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Overcoming Methodological Nationalism: Spatial Perspectives on Migration to the Gulf Arab States

Adam Hanieh

Flows of labour migration to the GCC constitute one of the most significant movements of human beings in today's world. In each of these states, the majority of the working population is made up of temporary, migrant workers who lack the political and civil rights held by the citizen population (Shamsi, 2006). For Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, the proportion of migrant workers exceeds 80 per cent of the entire labour force. Mostly found in the private sector, these workers carry out a vast array of manual work and provide construction, service and domestic labour. The majority of this migrant workforce originates from countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, and their remittances contribute to the survival of millions of people throughout these areas.

While there exists a wide set of insightful anthropological and sociological work on migrants in the Gulf, the political economy literature commonly treats the presence of these migrant workers as a minor adjunct to the main story of oil revenues and the machinations of the ruling monarchies in great power politics (cf. Mahdavy, 1970; Beblawi and Luciani, 1990; Crystal, 1995; Ross, 2001). Dominated by rentier state theory, much analysis of the Gulf's political economy focuses upon the interlinkages between the state, the ruling family and allied classes, and the ways in which oil revenues are redirected through these networks. Within this state-centric framework, labour migration is typically treated as a subsidiary question that is reduced

to a potential 'demographic problem' rather than structurally embedded within the nature of the Gulf's political economy.

In those studies that do deal with the political economy of migration in the Gulf, an explanation of the region's reliance on these workers usually adopts the trope of neoclassical 'push-pull' factors: a lack of skills and population levels in the Gulf, and the prospect of higher wage levels, 'pulls' those who are simultaneously 'pushed' by the low wages in their country of origin (Birks and Sinclair, 1980; Kapiszewski, 2004). This approach often considers migrant labour flows as a 'positive sum game' for both the sending and receiving countries, thereby obfuscating the mechanisms of exploitation that underlie these movements of people. As a result, academic writing on the Gulf has a strong orientation towards 'technocratic' policy advice – what types of economic strategies the state should pursue, how to industrialise, how to deal with the question of non-citizen labour and so forth – that assumes the neutrality of the Gulf state and its dealings with migrant workers.

This chapter aims to present an alternative framework for thinking through labour migration to the Gulf States. It begins by outlining some of the dominant theoretical frameworks towards the political economy of migrant work in the Gulf, linking these to the wider migration literature. The key critique raised regarding this literature is its 'methodological nationalism' – a focus upon individual nation-states as self-contained, enclosed sets of social relations, separate from the wider region and world market (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). The chapter outlines an alternative perspective to this, drawing upon some recent thinking about space, class and region inspired by scholars of radical geography. Within this approach, migration to the Gulf can be understood as a process of class formation, demarcated by the institution of citizenship in the Gulf, and necessarily situated within the wider Middle East region and the political economy of the world market. The conclusion draws together some of the political and scholarly implications of this alternative framing.

Migration Theory and the Gulf

There are three broad strands of literature dealing with the political economy of migration to the Gulf. The first of these draws heavily upon neoclassical explanations that emphasise wage differentials as the driving force for migration (Castles and Miller, 2003). These approaches conceive

society as a collection of rational, atomised individuals motivated by the desire to maximise self-interest. When faced by worsening conditions of income and employment at home, individuals make a self-interested choice to move to another location in search of better wages (Lewis, 1954; Harris and Todaro, 1970).¹ This process is often described by the terminology of ‘push–pull’ factors: migrants are pushed from a particular location, while simultaneously pulled by the lure of better conditions somewhere else. Migration is thus framed as a ‘positive sum game’, with all sides benefitting from the flows of labour. The policy challenge becomes one of matching labour surpluses with labour demand, and channelling remittances in such a way that they can be an aid to development.

Although the associated methodological assumptions often go unspoken, studies of migration to the Gulf frequently draw upon these neoclassical frameworks. The Gulf States are said to be ‘capital rich’ but facing ‘a shortage of human capital [as] the major, even pre-eminent constraint upon development’ (Birks and Sinclair, 1980: 2). Labour flows from other countries are thus a ‘structural imperative ... as the oil-related development depends upon the importation of foreign technologies and requires knowledge and skills alien to the local Arab population’ (Kapiszewski, 2001: 3). For labour-sending countries, outflows are caused by ‘such push factors as the low per capita income, lack of job opportunities, low wage rates and/or the prospects of slow growth in per capita income and wages’ (Sherbiny, 1981: 42). In this context, the matching of labour demand in the Gulf with labour surpluses elsewhere can potentially provide a win-win situation. In some accounts from the 1970s and 1980s, when the majority of migrant workers in the Gulf came from the Arab world, the remittance flows that ensued from these labour flows were sometimes framed in Arab nationalist terms – a means through which the Gulf could redistribute its oil surpluses to the surrounding region.

The emphasis on wage differentials in these neoclassical approaches has, nonetheless, been widely critiqued. Numerous empirical studies have found that wage differences are not necessarily present in major migration corridors (Bilsborrow et al., 1984; Standing, 1985; de Haan, 1999). Moreover, a range of theorists have proposed that the methodological individualism inherent to the neoclassical models are mistaken for their lack of attention to the nature of decision makers – very often these are not individuals, but families who distribute risk depending upon particular circumstances. Families, or extended social groups, might decide on a variety of strategies to deal with this risk: sending individuals to pursue

education opportunities, remaining on the land to assist in family labour or migrating to nearby urban areas. Within this perspective, migration becomes one among many options.

In response to these criticisms of the neoclassical model, a second approach to labour migration has refocused attention on the nature of decision-making in the migrant journey. This 'new economics of labour migration' (NELM) model emphasises that migration decisions are formulated within particular social networks and institutional arrangements, and thus cannot be reduced to wage differentials alone (Stark and Bloom, 1985; Stark, 1991). The NELM shares the same basic assumptions of neoclassical approaches (the utility-maximising rational agent operating in an environment of scarcity), but attempts to mediate these choices through particular institutional configurations. A related theme is the concept of 'relative deprivation', the claim that migration decisions are also an attempt to improve the position of individuals or families compared to other relevant groups (Stark, 1984; 1991; Stark and Taylor, 1989). In this sense, the NELM approach has focused upon the nature of family structures in labour-sending countries; the question of power relations (including gender) in determining decisions; cultural and historical factors; as well as the networks established through the migration journey that help to shape its subsequent dynamics (Fields, 1975; Bhattacharya, 1993; Taylor, 1999). An important theme here is the question of path dependency, or, as it has become known in the migration literature, *cumulative causation* (Massey, 1990) – the notion that once a particular migration pathway is established it is more likely to continue in the same manner due to the networks that have been set up by earlier migrants.

This institutionalist approach is widely reflected in much scholarly writing on the Gulf, particularly in sociological and anthropological studies that look at the different mechanisms of decision making by migrant families, and the networks that are established through these movements. Some writers have examined the ways that institutional factors – such as recruitment structures, limited job mobility, gender and weaknesses of legal regimes – act to shape the patterns of labour flows to the Gulf (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011; Esim and Smith, 2004). The question of 'risk' is a prominent feature of this literature: i.e. migration carries an inherent gamble on future pay-off, and the ways that institutions are structured thus strongly impact the nature of this risk and hence the decisions to migrate (Rahman, 2011). The literature has also examined the ways in which the act of migration changes family structures, perhaps leading to a 'transnational

split' as migrants who move to the Gulf are unable to bring their families with them and continue to maintain long-distance relationships (Boyle et al., 2003). Nonetheless, while this literature has contributed a rich array of insights into the mechanisms and specificities of migration to the Gulf (and the variations that exist between different areas as a result of institutional factors), it shares with the neoclassical approach the basic assumption of distinct and analytically separate 'push' and 'pull' factors as the principle framework through which to analyse the reasons behind migration (cf. Asfar, 2009: 11).

A third general strand of Gulf migration literature has concentrated upon the implications of migration for structures of power in the Gulf, bringing to the fore the significance of migratory movements for understanding the historical trajectories of these societies. These critical theories have thus helped to generate an important process of rethinking of Gulf histories, which foregrounds the ways in which migrant labour has constantly acted to challenge its subordinate position and, in constant interaction (and frequently tension) with the citizen population, helped to shape the nature of state power and its ability to maintain control over the wider population. Within this critical literature, some writers have emphasised the ways in which migration reinforced the position of traditional ruling classes by shifting citizens into non-productive activities that were dependent upon government employment (Beauge and Sader, 1981; Khalaf, 1985; Lackner, 1978; Halliday, 1984). In this manner, ruling elites could blunt any pressures for social change or democratisation. At the same time, migrant labour played a functional role for Gulf rulers, providing what was seen as a pliant and low-paid workforce. Disney, for example, has documented the role of South Korean labour in the Gulf's construction boom of the 1970s. Korean companies, organised through the *chaebol* conglomerates, would bring a 'semi-militarized labor force' of former soldiers who had been trained in specially converted military bases to work in construction, welding, truck driving and the operation of heavy equipment (Disney, 1977: 23). These migrants would be housed away from other workers, and were considered by the Gulf States as a low-wage, highly disciplined labour force that would be highly unlikely to engage in any subversive activity (although, in reality, a range of strikes and protests by these workers did challenge the fiction of political passivity) (Disney, 1977: 24). More recently, other writers have highlighted the fact that migrant labour in the Gulf needs to be seen as an active political agent, playing an important role in challenging the position

of monarchies (Longva, 1997; Louër, 2008a; Russell, 1989; Vitalis, 2007; Chalcraft, 2010).

It is the contention of this chapter, however, that each of these three broad approaches tend to suffer from what can be described as *methodological nationalism*: a privileging of the national space as the vantage point from which to interpret social phenomena. As Wimmer and Glick Shiller have noted, this process has led to a ‘territorialization of the social science imaginary and the reduction of the analytical focus to the boundaries of the nation-state. The social sciences have become obsessed with describing processes within nation-state boundaries as those contrasted with those outside, and have correspondingly lost sight of the connection between such nationally-defined territories’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002: 307). The problem with methodological nationalism is that social relations are not neatly bounded within national borders – flows of capital and labour, and the various policy frameworks that mediate them, act to tie different spaces to one another. Social relations are not demarcated by the borders of the nation-state but are internally-related (Ollman, 2003) – they are constituted in relation to the whole.² As Pradella has recently pointed out, at the roots of this methodological nationalism lie a particular view of the state, which affirms ‘the same dualism between state and market, and between the national and international spheres, that is sustained by the neoliberal current’; i.e. the state is seen as an autonomous actor that is abstracted from social relations existing at both the national and international scales (Pradella, 2014: 181, 188). This particular conception of state theory – which also characterises both ‘rentier’ and ‘developmental’ approaches to the state – posits an analytical separation between so-called internal and external features of the state, providing primacy to the former (Pradella, 2014: 181).³

Bringing the Region Back In

Overcoming methodological nationalism thus implies an emphasis on the regional and world-market context, tracing the ways that social relations develop across and through borders within a single global structure. Seen from this perspective, an analysis of migration to the Gulf needs to begin with an understanding of the Gulf’s place within the wider Middle East region. A full analysis of this is clearly beyond the scope of this chapter, but some essential features can be sketched here. Beginning in the 1970s

– and consolidating through the 1990s and 2000s – most countries in the Middle East and North Africa region have been profoundly transformed by neoliberal economic policies. These policies have included privatisation, labour market deregulation, opening up to foreign direct investment (FDI), increasing integration into global financial markets, reduction of tariffs and other barriers to trade, cutbacks to social spending (notably on food subsidies) and so forth (see Hanieh, 2013 for an account of neoliberalism in the region). The pace and form of these neoliberal measures has certainly varied from country to country, but all areas of the Middle East have been affected by their implementation. In particular, the countries of North Africa have been heralded as the ‘model’ of neoliberal reform – Egypt, for example, was frequently commended by the World Bank as a leading regional ‘reformer’ from 2005 to 2008.

These neoliberal processes engendered a range of important social transformations. Central to this was a major shift in rural conditions as land was privatised, caps on rents lifted, and prices liberalised for both inputs and marketed agricultural commodities. These changes produced an increasing insecurity of rural life, with farmers and their families finding it more difficult to survive on the land. Likewise, in urban areas privatisation and labour market deregulation generated escalating levels of unemployment, particularly among youth and university graduates. These processes hit young women the hardest, as the sector of the population most reliant upon jobs in the public sector. In general, these policies resulted in an increasing polarisation of wealth – mass impoverishment and precarity came to exist alongside a small layer of society that was enriched through neoliberal reform. Concomitant to these changes in the distribution of wealth was a realignment of state power, expressed most sharply in increasingly authoritarian regimes. Authoritarianism was the means through which neoliberalism was implemented in the Middle East (Hanieh, 2013).

The Gulf Arab States were central to promoting and facilitating this turn towards neoliberalism in the wider Middle East. This role began in the 1970s and 1980s, when Gulf States provided financial assistance to key Arab countries suffering from the debt crises of the time, while, in return, conditioning this support on reforms overseen by the World Bank, IMF and other international financial institutions. In Egypt, for example, the Gulf Organization for the Development of Egypt (GODE) – formed in 1976 by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Qatar – provided loans to the Egyptian government in the context of a major debt crisis in the mid-1970s (Hanieh, 2013). The loans had both political and economic

implications – they were a major part of Egypt's turn away from the Soviet Union and alliance with the US; they were also predicated on a series of economic reforms including cuts to food and energy subsidies and a devaluation of the Egyptian pound. These reforms were the initial phase of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's *infitah* process, and were later deepened in structural adjustment packages (SAPs) that laid the basis for contemporary neoliberalism in the country (Bush, 1999; Mitchell, 2002; Wurzel, 2009). Similar policies were replicated throughout the region, with the Gulf States working closely with the international financial institutions to provide loans and aid linked to SAPs.

There are two important consequences of this deepening liberalisation as it relates to the question of labour migration in the Middle East. First, neoliberal reforms played a major role in generating the conditions in which migration became a principal mechanism of survival for millions of people across the Middle East and North Africa. Faced with the multiple socio-economic crises arising from the political economy of neoliberalism – including dispossession from land, political violence, rising land rents and growing precarity of labour in both urban and rural areas – migration acted as a mechanism of 'crisis management'. Remittances from those who migrated could help support families remaining at home. These flows of migration involved skilled and higher-paid workers such as teachers, engineers, medical personnel and veterinarians as well as lower-paid work in construction, agriculture and service sectors. They took place across international borders, as well as internally within individual countries (rural to urban migration). Migration was not only a means by which migrants and their families attempted to overcome the socio-economic problems they faced at home, it was also seen by governments as a way to ameliorate any potential social upheaval. In the case of Egypt, for example, the government 'welcomed the activities of emigrants who concentrated on making money instead of making revolution' (Marfleet, 2006: 92). Likewise, in Jordan migration was seen as a means of limiting political dissatisfaction among 'an influential sector of population' (Saif and el-Rayyes, 2009: 34).

In addition to this 'permanence of temporary migration' (Farrag, 1999: 55),⁴ a second important consequence of the decades of neoliberalism in the Middle East has been the growing weight of the Gulf States in the regional political economy. This shift was particularly marked through the 2000s. Having amassed growing pools of surplus capital as a consequence of the rising price of oil in the first decade of the 2000s, the Gulf States were to become a primary beneficiary of neoliberal reform in states across

the region. Gulf-based investors made major purchases of Arab companies involved in real estate, finance, industry, agribusiness and other key sectors. These sectors were not only economically significant; they were also strategically central to the broader neoliberal project. According to World Bank figures, the Gulf countries were the largest foreign investors in the Middle East in 2008, with total investments making up more than one-third of all investments in the region (World Bank, 2009: 56). From 2003 to 2009, projects in the Mediterranean countries announced by investors from the Gulf were greater than any other country or region.⁵ Nearly two-thirds of investments from the Gulf went to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine and Syria. The predominance of Gulf investments in the region continued even after the 2008 economic crisis, with total FDI from the Gulf surpassing any other country in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, and Tunisia, and ranking second in Morocco and Syria (ANIMA, 2011). These capital flows included both sovereign wealth funds as well as private companies based in the Gulf. They confirm that the liberalisation of markets in the Middle East was accompanied by the internationalisation of Gulf-based capital, with Gulf investors taking major (and often controlling) stakes in companies privatised by Arab governments. Neoliberalism, in other words, acted to simultaneously strengthen the position of national elites as well as the Gulf States within the regional order.

Viewed in their unity, these two concomitant processes of neoliberal reform – labour flows induced by the changing political economy and the growing weight of the Gulf States in the Middle East – are indicative of the unevenness of capitalist development in the region. They confirm, most significantly, that the ‘push–pull’ model is an inadequate one for understanding labour migration in the region. The social conditions that ‘push’ people to seek to migrate are bound up with the social conditions that ‘pull’ people towards a particular location. Both these factors are an outcome of the nature of capitalist accumulation in the Middle East, and thus the basic neoclassical assumption that they can be treated as distinct, separate phenomena is misplaced. Of course, not all of the migration in the Arab world is aimed at the Gulf States – indeed, increasingly these flows of people are directed at Europe or other states in the region.⁶ But the Gulf remains a central destination point for many migrants, while simultaneously being a prime agent in generating the conditions for this movement. The uneven and combined development across the region as a whole means that the ‘pull’ is causally linked to the ‘push’ (and vice-versa) in a mutually reinforcing chain.

Spatial Structuring of Class

Moving beyond methodological nationalism means taking seriously the fact that class relations in the Gulf extend across the borders of the Gulf nation-state. In a related sense, the feminist geographer Doreen Massey has noted that capitalism is necessarily spatialised – the geographical arrangements by which capital organises its accumulation necessarily provides a spatial inflexion to the social relations that underlie it. Within this framework, class is not just an abstract category describing a certain relationship to the reproduction of society's needs; it is also marked by a particular spatial form in any concrete circumstance – it comes into being through the interlinking of geographical spaces (in addition, of course, to being racialised and gendered in particular ways). Viewed in this manner, migration to the Gulf can be understood as a process of *class formation* that is necessarily spatialised. The Gulf's class formation is – to employ a term used by Massey – a 'spatial structure'; one that involves the emergence of social relations intertwined across different geographical spaces (1984: 112).⁷

There are several useful insights that can be gained from approaching class formation in the Gulf States as a 'spatial structure' formed beyond the borders of any individual nation-state. First, it is through this spatial structure that Gulf States are able to institutionalise extremely high rates of exploitation. There are many well-documented accounts of the widespread abuse of workers in the Gulf and the systematically low levels of pay to which many of these workers are subject, but the key point is that this exploitation is *enabled* by the spatial structuring of class and the differential laws that demarcate citizenship rights.⁸ The value of labour power in the Gulf is not measured by the cost of reproduction in the Gulf States themselves, but relative to the cost of labour power in the home country of the worker. If all workers in the Gulf had parity in terms of their labour and citizenship rights, then this difference would disappear.⁹ There are no minimum wages in the private sector – where most migrant workers are found in the Gulf – and there are vastly different wage levels between citizen and non-citizen labour, which are even greater if non-wage costs are included (such as access to education, health, housing and other social rights for citizens).¹⁰ Most strikingly, studies have documented differences in pay for the same work depending upon national origin of the workers (notably in domestic work). This observation has political and policy implications to which we shall return below.

These high rates of exploitation are not just a consequence of deteriorating social conditions in the home countries of migrant workers. They are also enabled by the enormous numbers of *potential* workers who constitute a labour pool for the Gulf. Once again, this illustrates the importance of understanding class in a spatial sense that breaks with methodological nationalism. Instead of seeing the Gulf's working class as being narrowly confined to those who happen to be inside its borders, we need to expand our notion of class to include the literally hundreds of millions of people who form a 'reserve army of labour' around the Gulf's periphery. These people may not be physically located in the Gulf, but they need to be seen as just as much part of the Gulf's potential labour force as anyone holding a work visa. The huge size of this potential pool, and the ability of the Gulf States to shift this spatial structure between different countries when necessary, acts to further depress wage levels that migrant workers receive in the Gulf itself. Most important to this spatial structuring of class is the institution of citizenship, which – through a highly complex system of border controls, work visas and sponsor systems – acts to mediate the spatialisation of class.

As well as enabling exploitation, the spatial structuring of class in the Gulf is a powerful disciplining instrument over labour. The ability of temporary migrant workers to be present in the Gulf is dependent upon a work visa and not determined by birth or citizenship rights. If a worker loses their job then it is very difficult for them to remain in the Gulf – even to search for alternative employment – and by law they must return home. Indeed, even children born to non-citizens who have been long-term residents in the Gulf lack any institutional route to citizenship or residency rights, and must depart if their parents lose their employment. This permanent precarity of status, fully dependent upon employment, means that any attempt to organise collectively can be met with the threat of deportation.

Moreover, the fact that a worker's spatial identity (their right to be present where they are) is constituted by and through their relationship with capital means that to engage in forms of struggle against capital is, to a large degree, to struggle against oneself (Hanieh, 2011: 63). The spatially and temporally precarious nature of working-class identity means that the nature of the class is continually being remade and reformed, divided across constantly shifting geographical boundaries. This places further obstacles in front of collective struggle and longer-term political organising. This should not be taken to mean that collective action by workers in the Gulf is impossible or unlikely (Chalcraft, 2010). Indeed, in recent years there

have been sporadic examples of strikes, illegal demonstrations and other forms of protest by workers in the region. The point is, however, that the barriers to these types of actions – and their potential efficacy – are much greater because of the way that class is spatially constituted in the Gulf. This raises a series of important questions about forms of solidarity and the nature of struggle that will be discussed further below.

Spatial Fix

In addition to understanding migration as a spatial structuring of class that is constituted across national borders, a further useful theme of the geography literature is David Harvey's notion of a 'spatial fix' (Harvey, 1985; 1999). By this, Harvey attempts to describe the ways in which capitalism is continually acting to overcome barriers and moments of crisis through altering the spatial structures that underpin certain periods of accumulation. Many of Harvey's examples in this regard relate to a global expansion of capital (i.e. the seeking of new markets), or the restructuring and devaluation of fixed capital laid down through the course of accumulation in particular landscapes (e.g. transport lines, urban gentrification processes and factories) (Harvey, 1985). But, precisely because migration is an inherently spatial process, the concept of spatial fix can also be expanded to include these labour flows. Seen in this manner, the shifting of the dynamics and patterning of these flows becomes a potential means to facilitate and overcome potential barriers to accumulation.

In the case of the Gulf, the particular patterning of class formation through migration has enabled a 'spatial fix' for Gulf capital and the region's ruling elites. At moments of crisis, the Gulf is able to rework the spatial structures underpinning migration as a means of overcoming or displacing crisis away from the Gulf towards other surrounding zones. There are two examples of this spatial fix that are useful to highlight here – the shift away from Arab labour towards Asian labour in the 1990s and 2000s, and the response of some areas of the Gulf towards the 2008 global economic crisis.

The demographic balance of the Gulf's migrant labour workforce has been well noted in much of the literature on the region (Kapiszewski, 2004). In the initial phases of development in the Gulf through the 1970s, most of these workers were brought from neighbouring Arab countries. Over the subsequent decades, however, many of these workers began to challenge the types of differential rights that underpinned the second-class

status of migrant work. Non-citizen Arab workers increasingly attempted to bring their families, expressed political aspirations and looked to settle for longer periods of time in the region (Louër, 2008a; Chalcraft, 2010). In response to the potential problems that this represented for a spatial structure dependent upon the predominant exploitation of Arab labour, Gulf States moved to adopt a spatial fix. This meant shifting migrant labour flows away from Arab countries towards South Asia and further afield. The 1990–1991 Gulf War presented an opportune moment to carry out this fix, with Arab migrant workers expelled en masse under the pretext that the Palestine Liberation Organization and Yemen had supported Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. In Kuwait, for example, the number of Palestinians fell from 400,000 in 1990 to about 50,000 by the mid-1990s (Fergany, 2001: 7). By 2002, the Arab proportion of migrant workers in the Gulf had fallen from 72 per cent in 1975 to around 25–29 per cent, replaced with cheaper labour from South and East Asia (Kapiszewski, 2004: 123).

The 2008 global economic crisis presented another example of the ways in which migration could act as a 'spatial fix' at moments of crisis. Through the initial phases of the crisis, particularly in areas such as Dubai that were hard hit by the withdrawal of financial flows and the puncturing of the city-state's real estate bubble, large state and private companies were able to reduce the hiring of workers and repatriate thousands as projects were postponed or cancelled (Hanieh, 2011: 169–73). The effect was felt most sharply in the construction industry and is shown in the decline of workers that left for the Gulf through 2009 and 2010. One construction company in Dubai noted that the numbers of workers it was employing in early 2010 had dropped from 50 to 100 a week down to one a month. While typically workers would stay for three years, 'some were now being sent home early due to the slowdown in the Dubai construction market'.¹¹ From 2008 to 2009, the outflow of Indian workers to the United Arab Emirates fell by 62.7 per cent, to Bahrain by 45 per cent and Qatar by 44 per cent (MOIA, 2012: 58). For Bangladesh, the number of workers travelling to Saudi Arabia and the UAE (the destinations of more than 60 per cent of all Bangladeshi overseas workers) fell by 89 per cent and 38 per cent respectively over 2008–2009.¹² This drop was reflected in figures for air travel from Bangladesh to the Gulf – with industry spokespeople claiming a greater than 50 per cent drop in the number of travellers per week from 2007 to 2009 (*Financial Express*, 2009). For Pakistan, the number of registered overseas workers in the Gulf also fell precipitously – for the UAE (the largest destination for overseas Pakistani workers) there was a

36 per cent drop, Qatar a 60 per cent drop and Kuwait a 75 per cent drop over 2008–2009.

These figures show the particular way in which the spatial structuring of class shaped the response of Gulf States to the crisis. Unlike many other countries that have had to deal with the severe social consequences of increased unemployment levels, the Gulf States were able to adopt a particular spatial fix to the crisis. This was a form of spatial displacement – pushing the worst effects of the crisis on to those surrounding countries that had formed the supply lines of the temporary workforce underpinning class formation in the Gulf. In the words of one analyst from the Saudi National Commercial Bank, the ability to repatriate workers in times of crisis and bring them back when needed was indicative of ‘a positive externality of labor market flexibility’ (Kotilaine, 2009: 21).

The Gulf and Global Capitalism

The final aspect to moving beyond methodological nationalist approaches to the Gulf is the need to situate migration flows within the overall hierarchies of the capitalist world market. As a range of authors have emphasised, US capitalism has taken a pre-eminent position in the world order since the Second World War. This position has both acted to strengthen the specific position of US capital vis-à-vis rival powers at the global scale, while simultaneously seeing the US play a lead role in ‘superintending’ capitalism globally. Competition between advanced capitalist states continued to be present, but, as Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin were to note, ‘only the American state bore the burden – and had the accompanying capacity and autonomy – to take on the task of managing the system as a whole’ (Panitch and Gindin 2003: 54–5).

Within this configuration of the world market, the countries of the Gulf region – most notably Saudi Arabia – have played a principal role. The region’s enormous hydrocarbon supplies, coupled with the financial surpluses that accrue to the Gulf States as a result, have meant that the control of the Middle East confers an enormous source of strategic power (Bromley, 1991). In the post-war period the dominant position in this regard has been taken by the US, which has offered unwavering political and military support to the Gulf States, while ensuring that petrodollar flows are directed through US treasury bonds and its other financial markets (Gowan, 1999; Spiro, 1999; Hanieh, 2011). To be clear, this is not meant

to imply that the US necessarily seeks direct ownership of the region's oil supplies (although this might be a feature of its strategic calculation in countries such as Iraq). Rather, the US aims to ensure that these oil supplies remain outside of the democratic and popular control of the peoples of the wider Arab region (Hanieh, 2013: chapter 2).

In this context, the spatial structuring of class discussed above takes on a particularly significant role. The hierarchies of the contemporary world market – and the position of US power within these – mean that the nature of class formation in the Gulf bears not only upon the position of local elites, but the entire architecture of global capitalism. Any challenge to this structure from labour within the Gulf – the likelihood of which would be greatly increased through the extension of equal rights to *all* workers regardless of origin – could profoundly shake this system. For this reason, the spatial structuring of class in the Gulf has underpinned the process of state formation itself – enabling the Gulf's ascension as a core zone within the global economy (Hanieh, 2011). A useful comparison can be drawn with the Gulf's oil-rich neighbours, Iraq and Iran, where working-class movements have historically played a central role in challenging both colonialism and domestic rulers. Contemporary global capitalism – and the particular location of the Gulf within it – would take a very different form if similar movements were present in the Gulf Arab monarchies.

Conclusion: Scholarly and Political Implications

In his sprawling counter-history of Western liberalism, the Italian philosopher Domenico Losurdo noted that many accounts of liberal thought tend to focus upon the beliefs, ideologies and interests of property owners, white settler populations and emerging middle classes in their struggles against representatives of the *ancien régime*. In so doing, this 'historiography tends to shade into hagiography ... a discourse completely focused on what, for the community of the free, was the restricted sacred space' (Losurdo, 2011: 299). Losurdo deemed this a process of discursive silencing, which ignored the 'profane space' of slavery, indigenous peoples and the various forms of indentured labour that accompanied the rise of Western liberal concerns with liberty, freedom and individual rights.

In many ways, a similar process of discursive silencing can be observed in studies of the political economy of the Gulf Arab States. The dominant approach to these societies tends to be concerned uppermost with the

enormous wealth that accrues to ruling families and state elites as a result of the region's enormous oil supplies. Political economy analyses of the region are subsequently framed by how these revenues are distributed, and the concerns and attitudes of the citizen population who are tied to the ruling families in complex ways. In so doing, the kinds of questions asked, and the explanatory factors that are sought, act to sideline the most significant feature of these societies – the fact that they rest upon a profound exploitation of a temporary, right-less and easily deportable working class who form a majority of the labour force.

This chapter has argued that labour, class and migration needs to be placed at the centre of our understanding of the Gulf's political economy. In contrast to state-centric approaches that look at the Gulf's enormous petrodollar flows as the basis on which to develop a conception of these societies, we should begin with the nature of class formation and the ways in which this rests principally upon the inflows of millions of temporary, precarious and easily deportable workers from other countries. In doing so, we must break with a predominant perspective on these states that views migration through the lens of individual sending and receiving countries. Instead, migration is a 'spatial structure' that extends beyond the nation-state and reflects both the uneven and combined development of the region as a whole, and the nature of the Gulf's position within the wider world market. This particular spatial structure enables both a means of control and exploitation of workers in the Gulf, while allowing the Gulf States to displace potential crises through its migration corridors on to surrounding countries.

This framework raises a set of important political questions. Most importantly, human rights abuses arising from the institutions that mediate the spatial structuring of class in the Gulf – citizenship rights, restrictions on the movement of labour, the *kafala* system and so forth – are not simply failures of governance that result from a lack of awareness about international norms or a consequence of entrenched interests of individual Gulf rulers. Rather, these institutions are a reflection of the relations of power extant in the world market and the uneven development of the Middle East as a whole. A fundamental shift in the character of these institutions is not possible as long as this regional and international context remains in place. Thus the efforts of human rights organisations and activists to raise awareness of the conditions of these workers, while laudable, have little hope of success if they remain confined to a narrow focus on government legislation. Addressing the human rights abuses of

migrant workers in the Gulf is inseparable from a challenge to the entire regional order.

Moreover, this approach also provides an insight into the very real contradictions that are developing in the Gulf as a consequence of the extreme reliance on a temporary workforce. Central to these contradictions is the growing level of youth unemployment faced by many citizens in many Gulf States, particularly in the context of a bulging youth demographic.¹³ In response to this, Gulf States have attempted to implement a range of 'Gulfisation' programmes aimed at encouraging businesses to employ nationals rather than foreign workers. Once again, however, it is the opinion of this author that there is no resolution of these issues through government policies that leave intact the position of Gulf rulers within regional and global hierarchies. Precisely because the spatial structuring of class in the Gulf is a consequence of the uneven development of capitalism in the region – foundational to the way that Gulf rulers rule and pivotal to the arrangement of power in the global economy – there is unlikely to be any reversal of this structure without imperiling a range of systemic interests that depend upon the continued maintenance of this structure. Any significant level of proletarianisation of Gulf citizens would raise precisely the kinds of problems that the spatialisation of class serves to undercut – the spectre of indigenous labour movements with the potential to challenge the position of ruling regimes.

A rejection of methodological nationalism also raises the question of how migrant workers fit within the political project of Left, labour and other social movements in the Middle East. In recent decades, there has been a noticeable absence of any real solidarity with these workers from Arab political movements. Indeed, during the recent uprisings in Bahrain, migrant workers were often viewed as being antithetical to the interests of Bahraini protesters, consciously used by the Bahraini government to undermine the coherence of opposition to the monarchy. Nonetheless, because class formation in the Gulf is a process that envelops the region as a whole, acting to facilitate the central position of the Gulf within the Middle East, migrant workers are a key actor to any political change in the region. An effective challenge to the Gulf monarchies means fighting to extend equal social and political rights to workers from India, Pakistan, the Philippines and so forth, as an integral part of the region's working classes. Once again, this is bound up with a decentring of the nation-state as the exclusive frame of analysis; we need to challenge the assumption

that those who are ‘in the right place’ have privileged access to rights or an ability to act politically.

Finally, while the Gulf States may demonstrate a unique reliance upon labour migration, it is important to recognise the similarities that do exist between the Gulf and other countries. Many of the features of the Gulf’s labour markets have begun to be generalised across other areas. These include a systematic and structural system of differential and precarious rights granted to migrant workers; the phenomenon of ‘containerisation’ – where workers are brought to the region by a company, housed separately from the citizen population and returned home at the conclusion of the contract; and the widespread use of labour contractors and other agents in recruiting workers from the Global South. These phenomena mark what has been described as the ‘tendential emergence of a global labour market’ (Overbeek, 2002: 76). In this sense, many of the themes noted in this chapter bear wider significance for the study of other migration systems – an important laboratory and test case for the increasingly ‘global factory’ of labour (de Angelis, 2000; Chang, 2009).

Notes

1. The classic summation of this perspective is the Lewis Model, which was initially used to think through rural to urban migration in the developing world. According to this model, a two-sector labour market is made up of a rural sector (from which migrants are assumed to move) and an urban sector (to which they migrate). With the standard neoclassical assumptions of perfect information (i.e. knowledge of *all* available jobs, wage rates and conditions in the region of destination), surplus labour from the rural areas migrates to the urban sector in search of relatively higher wages. According to Lewis, as the modern sector expanded, these flows of labour would reduce labour surpluses in the rural sector and lead to increased wage levels in the areas of origin. Over time, wage levels between the rural and urban sectors would reach an equilibrium point and migration would halt (Massey et al., 1998: chapter 2). Lewis’s model was developed in the mid-1950s and was aimed at laying out a model of industrialisation for newly independent European colonies (Canterbury, 2012: 41). The problem was that the model failed to adequately describe the ongoing reality of increasing migration flows to the urban areas despite increasing levels of unemployment. It was partly in response to this failure that the Harris–Todaro (H–T) model was developed. Within the H–T model, rural workers continue to migrate to urban areas despite the presence of unemployment because they are enticed by the *potential* to receive higher wages. What Harris and Todaro attempted to do was develop a theory that could integrate probabilistic

rational choice into the model – assessing factors such as likelihood of finding a job or being unemployed, and receiving a higher wage than that available in the rural area. The H–T model (with further refinements) has become the standard approach to understanding migration flows. Indeed, the original article published by Harris and Todaro was described by the *American Economic Review* in February 2011 as one of the 20 most important and influential articles the journal had published in 100 years of its history.

2. Ollman argues that we need to understand different social categories as ‘internally related’, i.e. the relations existing between things should not be considered external to the things themselves, but are part of what actually constitutes them. Any object needs to be seen as ‘relations, containing in themselves, as integral elements of what they are, those parts with which we tend to see them externally tied’ (Ollman, 2003: 25). The relationships in which all things are embedded do not exist ‘outside’ of these objects (or externally) but are internal to their very nature.
3. More generally, it is a view of the state that exhibits what Marx described as ‘formal abstraction’, in which particular categories are taken as natural and given (in this case state, class and nation) and treated independently from one another as separate spheres in abstraction from the totality of social relations. As Chang has emphasised in relation to theories of the Korean state – the other global example, alongside the Gulf states, where approaches positing the analytical separation of class and state are extremely prevalent in the literature – once these categories are presented ‘as naturally independent of one another, without understanding of the inner-relations between those aspects through the *totality* of social relations, the only way to express the mysterious and complex relations between those aspects is to present the relations as externally mutual relations, such as relations between the “economic” class and “political” state’ (Chang, 2009: 34). Chang’s critique could be equally applied to many rentier state approaches to the Gulf.
4. Farrag used this phrase to describe the situation in Egypt, but it is applicable to most states in the region.
5. These figures are from ANIMA, an EU institution that monitors foreign direct investment in the Mediterranean region, which it defines as Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey (ANIMA, 2009).
6. Moreover, these processes need to be viewed across the entire regional scale. Various examples of ‘replacement migration’ mean that outflows of people from one part of the Middle East to the Gulf are met with corresponding inflows from other countries in the region. A good example of this is shown by the situation in Jordan, where migration to the Gulf generated both a construction boom and a need for agricultural and other workers in the wake of rural-to-urban migration. Much of this demand was met by workers from Egypt, facilitated by the ‘open-door’ policy to migration adopted by the Jordanian government through the 1970s and 1980s. As a consequence, much of the agricultural labour in Jordan was performed by Egyptian workers.
7. Massey’s empirical work examined the ways in which the political economy of Britain could be mapped through changes in the spatial location of different

classes and production networks (Massey, 1984). 'Different classes in society are defined in relation to each other and, in economic terms, to the overall division of labour. It is the overall structure of those sets of relationships which defines the structure of the economic aspect of society. One important element which any concept of uneven development must relate to, therefore, is the spatial structuring of those relationships – the relations of production – which are unequal relationships and which imply positions of dominance and subordination' (Massey, 1984: 87).

8. This is not to deny, of course, that individual workers in the Gulf may benefit from their employment, or may experience an improved standard of living vis-à-vis their compatriots who were unable to migrate. These benefits, though, are frequently overstated in the literature and often overlook the distributional effects that remittance flows may have on inequality levels in the country of origin. From the point of view of capital, however, the structural ability of companies in the Gulf to employ workers at a value that is vastly below the cost of reproduction of (citizen) labour power is indicative of extremely high levels of exploitation. In this sense, the Gulf States have a systemic interest in seeing widening levels of unevenness between themselves and the surrounding regions that supply its labour force.
9. Of course, this does not mean that exploitation per se would disappear, as the capital-labour relationship would still exist.
10. The exception to this trend is found in sectors such as high-level management, banking and finance, where a different type of migrant worker can be found (usually from Western countries).
11. Shane McGinley, 'Sharp Decline in Labourer Recruitment in Dubai', *Construction Weekly*, February 2011. www.constructionweekonline.com/article-7576-sharp-decline-in-labourer-recruitment-in-dubai/#.UWvj39GQfGs (accessed August 2014).
12. Figures from Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), Bangladesh.
13. Across the GCC, over 50 per cent of the population is now under the age of 25 (Malecki and Ewers, 2007).