CHANGE IS INEVITABLE

Interview with Andrew Gardner (Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of Puget Sound) about labor migration to the Arab Gulf states. The interview was conducted by Tobias Schwarz.

Tobias Schwarz: Prof. Gardner, you are an anthropologist working on transnational labor migrants from Asia, Africa, and other parts of the Middle East to the Gulf States. Could you briefly outline the main characteristics of (labor) migration to the Arabian Peninsula?

Andrew Gardner: I can try. First of all, there is a publication (http://www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/sdd-07-2.pdf) I bumped into some years ago that suggests the Gulf States (that is, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman) comprise the third-largest transnational destination for labor migration in the contemporary world — after Europe and North America. While I'm not so interested in counting transnational migrants, I think this assertion really captures a fundamental fact about labor migration to the Arab Gulf states: For tens of millions of migrants and tens of millions of households, most of which are scattered across South Asia and Southeast Asia, the hydrocarbon-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula figure prominently in the limited economic options they face. And considering how cyclical these migrations often are, the number of impacted households is actually much larger – every year millions of migrants return home and millions more of new migrants stream to the region.

TS: Can you describe the typical experience of a labor migrant to the Gulf?

AG: Over years of ethnographic research, I've really had to embrace the diversity of pathways that migrants follow to the Arabian Peninsula. But typically, potential migrants pay US $1000, US $2000, and sometimes even more to a labor broker in the sending state. That money "purchases" an entry ticket into this transnational migration system, in the form of a two-year labor contract that secures the migrant's employment. The money paid for this contract often delves into household savings, and it often involves mortgaging the productive assets of the migrant's household (imagine, for example, mortgages on agricultural land). The labor broker himself keeps some portion of that money. The remainder makes its way to the employer or his proxies in the Gulf States. As researchers, we have very little insight into this particular junction of the migration process. But importantly, those debts remain in place in the sending state.

When the transnational migrant arrives in the Gulf States, he or she might encounter all sorts of different situations, and no summary can really capture the diversity of those experiences. Indeed, my own ethnographic work has attempted to portray that variability, or at least fragments of it. At best, the migrant prospers in his or her work, repays the loan paid to a labor broker back home, remits monies with regularity, and secures a second employment contract for a lower cost. But all sorts of things can go wrong. In a recent large-scale survey, we determined that the non-payment of promised wages, improper documentation, and passport confiscation were common features of these transnational migrants' experiences in Qatar. And while those problems are commonplace, more significant problems – and combinations of those problems – are also common.

TS: I assume that many of the hardships the migrants face are somehow related to the sponsorship system?

AG: Yes. Researchers and scholars (myself included) theorize that the extraordinary variability in migrants' experiences in the Gulf States results from the *kafala* – the sponsorship system that governs migration to the Arab Gulf states. In essence, the *kafala* distributes portions of the right and responsibility of governing foreign migrants to those migrants' employers. Employers are typically citizens, or those citizen-sponsors' proxies. As a result of this arrangement, the transnational labor migrant is locked to a particular job, and her or his fate depends heavily on the on the actions (or inactions) of that employer. From another angle, the states themselves have divested significant portions of the responsibility for governing their vast foreign workforces. The divestiture of this responsibility to citizen-sponsors explains why some migrants' experiences in the Gulf answer

their financial dreams, while, for others, migration results in horribly difficult years abroad and a financial cataclysm for their households back home.

TS: Is the kafala *system really a suitable foundation for the immigration policy of a country so badly in need of many cheap laborers?*

AG: This system is not static. After decades of existence, the unfree labor market structured by the *kafala* has been normalized throughout the region. Potential migrants expect to pay for their labor contracts, and employers expect to govern and control their workforce in ways that are somewhat unusual elsewhere in the contemporary world. It's also important not to lose sight of the extraordinary proportions of migrants in the Gulf States. In Qatar, for example, more than nine out of ten residents is a foreign worker. But assimilation is not really central in the broader migrant agenda in the Gulf States, and naturalization is not possible for migrants there (see van Waas' recent paper for an overview). The inflexibility of this unfree labor market is also a significant challenge for the development of the Gulf economies.

Responses, however, have emerged. Many transnational labor migrants are employed by "manpower agencies", an arrangement that preserves the control and governance of the foreign workforce, but allows that workforce to be rented to particular companies or concerns. There is also a substantial population of labor migrants operating under "free visas", an arrangement in which foreign migrants regularly pay a sponsor who allows them to pursue variable employment as they see fit. These are two avenues by which the inflexibility of the *kafala* is circumvented by labor and employers.

Perhaps that yields enough of a sketch of this migration system to compare it with other migrations systems in the contemporary world and in history. After years of ethnographic fieldwork, I really came to understand these migrations to Arabia as fragments of a *migration system,* with many interrelated pieces and parts distributed across the continents adjoining the Middle East. And after exploring this migration system for more than a decade, I've begun to describe it as a *migration industry*. William Walters' work led me to that idea. Terming it a *migration industry* draws attention to its systemic properties, to the presence of profit-seeking motives throughout that system, and to the (human) resources that system depends upon.

A few random notes in addition: It's best not to lose sight of the extraordinary proportions of migrants in these destinations. In Qatar, for example, more than nine out of ten residents are foreign workers. And it should be mentioned that naturalization and citizenship are not possible for migrants in the Gulf States, and that assimilation is not really central in the broader migrant agenda there. That yields a very interesting and unusual sociocultural brew. But that's another complicated and multifaceted topic!

TS: Would it be an exaggeration to call this current labor migration regime a unique system, compared to other regions of the world?

AG: As a researcher and scholar, I have been so immersed in exploring this particular migration system that I've devoted insufficient time to building a good foundation for the sort of comparison your question requests. I can make a couple of observations, however, that might illuminate such comparisons. As I mention in the last chapter of my book City of Strangers, it was more than fifteen years ago that I first encountered a group of Indian transnational labor migrants abandoned by their employer. They dwelled in crowded rooms with beds pressed against all walls, they faced the non-payment of the salaries promised to them, and their families back at home suffered under the substantial debts they had incurred to send the migrant abroad in the first place. This is a scenario I would come to know well in the Gulf, but this first encounter occurred years before I set foot on the Arabian Peninsula. That first encounter was in a dog-eared motel on a highway in Southern Louisiana – in the heart of America's oilpatch. The simple message here, I think, is that these sorts of arrangements and exploitations are recurring features of contemporary migration and mobility, and are neither consigned to the Arabian Gulf States nor to the Global South.

I think these systemic and exploitative relations are also not consigned to the contemporary era. In our session concerning labor contracts at the recent GSSC conference, the parallels between the contemporary migration system I described

and various colonial era forms of forced labor, slavery, and coolie conscription were striking – readily discernible in Oliver Tappe's work on the history of coolie labor in New Caledonia, in Alexander Keese's work on the history of forced labor in Southern Africa, and Vincent Huber's work on historical labor relations in Java. To me, these parallels and continuities reveal the enduring and foundational nature of the forces at work. I think the geography of those forces and powers is less territorialized than in previous eras. Alternatively, I think many of us can see the global South in our own backyards, or infused into the commodities, products, and peoples that move about our world.

I do recognize that while these migrations and the forces that govern them reveal some universal and deterritorialized characteristics, they inevitably draw upon local customs, cultures, and histories. The universal qualities, tendencies and compulsions that pervade our world system are actualized in real places – in real and diverse social and cultural settings, each of which is partially organized and governed within the container of the nation-state. The patterns I see in the Gulf migration system point to these global and seemingly universal forces, but those forces are recognizably articulated and materialized in the very real circumstances of contemporary Arabia. But the infusion or evolution of any particular migration system, in dialectic with local norms, histories, and customs, is also counterbalanced by the agency woven into many contemporary mobilities: Malaysia, India, or Kuwait, consider a potential Nepalese migrant. Hong Kong or Kuwait, weigh a young potential migrant in the Philippines.

In conclusion, I think the empirical pursuit of an understanding of the diversity of contemporary migration systems is an invaluable academic task, and much of that systemic diversity can be found in the Global South.

Interestingly, however, my example from Louisiana was in the Global North. And the Arab Gulf States themselves certainly challenge the boundaries and thresholds of any geographical conception of the Global South. Patterns certainly adhere more to migrations in the Global North, a result, I think, of standardization, modernization, development, and interconnectedness.

Forthcoming/Imagined Modernity: An image on a fence in Doha, Qatar (2012). These computer-generated images of the future proliferate in Doha, and provide a window to the imagined social terrain of the forthcoming future.

TS: You've mentioned the enormous number of foreigners in the Gulf States, and pointed to the exclusive immigration policy there that differs widely from policies of immigrant incorporation in "Western" countries of immigration. I wonder if excluding immigrant workers almost entirely from access to the social and political life would not over time undermine social cohesion?

AG: I think it definitely does undermine social cohesion, and that observation is indeed central to the thesis I've crafted for the new manuscript I'm currently drafting. The more I think about the idea of social cohesion, however, the more wary I become. Perhaps it is the longstanding anthropological concern with ethnocentricity, but I'm wary of the valorization of social cohesion that permeates many contemporary scholarly conversations. The value of social cohesion amidst contemporary diversities is one that has been developed and articulated in western social science, the western public sphere, and in a western (and democratic) political context. What portion of our understanding of social cohesion – and our high estimation of its value – is a product of the predominant forms of migration that we've historically witnessed in Europe and North America?

With some exceptions (such as the Native American population that occupied my continent centuries ago), the migrations we've collectively digested almost ubiquitously consist of fragmentary immigrant minorities assimilated into a much larger majority society. So what portion of

the value we attribute to social cohesion is tied to that historical experience, the democratic foundations in which it evolved, and the particular arrangements of state, citizen, and nation that predominate in Western Europe and North America? This is not meant as a justification for the system that has emerged in the Arab Gulf States, but rather meant to exemplify the care we need to take in assessing diverse migrations.

TS: I agree that I was not sufficiently aware of the normative grounding of my last question. Let me ask more specifically about the immigration policies: Do you think they might become dysfunctional and hence less restrictive in the future? Or is this system stable enough to be maintained for generations to come?

AG: I think that this system is inevitably unstable. It is driven by the hydrocarbon wealth these nations possess (and contingent on that wealth, I think). Even amidst that wealth, however, other changes are afoot. Most of the GCC states are incrementally bringing themselves into alignment with the systemic norms and frameworks that shape migrations in Europe and North America. Attitudes about migrants, and about human rights more broadly, are also rapidly evolving on the Arabian Peninsula, with a noticeable generational shift in those attitudes. Employers, and the economies more broadly, would benefit from more labor mobility, although this attitude has yet to coalesce as a movement. The Gulf States continue to struggle with building the vast institutional framework to govern and regulate the status quo of migration in the region. Governing the detritus of the *kafala* is, perhaps, an impossible task. So while I think that change is inevitable, I also think social cohesion is a problematic goal, particularly when promoted by scholars and others in the long-developed world.

Interestingly, however, while naturalization and assimilation are never aspirations for the Gulf States and their citizenries, there is a form of social cohesion that is visibly promoted. That social cohesion is foremost a class-based conceptualization of social cohesion, albeit inflected with ethnicity and nationality. Visitors and foreign residents to the Gulf States are familiar with the proliferation of billboards, dioramas, scale models, and architectural drawings that portray the future that will soon arrive. In these images of the future, local Arabs predominate, but they mix with a refined minority population of computer-generated foreigners. This fits with the overarching long-term plans by which these nations frame the present: labor migrants are a temporary demographic feature of the present. After their cities are constructed, this labor force will return home, and the post-oil cities will function as cosmopolitan hubs in a knowledge-based global economy.

Forthcoming/Imagined Modernity: This computer-generated image portrays Msheireb, an urban redevelopment of a historic district in the center of Doha.

For more than a decade, Andrew Gardner has worked on transnational migrants and the Gulf Arab societies that host them. His most recent publications include "Tribalism, Identity and Citizenship in Contemporary Qatar".