. Even normal averages of efficiency are quite rare in this country. So I keep my left tendency for myself and defend the priority of development. By development, I especially mean a revival of long-term strategic planning. Upon

the prevalence of long-term policymaking, it would be possible to consider social investment and social welfare supports as the necessary features of a work-based economy. Making the state accountable, again, to the public fields of health and education and recovering the promises of comprehensive insurance would depend as well on the possibility of long-term planning. (Sid)

Sid's position on the backwardness of the Iranian economy leads to the question of how this economy still manages to survive and meet the functions of a modern state. Zora claims that a part of this functionality is related to the better performance of the privatized sectors of society:

It has been the constant pretext for all the privatization cases in recent decades. A particular field is reported to be dysfunctional under public administration, and then it is transferred to some private entities, and suddenly, the performance goes high again. (Zora)

Zora insists that young teachers like herself would prefer to work in one of those privatized schools because people there need to be innovative to keep their jobs. Yet, Zora continues, the teachers of public schools could go on for years without any changes or evaluative reports on their performance.

While the shrewd are skilled in capturing the existing profits as much as possible, Sid and Zora belong to the adapted category. The adapted are not interested in the ongoing trends of the national economy, but they finally find a way to live and deal with the current situation:

I have always had the requirements to emigrate, but it is not an option. We leave our identity and meanings here. This economy should go forward and give us a chance to be a part of Iran's future. This backwardness is the result of revering particular social types. The elite groups here are not close to what you normally see in advanced nations. We are destined to lose because the country is paying the costs of a reactionary elitism. (Sid)

The Connected

The data accumulated through the problem-centered interviews helped us direct our attention to the social relations based on which the patterns of elitism in Iran differed from those of the developed societies. We had to ask the interviewees about their knowledge of the Iranian elite and the relations involved in perpetuating those relations. After several interviews, the themes of *connectedness* came up to complete the ones previously extracted in this research. In the absence of conventional capitalism, the Iranian capitalist order has been a fertile ground for some particular networks. The elite, from the highest ranks of those networks, administer the national economy using formal and informal powers:

The good genes are living a different life here. They make good money, and in times of crisis, they make even more. For example, no one asks about privatizing public hospitals. Most of their board members have the connections to capture such public entities overnight. (Lubo)

Just check out the rising prices in the house market during the last three decades. The powers behind this market would not allow anyone to threaten their benefits. (Shon)

The connected, as the clusters derived from the elite groups, are the unparalleled winners in this economy. They initiate and manage the profit networks that might be open to the shrewd occasionally. As listed by the interviewees, Construction, Banking, State Contract, Finance, Speculation and Brokerage, Privatized Medicine, Health, Insurance and Education, International and Internal Trade, and different sorts of managerial positions were some instances of the privileged positions set aside for the connected:

The procurement office is next to ours. They officially do nothing but coordinate some deals on their phones. Such jobs are never competitive. You should be connected to be a candidate for these easy and well-compensated jobs. (Jade)

Even high-tech companies need the connection to survive. They finally need to receive some loans or permits. No one can be free from such considerations. (Sam)

As a relative to the school manager, my colleague had a contract with different terms and conditions. (Nina)

The Iranian Precariat

The emergence of the adapted, the shrewd, and the connected inspired us to hold the two preplanned focus groups in a more dialogical way. The unorthodox had finally spoken up in their interviews. It was time to return to Standing's framework and invite the participants to interpret their situations in comparison with the precariat. As the motivational presentation, we prepared several slides of the main arguments made by Standing. We also became active as the moderators of the focus group in adding some social comments on how Standing decided to differentiate the precariat as an emergent class. As well as the orthodox who were ready to muse over the topic, we were eager to vocalize the unorthodox in this overall comparison.

The First Encounter Agitated by the previous discussions, the unorthodox received the slides in clear acclamation. For an hour, they were louder in finding the exact similarity between their experience and the slides' contents. The orthodox had no answer but expressing their despair on how such a redundant concept could be delusive:

I am just reminded of the concepts of neo-feudalism or extraction. These are just symptoms of a severe illness in the left front. We should go back to the key concepts of class-conflict and use the other concepts for complementary purposes. (Keil)

As the moderators, we were entitled to intervene in the polemics uncondusive to the explanatory ends of the focus groups. So we returned to some details of the slides to remind the participants about the complexities attended by Standing. The intervention was effective, especially in weakening the chants on the genius of Standing and in vocalizing those who were keen on the points missed by the current definition of the precariat.

The Precariat Reconsidered Sid took the first step to qualify the total correspondence between Standing's precariat and its Iranian samples:

According to this framework, the middle-class people who used to feed and support the welfare state, are now prone to the pressure of falling down on the welfare hierarchy. As a middle-class citizen in Iran, my experience of precarity is different, as we are not pushed to the lower positions of a normal welfare hierarchy. Some of us here have done a lot to find one of those precarious jobs that give us the chance to use a bit of what we learned in the academy. So we are definitely precariat but these differences should be considered too. (Sid)

Macho went back to the role of the state as the reference of welfare policies:

Is it not the state to be accountable to society in the case of cutting the ties between what we do and the welfare they provide? My understanding is that the state is so weak here that it has literally lost its sovereignty on many social affairs. My job is directly related to free markets, but I think what is happening here between the state and the market is pathologically wrong. (Macho)

Liam came with a short comment on how the talks are replacing the concept of neoliberalism with some wordy descriptions, but it was not accepted by the unorthodox:

Tell my story as a marginalized woman by the concept of neoliberalism. I have tasted precarity in whatever jobs I had, but it was nothing like what you say. We, the women, are not just exploited by the upper hands of free-market forces. We have been kept out, socially and politically, from the scopes of many job markets. (Mona)

"What about my story?" said Sieh, who was a silent observer in all previous chapters of this research:

I am a woman from a rural area in Baluchistan. Should I blame neoliberalism or the state for converting us to some pure numbers? When I went to the city to have this underpaid part-time job, the only revenue my parents had was the monthly subsidies. We do not exist for the state. Some of us die and it takes years for the statesmen to update their lists. (Sieh)

Sieh's experience could not be categorized as just an extreme case of precariatization:

I told you about my job in a private school where they removed my name from the official lists of employees and then did whatever they wanted to my unofficial contract. That was an ordinary case of invisibility and Sieh is giving us a harsh one here. (Zora)

The "Invisibility" theme resonated with the experiences of some participants. Mira remembered one of her jobs in which the manager had warned about any legal complaints:

In such environments, the main rule of the game is: there is no rule. Hired in Baluchistan or some importer company in Tehran, they want you nonexistent. You should not dare to be seen, either socially or legally. (Mira)

"Have you not had the chance of filling up those job-seeking forms or being employed by companies?" responded Sieh, who was unsatisfied with the sympathetic comments on invisibility. However, her objection was rejected by some participants:

And you think those forms work for us, or there is a state pushing the headhunter companies to find us the jobs we want as soon as possible? That is not true. We mostly find our jobs through informal networks. Zora is right about the harshness of your experience, but ours is not that different. (Nino)

The state's memory is already full without our names. We misguidedly expect the statesmen to make policies and write plans to keep the population employed. They are amused by different concerns. You are right about our easier access to the state and market, but it has not given us a distinctive privilege in this economy. (Fiona)

The Invisible and the Overly Visible Sieh broke her silence to help us find a common feature in the lives of the Iranian precariat. However, the extracted spectrum of marginality-invisibility was essentially negative. To be precise, the spectrum was an account of the state's absence in some domains of the Iranian economy, but it failed to explain the vivid cases of the state's presence in other ones. So, we started the second focus group with the hope of developing

an affirmative account of the mechanisms of producing precarity in the Iranian economy:

The statesmen are not forgetful in this case. They do not need us. Their plans for us are mostly cost-oriented. They even open the doors of the universities to us to postpone the costs of planning and budgeting for our future. (Mona)

What they do to us while ignoring our excluded legal and social situations is keeping their repressive forces ready to do their jobs if needed. (Bela)

We had to intervene again to stress the explanatory goals of the session. Zora responded well by bringing up the label of the powerless:

We have lost the power to bargain and negotiate with the employers. They are the powerful side, and we are powerless. The powerless should be careful all the time. They cannot be mistakenly involved in the activities of the formal workers. The strike is a fancy word for us. We should be preoccupied with the arduous details of our work. I am, for instance, busy with the shameful difficulties of personal branding. I am deprived of all my legal rights. I have no power to change this. The best I can do is to be active in marketizing myself as still useful. (Zora)

The social relations leading to this divide between the powerful and the powerless seemed influential in forming a distinctive layer at the zenith of the Iranian economy:

The powerful have the connections to be legally saved. They have the laws and rules to rely on. They have excuses to marginalize women. They have the power to suddenly fire all of us. (Zora)

The Theme of Centricity

It was a wise move, inspired by the theme of powerlessness, to listen carefully to the narratives of the participants on the relations of power:

In the case of private schools, they had the links to keep themselves away from any risks of legal audition. They were vigilant in protecting those links. Those links kept them entitled to do whatever they wanted arbitrarily. (Zora)

In contrast with the ideological affiliates of the state, the private entrepreneurs use their lobbies to do whatever they want to their employees. They just need to support whoever supports them on the hierarchies of power. (Sid) Strangely, the pattern of ideological dependence is repeated in the financial ones. The center, in turn, depends on the dependent networks. (Judy)

Judy went on to tell us her story of how she had lost her position due to a simple conflict with one of those centers of power:

It is mutual and it remains like that. Spend years and years in a position, be the best in whatever you do, and think of something unexpected or undefined by your primary dependence on the elite and then wait for the horrible consequences. (Judy)

Another problem, usually missed by official analyses, is the fact that regardless of the time and quality of these relations, there should always be a long shadow of informality on everything:

I have never thought of my contracts as something saved for getting litigious in the future. The world does not work that way here. We should respect this informality. We cannot make them any real trouble, because they are able to ban us from working in any node of their networks. The hidden contract is exactly the one you should keep by your informal habits and skills. (Zora)

The centricity theme emerged this way. Based on the participants' narratives, the power relations were not despotic or overly centralized. Conversely, they were prolonged and disseminated through the formation of *interconnected circles*. Shon, Liam, and Maggie had a dialogue to decide on the theme:

It is not like an all vertical structure. You are always the weaker player, but you have your own ways of keeping the position and your privileges. (Shon)

I never felt this power you are talking about. I was ready, everyday, to be punished and fired. I had my system of dealing with the complexities around but after all I was quite defenseless. I do not want to adorn my bitter experience with such imaginations. (Liam)

What I am hearing from Shon is that we are weak but we still have a system of resistance. Cannot that be counted as a different form of power? I think it can. (Maggie)

I like to believe it but I have never experienced this power. Where was this power when the inflation went crazy and I had to sign a contract with a decrease in my salary. (Liam)

Did that system of yours work to keep your position? Did you not have your ways of keeping the other side dependent upon your outputs? (Shon)

We do not deny the inferiority of our positions here, but the truth is more than that. Some of us are like Zora who is known to be in mutual working connections with those centers of power. We should acknowledge this. (Maggie)

I suggest the theme centrality to cover it all, because here we should recognize the fact that there are people who enjoy inclusion as the weaker sides of these relations and there are also the ones who should wait for similar chances. (Shon)

The theme of centrality was received very well by most of the participants. Following the rules of *centricity*, different centers of power are contingently formed while they stay in collective harmony. The relations of centrality qualify many of the established beliefs on the networks of power. The powerless people, as the ones left out of those interconnectivities, should master the art of flexibility to have limited chances of becoming visible. Otherwise, there are little hopes for those who choose to stay untouched by these particular circles of power:

They do have the power to set the rules in these relationships, but they should finally think of the fate, logic, and costs of what they do to us. Here we enter to read our lines in this scenario. They could keep us deprived of contract or insurance, but they also need us to abide by their rules. (Shon)

Finally, Zora added comments on how the ideological factors are also in agreement with these relations of power:

Most of our employers have been ideologically close to the ideals of the state. They have never had any problem with mass layoffs. You give them the reason and they will do it over and over again. They are fine with the required measures to keep their shares of market. They do what it takes to monopolize national and local markets. They actually have even more power to disobey the legal and conventional rules and laws. They have the power to be more exceptional. (Zora)

Discussion: Precarity and Particularity

The results of this research should help understand the mechanisms of reproducing precarity in Iran. The themes extracted here do not represent some side effects in a normal capitalist order. Combined with the two groups of the elite and the salariat, the shrewd and the connected have synergic effects in creating a particular ensemble. The centrality as the conclusive theme shows how the Iranian national resources fail to save millions from precarity.

The centric circles capture the resources to distribute the fortunes of power. Aside from the ideologically charged circles, the other circles appreciate the paths of distribution to maximize their share of the existing wealth. They follow the rules of the elite to host the connected and the shrewd. These synergies of predation and dispossession leave a majority of people alone to suffer from intense precarity.

This outline of the reigning forces in the Iranian economy is in agreement with some contributions made by unorthodox analysts. Maljou (2018: pp. 24–26) emphasizes the essential conflicts between the interests of the productive capitalists and the reactionary bourgeoisie to claim that in the sluggish Iranian economy, a rising number of the impoverished subaltern will have to face simplification, unemployment and starvation. Maljou (2021: pp. 28–30) criticizes the reactionary allies of the state for their dollarized repression of the productive capitalists who, in turn, intensify the exploitation of the workforce. Seif (2018: pp. 400–401) rejects the monetary and demand-oriented accounts that deny the stagflationary effects of a high unemployment rate. Raisdana (2016: pp. 80–81) condemns the hunger-based system of social security in Iran.

HadiZonuz and Barmaki (2018: p. 129) associate the high unemployment rate in Iran with the state's random choice of policies, the unrealistic objectives of the state, the continuous gap between vacancies and academic output, and the stagnant policies of micro-employment. Mortazavi Sarayi (2018: pp. 182–13) points out the disagreement between the promises of fighting unemployment and the actual tax, and monetary and financial policies that just add to the institutional pressures on the productive sectors. Karimi and Pari (2018: pp. 228–230) denounce the projective transfer of pressures to the precarious lives of Iranian workforce under the title of *productivity improvement*, while the workers cannot be responsible for the problems related to technology, regulations, investment, and labor market policies.

Conclusion: Proletarian Promise for the Iranian Precariat

According to Monavvay and Gheissari (2021), despite enough evidence of experiencing neoliberalism by millions of Iranian subalterns, it would be difficult to claim that the Iranian state has thoroughly adopted neoliberal policies. Based on a particular political agenda, the upper class has been differentiated from the rest of society. While the former depends on *state capitalism* to be free from public scrutiny, the latter face pressures of marketization under the titles of productivity and cost management.

The reactionary essence of Iranian capitalism has emerged in the long-term isolation from the global chains of value creation. This isolation has led to the growth of speculative private activities and the creation of new circles of patronage under the ideological apparatus (Maljou, 2018). Opposing this backward assemblage, Raisdana (2005: pp. 158–162) suggests a pattern of self-reliant growth to go beyond dependency approaches, activate the national economy, and play a decisive role in the regional

markets. So, in the face of valid reasoning on the existence of neoliberal fronts and policymaking, e.g., Omid (2020: pp. 44–55), a sound analysis would not miss the impact of this particular order of political economy on the regimes of capital accumulation in Iran.

Neoliberalism as the financial solution to the global crisis of capital accumulation (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005, preface) has a pivotal role in Standing's defense of unrevolutionary modes of resistance for the precariat. Since the precariat is the class created by the coalition of states and global capital, the transformative role of the precariat must focus on distributive justice (Standing, 2014b). This study, however, has resulted in a different notion of precarity and precariousness. Suffice it to say, the dominance of financial and commercial capital has not resulted in a capitalist society in Iran. As Offe (2011) articulates, developing nations need more than insular elements in their economy to possess the qualities of capitalist societies. The lay concepts developed during this research have a lot to say about this inadequacy in Iran.

The connected and the shrewd are the allies of a conservative isolated order not interested in the competitive consequences of Globality. While Standing (2014b) adds a Durkheimian element to his theory by identifying the *entrepreneur Proficians*, the reactionary strata in Iran push the knowledgeable workforce to the choice of migration. Calling for distributive solidarity in such a polarized society is quite misleading. In line with Durkheim (1969: pp. 391–393), this research has revealed the social roots of an *exclusionist social order*. The connected and the shrewd save their inviolable exchange rights at the expense of productive groups that might advance the legal bases of society through the division of labor. A Nordic welfare nostalgia cannot be the point of departure in analyzing the experience of precarity in the Iranian society. Precarity here is the name of all invisible, excluded, and marginalized people who do not find their routes to the happy circles of connectedness. In such a class-stagnated society, the precariat should forget about the distributive demands and follow a proletarian way of resistance: demanding a fair share of *work* to deserve a fair share of welfare.

Author Contribution Hamid Gheissari and Nooh Monavvay had equal and complementary roles in different phases of this study including the design, interviews, methodology, and final discussion of the findings. The final manuscript is also the result of a mutual work and contribution.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Before the interviews and focus groups, all participants signed informed consent. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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