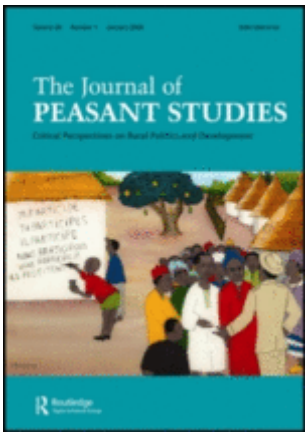

"'Amnarja' la wara (We are going backwards)": Economic Reform and the Politics of Labour in Agrarian Syria

Journal:	*Journal of Peasant Studies*
Manuscript ID	FJPS-2019-0124.R2
Manuscript Type:	Regular research article
Keywords:	Agrarian Politics, Subsumption of labour, Value, Syria, Economic Reform

"*'Amnarja' la wara* (We are going backwards)": Economic Reform and the Politics of Labour in Agrarian Syria

Diana Sarkis Fernández, PhD

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

Montalegre, Str., 4

08001 Barcelona (Spain)

Email: dianasafe@gmail.com

ORCID Code: 0000-0002-8955-2164

Diana Sarkis Fernández (PhD University of Barcelona 2015) is assistant professor of Anthropology at the University of Barcelona. Her work focuses on capital/labour relations, models of state and grassroots moral economies in agrarian contexts from a comparative perspective.
She contributes to the work of the International Research Collective on agriculture, environment and labour in the Arab World (Thimar, https://www.athimar.org/en). Her recent publications include: "Austerity from below: Class, temporality and scale in grassroots analysis of Crisis" in S.Narotzky (ed.) *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe* (Pluto Press, forthcoming). Email: dianasafe@gmail.com

"'*Amnarja' la wara* (We are going backwards)": Economic Reform and the Politics of Labour in Agrarian Syria

From the end of the 1990s to early 2011, Syria went through an ambivalent transformation from a centrally controlled economy towards a fully globalised market economy. Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted in Syria between September 2008 and February 2011, this article explores the consequences of policies of economic reform and market liberalisation for agrarian relations of production in two different but interlinked agrarian contexts. The theoretical discussion of Marx's concept of subsumption -through the lens of agrarian, feminist and colonialism/imperialism debates- is used as both a point of departure and arrival in the analysis. From this perspective, the Economic Reform emerges as a hegemonic project of rescaling and of reconstituting the subsumption of labour. This involved both a process of devaluation of agrarian work and workers' livelihoods, and the disempowerment of the working class through the reorganisation of the state.

Keywords: Agrarian politics, subsumption of labour, value, Syria, Economic Reform

Introduction

In the relatively short period from the 1990s to early 2011, Syria went through a partial and ambivalent transformation from a centrally controlled economy towards a fully globalised market economy (Hemash 2003, 2013; Kadri 2012; Seifan 2010; Zuraik and Gough 2014). For the country's agrofood regimes, the application of "Economic Reform and Market Liberalisation" (*al-Islah al-iqtisadi wa-tahrir al-suq*) policies, particularly from the 2000s onwards, meant a major shift from the historical political economy of Baʿthist Syria (Ajl 2019; Matar 2018). Fostered by agrarian reform (which began with the Egyptian Syrian Union and was developed by the Baʿthist Socialist

Revolution of 1963) and policies of national food self-sufficiency (Al Zoughby 2006), the nationally embedded character of the Syrian agricultural system was, until the early years of this century, an exception in the setting of the globalised 'new agrofood corporatist regime' (McMichael 2008)[1]. Then, with Syria applying (and failing) to join the WTO in 2001 and its subsequent signing of the Great Arab Free Trade Area in 2005, the seeds were planted for a change aimed at "overcom[ing] Syrian backwardness in relation to its location in a globalised economy, while strengthening its export activity"[2].

In this article I explore the shifting agrarian politics of this period through the lens of Marx's concept of the subsumption of labour. From this perspective we observe a (further) subsumption of Syrian labour under capital accumulation *via* the *global market* (Federici 2013; Kadri 2018; McMichael 2009). The theoretical discussion of the Marxist concept of subsumption then will be a point of departure and of arrival in the following ethnographic analysis. By drawing on feminist and colonialism/imperialism theories as well as agrarian debates, I suggest two main modifications *vis à vis* the prevailing uses of the concept. On the one hand, I propose the *devaluation of labour* as a key aspect concerning the dynamics of valorisation of capital through subsumption. On the other, this means that the subsumption of labour is a political process; in this case the struggle over forms of the state and models of development are at the core of this politics of devaluation (Gramsci 1977, [1947] 2010; Vergoupulos [1974] 1993).

[1] Although the policies of Infitah ("the Opening") of the end of the 1980s partially prefigured the Economic Reform, the transformation of the socioeconomic landscape reached a new scale in this second period.

[2] Speech of the former Minister of Economy and External Trade on Liberalisation of Trade and Policies of Economic Reform (1994) (as quoted in Hemash 2003). The translation from Arabic is mine.

These modifications can help us to avoid typological and teleological debates around forms of subsumption and lead us to a more holistic understanding of the dynamics through which social labour is captured and transformed into capital.

The results discussed in this article derive from a larger research project conducted in two Syrian villages of different governorates between September 2008 and February 2011[3]. The first field study was in the coastal village of Beyt Khodra[4], Tartous, (1.500 inhabitants in 2010). Since the 1990s the main crops (olives; citrus and eggplants) were produced under a state-controlled market system, and small farm-owners dominated the landscape (67% of properties bellow 1.5 Ha; max. 6.5Ha in 2010). The second location, Al-Hayat (Ma ʿarrat-el-Noʿuman, Idlib), was a village of 1296 inhabitants where land was nationalised and distributed by the State according to the Laws of the Agrarian Reform (*istimlakiya*). Cultivators farmed their plots (95% between 3 and 7 hectares; max.10 hectares) under a regime of possession and (until the early 2000s) state-planned production and distribution[5] of wheat, barley and lentils (including cumin as a complement).

[3] The research included ethnographical observation (comprising co-residence and working in the fields), semi-structured interviews, life and family histories, the compilation of oral history, focus groups, networks charts, the review of some historical documents and the collection of some statistical data (landownership, productivity, etc.). In addition to fieldwork, I used secondary literature to address the political-economic history of Syria. This historical approach started from the nineteenth century and focused on the period between 1958 (beginning of the Agrarian Reform) and the 2000s (Economic Reform). See Sarkis (2015).

[4] I use fictional names for the villages and the people in order to preserve their anonymity.

[5] Laws of the Agrarian Reform established that beneficiaries of redistributed land had to pay a quarter of its value over thirty years before becoming full owners of their plots. The late application of these laws in Al-Hayat (starting in the 1980s) meant that at the time of my fieldwork peasants had not yet completed this mandatory period.

The method of multi-sited ethnography (Burawoy 2003) was particularly appropriate given the uneven historical development of agrarian regions around the country (Dubar and Nasr 1976; Hanna 1985, 1975; Khalidi 1984; Mundy 2000; Mundy and Saumarez Smith 2007; Schaebler 2000) and the dualism of agrarian policies (supervised market/state planned) developed by the Baʿthist Syrian state (Hinnebush 1989; Perthes 1999). Moreover, the experiences of the agrarian producers of the two localities were directly interrelated since the 1990s, when an important part of the cultivators (*fallahin*)[6] of Al-Hayat started to work as seasonal dayworkers in the lands of Beyt Khodra. Synchronic comparison (Buroway 2003) between the consequences of market liberalization in the two locations revealed the ambiguities and contradictory character of this hegemonic project as well as the heterogeneous (but connected) lived experiences of the agrarian working-classes that the reform engendered.

After a brief discussion of Marx's notion of *the subsumption of labour to capital*, I focus on the consequences of the process of globalised liberalisation for the agrarian reconfiguration of the village of Beyt Khodra (Tartous); this especially affected the re-composition of forms of day-labour in the olive-oil sector. In a context of land commodification coupled with the marginalisation of olive oil production, small farmers reconfigured their strategies – some selling or lending their lands and others seeking to assure the *viability* of their plots by decreasing expenses in the labour-force. As a result new forms of day-labour emerged. Key examples include the feminisation of labour

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Until the early 2000s, the state stipulated the crops that had to be produced and monopolised their purchase and sell, paying to the farmers above the world-price of these crops (Ababsa 2004; Ajl 2019; Fiorni 2001; Perthes 1999; Wattenbach 1996). In 2002, wheat transformed into a mixed sector (*qitaʿ mushtarak*) allowing private traders to purchase and sell the portion of wheat not bought by the state. The distribution of barley and lentils was privatised in 2005.

[6] Lit. tillers, in this case: cultivators favoured by the agrarian reform.

gangs and a *preference* for contracting teenager workers. Meanwhile, a new category of seasonal migrant workers arrived who came from the impoverished dry continental and eastern regions. These renewed forms, in which labour power was rendered abstract via a marker that was itself differentiated, threatened the previous ties between small farmers of the village of Beyt Khodra and *old* temporary-cyclical workers (small farmers) from Al-Hayat (Maʿarrat-al-Nouʿman, Idlib) who used to work together for decades and experienced their bonds in terms of cooperation (*taʿawun*) and friendship (*sadaqa*).

In the next section, I examine the consequences of the process of market liberalisation for the domestic agrarian economies of *old* temporary workers in their land of origin, Al-Hayat. My analysis places a strong emphasis on the description of how this social group made sense of these changes, in terms of a restored process of disempowerment of agrarian labourers which sent them back to the old forms of capitalist serfdom that existed prior to the Baʿthist revolution.

In the final section I argue that the Economic Reform can be understood as a hegemonic project of rescaling and reconstituting the subsumption of labour. This involves both a process of devaluation of (agrarian) work and workers' livelihoods, and the disempowerment of the working class through the reorganisation of the state.

The politics of capital domination over labour: subsumption, devaluation and institutional disempowerment

Before turning to the case material, let me briefly review useful developments of the concept of labour subsumption. The term was originally used by Marx to capture the process by which social labour is subordinated to the dynamics of capital for the production of surplus value (*Capital*, especially chap.VI unpublished and chap. XVI).

While keeping this fundamental part of the concept in this article, I suggest that we need to discuss what we understand as *productive labour*. And explore the relationship between the *production of surplus value* and *other crucial forms of capital accumulation* (the capture, conversion and hoarding of value not produced *per se* as capitalist surplus value), in the context of the specific political development of *class struggle*.

Marx's discussion of the concept of productive labour hinges on its relations to two different forms of surplus value – absolute and relative. These correspond to two means by which surplus is produced: initially formal subsumption and then, through advances in the means of production, real subsumption (Cf. the Chapters VI and XVI of *Capital*; for Spanish versions: Marx [1867] 2009 and Marx [1867] 2007). Building on this understanding, agrarian political economists have long gone beyond this linear conceptualisation of how labour is transformed into capital in two ways, in particular. First, they have discussed forms of formal (Chevalier 1983; Smith 1989), pre-formal (Banají 2010) or indirect (Montoya 2013) subsumption of petty commodity producers where usurious credit and unequal exchange replaces the wage as mechanism of surplus extraction[7] (Narotzky 2016). Second, they have examined how gender and spatial forms of labour segmentation reinforce surplus extraction by capital through the devaluation of various forms of remuneration (Das 2011; Mies 1989; Stolcke 1986; Wolf 1982). Particularly important for this article is the second of these processes, for it reveals how the devaluation of the commodity labour-power enlarges the portion of surplus value

[7]I find particularly interesting the distinction made by Montoya (2013) between indirect (merchant and usurious capture of value) and formal subsumption of petty commodity production. The author uses the last term to refer to cases where capital reconfigures forms of production (intensification and extensification of the work-day, expanding scale, capital's direction of production) of petty-producers.

captured by capital thus reducing the worker's portion, and thereby widening the concept of productive labour[8].

Feminists and theorists of colonial-imperial domination have further developed this line of interpretation by showing how capital accumulation has been inherently dependent on the capture/conversion of surplus value produced outside the market relation. This is one of the pillars of colonial pillaging and unequal exchange (Amin and Casanova 1993; Harvey 2003; Kadri 2013 and 2018; Luxemburg [1917] 2007; Wallerstein 1973); as well as of the appropriation of non-paid women's work concerning the reproduction of workers (Dalla Costa and James [1972] 2005; Narotzky 1997; Razavi 2009). In all these cases, social labour is integrated into capital's expanded accumulation precisely without being *formally* or *really* subsumed through wages (see also Federici 2013; Mies 1989).

These three perspectives reshape the conceptualisation of *productive labour* by emphasising that expanded accumulation is not only the product of absolute or relative capitalist production of value, but also of forced dispossession, destruction, transfer and conversion of existing value, both locally and on a world scale. Thus referring to neocolonial relations through *militarism* in the Arab world, Kadri (2018, 1) remarks, "The most violent practice of cheapening labour is a principal characteristic of the law of value". Although since 2011 it has been through war that this law has deployed in Syria (see conclusions), in this article I examine its previous development amidst the

[8]In another place, I argued for an analytical distinction between this narrow definition of productive labour (in terms of its integration into the valorisation of capital) and a broader definition focused on the productive nature of concrete labour for human reproduction. Cf. Delphy (2001); Narotzky (1997); Pérez-Orozco (2014).

globalisation and liberalisation of markets and the partial abandonment of a nationally embedded agricultural system.

Beyt Khodra, de-agrarianisation and the crisis of local olive oil

Over the centuries, agrarian production had been the centre of the household economies of Beyt Khodra, both through self-provisioning and as a source of income (petty-production and day-labour). Olive oil has been the main market product at least since the nineteenth century when it circulated through the regional, Ottoman and European, markets. Farmers used to combine it with other crops (such as tobacco or peanuts into the 1960s) and mixed farming for the household's self-provisioning. Since 1979, as in other coastal areas, citrus has been introduced, on the basis of a plan drawn up by the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform and sustained through peasants' cooperatives and the Office for Rural Planning. In the zenith of economic autarky, this planned extension of certain crops was aimed at helping Syria to strengthen its national food self-subsistence (Wattenbach, 1996), as well as to feed the new state-led industries of fruit juices and fruit-flavoured sodas. And the long harvest period of different kinds of citrus (eight months per year) granted a secure source of income to the coastal agricultural households.

Then, through the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Economic Reform completed a process of de-agrarianisation already under way as a result of several factors: the fragmentation of agricultural plots due to inheritance practices, sustained decreases of olive-tree and citrus profitability, and changes of consumption standards and values around agricultural work. Particularly important in this process was the development of a land property market, an outcome of the interaction between the new economic hegemony and longer-term historical dynamics of international migration

specific to the village, and more broadly to Tartous Governorate. The controlled liberalisation of foreign investments and the implementation of policies of land requalification stimulated the return of some of the *mughtaribin* (emigrés), who held Syrian nationality and hence were able to buy up land. Beyt Khodra has an important émigré community in Venezuela, among whom some big traders who were by this time keen to move their capital out of the now socialist Venezuela to re-invest in housing and tourism in their native land[9].

By 2010, no household in the village made its living exclusively through agriculture and only 40% of males and 25% of females engaged in agriculture at all, and not very intensively. In contrast, during the 1980s, 90% of adults (both male and female) were engaged in such activities[10]. The development of a landownership market and the erosion of agriculture as a worth way of living accelerated the differentiation of local (ex) farmers. A minority abandoned agricultural tasks to start small non-agricultural business and/or became local moneylenders. In contrast, the members of semi-proletarianised households combined agricultural labour in their domestic and sometimes rented plots, with self-employment (e.g. taxi-drivers), waged work in non-qualified low-paid jobs (particularly in the construction sector in Lebanon and the

[9] The modal price of land in Beyt Khodra reached around 2.000.000 SP/1000m^2 (1 euro= 65 Syrian Pounds). By contrast, the price for the "good grain lands" in the Idlib governorate did not reach 40.000 SP/1000 m^2; thus land cost 50 times less there. A key factor explaining these differences is the absence of processes of land requalification in Idlib, where land continued to be tied to agricultural uses. At the same time, wages in Idlib were around a half of those in the coastal region (field information compared with Fiorni 2001).
For a discussion of this further process of commodification of land from an ethnographical perspective, see Sarkis (2011) and Márquez, Montesinos and Sarkis (2011)

[10]The decrease in the rate of agrarian tasks in Beyt Khodra was especially high even for coastal standards and might be put in contrast to rural continental areas, such as Al Hayat, where over 90% of inhabitants were in 2010 still mainly involved in agriculture.

restaurant sector in Barcelona, Spain) and public employment (mostly women)[11]. Besides the withdrawal from agrarian tasks and accelerated bipolarisation, land-use patterns were also transformed, particularly since the 1990s, when greenhouse eggplant production spread. Nevertheless, although the profitability of eggplants was 30 times higher than that of olive oil, many owners did not have the necessary resources or geographical conditions to carry out this change, and olive tree plantations continued to cover 66% of the landscape.

With the exponential growth of Syrian olive oil export figures that followed the opening up to a *free* international market (Ali 2006, 2009; Malevotti 1999; Fiorni 2001)[12], local production became peripheral to households, whether worked under leasing contracts (*ḍaman*), 60% of plantations in 2010, or used for domestic self-provisioning. This was because the hegemony of *comparative trade advantage* policies broke down the security provided by the previous national plans to local farmers (*muzari'in*). Therefore, local production of olive oil entered into a crisis of competitivity faced with the oil of the continental areas, because of its lower acidity rate and relatively higher production costs. Meanwhile Tunisian oil started to dominate the Syrian market after the full application of GAFTA in 2007. As a local trader put it, 'You know, that's the free market, everyone is free to search what is better for him, what brings him more profit' (Local trader, Tartous, November 2010).

[11] See Moyo and Yeros (2007) for a further discussion of the relations between liberalisation, the unmaking of national projects, imperialist domination and semi-proletarianisation in the global South.

[12]National export volume moved from 1.912 tons (1997-1999) to 33.847 tons (2004-2006). Revenue from national exports increased from 5.4 million dollars to 49.7 million dollars between the same periods.

With this shift away from protection, the abstract global law of value that operated across countries and regions now determined the drop of prices for local producers[13]. The price that producers of Syrian olive oil received had been the highest in the Mediterranean up until 2005 (Ali 2009; Spanish Commercial Office in Damascus 2006). Thus Malevotti (1999, 28) points out that in 1998, Syrian producers sold their oil for 2.84 $/kg in the final market and sold it for 2.60 $/kg to traders, whereas the oil from other Southern Mediterranean areas, fetched only 1.71 $/kg. By 2010 the laws of the *free* (Arab) market tied local Syrian oil production to the abstraction resulting from the cheapest offer present in the market - Tunisian oil – which became the base-price for oil across the area[14]. This triumph of the maximisation of those dominating the market over producers expanded the gap between the concrete value of the content of work in the units of oil produced in Beyt Khodra and the abstract value which now served as the reference of measure through competition. Likewise, it also widened the gap between the actual production cost in the locality and the final prices received by producers. These production costs were particularly increased by the rise of wages in Beyt Khodra. From 1992 to 2010, in a period when households came to depend more and more on employing waged workers, wages making up the tank (local unit of measure equal to 16 litres of oil) price rose from 11.6% to 19.5% for producers, while in 1997 wages made up only 5.71% of the tank price.

[13]The liberalisation of the oil exports (1996) was preceded by a protectionist law, which banned imports. In 2006, a new law temporary allowed imports, although just for the immediate pre-harvest. Full application of the Arab Free Trade Area arrived in 2007.

[14] See Ayeb (2019) for a critical analysis of the impoverishing consequences of *comparative trade advantage* for Tunisian olive oil producers.

From this perspective, apparently economic phrases like state *deregularisation* and market *liberalisation* obscure profoundly *political* mechanisms – the withdrawal of the State Department of Supplies (*idarat al-tamwin*), the stimulation of production in continental areas, and the control of prices by local-international traders and agro-processing capital. Such political manoeuvres made possible capital's control over producers through, among other factors, the abstraction of the concrete labour processes and hence the obscuring of the conditions of social reproduction that underlie the final exchanged products.

The politics of labour (I): devaluation and the dialectics between abstraction & differentiation

The strength of capital's power to shape agrarian logics and the reproductive strategies of rural subjects also materialised in the re-composition of forms of day-labour. The emergent practices of selling agricultural land, combined with new economic strategies, endangered previous bonds between small farmers from the village and *old* temporary-cyclical workers (small farmers), particularly but not exclusively, from Al-Hayat (Maʿarrat-al-Nouʿman, Idlib). Since the end of the 1980s, complementarity between local agrarian cycles in both sites had given root to a cyclic working structure, which combined domestic and waged work. Very personalised ties dominated the relations between small farmers and labourers, who experienced their bonds in terms of cooperation (*taʿawun*), and friendship (*sadaqa*) among ordinary people (*al-nas al-basita*). They had worked together for decades, and labour relations were embedded in a larger framework of moral and affective ties that attached employees and employers, as individuals and as members of households (*buyut*, pl. from *bayt*). The force of these mutual commitments lay in the fact that far from being a compendium of abstract precepts, they expressed and performed the material entanglement of the projects of

(better) reproduction for both farmers and workers as they were built up on continuous shared experiences pervaded by feelings of affect (cohabitation, joint work, etc.).

This changed with the new renters of the plantations (and even some villagers in their own self-provisioning plots) who started to focus their strategies of rationalisation (towards simple 'viability' or maximising profit) on the single factor of production that they controlled: labour. Besides (the increasingly contested) use of family labour, two intertwined forms of labour devaluation displaced the *old* forms of day-work: the hiring of a new category of workers and the feminisation of gangs.

The recruitment of new (*judad*) workers seen as strangers (*ghurba*) or *badu* (lit. bedouins, see below) constituted the first form of labour force segmentation. On the one hand, they earned around 100 SP/day less than the day-workers who were part of the previous networks of friendship (*sadaqa*) and trust (*thiqa*) (see figure 2). On the other, being disembeded from the ties of friendship forced them to accept worse labour conditions: lengthening of the work-day, a range of the uses of women and teenagers' work (see below), and the abandoning by farmers of responsibility for providing housing and food. This new group of workers was more *flexible* and easily adaptable to the changing productive structure, which demanded a combination of an intensive and cyclical workforce for olive harvesting alongside a permanent workforce in greenhouses. In contrast with the *old* day-workers who were subjected to the agrarian cycles of their towns of origin, these *new* workers were absolutely separated from their means of livelihood and production because of the disintegration of their agro-pastoral economies (Ababsa 2004; Chatty 2006, 2007; Geyer and Dbyat 2007)[15]. Far from the

[15] For the structural nature of ethnic and gender segmentation of globalised agrarian labour markets in the Syrian case, see Abdelali-Martini (2011), Abdelali-Martini, Tutwiler and Kalume (1998), Abdelali-Martini et al. (2003), Morelló and Sarkis (2013). Concerning the alterisation of

reified *laissez-faire* metaphors of the market (Edelman 2005), uneven development and dispossession were the first political processes regulating the labour relations well before any particular work agreement.

Table 1. Comparative Regional Day-salaries in the olive's Harvest for the period 2009-2010

[Table 1 near here]

The second political process regulating the (unfree) labour market was the moral economy of ethnification (Ahmed, 2010) under which members of this *new* group were constructed as different and, moreover, less-valuable workers. In our particular socio-historical topography, this process of *othering* was constructed around the *bedouinity* of the new day-workers. In general terms, the noun *bedouin* describes those who live in the *badya* (semi-desert steppe). In the Syrian context, it refers to the human groups settled in the eastern regions characterised for their pastoral and nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life and for their tribal sociopolitical organisation (Ababsa 2004; Al-Yundi 1963; Chatty 2006, 2007; Bocco and Chatelard 2001; Hourani 1992). Giving the multiple factors denying any essentialist definition of *bedouins* (marriages with other human groups, multiple migratory and settlement processes throughout history), particularly important in this case are contemporary uses of the concept. The political nature of these uses during my fieldwork revealed itself in different conduct: the label was usually used for categorising people who had neither been shepherds (often for centuries), nor had they lived in the *badya* such that semi-nomadism had

Syrian workforce in Lebanon, see Chalcraft, (2009). For a comparative example about the case of migrant and Pakistani workers in the Jordan valley, see Van Aken (2005).

been a forced consequence of their dispossession, and not a response to the agro-pastoral cycle. Taken together, what seems particularly relevant for the analysis is how *difference* appears as a metaphor, a euphemism legitimising inequality and as a device for stratifying, devaluing and dividing the work force.

Although this new group of workers constituted no more than half of the labour force in 2010, their presence in the labour market transformed the conditions of day-labour in general terms. In this sense, the capitalist law of value penetrated the day-labour conditions even for *old* workers forced to accept further forms of devaluation. Besides the extension of the work-day and other ways of depreciating the salaries mentioned above, the feminisation of gangs arose as the second main vector of labour segmentation.

Most of the literature about the feminisation of agrarian labour associates it with processes of productive intensification and market expansion (Reigada 2009; Tooth 2005; Van Aken 2005). Although the marginalisation of oil production and the contraction of the scale of circulation defined our ethnographical case, the feminisation of gangs (including teenagers of both sexes as performers of gendered tasks which women had traditionally performed) responded likewise to the strengthening of the power of global capital over local/national production. Bonded forms of day-labour that had flourished throughout the 1990s had followed the pattern of hiring groups of relatives (particularly brothers and sisters of the same extended-household) and had maintained a symmetric proportionality (1:1) between the feminine and masculine work force. Yet by 2010 women and teenagers composed, on average, two thirds of the gangs. Similarly to the case of *Bedouin* workers, power relations and gender ideologies of differentiation sustained the segmentation of salaries between men, women and teenagers.

The devaluation of the different tasks worked in much the same way. The actual picking up of the olives was devalued compared with the task of knocking them down from the trees with the ideological attribution of each of these tasks to women and teenagers and men respectively. Although my observation made clear that at points, both sexes and age groups were performing these tasks, particularly women and teenagers had the main responsibility for the tasks related to the picking up of and the preparation of knocking down olives. The representation of men as the organisers of labour (a practice much contested and context-particular in the fields) operated in the same vein as did the construction of teenagers as "less productive" workers (in terms of quantity and quality).

In 2010, a woman's day-wage represented 78, 5% of a man's, while that of a teenager was, by contrast, 66% (see Table 1)[16]. The hiring of teenagers responded to the proportional increase in women's day-salary in the village since the 1960s (when feminine day-salary were half of the masculine one, see Daniel 1967) and particularly in the last years before 2011. In this sense, I observed that in contrast with men's salaries, which remained fixed, women received in 2010 50 LS more per day than in 2008. Nevertheless, the predominance of women in the gangs did not relate exclusively to the pure depreciation of pay, but likewise to other forms of the labour's subsidiarisation (Dalla Costa and James [1972] 2005; Mies 1986; Reigada 2009). As in so many other cases, we cannot avoid the fact that women took the main responsibility for the reproductive tasks (food, clothes, cleaning, care) that sustained low salaries as well as

[16] Gender and age inequality in salaries remained lower than in other regions of the country (as Hama, Homs or Alep) were they reached 50 % (fieldwork notes compared with Abdelali-Martini 2011); as well as in other agrarian contexts over the Middle East in recent history (Hammam 1986; Moghadam 1994; Toth 2005).

the work order of a well-fed and cared for work-force. Moreover, their role acquired a renewed importance faced with the decline in the responsibility of employers to offer some provisioning for workers.

In this section we have examined how the globalisation of the olive oil market imposed an abstract law of value devaluing the commodified labour force, *therefore* worsening the work and livelihood conditions of workers. In the next section I focus on how the reorganisation of the state downgraded the condition of *old* workers as agricultural producers. And I examine how this social group made sense of this institutional transformation in terms of a process of disempowerment of agrarian workers through the remaking of the state.

The politics of labour (II): 'We are going backwards'

New agrarian and social policies threatened the livelihoods of *old* workers from Al-Hayat (Maʿarrat-al-Nouʿman, Idlib) both as day-labourers and as cultivators. Although in 2010, the state continued to limit commercial practices of wheat hoarding and paid for grain at double its world price and seventy-five per cent more than private traders did (fieldwork data), diverse factors undermined their domestic economies. On the one hand, they were upset by a series of external factors: inflation[17], the partial withdrawal of subsidies for fuel and supplies[18], a drop in the purchase price of lentils and barley

[17]The yearly inflation rate for the period between 2006 and 2010 averages 10% (http://cbssyr.org/index-EN.htm). See Hemash (2003) to access to statistics from the previous period. Kadri (2012b, 18) estimates a drop in the real salary of 50% between 2006 and 2011. Although this estimation seems to me a little bit exaggerated (i.e. average household's expenses in food = 14.000 SP; higher than the data that I registered from Idlib) it offers a good pointer to the precarisation of subaltern people's livelihoods in this period.

[18]Although the withdrawal of fuel subsidies started to be effective in 2008, in 2009 the subsidy continued to represent 5% of the GDP. For the quinquennial [2005-2010] the Syrian state invested

after the liberalisation of the sector in 2005 and the transformation of wheat into a mixed economy sector (*qitaʿ mushtarak*) in 2002. On the other hand, changes in state credit and distribution policies (i.e. restricted withdrawal of amnesties regarding unpaid credits; delays in payments for grain) underpinned the subjugation of cultivators to usurious-merchant capital (Hemash 2003, 2013; Kadri 2012b; Zuraik and Gough 2014).

These entangled processes of material disempowerment shook up the lives of the members of the Abu Nasr' household, with whom I resided and worked during my fieldwork. This extended household - formed by the households of Abu Nasr (including his wife and their three unmarried daughters), his elder son Nasr (with his wife and their seven children) and his younger son Firas (with his wife and five children) worked on 15 Ha (7, 4.5 and 4.5 Ha respectively) of redistributed-land[19] planted with wheat, barley, lentils and cumin.

Like other cultivators from their village the members of this household during my fieldwork tended endlessly to emphasise how agrarian and social policies in the over forty years before the Economic Reform had radically transformed their lives in terms of stability (*istiqrar*) and the improvement of their well-being (*fi tatawwur; naʿish mukayfin*). Particularly important in their accounts were: the improvement in food provisioning, access to land and other means of production, the security provided by state planning and distribution, infrastructural development allowing their access to basic means of livelihood such as water and enrolment of younger generations in

27.8 billion dollars in these subsidies. Nevertheless, dual price policies starting in 2009 (subsidised fuel: 9 SP/litre and free market fuel: 25 SP/litre), complicated household economies of agrarian subjects.

[19]The first redistribution of land occurred in Al-Hayat at the end of the seventies and a second process of redistribution happened in 1992. Beyt Khodra was one of the few places in the country where full-ownership of agrarian lands was registered under French colonial domination.

schools. Likewise, they highlighted their political empowerment and the moral re-valorisation of being a cultivator (*fallah*) in the face of the previous dominant classes (in this case, latifundia owners-money lenders (*bakawat*) to whom they had been subjugated by a kind of capitalist serfdom). As Abu Nasr's wife put it in 2009, in one of our meetings for collecting her life-history:

> The lives of cultivators today have nothing to do with the past! (…) The Reform (she meant the Agrarian Reform) arrived and the government fired all these dogs and brought the land for the cultivator and rights for the People. Before we worked until death just to eat and sometimes even that was impossible; now we live well (*mukayfin*). There is stability (*istiqrar*)"[20].

Two events in 2010 threatened these recent experiences of livelihood improvement and enhanced human dignity in Abu Nasr's extended household. For the first time in almost thirty years, Abu Nasr and Firas were forced to sell their wheat to a local trader. This happened because the state stopped its practice of turning a blind eye to the accumulated debts of peasants regarding land-rent and state-distributed supplies, and refused to buy the grain or to allocate credit to indebted households. The same changing policies had obliged Nasr one year earlier to take a loan from a local money-lender with an annual interest rate of 30% instead of the one-year free-of-charge loans provided by the state. The money-lender then forced him indirectly to sell his lentil production to

[20]These shared historical experiences did not obscure the fact that at the same time agrarian subjects felt and judged some aspects of the historical practices of the Baʿthist State as oppressive and exploitative. The issues of corruption (*fasad*) and the tyranny exercised by the information services (*mukhabarat*) were central in the constitution of particular sentiments of injustice (*zulum*). Nevertheless, these complex political experiences contrast with some academic accounts, like that of Seurat (1979), who, blind to the historical experiences of millions of Syrians, allowed himself to establish a continuity between the *old despotism of latifundia owners* and *the new despotism of the Baʿthist state*. For a critique of the idea of "oriental despotism" used for the *bakawat* structure of power from the point of view of its connections with capital accumulation on a world scale, see Gilsenan (1984); Islamoglu (2000) and Mundy and Saumarez Smith (2007).

himself for the worst price in the region. This concatenation of misfortunes (*masa'ib*)– in their terms- arose the same year that their twenty-year-long friends and employers from Beyt Khodra stopped counting on them to work in the olive harvest. Five years after the demise of the old owner-farmer, Abu Nassim, his children had sold over 30% of the property and rented out the majority of the remaining land. On top of that, they decided to employ a gang of *bedouin* workers to work on the small plots that they retained for domestic consumption. In the end, Firas and Nasr's older son (13) started to work at the new small business (rent-a-car) of one of Abu Nassim's sons. The same person likewise found new employment for Firas's two sisters in the olive-plantation of a good friend. Like other old day-workers in the same situation, waged work acquired new material and moral meanings. Women had to work under the same conditions imposed on *new* day workers, conditions worse than in the past. Meanwhile their male relatives endured not only decreasing salaries and longer work-days but a sense of self-degradation because of their involvement in cleaning and services tasks, in a context where the appeal to old moral metaphors by their *old friends* acquired no more than rhetorical value.

Alongside moral critiques and millenarian discourses (see author's reference), agrarian workers tend to make sense of these transformations in terms of a movement of "returning back" to past forms of dispossession (*hurman*) and domination (*saitara*) – as though they were going backwards in history. They also stressed the key role of the re-composition of the state in this process. However, some of them (or the same person on other occasions) underlined the continuity of protective policies towards agricultural producers in spite of changing patterns.

This complexity appeared in a very vivid form in one discussion about changes of agrarian policies that I had with some members of Abu Khaled's household some months before the end of my fieldwork:

> The oldest daughter was criticising changing state policies for "abandoning cultivators" when her mother nodded and pointed out that old *bakawat* (traders and or latifundia owners) *were returning little by little*. In her view they were taking advantage of the laxness of the son (referring to President Bashar Al-Asad) for coming back to the domination of cultivators, of the state and of *everything*. The oldest son grumbled from the porch outside the room and stated that the government was still controlling the merchants. Then argued that several traders from Aleppo ended up in jail the previous year because of practices of hoarding. The state then distributed all the hoarded crops among people (*al-sha'b*). For him, the state was not going to let merchants dispossess them (*yuhramna*) over again. With grave concern, Abu Nasr, the father, said: "God knows if they are preparing themselves to return back from France, from Turkey and the other places where they hid with their friends. And the state is not as strong as before, nor is there unity inside (…) and what do you think about Americans [meaning US]…Are they going to leave Syria (to develop) on its own? God knows! In any moment we could become a new Iraq" (Re-writing of my fieldwork notes, 22.10.10)

The contrasted perspectives of the members of this family of cultivators situated the process of market globalisation in the history of class struggle. From their perspectives, it formed a new development of a long-standing project of domination. In this sense, capitalist relations in the embodied historical experiences of agrarian workers from Al-Hayat have historically been personified for the majority in the figure of merchants and

financial-latifundia owners (see Ababsa 2004; Al-Yundi 1963; Gilsenan 1984; Hanna 1975; Mundy 2000). This had been restrained, for a period of time, by a particular form of state. Notwithstanding regional differentiation and state-rentist and merchant accumulation (Kadri 2012a, 2012b), the Baʿthist state (through its socialist and nationalist-corporatist forms –developed after the Corrective Movement of the 1970s) has provided a certain degree of material security and improvement for the agrarian producers of both the localities in my study. In this sense, it entangled its own forms of differentiation, value extraction and political domination with the weakening of the subsumption of agrarian working classes to glocal capital, at the same time as it institutionalised an alternative socioeconomic model to global neoliberalism based in the remaking and unmaking of Arab Socialism (Sarkis 2015).

As expressed by the conflicting standpoints of the different members of Abu Khaled's extended household, in 2010-2011 the advancement of this renewed project of subsumption was still limited by the partial nature of the politico-economic transformations and the ambiguity of state policies. The endurance of some fuel subsidies (see above) or the continuity of the *idarat al-tamwin* [Provisioning Administration] in controlling market mechanisms particularly in some areas, are examples of the ambivalence of the Syrian state in the application of the World Bank's promoted Economic Reform. In 2007 agrarian GDP continued to represent 30 % of national GDP (Ababsa, 2007), and the planned investments in the sector in the 11th Quinquennial Plan (2011-2015) persisted in not fulfilling the directives of (imperial) international institutions (Landis quoted in Muhanna 2011)[21]. The limits imposed on

[21] Landis quoted in Muhanna's blog on the 5th January 2011 "The 11th FYP (2011-2015) does not propose to cut jobs in the public sector, which is a huge cost to the state (…) It should also be careful not to focus on unproductive and water-intensive areas such as agriculture and industry

corporate metropolitan capital and the still relatively self-embedded nature of the Syrian economy of the period limited the pauperisation of agrarian subjects, particularly in relation to neighbouring countries. For Syria in 2008, Kadri (2012a) recorded the lowest rate of rural poverty in the Middle East (15%), in contrast, particularly with that of Egypt (43.7 %)[22].

The prophetic words of Abu Khaled anticipated the process by which the metropolitan capital of the US-NATO BLOC ended up imposing a new direction on the rescaling of capital/labour relations resulting from the Economic Reform. In this sense, the imperialist-civil war shaking the country since 2011 is an expression of the international nature of class formation and struggle, while it also endorses the prioritising of militarism over market globalisation, as the main form of integration of the Arab World into the space of capital accumulation on a world scale (Kadri 2018).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have addressed the Syrian Economic Reform as a particular moment in the historical struggle over the allocation of value (social wealth and human work capacity) between classes on a global/local scale[23]. And I have underlined the key role of the state in (re)organising the conditions where this battle is developed (Gramsci

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when the money could be better spent on retraining people to work in more productive areas". https://nadiamuhanna.wordpress.com/2011/01/05/counting-on-the-people-2/

Cf. Aita (2007).

[22] See also Zuraik and Gough (2014)

[23] From this perspective, the local is not a dimension articulated with the global, but a specific concretisation of global dynamics, which are in turn the product of local struggles (Roseberry 1989; Wolf 1982).

[1891-1937] 1977; Wolf 1989). Seen from this political angle, the capitalist law of value appeared as the historical outcome of class struggle (Das 2011; Kadri 2018[24]) materialised in the restructuring of institutions (the state and the market), models of development (Borras 2009) and the weakening of working-class material power and alternative socioeconomic models (Gramsci 1977, [1947] 2010; Vergoupulos 1993). In this regard, the focus on the reorganisation of the labour market in the olive-oil sector in Beyt Khodra (Tartous) has shown how the expansion of the merchant capacity of hoarding surplus value across national and international chains was sustained by the devaluation of the labour-force. The Janus face of this devaluation not only connected the political segmentation of labour (through gender, age and ethnic lines) to the depreciation of salaries, it also included the strengthening of formal forms of subsumption (i.e. extensification of the work-day, intensification of the rhythm of work) and the escalation of women's unpaid reproductive work thereby subsidising the labour-force. At the same time labour devaluation of this kind was made especially effective because it took place alongside the dispossession of agrarian workers from their means of production and livelihood. As shown by the testimonies of old day-labourers from Al-Hayat (Idlib), dispossession (Marx's ironic use of "the freeing-up" of the worker) was the pre-condition for both their new waged condition and for the relaunch of mechanisms of commercial and financial extraction.

Alongside these processes that were occurring at the level of my field-sites, the emergent dismantlement of the national Syrian agrarian system and the related process

[24] Das (2011) claims against a teleological view of subsumption and points to class struggle for explaining uneven development of forms of subsumption on a world scale. Nevertheless, I refuse his argument about how the endogen class struggle in the peripheries explains the underdevelopment of real subsumption in those territories. In this sense, my argument is closer to that of Kadri (2018) who stresses the global nature of class conflict and struggle.

of devaluation of agrarian livelihoods served to integrate Syrian labour and agrarian wealth into the global chains of capital accumulation of the world market and shaped by its dominant players. The triumph of militarist imperial forms of subsumption has dissipated such a scenario of so-called *peaceful integration* into the global market of labour and capital. However, devaluation, disorganisation and discontent have nourished the internal conflict that in a limited way sustained the development of a long-standing imperialist project of destruction and pillage of Syrian labour-value and labourers[25].

This bloody historical development restates and expands the central thesis of this paper. From the perspective of global history, capital accumulation results less from the expanded production of (relative surplus) value than from the devaluation of human life, the capture of historically produced value, and the violent destruction of social wealth and people on a world scale.

[25] Though it is not the purpose of this article to analyse the intricate conditions of possibility of the current war, I would like to briefly clarify some aspects directly related to this paper. Contrary to most dominant accounts of the current conflict as the linear product of a "popular rebellion" against neoliberalism (Rafizadeh 2013; https://www.thedailybeast.com/in-syria-follow-the-money-to-find-the-roots-of-the-revolt), I believe that the intensification of feelings of distrust *vis à vis* agrarian and social policies that I described do not lead teleologically to the outbreak of an armed conflict. Two other variables seem to me more important for explaining the ongoing destruction of the Syrian land, people and wealth. On the one hand, the existence of a conflict inside the Ba'th Party and the state apparatus regarding the process of Economic Reform and Market Liberalisation (Hemash 2013), and on the other, the role of metropolitan capital in promoting the process of market liberalisation for decades and its direct implication in the transformation of social conflict into violent war.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Spanish Minister of Science and Technology (FPU Program) for supporting the research on which this paper is based. I am also grateful to the Leverhulme Trust International Network Grant ("Agricultural Transformation and Agrarian Questions in the Arab World") for supporting the writing of this paper.

I thank Susana Narotzky and Jesus Contreras for their scientific support during the research. I also thank Gavin Smith, Jaume Franquesa and two anonymous reviewers from the Journal of Peasant Studies for their insightful comments on this manuscript. Finally, I thank the colleagues from the International Research Collective on agriculture, environment and labour in the Arab World (Thimar), and particularly Martha Mundy and Karim Eid-Sabbagh, for their scientific and human support without which I have never written this article.

I would like to thank all Syrian participants on this study for their generosity, intelligence and knowledge, *shukran*.

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Tables with captions

Table 1. COMPARATIVE REGIONAL DAY-SALARIES IN THE OLIVE'S HARVEST FOR THE PERIOD 2009-2010 IN SYRIAN POUNDS (1 euro = 65 SP)

Governorate	ALEPPO	IDLIB	TARTOUS New Workers	TARTOUS Old Workers	TARTOUS Local Workers
Men	----------	----------	450-500	500-600	800
Women/ Youth	200-250	200-250	300-350	400	----------

Sources: Fieldwork Notes and key informant interviews, September 2009-December 2010

EXPLANATORY NOTE II

Dear reviewers,

I would like to thank you again for your corrections, comments and suggestions.

I have introduced changes related to spelling, grammar, usage and transliteration (highlighted in yellow).

I detail bellow few changes that I think deserve further explanation.

To Reviewer 1

p. 2, line 27, labour should be lower case,

> I did not find the word "labour" in line 27, so I have changed it in line 11 (please check it)

p. 18, the transliteration of mukafa'in is wrong (…) I am not fully familiar with Syrian dialect, but assuming this is the same word as used on p. 18, the transliteration is mukafa'in

> I haven't used the correct transliteration in the first case: The word is "mukayfin" plural of "mukayeef", meaning "To feel well, to be in a good situation" (Syrian dialect).

To Reviewer 2

p. 13

…related to indirect ways of devaluing salaries…: I thought that in your previous distinction between indirect (i.e. largely market pricing) and direct ways of devaluation, these changes would have been direct [not indirect] ways? Could you check that you are using the terms in the same manner throughout?

- I have deleted here the notion of "indirect". In fact I was using the notion here "only" to stress that workers were not only receiving lower salaries, but working more for the same salary….But you are right. The notion sends the reader to the global discussion about devaluation. The sentence looks now as follows:

  "On the other, being disembeded from the ties of friendship forced them to accept worse labour conditions:…"

… intensive-extensive… do you mean intensive-numerous? I don't understand the extensive here if it doesn't mean simply numerous?

> I've substituted intensive-extensive for "permanent"

p. 19

check spelling of *fellah/fallah*: the standard English/French spelling without italics would be fellah but italics means proper transliteration hence it would be *fallah*.

➢ Ok! Changed

Here the spelling is *mukayfin* which is better than the earlier spelling *mukaifin* –make consistent better on the first spelling here.

> Changed

f.n. .21

Is this footnote repeated in the article? If so, cut it out the duplication.

> Yes, It was repeated---Cut!

p. 25

remove the second occurrence of integrate in the same sentence so that it read capital accumulation of the world market without integrated into

➢ I've deleted the last part of the sentence. It seems to me clearer and less repetitive:

"the emergent dismantlement of the national Syrian agrarian system and the related process of devaluation of agrarian livelihoods served to integrate Syrian labour and agrarian wealth into the global chains of capital accumulation". ~~of the world market and shaped by its dominant players.~~

"'*Amnarja' la wara* (We are going backwards)": Economic Reform and the Politics of Labour in Agrarian Syria

From the end of the 1990s to early 2011, Syria went through an ambivalent transformation from a centrally controlled economy towards a fully globalised market economy. Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted in Syria between September 2008 and February 2011, this article explores the consequences of policies of economic reform and market liberalisation for agrarian relations of production in two different but interlinked agrarian contexts. The theoretical discussion of Marx's concept of subsumption -through the lens of agrarian, feminist and colonialism/imperialism debates- is used as both a point of departure and arrival in the analysis. From this perspective, the Economic Reform emerges as a hegemonic project of rescaling and of reconstituting the subsumption of labour. This involved both a process of devaluation of agrarian work and workers' livelihoods, and the disempowerment of the working class through the reorganisation of the state.

Keywords: Agrarian politics, subsumption of labour, value, Syria, Economic Reform

Introduction

In the relatively short period from the 1990s to early 2011, Syria went through a partial and ambivalent transformation from a centrally controlled economy towards a fully globalised market economy (Hemash 2003, 2013; Kadri 2012; Seifan 2010; Zuraik and Gough 2014). For the country's agrofood regimes, the application of "Economic Reform and Market Liberalisation" (*al-Islah al-iqtisadi wa-tahrir al-suq*) policies, particularly from the 2000s onwards, meant a major shift from the historical political economy of Baʿthist Syria (Ajl 2019; Matar 2018). Fostered by agrarian reform (which began with the Egyptian Syrian Union and was developed by the Baʿthist Socialist

Revolution of 1963) and policies of national food self-sufficiency (Al Zoughby 2006), the nationally embedded character of the Syrian agricultural system was, until the early years of this century, an exception in the setting of the globalised 'new agrofood corporatist regime' (McMichael 2008)[1]. Then, with Syria applying (and failing) to join the WTO in 2001 and its subsequent signing of the Great Arab Free Trade Area in 2005, the seeds were planted for a change aimed at "overcom[ing] Syrian backwardness in relation to its location in a globalised economy, while strengthening its export activity"[2].

In this article I explore the shifting agrarian politics of this period through the lens of Marx's concept of the subsumption of labour. From this perspective we observe a (further) subsumption of Syrian labour under capital accumulation *via* the *global market* (Federici 2013; Kadri 2018; McMichael 2009). The theoretical discussion of the Marxist concept of subsumption then will be a point of departure and of arrival in the following ethnographic analysis. By drawing on feminist and colonialism/imperialism theories as well as agrarian debates, I suggest two main modifications *vis à vis* the prevailing uses of the concept. On the one hand, I propose the *devaluation of labour* as a key aspect concerning the dynamics of valorisation of capital through subsumption. On the other, this means that the subsumption of labour is a political process; in this case the struggle over forms of the state and models of development are at the core of this politics of devaluation (Gramsci 1977, [1947] 2010; Vergoupulos [1974] 1993).

[1] Although the policies of Infitah ("the Opening") of the end of the 1980s partially prefigured the Economic Reform, the transformation of the socioeconomic landscape reached a new scale in this second period.

[2] Speech of the former Minister of Economy and External Trade on Liberalisation of Trade and Policies of Economic Reform (1994) (as quoted in Hemash 2003). The translation from Arabic is mine.

These modifications can help us to avoid typological and teleological debates around forms of subsumption and lead us to a more holistic understanding of the dynamics through which social labour is captured and transformed into capital.

The results discussed in this article derive from a larger research project conducted in two Syrian villages of different governorates between September 2008 and February 2011[3]. The first field study was in the coastal village of Beyt Khodra[4], Tartous, (1.500 inhabitants in 2010). Since the 1990s the main crops (olives; citrus and eggplants) were produced under a state-controlled market system, and small farm-owners dominated the landscape (67% of properties bellow 1.5 Ha; max. 6.5Ha in 2010). The second location, Al-Hayat (Maʿarrat-el-Noʿuman, Idlib), was a village of 1296 inhabitants where land was nationalised and distributed by the State according to the Laws of the Agrarian Reform (*istimlakiya*). Cultivators farmed their plots (95% between 3 and 7 hectares; max.10 hectares) under a regime of possession and (until the early 2000s) state-planned production and distribution[5] of wheat, barley and lentils (including cumin as a complement).

[3] The research included ethnographical observation (comprising co-residence and working in the fields), semi-structured interviews, life and family histories, the compilation of oral history, focus groups, networks charts, the review of some historical documents and the collection of some statistical data (landownership, productivity, etc.). In addition to fieldwork, I used secondary literature to address the political-economic history of Syria. This historical approach started from the nineteenth century and focused on the period between 1958 (beginning of the Agrarian Reform) and the 2000s (Economic Reform). See Sarkis (2015).

[4] I use fictional names for the villages and the people in order to preserve their anonymity.

[5] Laws of the Agrarian Reform established that beneficiaries of redistributed land had to pay a quarter of its value over thirty years before becoming full owners of their plots. The late application of these laws in Al-Hayat (starting in the 1980s) meant that at the time of my fieldwork peasants had not yet completed this mandatory period.

The method of multi-sited ethnography (Burawoy 2003) was particularly appropriate given the uneven historical development of agrarian regions around the country (Dubar and Nasr 1976; Hanna 1985, 1975; Khalidi 1984; Mundy 2000; Mundy and Saumarez Smith 2007; Schaebler 2000) and the dualism of agrarian policies (supervised market/state planned) developed by the Baʿthist Syrian state (Hinnebush 1989; Perthes 1999). Moreover, the experiences of the agrarian producers of the two localities were directly interrelated since the 1990s, when an important part of the cultivators (*fallahin*)[6] of Al-Hayat started to work as seasonal dayworkers in the lands of Beyt Khodra. Synchronic comparison (Buroway 2003) between the consequences of market liberalization in the two locations revealed the ambiguities and contradictory character of this hegemonic project as well as the heterogeneous (but connected) lived experiences of the agrarian working-classes that the reform engendered.

After a brief discussion of Marx's notion of *the subsumption of labour to capital*, I focus on the consequences of the process of globalised liberalisation for the agrarian reconfiguration of the village of Beyt Khodra (Tartous); this especially affected the re-composition of forms of day-labour in the olive-oil sector. In a context of land commodification coupled with the marginalisation of olive oil production, small farmers reconfigured their strategies – some selling or lending their lands and others seeking to assure the *viability* of their plots by decreasing expenses in the labour-force. As a result new forms of day-labour emerged. Key examples include the feminisation of labour

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Until the early 2000s, the state stipulated the crops that had to be produced and monopolised their purchase and sell, paying to the farmers above the world-price of these crops (Ababsa 2004; Ajl 2019; Fiorni 2001; Perthes 1999; Wattenbach 1996). In 2002, wheat transformed into a mixed sector (*qitaʿ mushtarak*) allowing private traders to purchase and sell the portion of wheat not bought by the state. The distribution of barley and lentils was privatised in 2005.

[6] Lit. tillers, in this case: cultivators favoured by the agrarian reform.

gangs and a *preference* for contracting teenager workers. Meanwhile, a new category of seasonal migrant workers arrived who came from the impoverished dry continental and eastern regions. These renewed forms, in which labour power was rendered abstract via a marker that was itself differentiated, threatened the previous ties between small farmers of the village of Beyt Khodra and *old* temporary-cyclical workers (small farmers) from Al-Hayat (Maʿarrat-al-Nouʿman, Idlib) who used to work together for decades and experienced their bonds in terms of cooperation (*taʿawun*) and friendship (*sadaqa*).

In the next section, I examine the consequences of the process of market liberalisation for the domestic agrarian economies of *old* temporary workers in their land of origin, Al-Hayat. My analysis places a strong emphasis on the description of how this social group made sense of these changes, in terms of a restored process of disempowerment of agrarian labourers which sent them back to the old forms of capitalist serfdom that existed prior to the Baʿthist revolution.

In the final section I argue that the Economic Reform can be understood as a hegemonic project of rescaling and reconstituting the subsumption of labour. This involves both a process of devaluation of (agrarian) work and workers' livelihoods, and the disempowerment of the working class through the reorganisation of the state.

The politics of capital domination over labour: subsumption, devaluation and institutional disempowerment

Before turning to the case material, let me briefly review useful developments of the concept of labour subsumption. The term was originally used by Marx to capture the process by which social labour is subordinated to the dynamics of capital for the production of surplus value (*Capital*, especially chap.VI unpublished and chap. XVI).

While keeping this fundamental part of the concept in this article, I suggest that we need to discuss what we understand as *productive labour*. And explore the relationship between the *production of surplus value* and *other crucial forms of capital accumulation* (the capture, conversion and hoarding of value not produced *per se* as capitalist surplus value), in the context of the specific political development of *class struggle*.

Marx's discussion of the concept of productive labour hinges on its relations to two different forms of surplus value – absolute and relative. These correspond to two means by which surplus is produced: initially formal subsumption and then, through advances in the means of production, real subsumption (Cf. the Chapters VI and XVI of *Capital*; for Spanish versions: Marx [1867] 2009 and Marx [1867] 2007). Building on this understanding, agrarian political economists have long gone beyond this linear conceptualisation of how labour is transformed into capital in two ways, in particular. First, they have discussed forms of formal (Chevalier 1983; Smith 1989), pre-formal (Banají 2010) or indirect (Montoya 2013) subsumption of petty commodity producers where usurious credit and unequal exchange replaces the wage as mechanism of surplus extraction[7] (Narotzky 2016). Second, they have examined how gender and spatial forms of labour segmentation reinforce surplus extraction by capital through the devaluation of various forms of remuneration (Das 2011; Mies 1989; Stolcke 1986; Wolf 1982). Particularly important for this article is the second of these processes, for it reveals how the devaluation of the commodity labour-power enlarges the portion of surplus value

[7]I find particularly interesting the distinction made by Montoya (2013) between indirect (merchant and usurious capture of value) and formal subsumption of petty commodity production. The author uses the last term to refer to cases where capital reconfigures forms of production (intensification and extensification of the work-day, expanding scale, capital's direction of production) of petty-producers.

captured by capital thus reducing the worker's portion, and thereby widening the concept of productive labour[8].

Feminists and theorists of colonial-imperial domination have further developed this line of interpretation by showing how capital accumulation has been inherently dependent on the capture/conversion of surplus value produced outside the market relation. This is one of the pillars of colonial pillaging and unequal exchange (Amin and Casanova 1993; Harvey 2003; Kadri 2013 and 2018; Luxemburg [1917] 2007; Wallerstein 1973); as well as of the appropriation of non-paid women's work concerning the reproduction of workers (Dalla Costa and James [1972] 2005; Narotzky 1997; Razavi 2009). In all these cases, social labour is integrated into capital's expanded accumulation precisely without being *formally* or *really* subsumed through wages (see also Federici 2013; Mies 1989).

These three perspectives reshape the conceptualisation of *productive labour* by emphasising that expanded accumulation is not only the product of absolute or relative capitalist production of value, but also of forced dispossession, destruction, transfer and conversion of existing value, both locally and on a world scale. Thus referring to neocolonial relations through *militarism* in the Arab world, Kadri (2018, 1) remarks, "The most violent practice of cheapening labour is a principal characteristic of the law of value". Although since 2011 it has been through war that this law has deployed in Syria (see conclusions), in this article I examine its previous development amidst the

[8]In another place, I argued for an analytical distinction between this narrow definition of productive labour (in terms of its integration into the valorisation of capital) and a broader definition focused on the productive nature of concrete labour for human reproduction. Cf. Delphy (2001); Narotzky (1997); Pérez-Orozco (2014).

globalisation and liberalisation of markets and the partial abandonment of a nationally embedded agricultural system.

Beyt Khodra, de-agrarianisation and the crisis of local olive oil

Over the centuries, agrarian production had been the centre of the household economies of Beyt Khodra, both through self-provisioning and as a source of income (petty-production and day-labour). Olive oil has been the main market product at least since the nineteenth century when it circulated through the regional, Ottoman and European, markets. Farmers used to combine it with other crops (such as tobacco or peanuts into the 1960s) and mixed farming for the household's self-provisioning. Since 1979, as in other coastal areas, citrus has been introduced, on the basis of a plan drawn up by the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform and sustained through peasants' cooperatives and the Office for Rural Planning. In the zenith of economic autarky, this planned extension of certain crops was aimed at helping Syria to strengthen its national food self-subsistence (Wattenbach, 1996), as well as to feed the new state-led industries of fruit juices and fruit-flavoured sodas. And the long harvest period of different kinds of citrus (eight months per year) granted a secure source of income to the coastal agricultural households.

Then, through the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Economic Reform completed a process of de-agrarianisation already under way as a result of several factors: the fragmentation of agricultural plots due to inheritance practices, sustained decreases of olive-tree and citrus profitability, and changes of consumption standards and values around agricultural work. Particularly important in this process was the development of a land property market, an outcome of the interaction between the new economic hegemony and longer-term historical dynamics of international migration

specific to the village, and more broadly to Tartous Governorate. The controlled liberalisation of foreign investments and the implementation of policies of land requalification stimulated the return of some of the *mughtaribin* (emigrés), who held Syrian nationality and hence were able to buy up land. Beyt Khodra has an important émigré community in Venezuela, among whom some big traders who were by this time keen to move their capital out of the now socialist Venezuela to re-invest in housing and tourism in their native land[9].

By 2010, no household in the village made its living exclusively through agriculture and only 40% of males and 25% of females engaged in agriculture at all, and not very intensively. In contrast, during the 1980s, 90% of adults (both male and female) were engaged in such activities[10]. The development of a landownership market and the erosion of agriculture as a worth way of living accelerated the differentiation of local (ex) farmers. A minority abandoned agricultural tasks to start small non-agricultural business and/or became local moneylenders. In contrast, the members of semi-proletarianised households combined agricultural labour in their domestic and sometimes rented plots, with self-employment (e.g. taxi-drivers), waged work in non-qualified low-paid jobs (particularly in the construction sector in Lebanon and the

[9] The modal price of land in Beyt Khodra reached around 2.000.000 SP/1000m^2 (1 euro= 65 Syrian Pounds). By contrast, the price for the "good grain lands" in the Idlib governorate did not reach 40.000 SP/1000 m^2; thus land cost 50 times less there. A key factor explaining these differences is the absence of processes of land requalification in Idlib, where land continued to be tied to agricultural uses. At the same time, wages in Idlib were around a half of those in the coastal region (field information compared with Fiorni 2001).

For a discussion of this further process of commodification of land from an ethnographical perspective, see Sarkis (2011) and Márquez, Montesinos and Sarkis (2011)

[10]The decrease in the rate of agrarian tasks in Beyt Khodra was especially high even for coastal standards and might be put in contrast to rural continental areas, such as Al Hayat, where over 90% of inhabitants were in 2010 still mainly involved in agriculture.

restaurant sector in Barcelona, Spain) and public employment (mostly women)[11]. Besides the withdrawal from agrarian tasks and accelerated bipolarisation, land-use patterns were also transformed, particularly since the 1990s, when greenhouse eggplant production spread. Nevertheless, although the profitability of eggplants was 30 times higher than that of olive oil, many owners did not have the necessary resources or geographical conditions to carry out this change, and olive tree plantations continued to cover 66% of the landscape.

With the exponential growth of Syrian olive oil export figures that followed the opening up to a *free* international market (Ali 2006, 2009; Malevotti 1999; Fiorni 2001)[12], local production became peripheral to households, whether worked under leasing contracts (*ḍaman*), 60% of plantations in 2010, or used for domestic self-provisioning. This was because the hegemony of *comparative trade advantage* policies broke down the security provided by the previous national plans to local farmers (*muzari'in*). Therefore, local production of olive oil entered into a crisis of competitivity faced with the oil of the continental areas, because of its lower acidity rate and relatively higher production costs. Meanwhile Tunisian oil started to dominate the Syrian market after the full application of GAFTA in 2007. As a local trader put it, 'You know, that's the free market, everyone is free to search what is better for him, what brings him more profit' (Local trader, Tartous, November 2010).

[11] See Moyo and Yeros (2007) for a further discussion of the relations between liberalisation, the unmaking of national projects, imperialist domination and semi-proletarianisation in the global South.

[12]National export volume moved from 1.912 tons (1997-1999) to 33.847 tons (2004-2006). Revenue from national exports increased from 5.4 million dollars to 49.7 million dollars between the same periods.

With this shift away from protection, the abstract global law of value that operated across countries and regions now determined the drop of prices for local producers[13]. The price that producers of Syrian olive oil received had been the highest in the Mediterranean up until 2005 (Ali 2009; Spanish Commercial Office in Damascus 2006). Thus Malevotti (1999, 28) points out that in 1998, Syrian producers sold their oil for 2.84 $/kg in the final market and sold it for 2.60 $/kg to traders, whereas the oil from other Southern Mediterranean areas, fetched only 1.71 $/kg. By 2010 the laws of the *free* (Arab) market tied local Syrian oil production to the abstraction resulting from the cheapest offer present in the market - Tunisian oil – which became the base-price for oil across the area[14]. This triumph of the maximisation of those dominating the market over producers expanded the gap between the concrete value of the content of work in the units of oil produced in Beyt Khodra and the abstract value which now served as the reference of measure through competition. Likewise, it also widened the gap between the actual production cost in the locality and the final prices received by producers. These production costs were particularly increased by the rise of wages in Beyt Khodra. From 1992 to 2010, in a period when households came to depend more and more on employing waged workers, wages making up the tank (local unit of measure equal to 16 litres of oil) price rose from 11.6% to 19.5% for producers, while in 1997 wages made up only 5.71% of the tank price.

[13]The liberalisation of the oil exports (1996) was preceded by a protectionist law, which banned imports. In 2006, a new law temporary allowed imports, although just for the immediate pre-harvest. Full application of the Arab Free Trade Area arrived in 2007.

[14] See Ayeb (2019) for a critical analysis of the impoverishing consequences of *comparative trade advantage* for Tunisian olive oil producers.

From this perspective, apparently economic phrases like state *deregularisation* and market *liberalisation* obscure profoundly *political* mechanisms – the withdrawal of the State Department of Supplies (*idarat al-tamwin*), the stimulation of production in continental areas, and the control of prices by local-international traders and agro-processing capital. Such political manoeuvres made possible capital's control over producers through, among other factors, the abstraction of the concrete labour processes and hence the obscuring of the conditions of social reproduction that underlie the final exchanged products.

The politics of labour (I): devaluation and the dialectics between abstraction & differentiation

The strength of capital's power to shape agrarian logics and the reproductive strategies of rural subjects also materialised in the re-composition of forms of day-labour. The emergent practices of selling agricultural land, combined with new economic strategies, endangered previous bonds between small farmers from the village and *old* temporary-cyclical workers (small farmers), particularly but not exclusively, from Al-Hayat (Maʿarrat-al-Nouʿman, Idlib). Since the end of the 1980s, complementarity between local agrarian cycles in both sites had given root to a cyclic working structure, which combined domestic and waged work. Very personalised ties dominated the relations between small farmers and labourers, who experienced their bonds in terms of cooperation (*taʿawun*), and friendship (*sadaqa*) among ordinary people (*al-nas al-basita*). They had worked together for decades, and labour relations were embedded in a larger framework of moral and affective ties that attached employees and employers, as individuals and as members of households (*buyut*, pl. from *bayt*). The force of these mutual commitments lay in the fact that far from being a compendium of abstract precepts, they expressed and performed the material entanglement of the projects of

(better) reproduction for both farmers and workers as they were built up on continuous shared experiences pervaded by feelings of affect (cohabitation, joint work, etc.).

This changed with the new renters of the plantations (and even some villagers in their own self-provisioning plots) who started to focus their strategies of rationalisation (towards simple 'viability' or maximising profit) on the single factor of production that they controlled: labour. Besides (the increasingly contested) use of family labour, two intertwined forms of labour devaluation displaced the *old* forms of day-work: the hiring of a new category of workers and the feminisation of gangs.

The recruitment of new (*judad*) workers seen as strangers (*ghurba*) or *badu* (lit. bedouins, see below) constituted the first form of labour force segmentation. On the one hand, they earned around 100 SP/day less than the day-workers who were part of the previous networks of friendship (*sadaqa*) and trust (*thiqa*) (see figure 2). On the other, being disembeded from the ties of friendship forced them to accept worse labour conditions: lengthening of the work-day, a range of the uses of women and teenagers' work (see below), and the abandoning by farmers of responsibility for providing housing and food. This new group of workers was more *flexible* and easily adaptable to the changing productive structure, which demanded a combination of an intensive and cyclical workforce for olive harvesting alongside a permanent workforce in greenhouses. In contrast with the *old* day-workers who were subjected to the agrarian cycles of their towns of origin, these *new* workers were absolutely separated from their means of livelihood and production because of the disintegration of their agro-pastoral economies (Ababsa 2004; Chatty 2006, 2007; Geyer and Dbyat 2007)[15]. Far from the

[15] For the structural nature of ethnic and gender segmentation of globalised agrarian labour markets in the Syrian case, see Abdelali-Martini (2011), Abdelali-Martini, Tutwiler and Kalume (1998), Abdelali-Martini et al. (2003), Morelló and Sarkis (2013). Concerning the alterisation of

reified *laissez-faire* metaphors of the market (Edelman 2005), uneven development and dispossession were the first political processes regulating the labour relations well before any particular work agreement.

Table 1. Comparative Regional Day-salaries in the olive's Harvest for the period 2009-2010

[Table 1 near here]

The second political process regulating the (unfree) labour market was the moral economy of ethnification (Ahmed, 2010) under which members of this *new* group were constructed as different and, moreover, less-valuable workers. In our particular socio-historical topography, this process of *othering* was constructed around the *bedouinity* of the new day-workers. In general terms, the noun *bedouin* describes those who live in the *badya* (semi-desert steppe). In the Syrian context, it refers to the human groups settled in the eastern regions characterised for their pastoral and nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life and for their tribal sociopolitical organisation (Ababsa 2004; Al-Yundi 1963; Chatty 2006, 2007; Bocco and Chatelard 2001; Hourani 1992). Giving the multiple factors denying any essentialist definition of *bedouins* (marriages with other human groups, multiple migratory and settlement processes throughout history), particularly important in this case are contemporary uses of the concept. The political nature of these uses during my fieldwork revealed itself in different conduct: the label was usually used for categorising people who had neither been shepherds (often for centuries), nor had they lived in the *badya* such that semi-nomadism had

Syrian workforce in Lebanon, see Chalcraft, (2009). For a comparative example about the case of migrant and Pakistani workers in the Jordan valley, see Van Aken (2005).

been a forced consequence of their dispossession, and not a response to the agro-pastoral cycle. Taken together, what seems particularly relevant for the analysis is how *difference* appears as a metaphor, a euphemism legitimising inequality and as a device for stratifying, devaluing and dividing the work force.

Although this new group of workers constituted no more than half of the labour force in 2010, their presence in the labour market transformed the conditions of day-labour in general terms. In this sense, the capitalist law of value penetrated the day-labour conditions even for *old* workers forced to accept further forms of devaluation. Besides the extension of the work-day and other ways of depreciating the salaries mentioned above, the feminisation of gangs arose as the second main vector of labour segmentation.

Most of the literature about the feminisation of agrarian labour associates it with processes of productive intensification and market expansion (Reigada 2009; Tooth 2005; Van Aken 2005). Although the marginalisation of oil production and the contraction of the scale of circulation defined our ethnographical case, the feminisation of gangs (including teenagers of both sexes as performers of gendered tasks which women had traditionally performed) responded likewise to the strengthening of the power of global capital over local/national production. Bonded forms of day-labour that had flourished throughout the 1990s had followed the pattern of hiring groups of relatives (particularly brothers and sisters of the same extended-household) and had maintained a symmetric proportionality (1:1) between the feminine and masculine work force. Yet by 2010 women and teenagers composed, on average, two thirds of the gangs. Similarly to the case of *Bedouin* workers, power relations and gender ideologies of differentiation sustained the segmentation of salaries between men, women and teenagers.

The devaluation of the different tasks worked in much the same way. The actual picking up of the olives was devalued compared with the task of knocking them down from the trees with the ideological attribution of each of these tasks to women and teenagers and men respectively. Although my observation made clear that at points, both sexes and age groups were performing these tasks, particularly women and teenagers had the main responsibility for the tasks related to the picking up of and the preparation of knocking down olives. The representation of men as the organisers of labour (a practice much contested and context-particular in the fields) operated in the same vein as did the construction of teenagers as "less productive" workers (in terms of quantity and quality).

In 2010, a woman's day-wage represented 78, 5% of a man's, while that of a teenager was, by contrast, 66% (see Table 1)[16]. The hiring of teenagers responded to the proportional increase in women's day-salary in the village since the 1960s (when feminine day-salary were half of the masculine one, see Daniel 1967) and particularly in the last years before 2011. In this sense, I observed that in contrast with men's salaries, which remained fixed, women received in 2010 50 LS more per day than in 2008. Nevertheless, the predominance of women in the gangs did not relate exclusively to the pure depreciation of pay, but likewise to other forms of the labour's subsidiarisation (Dalla Costa and James [1972] 2005; Mies 1986; Reigada 2009). As in so many other cases, we cannot avoid the fact that women took the main responsibility for the reproductive tasks (food, clothes, cleaning, care) that sustained low salaries as well as

[16] Gender and age inequality in salaries remained lower than in other regions of the country (as Hama, Homs or Alep) were they reached 50 % (fieldwork notes compared with Abdelali-Martini 2011); as well as in other agrarian contexts over the Middle East in recent history (Hammam 1986; Moghadam 1994; Toth 2005).

the work order of a well-fed and cared for work-force. Moreover, their role acquired a renewed importance faced with the decline in the responsibility of employers to offer some provisioning for workers.

In this section we have examined how the globalisation of the olive oil market imposed an abstract law of value devaluing the commodified labour force, *therefore* worsening the work and livelihood conditions of workers. In the next section I focus on how the reorganisation of the state downgraded the condition of *old* workers as agricultural producers. And I examine how this social group made sense of this institutional transformation in terms of a process of disempowerment of agrarian workers through the remaking of the state.

The politics of labour (II): 'We are going backwards'

New agrarian and social policies threatened the livelihoods of *old* workers from Al-Hayat (Maʿarrat-al-Nouʿman, Idlib) both as day-labourers and as cultivators. Although in 2010, the state continued to limit commercial practices of wheat hoarding and paid for grain at double its world price and seventy-five per cent more than private traders did (fieldwork data), diverse factors undermined their domestic economies. On the one hand, they were upset by a series of external factors: inflation[17], the partial withdrawal of subsidies for fuel and supplies[18], a drop in the purchase price of lentils and barley

[17]The yearly inflation rate for the period between 2006 and 2010 averages 10% (http://cbssyr.org/index-EN.htm). See Hemash (2003) to access to statistics from the previous period. Kadri (2012b, 18) estimates a drop in the real salary of 50% between 2006 and 2011. Although this estimation seems to me a little bit exaggerated (i.e. average household's expenses in food = 14.000 SP; higher than the data that I registered from Idlib) it offers a good pointer to the precarisation of subaltern people's livelihoods in this period.

[18]Although the withdrawal of fuel subsidies started to be effective in 2008, in 2009 the subsidy continued to represent 5% of the GDP. For the quinquennial [2005-2010] the Syrian state invested

after the liberalisation of the sector in 2005 and the transformation of wheat into a mixed economy sector (*qitaʿ mushtarak*) in 2002. On the other hand, changes in state credit and distribution policies (i.e. restricted withdrawal of amnesties regarding unpaid credits; delays in payments for grain) underpinned the subjugation of cultivators to usurious-merchant capital (Hemash 2003, 2013; Kadri 2012b; Zuraik and Gough 2014).

These entangled processes of material disempowerment shook up the lives of the members of the Abu Nasr' household, with whom I resided and worked during my fieldwork. This extended household - formed by the households of Abu Nasr (including his wife and their three unmarried daughters), his elder son Nasr (with his wife and their seven children) and his younger son Firas (with his wife and five children) worked on 15 Ha (7, 4.5 and 4.5 Ha respectively) of redistributed-land[19] planted with wheat, barley, lentils and cumin.

Like other cultivators from their village the members of this household during my fieldwork tended endlessly to emphasise how agrarian and social policies in the over forty years before the Economic Reform had radically transformed their lives in terms of stability (*istiqrar*) and the improvement of their well-being (*fi tatawwur; naʿish mukayfin*). Particularly important in their accounts were: the improvement in food provisioning, access to land and other means of production, the security provided by state planning and distribution, infrastructural development allowing their access to basic means of livelihood such as water and enrolment of younger generations in

27.8 billion dollars in these subsidies. Nevertheless, dual price policies starting in 2009 (subsidised fuel: 9 SP/litre and free market fuel: 25 SP/litre), complicated household economies of agrarian subjects.

[19]The first redistribution of land occurred in Al-Hayat at the end of the seventies and a second process of redistribution happened in 1992. Beyt Khodra was one of the few places in the country where full-ownership of agrarian lands was registered under French colonial domination.

schools. Likewise, they highlighted their political empowerment and the moral re-valorisation of being a cultivator (*fallah*) in the face of the previous dominant classes (in this case, latifundia owners-money lenders (*bakawat*) to whom they had been subjugated by a kind of capitalist serfdom). As Abu Nasr's wife put it in 2009, in one of our meetings for collecting her life-history:

> The lives of cultivators today have nothing to do with the past! (…) The Reform (she meant the Agrarian Reform) arrived and the government fired all these dogs and brought the land for the cultivator and rights for the People. Before we worked until death just to eat and sometimes even that was impossible; now we live well (*mukayfin*). There is stability (*istiqrar*)"[20].

Two events in 2010 threatened these recent experiences of livelihood improvement and enhanced human dignity in Abu Nasr's extended household. For the first time in almost thirty years, Abu Nasr and Firas were forced to sell their wheat to a local trader. This happened because the state stopped its practice of turning a blind eye to the accumulated debts of peasants regarding land-rent and state-distributed supplies, and refused to buy the grain or to allocate credit to indebted households. The same changing policies had obliged Nasr one year earlier to take a loan from a local money-lender with an annual interest rate of 30% instead of the one-year free-of-charge loans provided by the state. The money-lender then forced him indirectly to sell his lentil production to

[20]These shared historical experiences did not obscure the fact that at the same time agrarian subjects felt and judged some aspects of the historical practices of the Baʿthist State as oppressive and exploitative. The issues of corruption (*fasad*) and the tyranny exercised by the information services (*mukhabarat*) were central in the constitution of particular sentiments of injustice (*zulum*). Nevertheless, these complex political experiences contrast with some academic accounts, like that of Seurat (1979), who, blind to the historical experiences of millions of Syrians, allowed himself to establish a continuity between the *old despotism of latifundia owners* and *the new despotism of the Baʿthist state*. For a critique of the idea of "oriental despotism" used for the *bakawat* structure of power from the point of view of its connections with capital accumulation on a world scale, see Gilsenan (1984); Islamoglu (2000) and Mundy and Saumarez Smith (2007).

himself for the worst price in the region. This concatenation of misfortunes (*masa'ib*)– in their terms- arose the same year that their twenty-year-long friends and employers from Beyt Khodra stopped counting on them to work in the olive harvest. Five years after the demise of the old owner-farmer, Abu Nassim, his children had sold over 30% of the property and rented out the majority of the remaining land. On top of that, they decided to employ a gang of *bedouin* workers to work on the small plots that they retained for domestic consumption. In the end, Firas and Nasr's older son (13) started to work at the new small business (rent-a-car) of one of Abu Nassim's sons. The same person likewise found new employment for Firas's two sisters in the olive-plantation of a good friend. Like other old day-workers in the same situation, waged work acquired new material and moral meanings. Women had to work under the same conditions imposed on *new* day workers, conditions worse than in the past. Meanwhile their male relatives endured not only decreasing salaries and longer work-days but a sense of self-degradation because of their involvement in cleaning and services tasks, in a context where the appeal to old moral metaphors by their *old friends* acquired no more than rhetorical value.

Alongside moral critiques and millenarian discourses (see author's reference), agrarian workers tend to make sense of these transformations in terms of a movement of "returning back" to past forms of dispossession (*hurman*) and domination (*saitara*) – as though they were going backwards in history. They also stressed the key role of the re-composition of the state in this process. However, some of them (or the same person on other occasions) underlined the continuity of protective policies towards agricultural producers in spite of changing patterns.

This complexity appeared in a very vivid form in one discussion about changes of agrarian policies that I had with some members of Abu Khaled's household some months before the end of my fieldwork:

> The oldest daughter was criticising changing state policies for "abandoning cultivators" when her mother nodded and pointed out that old *bakawat* (traders and or latifundia owners) *were returning little by little*. In her view they were taking advantage of the laxness of the son (referring to President Bashar Al-Asad) for coming back to the domination of cultivators, of the state and of *everything*. The oldest son grumbled from the porch outside the room and stated that the government was still controlling the merchants. Then argued that several traders from Aleppo ended up in jail the previous year because of practices of hoarding. The state then distributed all the hoarded crops among people (*al-sha'b*). For him, the state was not going to let merchants dispossess them (*yuhramna*) over again. With grave concern, Abu Nasr, the father, said: "God knows if they are preparing themselves to return back from France, from Turkey and the other places where they hid with their friends. And the state is not as strong as before, nor is there unity inside (…) and what do you think about Americans [meaning US]…Are they going to leave Syria (to develop) on its own? God knows! In any moment we could become a new Iraq" (Re-writing of my fieldwork notes, 22.10.10)

The contrasted perspectives of the members of this family of cultivators situated the process of market globalisation in the history of class struggle. From their perspectives, it formed a new development of a long-standing project of domination. In this sense, capitalist relations in the embodied historical experiences of agrarian workers from Al-Hayat have historically been personified for the majority in the figure of merchants and

financial-latifundia owners (see Ababsa 2004; Al-Yundi 1963; Gilsenan 1984; Hanna 1975; Mundy 2000). This had been restrained, for a period of time, by a particular form of state. Notwithstanding regional differentiation and state-rentist and merchant accumulation (Kadri 2012a, 2012b), the Baʿthist state (through its socialist and nationalist-corporatist forms –developed after the Corrective Movement of the 1970s) has provided a certain degree of material security and improvement for the agrarian producers of both the localities in my study. In this sense, it entangled its own forms of differentiation, value extraction and political domination with the weakening of the subsumption of agrarian working classes to glocal capital, at the same time as it institutionalised an alternative socioeconomic model to global neoliberalism based in the remaking and unmaking of Arab Socialism (Sarkis 2015).

As expressed by the conflicting standpoints of the different members of Abu Khaled's extended household, in 2010-2011 the advancement of this renewed project of subsumption was still limited by the partial nature of the politico-economic transformations and the ambiguity of state policies. The endurance of some fuel subsidies (see above) or the continuity of the *idarat al-tamwin* [Provisioning Administration] in controlling market mechanisms particularly in some areas, are examples of the ambivalence of the Syrian state in the application of the World Bank's promoted Economic Reform. In 2007 agrarian GDP continued to represent 30 % of national GDP (Ababsa, 2007), and the planned investments in the sector in the 11th Quinquennial Plan (2011-2015) persisted in not fulfilling the directives of (imperial) international institutions (Landis quoted in Muhanna 2011)[21]. The limits imposed on

[21] Landis quoted in Muhanna's blog on the 5th January 2011 "The 11th FYP (2011-2015) does not propose to cut jobs in the public sector, which is a huge cost to the state (…) It should also be careful not to focus on unproductive and water-intensive areas such as agriculture and industry

corporate metropolitan capital and the still relatively self-embedded nature of the Syrian economy of the period limited the pauperisation of agrarian subjects, particularly in relation to neighbouring countries. For Syria in 2008, Kadri (2012a) recorded the lowest rate of rural poverty in the Middle East (15%), in contrast, particularly with that of Egypt (43.7 %)[22].

The prophetic words of Abu Khaled anticipated the process by which the metropolitan capital of the US-NATO BLOC ended up imposing a new direction on the rescaling of capital/labour relations resulting from the Economic Reform. In this sense, the imperialist-civil war shaking the country since 2011 is an expression of the international nature of class formation and struggle, while it also endorses the prioritising of militarism over market globalisation, as the main form of integration of the Arab World into the space of capital accumulation on a world scale (Kadri 2018).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have addressed the Syrian Economic Reform as a particular moment in the historical struggle over the allocation of value (social wealth and human work capacity) between classes on a global/local scale[23]. And I have underlined the key role of the state in (re)organising the conditions where this battle is developed (Gramsci

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when the money could be better spent on retraining people to work in more productive areas". https://nadiamuhanna.wordpress.com/2011/01/05/counting-on-the-people-2/

Cf. Aita (2007).

[22] See also Zuraik and Gough (2014)

[23] From this perspective, the local is not a dimension articulated with the global, but a specific concretisation of global dynamics, which are in turn the product of local struggles (Roseberry 1989; Wolf 1982).

[1891-1937] 1977; Wolf 1989). Seen from this political angle, the capitalist law of value appeared as the historical outcome of class struggle (Das 2011; Kadri 2018[24]) materialised in the restructuring of institutions (the state and the market), models of development (Borras 2009) and the weakening of working-class material power and alternative socioeconomic models (Gramsci 1977, [1947] 2010; Vergoupulos 1993). In this regard, the focus on the reorganisation of the labour market in the olive-oil sector in Beyt Khodra (Tartous) has shown how the expansion of the merchant capacity of hoarding surplus value across national and international chains was sustained by the devaluation of the labour-force. The Janus face of this devaluation not only connected the political segmentation of labour (through gender, age and ethnic lines) to the depreciation of salaries, it also included the strengthening of formal forms of subsumption (i.e. extensification of the work-day, intensification of the rhythm of work) and the escalation of women's unpaid reproductive work thereby subsidising the labour-force. At the same time labour devaluation of this kind was made especially effective because it took place alongside the dispossession of agrarian workers from their means of production and livelihood. As shown by the testimonies of old day-labourers from Al-Hayat (Idlib), dispossession (Marx's ironic use of "the freeing-up" of the worker) was the pre-condition for both their new waged condition and for the relaunch of mechanisms of commercial and financial extraction.

Alongside these processes that were occurring at the level of my field-sites, the emergent dismantlement of the national Syrian agrarian system and the related process

[24] Das (2011) claims against a teleological view of subsumption and points to class struggle for explaining uneven development of forms of subsumption on a world scale. Nevertheless, I refuse his argument about how the endogen class struggle in the peripheries explains the underdevelopment of real subsumption in those territories. In this sense, my argument is closer to that of Kadri (2018) who stresses the global nature of class conflict and struggle.

of devaluation of agrarian livelihoods served to integrate Syrian labour and agrarian wealth into the global chains of capital accumulation of the world market and shaped by its dominant players. The triumph of militarist imperial forms of subsumption has dissipated such a scenario of so-called *peaceful integration* into the global market of labour and capital. However, devaluation, disorganisation and discontent have nourished the internal conflict that in a limited way sustained the development of a long-standing imperialist project of destruction and pillage of Syrian labour-value and labourers[25].

This bloody historical development restates and expands the central thesis of this paper. From the perspective of global history, capital accumulation results less from the expanded production of (relative surplus) value than from the devaluation of human life, the capture of historically produced value, and the violent destruction of social wealth and people on a world scale.

[25] Though it is not the purpose of this article to analyse the intricate conditions of possibility of the current war, I would like to briefly clarify some aspects directly related to this paper. Contrary to most dominant accounts of the current conflict as the linear product of a "popular rebellion" against neoliberalism (Rafizadeh 2013; https://www.thedailybeast.com/in-syria-follow-the-money-to-find-the-roots-of-the-revolt), I believe that the intensification of feelings of distrust *vis à vis* agrarian and social policies that I described do not lead teleologically to the outbreak of an armed conflict. Two other variables seem to me more important for explaining the ongoing destruction of the Syrian land, people and wealth. On the one hand, the existence of a conflict inside the Ba'th Party and the state apparatus regarding the process of Economic Reform and Market Liberalisation (Hemash 2013), and on the other, the role of metropolitan capital in promoting the process of market liberalisation for decades and its direct implication in the transformation of social conflict into violent war.

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Tables with captions

Table 1. COMPARATIVE REGIONAL DAY-SALARIES IN THE OLIVE'S HARVEST FOR THE PERIOD 2009-2010 IN SYRIAN POUNDS (1 euro = 65 SP)

Governorate	ALEPPO	IDLIB	TARTOUS New Workers	TARTOUS Old Workers	TARTOUS Local Workers
Men	----------	----------	450-500	500-600	800
Women/ Youth	200-250	200-250	300-350	400	----------

Sources: Fieldwork Notes and key informant interviews, September 2009-December 2010