

Space and Materiality in Recent Studies of Labor and Class in the Middle East and Islamic World

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Abstract

This review article proposes new directions for the field of labor studies in the Middle East and Islamic world. It does so by examining a diverse array of recent works that are not framed as studies of labor and class per se, but that illustrate what this field might look like through their respective concerns with space and materiality. Taking such concerns together unites these otherwise disparate studies of class, oceanic connections, gender, urban transformation, and the environment. We have organized this essay around the themes of space and materiality because of the utility that they hold for the study of labor and class in the Middle East and Islamic world. They enable us to attend to the basic aims of older scholarship on labor and political economy while also internalizing the critiques of that tradition mounted by scholars of race, gender, and colonialism. We moreover suggest that the theoretical developments outlined here can inform scholarship on labor and class across regional divides.

Works reviewed

- Jennifer Derr. *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019. 264 pp. \$26.00.
- Hanan Hammad. *Industrial Sexuality: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Transformation in Egypt*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2016. 299 pp. \$27.95.
- Matthew Hopper. *Slaves of One Master: Globalization and Slavery in Arabia in the Age of Empire*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015. 320 pp. \$30.00.
- Matthew Hull. *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012. 320 pp. \$29.95.
- Aaron Jakes. *Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. 376 pp. \$30.00.
- Timothy Mitchell. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso, 2011. 288 pp. \$19.95.

Introduction

According to a dominant account of the cultural turn in Middle East historiography, postcolonial and poststructuralist critiques of Marxist analysis put an end to academic

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interest in the study of labor and working-class politics. The latter was purportedly supplanted by discursive—and primarily textual—interpretations of colonial modernity that were centrally concerned with gender, race, and colonialism rather than “class”—meaning, in this account, an analytically and politically privileged class of industrial wage workers.¹ But recent scholarship on labor and class in the Middle East does not focus solely on industrial workers with a class status that can be privileged over purportedly “cultural” categories like gender and race. Rather, it attends to many of the theoretical and methodological concerns raised by studies of gender, race, and colonialism, as well as subsequent turns toward the study of space and materiality. In this essay, we review new scholarship that transcends assumed divides between these various theoretical approaches specifically *through* its study of labor and class. The majority of the works that we have included are not explicitly framed in these terms, but we have grouped them together because of their utility for further studies of these themes.

There are both historiographical and analytical grounds for an explicit reconsideration of labor in Middle East Studies, which may in turn offer insights into the study of labor in other regions. Many cultural histories of the gendered and racial underpinnings of modernity and nationalism in the modern Middle East that proliferated in the 1990s and 2000s were also often, implicitly or explicitly, histories of the urban middle classes.² This scholarship was crucial in bringing previously unstudied historical groups into focus. At the same time, it tended to foreground a conception of class as a self-conscious set of cultural practices and political aspirations—rather than the outcome of exploitative, hierarchical social relationships through which value is produced, *pace* earlier studies of social history and political economy in the Middle East. Cultural histories of the middle classes often invoked the existence of an analytically static capitalist world market as a basic premise for the study of nationalist subjectivities, modern governmentality, and the politics of the everyday, without directly addressing how the acts of commercial exchange and consumption so commonly associated with middle-class culture are themselves tied to specifically capitalist forms of labor and wealth.³

Our review attempts to account for these historiographical and analytical gaps by arguing that the exploitative, hierarchical social relationships through which value is produced—and classes are made—are most prominent in new scholarship on labor, space, and materiality. We examine a diverse array of recent works that all involve analyses of labor and class yet nevertheless exhibit a disjuncture: the works that study class do not consider its relationship to labor, and the works that study labor do not rely on class as a primary analytical category. It is precisely because of that disjuncture, however, that reading this scholarship together is productive. Taken together, their insights illustrate what new directions in Middle East labor studies might look like. The first section of the paper focuses on geographies of labor and value. These elucidate the tight but uneven imbrication of political economies in the Middle East with other spaces in the global geography of capitalism, as well as the different kinds of labor to which value has been attached historically. The study of labor and materiality offers novel approaches for understanding the relationship between physical work, value-producing labor, and political-economic struggle, as well as the uneven distribution of the bodily and economic burdens of capitalist production. Beyond this, these labor-focused accounts also represent a useful corrective to the capital-centric approaches that have predominated in the recent revival of political

economy in Middle East Studies and in the broader turn toward global histories of capitalism.⁴ Finally, while scholars of the Middle East and Islamic world have generated this productive mix of analytical approaches, concerns, and problems, the theoretical developments outlined here can inform scholarship on labor and class across regional divides.

Geographies of Labor and Value

Diverse histories of global capitalism must take social relations seriously—the class dynamics that produce and circulate value in the forms of labor and wealth—without falling prey to either economism or culturalism. The latter binary often helps to reify other unhelpful dichotomies like that often drawn between critical political economy and postcolonial discourse analysis, as though the former belonged only to the West and the latter to the colonial world. Critical approaches to space and place in labor history represent one especially promising means of transcending such polarization. Labor historians have sought to render visible the connections between distinct labor regimes across the capitalist world market, and to excavate more deeply the complex and globe-spanning processes of class formation in particular historical settings.⁵

This trend has been borne out in Middle East Studies through new research that is broadly influenced by the spatial turn in the social sciences. While the spatial turn specifically originates in the work of critical geographers who theorized the contingent, causal role of space in historical and social processes, it has also helped inspire the recent interest in global and transnational histories that offer a way out of methodologically nationalist social science. The use of new spatial units and scales of analysis is evident in a wave of recently published articles and monographs in Middle East Studies that shed light on unknown or underappreciated struggles and subjectivities in the historical geographies of labor in the region. We can identify two main currents in this wave: studies that range across transnational maritime spaces, and works that focus on specific urban places. When taken together, they address the most common themes of newer labor studies on the Middle East, which include dynamics of gender differentiation, the instability of traditional divisions of rural/industrial and free/coerced labor, and cross-border movements of labor and capital. Therefore, in this section of our essay we review two works that exemplify the two currents mentioned above: Matthew Hopper's *Slaves One Master: Slavery and Globalization in the Age of Empire* (2015) and Hanan Hammad's *Industrial Sexuality: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Transformation in Egypt* (2016). Neither present themselves as labor histories. Nonetheless—and perhaps for this very reason—they are effective at moving the spatial focus beyond the familiar industrial shop floor and a conventionally-defined proletariat of orthodox labor histories. In doing so, Hopper and Hammad illuminate the role of a diverse range of workers in shaping the position of the modern Middle East in the history of global capitalism.

Within Middle East Studies, the impact of the spatial turn has been particularly evident in histories of oceans as transnational zones of exchange. Here, *Slaves of One Master* is illustrative. Its explanation of the rise of global markets for Arabian dates and pearls at the end of the nineteenth century joins other accounts that have historicized our contemporary era of globalization by reconstructing older transoceanic networks of trade, migration, and ideas.⁶ But Hopper distinguishes his work

by examining slavery, a social formation that is often counterposed to capitalism, a system ostensibly defined by free labor and movement. Although in Middle East Studies scholarship on elite, “non-economic” household slavery predominates, *Slaves of One Master* unearths in the fin de siècle Persian Gulf the type of forced labor in plantation agriculture and resource extraction more commonly associated with the Atlantic world. While Hopper primarily situates his work in the literature on slavery, he nevertheless charts new directions in Middle East labor history by showing how our persistent, problematic dichotomy of slavery and free labor dissolved in the waters of the Gulf and under the aegis of empire.

At the heart of *Slaves of One Master* is the same ostensible paradox that has animated recent debates in the historiography of global capitalism: namely, that “the era of expanding global markets that followed the abolition of slavery in much of the world also created systems of labor that mirrored slavery or were in fact systems of slavery.”⁷ These debates often hinge on definitions of capitalism, especially as to whether it is a system of market dependence and proletarianization, or of globally if unevenly connected production and exchange. But Hopper’s focus is on new and greater demands for labor in the late nineteenth century. It was during this period of heightened global competition that capital accumulation and imperial appropriation entered a ferocious new phase on the commodity frontiers of the colonial world. Racialized and violent value extraction in the colonies—often practiced in the name of realizing the free movement of labor and capital therein—subsidized the exploitation of wage labor traditionally associated with industrial development in the metropole. In the Persian Gulf, Britain simultaneously consolidated its “informal empire” and waged a prominent antislavery campaign there while as many as half a million East Africans were forcibly brought to the Arabian Peninsula. Gulf political economies—which included diasporic merchants and financiers, local sheikhs, British colonial officers, and European shippers—depended on the value produced by their work. But so too did Western consumers, whose newfound taste for Arabian dates and pearls was manufactured alongside the new world market.

Hopper’s research in the archives of the Zanzibari state, American shipping companies, and the British navy demonstrates that categories of free and unfree labor in the Arabian date and pearl industries were not absolutely separate; they instead stretched into one another along a spectrum of coercion and amid the volatile movement of value through capitalist circuits and beyond the Gulf. The irrigating and harvesting of dates in coastal Oman, for example, was mainly performed by men whom slavers had taken captive and disciplined at a young age in places like Pemba, while Omani women earned a wage packing those dates for shipment to new global markets. Moreover, many plantation slaves who were sold or escaped north to the Trucial Coast came to work as or alongside “free” pearl divers who were themselves trapped in a system of perpetual debt and inherited legal obligation that arguably amounted to slavery. Hopper describes a range of everyday tactics that East African slaves employed to endure and even resist these regimes of exploitation: dive crews sang pearl-themed devotionals, date harvesters arranged their own marriages or developed extramarital sexual relationships, and enslaved people across the Gulf littoral engaged in systematic acts of slowdown, revolt, and flight.

The remarkable mobility of mostly male East African slaves in the Gulf—evinced by their frequent (though not always successful) decisions to flee to areas of direct British control in the hopes of manumission—speaks to a key element in Hopper’s narrative: All of this exploitation and value appropriation took place on an uneven but nevertheless cohesive transnational geography. Although the Gulf was not a timeless space of environmental and cultural unity, it was still bound together through overlapping networks of imperial rule, religio-juridical norms, logistical infrastructures, and diasporic migration. In tracing particular commodity chains across such geographies, as *Slaves of One Master* and other recent commodity studies do, even more interconnections between different regimes of exploitation and accumulation come into focus. Unionized stevedores in Brooklyn hauled dates that had been picked by enslaved East Africans in the Gulf, while French pearl merchants recycled surplus capital from the Arabian Peninsula into the built environment of Paris. Such ties suggest that the proletarian wage labor associated with industrial capitalist development in one part of the world was constitutive of the slavery of ostensibly pre-capitalist, “feudal” production system in another, and vice-versa. This is a critical point, given that it is the former that has traditionally undergirded our conception of labor and the working class as a privileged category of historical writing and political practice.

The above conclusions about the relationship of unfree labor to capitalism are far from novel. Scholars in the Black radical tradition suggested them early in the twentieth century, while the new field of global labor history foregrounds slavery and empire.⁸ Middle East labor studies have yet to thoroughly incorporate these insights, however, despite the histories of empire and slavery in our region of study. Here Hopper makes important contributions, for instance, by explicating how British colonial emancipation was also a process of racialization and value extraction, as naval patrols in the Gulf assigned many freed slaves to indentured labor contracts across the Indian Ocean; and even forced them into plantation work to subsidize the Christian missions at which they were deposited. Much research remains to be done on diverse forms of labor across oceans and transnational imperial spaces generally, but there are promising signs in recent work on anticolonial internationalist worker solidarities and the intersections of sovereignty, citizenship, and migrant labor.⁹ Most recently, for example, Laleh Khalili has described the continuities between racialized labor hierarchies in colonial-era Gulf port cities and migrant labor regimes in the contemporary Gulf. Yet the same imperial networks that circulated migrant dockworkers and sailors also allowed for the cross-border transmission of oppositional politics in a variety of overlapping registers, be they anticolonial, nationalist, or communist.¹⁰

The typically macroscopic geographic scale of transoceanic labor history clarifies long-distance connections, but can also efface crucial dimensions of class formation. Hammad’s *Industrial Sexuality* is among the best works in Middle East Studies to approach class and labor through microscopic attention to urban place.¹¹ Her study of social transformation in twentieth-century Mahalla al-Kubra, Egypt’s historic center of textile manufacturing, is both indebted to and critical of the seminal Marxist-structuralist works on Middle Eastern labor mobilization. *Industrial Sexuality* is an urban history of labor and as such expands upon these works and addresses the silences that they left as a result of their more limited conceptions of

political economy. Hammad explores how workers' everyday experiences in the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company (MSWC) and its surrounding neighborhoods produced complex classed and gendered subjectivities, as well as new social coalitions. The achievements of *Industrial Sexuality* are many, not least in providing a new model for social historians of modern Egypt through its research into municipal court records, worker petitions, and local company archives. For our purposes, the most relevant is its redefinition of class formation as an intersectional, relational social process that occurs in places beyond the point of commodity production.

By focusing on the lived experiences of textile workers in their everyday interaction with supervisors, landlords, and neighbors, Hammad seeks to reconcile purportedly economic and culturalist approaches to class while avoiding the determinism that either might entail. The social rituals, forms of dress, and patterns of consumption of MSWC employees, many of whom were rural migrants to Mahalla, all helped constitute the shop floor culture in which class distinctions emerged. In addition to these "sociocultural performances," hierarchies of income and occupational status—enforced through the company's violent disciplinary measures—shaped class identities. Crucially, however, these identities were not fixed or exclusive. They intersected with the differential formation of national and gendered subjects: The physical violence of bodily searches at the factory gates, for example, simultaneously signified and helped to entrench class and gender hierarchies. Company guards frequently molested male workers in such moments, who then in turn asserted masculine social power through the harassment or protection of female workers whom they encountered on the shop floor. Female workers were already earning lower wages than their male counterparts but now were also earning the resentment and suspicion of the latter. Gendered oppression and economic exploitation thus went hand in hand under a historically specific regime of semicolonial capital accumulation and state formation.

The co-constitution of class and gender did not stop at the factory gates, and in fact became entangled with yet other axes of identity like geography and community. The valorization of certain practices of violence as masculine, for example, was reproduced in the figures of neighborhood *futuwwat*, or "tough men." These were often prominent handloom weavers who mediated the social conflicts that broke out on the shop floor and in surrounding neighborhoods between longtime residents and newcomers to MSWC. In associating with workers from their own neighborhoods or villages, the *futuwwat* accentuated the geographically-specific, homosocial bonds that arose among workers who rented apartments together and frequented the same taverns. Female workers suffered from the double bind of economic exploitation and gendered oppression outside the factory, too, whether as unpaid workers in small household weaving enterprises; as young tenants vulnerable to assault by the single men who rented rooms in the same housing slums that sprung up around MSWC; or as sex workers forced to the spatial and legal margins of Mahalla al-Kubra. In the shadow of elite housing projects reserved for MSWC administrators, the company sought to produce gendered laboring subjects of Mahalla al-Kubra through socio-spatial division and hierarchy.

The segmentation of the workforce along lines of gender and community served the interests of MSWC management, but this strategy did not have purely divisive

effects. In certain conjunctures, Mahalla forged alliances across and *through* axes of social difference to resist the power of MSWC and the semicolonial state that buttressed it. In 1938 and 1947, for example, MSWC workers organized some of the largest industrial strikes in Egyptian history amid increasingly precarious national labor conditions and a crisis of collective confidence in the Wafdist regime. They could only do so, however, with the support of a diverse set of social actors whom they had come to know through differential and often hierarchical relationships: Their allies included women landlords, from whom they had rented rooms because MSWC did not provide housing and who now waived rent in solidarity; vendors who donated food to the strike funds after having been frequently harassed by city police for their unlicensed economic activity outside the factory; and educated *effendiyya* who petitioned the Egyptian government on behalf of militant workers, in the language of nationalist camaraderie. In fact, whatever solidarity existed in such a socially heterogeneous workforce depended in part on the affective labor of social reproduction and care work that the “neo-landladies” performed when mediating tensions that arose daily among their worker-tenants. It was precisely because women landlords of Mahalla were *not* from the same geographic areas as their rural migrant tenants that they were able to serve as arbiters of disputes among workers.

Sometimes, then, in the spaces beyond the factory, “social interactions blurred and redefined divisions and interests,” such that “cultural differences neither generated particular confrontations nor handicapped personal and business relations between landladies and tenants.”¹² This could be the case even within the shared spaces of the shop floor, as in the mid-1940s, when MSWC male workers blamed administrative inefficiency for overproduction and shift cutbacks; this rather than victimizing female workers who had previously acted as a reserve army of cheap labor, in recognition of how cultural differences could be strategically redeployed by company management. “Subjective” social differentiations therefore did not simply constrain more universal “objective” identifications like class, but actually rendered political-economic grievances and solidarities more powerful. This is not surprising given that the conflicts between management and labor at MSWC, as with daily life on the shop floor, also turned on competing visions “among capitalist bourgeoisie, male *afandi* bureaucrats and technocrats, and subaltern men and women over the modern productive subject, normative sex, and gender relations.”¹³ Hence, if the strikes occurred most visibly at the point of production, they were part of wider conflicts over the distribution of value that extended far beyond the factory gates. Such dynamics belie a separation of the “economic” dimensions of struggle over value from the “cultural” values in which they were couched.

It is important to note that Hammad’s study does not explicitly articulate this methodological intervention, and generally (like Hopper’s) wears its theory rather lightly. In fact, though we have drawn from these monographs insights into the historical geography of labor in the modern Middle East, neither directly cites key theorists in critical geography like Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, or David Harvey. This may be a sign of how commonsensical certain concepts from the “spatial turn” have become in Middle East Studies, whether it is the evident need to transcend methodological nationalism (Hopper); de-center accounts of

urban politics and culture heretofore preoccupied with the capital city (Hammad); or recognize the uneven character of socio-spatial processes under capitalism (both authors, albeit at different territorial scales). Yet if the importance of space and place is today readily accepted in our field and the “new histories of capitalism” more generally, the application of such notions to labor—understood capaciously as both the social basis and capricious form of value under capitalism—remains all too rare. We may better understand how the political-economic geographies of our present have been produced not just by the much-studied circulations of capital, but also through the socio-spatial fixity and movements of labor. Fortunately, Hopper, Hammad, and others have begun to demonstrate the method and utility of doing so.

Labor and Materiality

Over the past two decades, Middle East Studies has been increasingly influenced by environmental history and Science and Technology Studies (STS) approaches that take seriously the causal force of nonhuman forces in human affairs. This recent turn to what has been called “new materialism” has been met with significant criticism from some scholars for whom political economy constitutes a primary analytical approach. Some of this critique seems to stem from semantic differences over whether the term “agency” means the exercise of intentional action by human actors, or the exertion of causal force by human or nonhuman forces. It also seems to stem from the intentionally provocative rhetoric of some STS scholarship. But scholars of political economy have also rightly been concerned with the de-politicizing tendencies of certain STS approaches. Aaron Jakes has argued that many “new materialist” works “actively refute the explanatory force of capitalist social relations” in favor of analyses that favor the causal force of nonhuman actors. In doing so, such accounts can obscure social processes of clear academic and political interest to scholars of the Middle East such as settler-colonialism.¹⁴ Andreas Malm has contended that by downplaying the distinctive intentionality of human action, scholars that he labels as “new materialists” simultaneously diminish the moral culpability of those who knowingly profit from fossil fuel use amidst climate change—to cite his example—and make it more difficult to imagine normative, alternative political projects toward which humans ought to strive.¹⁵

Earlier iterations of this debate about the role of nonhuman forces in human affairs, however, saw considerable common ground between historical materialism and what might now be called “new materialist” approaches to social inquiry. Marxian strains of environmental history have long placed the dialogical relationship between human “culture” and nonhuman “nature” at the center of their analysis. In a very amicable debate hosted by the Association of American Geographers in 1995, David Harvey expressed admiration for Donna Haraway’s willingness to question the nature-culture binary just mentioned. In turn, Haraway described her and Harvey’s projects as sharing a set of basic analytical tenets:

contingency and relationality are not equal to relativism. . . radical historical contingency is about understanding the modes of materiality in the world. . .

understanding issues of possibility or understanding issues of apparatuses of production is materiality; and . . . it's semiotic all the way down. There is no gap between materiality and semiosis; the meaning-making processes and the materiality of the world are dynamic, historical, contingent, specific . . . bodies and institutions and machines are made, not made up.¹⁶

Most centrally, the two scholars recognized a set of shared political commitments to—in Haraway's words—"deeper equality, keener appreciation of heterogeneous multiplicity, and stronger accountability for livable worlds."¹⁷

Over the past several decades, the study of material work and value-producing labor in fields like environmental history and anthropology has been especially productive. Scholars have asked how human labor and nonhuman nature contribute to value, assessed the ways in which nonhuman life and nonlife mediate social struggles, and interrogated the boundaries and relationship between the human and the nonhuman.¹⁸ Studies of labor—including industrial labor, but also the work of transportation, bureaucracy, and agriculture—represent an especially compelling area for investigation for these scholars because labor constitutes a site at which the human and the nonhuman quite evidently meet, mix, and transform one another, and because labor is always social, frequently contentious, and essential to the production and reproduction of unequal social relations. In work, humans transform crude oil into refined products, use paper documents to direct flows of information, and are exposed to pollution, parasites, and disease. Through work, nonhuman forces like oil, paper, and parasites shape social and political processes of central analytical concern, including capitalist social relations.

Several recent monographs and articles focusing on the Middle East and Islamic world use labor as a site at which to interrogate how nonhuman life (organisms) and nonlife (commodities and their attendant infrastructures) mediate social relations and shape politics. Although the authors examined here do not use these terms, their works can help us simultaneously think about labor's materiality and its role in producing value, and demonstrate that the subjects they study cannot be adequately understood without an analysis of the materiality of labor. At the same time, all of these interventions can be understood in terms of value and cost—how value is produced, for whom, and who bears the costs of its production. Finally, these works also open up important questions of how particular kinds of work redistribute political power, whose work is relevant to the study of labor, and how labor is experienced. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the nonhuman forces that humans encounter while performing labor shape social relations in ways that are not entirely reducible to the logic of capitalism. When labor is organized under the imperative of capitalist accumulation, workers tend to bear the economic and bodily costs of creating profit through the transformation of nature. But the specific material conditions under which that labor takes place also shape the terrain of the struggle to determine who will bear the costs, and reap the gains, from labor. These works thereby demonstrate that the materiality of labor is a productive vantage point for understanding the formation of groups whose distinctive relationships to nonhuman life and nonlife can be observed in how they produce and capture value, bear economic and bodily costs, and experience and understand the world.

Two recent works by Timothy Mitchell and Matthew Hull assess how the material properties of particular commodities—oil and paper, respectively—shape the social relations of the labor involved in their production, distribution, and use, and how this in turn conditions the distribution of political power. In *Carbon Democracy*, Mitchell contends that the autonomy that workers enjoyed in underground coal mines empowered miners to strike, and the dense connections between these and other workers fostered by the labor required to produce, distribute, and use coal enabled strikes to spread from mines across railways to factories, ports, steamships, and coal depots.¹⁹ This capacity for mass strike action enabled workers in much of the Global North to win a less precarious life and greater political power. But oil's growing predominance in global energy regimes helped governments and industrialists undermine the power that workers in the Global North had acquired, and to prevent this positional power from emerging elsewhere. Oil tends to be produced above ground by relatively small labor forces made up of highly skilled engineers isolated in oil fields, pipelines, refineries, and tankers, and who manage oil flows remotely rather than handling them themselves. This has rendered coordination by workers and their allies to disrupt energy flows more difficult. Moreover, the flexibility of oil flows allows companies to reroute petroleum around whatever blockages intransigent workers or governments might erect. Oil's propensity to flow has thus historically impeded mass labor mobilization, while enabling oil companies to modulate oil flows to capture massive profits.²⁰ In short, the material properties of oil have tended to favor the dismantling of workers' political power, including the power to redistribute value.

This argument has been tremendously influential, spurring an expansion of critical scholarship on the history of energy. It has also generated a number of critiques. Kaveh Ehsani, for instance, has contended that Mitchell's argument fits within a broader tendency to render invisible the labor required to produce, transport, and consume oil, and to downplay the historical contentiousness of labor politics in the oil industry.²¹ Peyman Jafari has used the case of revolutionary Iran to show that mass strikes by oil workers can constitute extremely effective revolutionary tactics: for Jafari, petroleum workers' capacity to halt Iranian oil exports was critical to the overthrow of the Shah's absolute monarchy. Their control over energy flows lent them a decisive role in the Iranian revolution that they contingently failed to exploit as Khomeini's forces consolidated power.²² And while Laleh Khalili does not contest Mitchell's argument, she does offer an alternative explanation for labor demobilization in the oil exporting countries of the Arabian Peninsula. After waves of petroleum sector strikes in the 1950s, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states became increasingly reliant on highly contingent migrant labor, especially from South Asia, limiting but not eliminating the scope for solidarity and coordination between workers.²³ But whether or not one accepts all of Mitchell's argument, *Carbon Democracy* has encouraged the expansion of scholarly inquiry into environmental and labor history by making clear that the material properties of fossil fuels and their attendant infrastructures shape the terrain of labor contestation and the broader political struggles of which it forms a part.

Hull's *Government of Paper* focuses on the politics of a particular *use*—rather than the production or distribution—of a specific commodity. It is therefore not a commodity study per se, but rather a study of how paper shapes the politics of

bureaucracy. Likewise, Hull does not describe himself as a labor historian, but engages in a historically informed ethnographic study of the materiality and politics of white-collar bureaucratic work—forms of work that labor studies have typically ignored. Hull traces the emergence of bureaucratic practices of documentation in contemporary Islamabad from Mughal traditions of petitioning, East India Company corporate record-keeping that carried into the British Raj, and modernist planning by the post-colonial Pakistani government.²⁴ Building on this historical argument, Hull conducts an ethnography of bureaucratic work in the institutions responsible for planning Islamabad. Hull's central argument is that the materiality of paper, and the particular ways in which paper documents flow through and produce space, "mediat[es] relations among people, things, places, and purposes" within the bureaucracy itself, and in the bureaucracy's imbrication with the society that it is charged with managing, demonstrably "[shaping] the governance of the planned city of Islamabad."²⁵

Hull shows how the materiality of paper-based bureaucratic work shapes power relations, and—echoing Ilana Feldman's *Governing Gaza*—broadens the study of labor politics to include the white-collar work of state bureaucracy, which has been occluded because of a persistent tendency in labor history to focus on industrial commodity production.²⁶ For Hull, bureaucrats "claim to represent, engage with, or constitute realities 'in the world' independent from the processes that produce documents," but the materiality of documents like petitions, maps, permits, and memos as well as the work of producing, circulating, and challenging them shapes the political economy of urban space and undermines the boundary between the state and the society it purports to regulate. When a mosque files a petition to access Islamabad's public water supply, for instance, the way that petition is stamped and forwarded can determine whether the state becomes concerned with the legality of the mosque's physical placement or its effect on Islamabad's sectarian geography.²⁷ Paper-based bureaucracies also enable bureaucrats to capture value by taking bribes to shepherd essential documents for clients through flows of paper.²⁸ Hull argues that in these and other situations, ordinary people intervene in paper flows to produce what he calls a paper-based "participatory bureaucracy." He warns that the distinctive material properties of electronic communication systems may reduce people's access to the bureaucratic processes that shape their lives.²⁹ Hull might have done more to establish how Mughal, Raj, and Pakistani paper bureaucracy differed from bureaucracies based on prior or alternative record-keeping technologies—for instance, papyrus, clay tablets, or quipu—though this may be too much to ask of a historically grounded work of anthropology. *Government of Paper*, like *Carbon Democracy*, represents an insightful attempt to understand how the work of producing, distributing, and using particular commodities shapes the distribution of political power.

Two recent works by Aaron Jakes and Jennifer Derr examine agricultural labor in Egypt in ways that help us better understand the place of particular forms of nonhuman life in political economy. In *Egypt's Occupation*, Jakes follows Jason Moore to treat capitalism as a "social and an ecological process," a "way of organizing nature."³⁰ To that end, Jakes analyzes the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in terms of capitalism's tendency to reduce nature to "'free gifts' for capitalist enterprise," and to employ human labor to deplete those gifts in pursuit of surplus

value.³¹ Paying special attention to finance capital and its evolving relationship to commercialized agriculture, Jakes traces the evolving political ecology of cotton in Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, offering an account of colonialism as European capital's depletion of nature's free gifts in the colonies. As "financial capital poured in from abroad" into Egypt under British occupation and European oversight of state finances, "Novel institutional arrangements would channel funds directly from the banking centers of Europe into the farthest reaches of the [Egyptian] countryside," burdening Egyptian smallholders with growing debts.³² On the basis of financiers' expectations regarding "the future productivity of the soil and the laboring bodies that farmed it," and the economic pressures faced by deeply indebted farmers, the production of cotton for export intensified, altering the ecology of the Nile River valley and spurring the proliferation of crop-destroying cotton worms.³³ Though British and Egyptian officials attributed this outcome to a racialized "greedy and shortsighted peasant farmer," Jakes argues that this pattern of ecological degradation resulted from the commercialization and financialization of agriculture and represented capitalism's depletion of nature's "free gifts."³⁴ Thereafter, profitable cotton cultivation required increasing amounts of labor—in this case, the forced labor of children who removed caterpillar-covered leaves—to produce surplus value, burdening vulnerable Egyptians with the accumulated consequences of colonialism's depletion of nature's contribution to value.³⁵ By taking nonhuman life into consideration, we render perceptible the costs that capital must pass off for the sake of its continued accumulation and reproduction.

In contrast to Jakes's finance-oriented account, Jennifer Derr's *The Lived Nile* focuses more squarely on bodily work and value-producing labor as a site for analyzing the relationship between nonhuman nature and the human body. She contends that the physical work of remaking the Nile valley through perennial irrigation to promote the cultivation of commercial crops like cotton, sugarcane, and maize altered the valley's ecology and the bodies of its inhabitants.³⁶ Perennial irrigation encouraged the proliferation of the parasites responsible for bilharzia and hookworm, which disproportionately affected the male farmers whose labor effected this ecological change and thus rendered both diseases newly endemic.³⁷ Simultaneously, increased dietary dependence on maize among the *fellahin* engendered widespread niacin deficiency, or pellagra.³⁸ For Derr as for Jakes, poor agricultural laborers ultimately bore the costs of capitalist agriculture in the colonies. But Derr calculates this cost in terms of the bodily "lived experience" of infected workers, tracing how the physical work of transforming the ecology of the Nile to capitalist ends transformed workers' bodies through infection and disease. She does so in order to "critically [consider] the significance of labor as a physical and environmentally situated act."³⁹ She therefore employs pain and the "slow violence" that produced it as indices of exploitation, foregrounding these concerns over the production and appropriation of value per se.⁴⁰ Derr adeptly uses physical work as a site at which to question the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, the social and the ecological. But she might have done more to explain why she specifically chose pain as her preferred category for understanding the bodily experience of labor. Likewise, she could have elaborated on her methodological thinking on how to use contemporary medical

understandings of diseases like bilharzia, hookworm, and pellagra as proxies for historical subjects' lived experiences.

Egypt's Occupation and *The Lived Nile* offer distinctive approaches to the relationship between the human and the nonhuman that map to broader theoretical cleavages. Whereas Jakes treats the proliferation of cotton worms as an expression of the dynamics of capitalism in colonial Egypt and in general, Derr gives substantial analytical weight to the specific properties of hookworm and bilharzia in her investigation of their interactions with capitalism in Egypt.

Nonetheless, Jakes and Derr both convincingly demonstrate that capitalist social relations shape human interaction with nonhuman life, and that labor is a useful site for investigating how this occurs because of its centrality to both capitalist social relations and human interaction with the nonhuman. Taken together, these works also show the analytical utility of careful studies of the interactions between various forms of nonhuman life and the specific political economies of particular times and places. Detailed studies of the political ecology of labor like Jakes's and Derr's allow us to trace these complex interactions, and to understand their material—that is, both economic and bodily—costs. These four studies provide useful insights into the materiality of labor, providing compelling accounts of how these particular commodities and organisms condition social relations under capitalism, shaping who appropriates value, who bears costs, and who gets to decide. These studies also raise attendant questions about whose work is relevant to historical studies of labor, and how different kinds of work are experienced. Whatever one's conception of capitalism, these labor studies demonstrate that an analysis of the materiality of labor can augment our understanding of social relations under capitalism, and can do so without abandoning political economy's core analytical concerns or political stakes.

Conclusion

Few of the new works we have examined in this essay explicitly describe themselves as labor history. Instead, they reflect how scholars interested in labor and class have internalized critiques of older political economy approaches in Middle East Studies but also migrated to other subfields. Our decision to review them collectively is therefore a way of imagining what a renewed field of Middle East labor studies might look like, how debates within this field might take place, and how this field might join theoretical and methodological projects that are too often separated.

In this article, we have imagined this field by looking to recent works that analytically center space and materiality. Historical scholarship on labor and space have shown that the Middle East played an active role in shaping the uneven geographies of global capitalism at multiple spatial scales. Scholarship on labor and materiality offers a means of assessing how the materiality of work shapes the distribution of value and political power as well as cost and harm. As a group, these works are attentive to questions of gender, race, and colonialism, and moreover counterbalance the capital-centrism of recent scholarship on the history of capitalism. Most significantly for our purposes, these studies demonstrate the importance of labor and class-formation (alongside gender, race, and colonialism) to understanding processes of historical change and offer innovative approaches to doing so.

The particular reconstruction of labor history we have derived from these works on the Middle East is also specifically relevant to our present moment, and the social and theoretical challenges it poses to the field of labor history. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic immobilized all but the most “essential workers” and triggered historic job losses almost overnight, the “long downturn” in productive capitalist investment had led to persistent underemployment around the world. We now live in a period in which formal labor has progressively been displaced from processes of capital accumulation, and yet more people than ever are dependent on stagnant wages for their own material reproduction and social intelligibility.⁴¹ Labor historians are watching this process play out before their very eyes, as the U.S. academic labor market collapses amid the broader, generational decomposition of the professional-managerial classes. Meanwhile, racialized groups the world over, from California to Dubai, have been pushed into precarious informal work and subjected to incarceration or expulsion.⁴² State-sanctioned political plunder and domination, as opposed to exploitation as such, have come to secure a growing share of profits over the long-term slowdown that has characterized contemporary capitalism.⁴³

Yet the concrete particularities of activities central to contemporary capitalism—the burning of fossil fuels and the encroachment of capitalist agriculture into new ecosystems—have also generated new climatic and epidemiological dynamics that are interrupting and reconfiguring processes of capitalist extraction, production, distribution, and accumulation.⁴⁴ The pandemic has accentuated the continued centrality of certain kinds of work to social reproduction and capital accumulation—especially in logistics, education, and care—even as this work is formally celebrated and materially devalued, and as workers employed in these fields (not to mention their families and wider communities) face the greatest threat of bodily harm from COVID-19. Indeed, the racialized groups that U.S. capitalism today treats as most dispensable are simultaneously the likeliest to be categorized as “essential workers” who must often work in the conditions in which COVID-19 thrives, for instance in the Amazon warehouses that have become increasingly central to commodity distribution.⁴⁵ This dynamic, combined with longstanding inequalities in access to medical care and other essential services and resources, has subjected African-American, Latinx, and indigenous communities in the United States to the highest rates of COVID-related hospitalization and death.

What does it mean to write labor history under such conditions? What kinds of research questions and topics speak to the political questions that these conditions raise? The literature reviewed here points toward possible directions. It describes instances of oil worker mobilization in mid-twentieth-century Iran, for example, which challenged the neo-colonial ownership of Iranian oil in the era of the Shah—but ultimately accommodated the deeper structure of capitalist production that revolution and full nationalization would rescale but not transform. In transnational spaces like the Gulf, meanwhile, the profitability of a new slave trade in the late nineteenth century accelerated processes of involuntary migration and racialization, which evoke the restrictive citizenship regimes governing migrant labor in the region and the world today.

Finally, multiple works on early-twentieth-century Egypt described the intersection of workplace struggles over distribution with those centered around issues of debt-driven consumption and national sovereignty. They help us think through the

relationship between capitalist agriculture and the proliferation of diseases that inflict the most harm on the workers who are most essential to continued accumulation. The modern Middle East may therefore be of interest to labor historians not simply as a place that either reiterates or complicates narratives of industrial working-class formation, but also as a window onto the social problems of the world we now live in.

Notes

1. Elements of this meta-narrative, with its presumed binary of social and cultural history, are evident even in otherwise comprehensive and optimistic reviews of Middle East labor historiography. See Kevin Jones, "Unmaking the Middle Eastern Working Classes: Labour and the Politics of Historiography," *Social History* 40 (2015): 146–156. Among the classic works of Middle East social history and political economy are Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movement in Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, NJ, 1978); Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ, 1982); Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954* (Princeton, NJ, 1987); and Judith Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge, 1985).
2. The relevant literature is too large to cite here, but signal examples include Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender and the Middle Class in Lebanon 1870–1920* (Berkeley, CA, 2001); Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, NC, 2011); Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, NJ, 2012); Nancy Reynolds, *A City Consumed: Urban Commerce, the Cairo Fire, and the Politics of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA, 2012); Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford, CA, 2016); Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, *A Taste for Home: The Modern Middle Class in Ottoman Beirut* (Stanford, CA, 2017). Divides within this group of literature are important to note here: Seikaly finds Watenpaugh's approach to the middle class lacking, and argues that it relies on the Anglo-American experience as universal and exceptional, leaving all other examples wanting (Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 12). Similarly, Abou-Hodeib has noted that her focus on material culture draws out contradictions between self-conception and reality, in contrast to literature on middle classes, which focuses solely on idealist self-conception.
3. For an elaboration of this interpretation of labor and value as forms of social mediation specific to capitalist commercialization, see Patrick Murray, "Capital: A Revolutionary Social Form," in *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Marx*, eds. Matt Vidal et al. (Oxford, 2019), 230–49. A foundational text in this value-form approach to labor is Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1993).
4. For a review of the historiography of capitalism in the Middle East, in light of the revival of political economy, see Omar Cheta, "The economy by other means: The historiography of capitalism in the modern Middle East," *Historical Compass* 16 (2018), 1–14.
5. Andrew Herod, "Workers, Space, and Labor Geography," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 64 (2003): 112–138.
6. For a summary of this subfield, see James Gelvin and Nile Green, eds., *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley, CA, 2014).
7. Matthew Hopper, *Slaves of One Master* (New Haven, CT, 2015), 82. For an elaboration on these debates within the "new histories of capitalism", see John Clegg, "Capitalism and Slavery," *Critical Historical Studies* 2 (2015): 281–304; Peter James Hudson, "The Racist Dawn of Capitalism," *Boston Review* (2016), <http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/peter-james-hudson-slavery-capitalism>; Aaron Jakes and Ahmad Shokr, "Finding Value in *Empire of Cotton*," *Critical Historical Studies* 4 (2017): 107–136.
8. The literature on unfree labor and capitalism is vast. Classic works in the Black radical tradition are Eric Williams, *Slavery and Capitalism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1944) and C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York, 1938). For a review of relevant Marxist theory and historical sociology, Sébastien Rioux, Genevieve LeBaron, and Peter J. Verovsek, "Capitalism and Unfree Labor: A Review of Marxist Perspectives on Modern Slavery," *Review of International Political Economy*

- 27, no. 3 (May 3, 2020): 709–31. In the field of global labor history and the pages of *ILWCH*, see Carolyn Brown and Marcel Van Der Linden, “Shifting Boundaries between Free and Unfree Labor: Introduction,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 78 (2010): 4–11; and Sara-Maria Sorentino, “The Abstract Slave: Anti-Blackness and Marx’s Method,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 96 (2019): 17–37.
9. Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley, CA, 2010); Anthony Gorman, “Radical internationalists on the Nile and across the Mediterranean,” in *Social Transformation and Mass Mobilization in the Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean Cities, 1900–1923*, ed. A. Lyberatos (Heraklion, Greece, 2013), 307–327; On Barak, “Outsourcing: Energy and Empire in the Age of Coal, 1820–1911,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47 (2015): 425–445.
10. An early, seminal work in this direction was Akram Khater, *Inventing Home*. More recently, see John Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon* (Stanford, CA, 2009); Touraj Atabaki, “Far from Home, but at Home: Indian Migrant Workers in the Iranian Oil Industry,” *Studies in History* 31 (2015): 85–114; Andrea Wright, “Migratory Pipelines: Labor and Oil in the Arabian Sea” (Ann Arbor, MI, 2015); Pardis Mahdavi, *Crossing the Gulf: Love and Family in Migrant Lives* (Stanford, 2016); and Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade* (London: Verso, 2020).
11. Others include Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge, 2009); Julia Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration* (Berkeley, CA, 2012) and Francesca Biancani, “International Migration and Sex Work in Early Twentieth-Century Cairo,” in *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality, and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880–1940*, ed. Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh, and Avner Wishnitzer (London, 2015), 109–133.
12. Hanan Hammad, *Industrial Sexuality: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Transformation in Egypt* (Austin, TX, 2016), 77, 129.
13. *Ibid.*, 213.
14. Aaron Jakes, “A New Materialism? Globalization and Technology in the Age of Empire,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47 (2015), 378.
15. See, for instance, Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm* (London, 2018), 78–118.
16. “Nature, Politics, and Possibilities: A Debate and Discussion with David Harvey and Donna Haraway,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13 (1995), 511.
17. *Ibid.*, 507.
18. Christopher Sellers, “Factory as Environment,” *Environmental History Review* 18, no. 1 (Spring, 1994); Greg Downey, “Virtual Webs, Physical Technologies, and Hidden Workers,” *Technology and Culture* 42, no. 2 (April 2001); Myrna Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil* (Cambridge, 2006); Gunther Peck, “The Nature of Labor,” *Environmental History* 11, no. 2 (April 2006); Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Erik Loomis, *Empire of Timber* (Cambridge, 2016); Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies* (Berkeley, CA, 2006); Michelle Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty* (Durham, 2006); Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); Jessica Rolston, “The Politics of Pits and the Materiality of Mine Labor,” *American Anthropologist* 115, no. 4 (2013), 582–594; Kate Brown, *Plutopia* (Oxford, 2013).
19. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy* (London, 2011), 23.
20. *Ibid.*, 36, 139–143.
21. Kaveh Ehsani in Atabaki, Bini, and Ehsani, eds., *Working for Oil* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2018), 11–34.
22. Peyman Jafari, “Fluid History” in Atabaki, Bini, and Ehsani, eds., 69–98.
23. Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade*, 197–218.
24. Matthew Hull, *Government of Paper* (Berkeley, 2012), 4–10, 113–4.
25. Hull, *Government of Paper*, 1.
26. *Ibid.*, 19.
27. *Ibid.*, 116.
28. *Ibid.*, 113–5.
29. *Ibid.*, 5, 255–6.
30. Aaron Jakes, *Egypt’s Occupation* (Stanford, 2020), 13.
31. *Ibid.*, 13.
32. *Ibid.*, 85, 199–200.

33. Ibid., 27, 85, 197.
34. Ibid., 199.
35. Ibid., 200–2. Jakes elaborates on this specific argument in Aaron Jakes, “Boom, Bugs, Bust,” *Antipode* 49 (2017): 1035–1059.
36. Jennifer Derr, *The Lived Nile* (Stanford, 2019), 1–13.
37. Ibid., 107.
38. Ibid., 100–120.
39. Ibid., 7–8.
40. Ibid., 7–8.
41. For a recent elaboration of the “long downturn” and “secular stagnation” that treats underemployment as a problem of both economic development and social mediation, see Aaron Benanev, *Automation and the Future of Work* (Verso: London, 2020).
42. A classic study of the policing of racialized populations deemed surplus to accumulation is Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California, 2007). For a different, indirect response to the dilemmas that the contemporary crises of work pose for labor history (one grounded in Afro-pessimist scholarship), see the recent *ILWCH* special issue on the afterlives of racial slavery. Franco Barchiese and Shona Jackson, “Introduction,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 96 (2019), 1–16.
43. Robert Brenner, “Escalating Plunder,” *New Left Review* 123 (May/June 2020), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/iii123/articles/robert-brenner-escalating-plunder>
44. See, for instance, Mike Davis, *The Monster Enters* (OR Books: New York, 2020) and “Social Contagion: Microbiological Class War in China,” Chuang, February 2020, <https://chuangcn.org/2020/02/social-contagion/>.
45. Jake Alimohamed-Wilson and Ellen Reese, “It’s a Prime Day for Resistance to Amazon’s Ruthless Exploitation of its Workers,” *Jacobin*, October 13, 2020, <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/10/jeff-bezos-prime-day-amazon-warehouse-workers>.