

# Class relations, communal solidarities and national identity in the Gulf States. The case of migrant workers

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**Labour migration and the process of social and political change in the Middle East**

Berlin, June 2-3, 1988

**Theme 1: Class and ethnical (national) determinants of the migrants social position**

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***Class relations, communal solidarities and national identity in the Gulf States. The case of migrant workers\****

***Abstract:***

Migration towards the Gulf States, contrary to analogous movements to developed countries has up till now interested sociologists primarily for its effects on the society of migrant origin - in particular rural society. On the other hand, Gulf societies have been understudied and the foreign resident population in the Gulf, despite their numerical importance, have received scant attention from sociologists. Societies of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula are at the cross-point of several types of social relations, of modes of production, which function on different scales and space-levels. Labour migrations and the modes of existence and insertion of the foreign population seem a clear indication of such a plurality of determinations and an analysis of class and power structures and relations at the regional level is necessary to understand these specific realities.

Migration towards the Gulf States, contrary to analogous movements to developed countries has up till now interested sociologists primarily for its effects on the society of migrant origin - in particular rural society. Furthermore, the focus of research has been more on questions of behavioural changes or modernization in general than on upheavals in the social structure at the macro-social level. No doubt, the recent character of this migration and the lack of integration into the local societies explain such neglect.

Yet there is no doubt but that the specific features of the Middle East situation both pose problems and suggest questions which would usefully enlighten current debates in the scientific community on the mechanisms at work in the formation of communal, class and national solidarities.

It might perhaps be useful here to give briefly the background to my own research in this field and some assumptions underlying my approach.

My interest in the position of the foreign population in the social structure of the Gulf countries arose from the opportunity I had a few years ago to do field research on migration from Lebanon to Riyadh, Muscat and

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Kuwait<sup>1</sup>. This research followed an earlier attempt in Syria to analyse the conditions of the formation of social classes and the obstacles to the crystallization of class relations.

Let me clarify here the theoretical frame which I hold. First of all, I make a clear distinction between class structure and socio-economic stratification. As I start from a Marxist method of analysis, which I try to enrich through the concrete analysis of little-known situations, I consider that one can only speak of classes after defining *class relations*, that is *production relations*. On the other hand, society is structured by relations not only of production, but also of distribution, power, and so on. Class membership designs a position in the relations of production. But any individual's position in society can be much more than a position in production relations: it can be defined as well by other social relations such as *kinship*, *power*, *distribution of wealth*, etc. As for the consciousness one has of one's position in society, it is never a mere mechanical reflection of reality, but rather the complex product of a history and a culture, which in turn explains the actor's strategy, the way he intervenes in different situations, and therefore contributes to the transformation of the conditions of reproduction of his social formation.

It seems to me clear that societies of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula are, more than any other society, at the cross-point of several types of social relations, we might say of modes of production, which are not only quite distinct from one another but even more function on different scales and space-levels. Labour migrations and the modes of existence and insertion of the foreign population seem to me a clear indication of such a plurality of determinations.

The basic causes and characteristics of labour migration to the Gulf States are now well-known. After the Aix-en-Provence symposium, and in particular Ph. Fargues' work on Kuwait and the monumental survey of Egyptian emigrants by N. Fergani<sup>2</sup>, we understand better the effects of the decline in oil revenues. The advances in analysis as well as in the accumulation of basic data now help us to progress in our understanding of what is at stake.

There seems to me to be four main features specific to the situation in the Gulf States:

- the traditional character of these societies, the very weak integration of the Gulf States into the capitalist world market prior to the discovery of oil and, consequently, the virtual absence of a skilled labour force and - even more so - of trained management or entrepreneurial personnel,
- the recent and massive recourse to a foreign labour force,
- the diversity of nationalities among recruited labourers as well as the extreme socio-economic differentiation from one national group to another, or in other words, the extreme division of the labour market,
- *last but not least*, the fact that the labour-importing countries and a large portion of the labour-exporting countries belong to the same (political) cultural-linguistic zone.

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<sup>1</sup> See BEAUGE (G.), LONGUENESSE (E.), NANCY (M.), *Communautés villageoises et migrations de main d'oeuvre au Moyen-Orient, Trois études d'anthropologie libanaise*, Paris, Beyrouth, CERMOC, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> See Aix en Provence workshop, june 1987

This last feature implies that for a significant proportion of the migrant population, their emigration has not - as in more classical migration situations - been outside their socio-cultural sphere.

The conditions in which oil - and with it, *oil rent*, as a revenue which derives from the mere *property* of oil fields, and distinct from the oil-industry profit - appeared, explain the particular forms of dependence which resulted, the recourse to foreign capital as well as manpower, and therefore the original structuring of society. The role played by the "*kafala*" (sponsorship) relation and its centrality to the system of social relations prevalent in the Gulf has been amply studied elsewhere, and is now well-known.

In short, it seems possible to distinguish three broad modes structuring social relations in the Gulf countries:

- a *socio-economic stratification of the indigenous population* directly related to the unequal appropriation and distribution of oil revenues, or oil-rent as defined earlier,
- a *legal cleavage between nationals and foreigners* reserving for citizens nationality rights and, consequently, access to oil revenue redistribution in its multiple forms; and also the right to be a *kafil* (a sponsor), hence to skim off a share of the foreigners' revenues;
- a *class cleavage mainly within the foreign population*, opposing a very large exploited proletariat from a capitalist class completely unhampered by restraints because of the absence of legislation protecting foreign labour.

Class relations are thus virtually extra-territorial, in the sense that they hardly concern the local society. In the local society, *distribution* is more important than *production* in determining relations, while the relation between citizens and foreigners is one of exclusion or tribute-levying.

However, these broad cleavages may become blurred when seen in the light of concrete situations, where a number of other factors - economic, cultural, political or ideological - come into play.

On the one hand, the national/foreigner cleavage centred around the *kafala* relationship may be completely transformed: from its first meaning of a tribute or tax-levy on the income of an entrepreneur, artisan or labourer, it may again take on what was perhaps its original function, and become a relationship of protection/collaboration between an indigenous host and his foreign guest. This appears to be the case for certain foreigners whose long residence in the country has enabled them to establish close personal ties (we actually met such cases in the Kfar Rummân community in Kuwait). Historical traditions of geographic mobility characteristic of some categories of the population in the Arab Muslim world (e.g. merchants, bureaucrats, men of religion, or scholars) and the real links forged by a common language and history may permit the integration of personal dimensions into the relations of a migrant and his *kafil*, or sponsor, helping the former to become integrated into the local society. That is why it may be necessary to make a distinction here between Arab and non-Arab foreigners, regardless of the similarities in their statuses and economic circumstances; the same distinction may, in some cases, apply between Muslims and non-Muslims.

On the other hand, within the foreign population, the class cleavage breaks down because of the diversity of socio-economic situations, directly related to differences in nationality. Nationality is in fact a major determinant for salary levels, living conditions, and even hiring practices. For instance, for labourers with equal skills, salaries may go from one to ten,

depending on whether a worker is a Yemenite, Palestinian, Egyptian or Pakistani (Asians being generally the worst paid). These variations in salaries, based broadly on the labour market situation and standard of living in the countries of origin (which depend themselves on the degree of integration of the considered country to the world market) are in fact regularly re-evaluated according to changing market conditions, and the average salary for each skill and nationality is regularly published in trade magazines. Firms generally hire labour of particular nationalities for particular types of work. Specialization by nationality exists in all fields of economic activity. Channels of recruitment vary according to the type of work and firm and therefore also by nationality. Employers, especially in small or medium-sized firms exploit the national origin factor, recruiting foremen and administrative personnel from their own communities and using the resulting feelings of national and communal solidarity to disguise relations of exploitation. These facts are well-known and need not be gone into further.

What results from all this is an ever shifting and confused situation where local, regional, international factors on the one hand, economic, historic, political and cultural ones on the other, all come into play, to create communities of circumstances or of interest, as well as mechanisms of solidarity which coincide largely with national or communal membership.

The image which migrants have of nationals, and vice-versa, can thus only be very contradictory. In the eyes of the immigrants, a citizen of the country is both a "rentier" and a good-for-nothing, incapable of working, and developing his country by himself, while at the same time exploiting the work of others without giving anything in exchange. However, the nationals of the Gulf States are by no means all aristocrats or princes, and they sometimes feel caught in a bind between the labourers they despise and the top management and entrepreneurs who earn vast amounts of money and are symbols both of modernity and a West which frighten them. To the dual image of the foreigner, miserable and exploited labour, or company manager of arrogant wealth, corresponds another duality, wealth and exploitation, which is both foreign and local. The image of the other reflects back, according to one's social or national affiliation, to a system of different values: the traditional values of a nomadic or peasant society, the new values of modernity or of money and conspicuous consumption, the former combining with the latter often in surprising ways, leading to sometimes insurmountable incomprehension.

On the other hand, the very functioning of society, the dominant role played by rent (as mere wealth found in the earth, appropriated through the control or ownership of the soil) in social relations and its redistribution through tribal channels throw off to the edges of society an excluded fringe unable to accommodate to the crude displays of wealth and the disruption of traditional values. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in Saudi Arabia, and not just in the Shi'ite community, which has traditionally been looked down upon and treated as virtually foreign. The rebels of Mecca in December 1979 included Saudis but also Egyptians, Syrians and Sudanese. This incident, among others, illustrates the development of such feelings of shared conditions and values.

The words used to designate a foreigner and even more the sense given to these words, are revealing. A foreigner (*ajnabî*) in common Arabic usage applies only to a non-Arab. The Western distinction between a national and a foreigner does not exist here. In its place, is a four-level hierarchy: a citizen of the country, a citizen of another Gulf (GCC) country or *khalijî*, an Arab

and a foreigner. What most enrages the Arab migrant is not that he is maltreated and exploited, but that he is treated "like a foreigner".

The Kuwaiti example is particularly instructive of this multiplicity of levels, even if it cannot altogether be extended to other Gulf States. In a close analysis of the most recent demographic data, Ph. Fargues has shown that the decline in oil revenues has actually reinforced differences between Arab and Asian immigrants. What is striking is that, contrary to most forecasts, there has been no real inversion of the demographic trends since the crisis began. Not only did the foreign population continue to expand in number and proportion to the population (from 78% of manpower in 1980 to 81% in 1985), while the rate of activity of the *Kuwaiti* population declined further from 1980 to 1985 (from 66.8% to 59.5% for the Kuwaiti male population), but employment stability increased among the most long-established Arab migrants. The proportion of Asian labour to the total active population increased during the same period, from 25.8% to 35%, but so did their mobility. Thus, there appeared to be a dual movement of greater stabilisation for Arab labour and greater precarity for Asian labour. Fargues rightfully poses the question of whether the Asians can be considered as true immigrants: more than ever, they remain external to the local society. A labour force in search of employment, they seem to have come by chance and remain all the more related to their own society and country as their employer is either of the same nationality or just as much an outsider as themselves. It would be interesting to know more not only about the background of these workers - Pakistanis, Philipinos, and Koreans - and what becomes of them, but perhaps even more about the image they have of the countries where they work, how their consciousness of their working and social relations evolves, etc. According to some researchers, we should make a distinction between South Asian (i.e. from the Indian subcontinent) and East and South-East Asian workers. The former appear generally to come on long-term contracts of employment and adapt themselves more easily to Middle Eastern societies. Hiroshi NAGABA even sees a "striking geographical, cultural and social similarity between South Asia and the Middle East."<sup>3</sup> It is true that a good number of them are Muslims but also that from a historical and cultural point of view, India was closer to western Asia than Far Eastern countries. Indian (including Pakistani) minorities have always been found on the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, as a result of commercial links through the Indian Ocean. Such backgrounds would also be interesting to explore, to understand the position of different national minorities, and not only their status on the labour market. But this is of course beyond the scope of this paper.

In spite of the increased gap between Arab and non-Arab migrants, the integration of Arab migrant labour is however not much advanced. Spatial segregation has increased, as the greater homogeneity of residential neighbourhoods shows, and the number of mixed marriages remains negligible. It would seem that the cultural proximity of the Arab immigrant population allows for the maintenance and reinforcement of specificities and particularisms rather than the promotion of integration.

However, the Arab migrant, whatever his dialect, Lebanese, Palestinian or Egyptian, has the same literary language as the Kuwaiti or the Saudi citizen; and his children will have no difficulty at all in adapting to the local educational system; they will keep on using their dialect at home just as the Kuwaiti or the Saudi, the Najdi or the Hijazi, do. And when English is the

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<sup>3</sup> See his contribution to this workshop.

language used at work, the difficulty will be the same for nationals and other Arabs. This is particularly the case in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where a good number of Arab migrants have already been residents for a long period, and have children in government schools and universities.

Here, we should bring into the picture some repercussions of the regional Arab political situation, which has changed greatly over the past twenty years. The sense of community based on a shared language and culture of the Arab populations forms one of the dimensions of an aspiration for unity which remains genuine even if at times contradictory or unequally felt in different social strata. It revolves around the aspiration for national liberation of which the Palestinian problem has been the chief focus point. Helga BAUMGARTEN has elsewhere analysed the role of emigration in the development of the Palestinian national movement. It should be said, though, that this dual aspiration for national liberation and unity has in part been diluted or counteracted by the rise of sectarian identities. The Iran-Iraq conflict has effectively exacerbated tensions between the dominant Sunnis and the dominated Shiites. In a perhaps less extreme form and in slightly different ways, the Lebanese civil war and the rise of fundamentalism in general have also increased the competition/hostility between Christians and Muslims.

Should we, however, consider such particularisms as an insuperable obstacle for the emergence of horizontal (class or occupational) solidarities? They surely are, as long as they reflect decisive socio-economic differentiations, and the total lack of contact and of common experience, either in the workplace or in everyday life. But old immigrants, as far as the example of Kuwait shows, have quite diversified professional situations, often work in the public sector, or in different branches of activities in small trade and the informal sector, where national differentiation is not as marked as elsewhere, at least between non Kuwaitis. It may well be that such fading of economic differentiation between nationalities allow the development of new solidarities, without suppressing cultural differences and particularisms. However, the actual state of research cannot yet permit us to give an answer to this question, or confirm this hypothesis.

But our discussion, up till now, has concerned only stable, long term immigrants, who are still a minority. In Kuwait, in 1985, only 25% of them had been there for more than 10 years, among whom a large number of Palestinians, who have no country of their own to go back to.

In contrast to this, Fergani's work demonstrates the continued rapid turn-over of Egyptian workers. In 1985, 45% of Egyptian workers in Saudi Arabia have arrived in 1984 or after; in Irak, it is the case for ... 85% of them. The extent of the turnover and the relatively low salary levels in comparison with those applicable to Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian migrants, put Egyptian manpower on a level similar to Pakistani or Indian migrants from a strictly economic and social viewpoint. The Egyptian case do serves as a reminder that we should also analyse the relations of these workers with the firms who employ them in terms of the more general exploitation of peasant societies.

If we take this case into account, together with the common Arab identity emphasised formerly, it seems impossible for our analysis to dissociate completely labour-importing and labour-exporting countries, especially concerning Arab migrants. First, since they maintain strong links with their country, and accept hard conditions in the Gulf as temporary, it becomes essential to take into consideration their strategies and

opportunities for success in order to understand their behaviour and situation abroad. Second, the break is not much more important than that between countryside and village life, and big cities, and cannot be compared with the case of other migrations (in particular, with Asians in the same region). That is why we should introduce into our reflection, the relation to a larger entity, however contradictory and ill-defined: if not the "Arab Nation" or "homeland" (al-watan al-arabi), at least, the Arab Middle East.

It seems to me that an analysis of class and power structures and relations at the regional level is not only possible and relevant, but also necessary to understand some specific realities. This does not mean we must reduce social contradictions to the ones which appear between rich and poor countries, as did Saad ed-Din Ibrahim in "The New Social Order" (Beirut, 1982), neglecting the existence of millionaires and exploiters in his own "poor" country, Egypt. The links between elites and dominant classes are clear: Rafiq Hariri, Akram Ojjeh, and many others, are Middle Eastern Arabs more than Saudi-Lebanese, or Syrian-Saudi...<sup>4</sup> and a rich Arab businessman has no difficulty acquiring Saudi or Kuwaiti nationality. On the other hand, if communal and national differentiations are particularly strong, and take specific forms because of the extreme division of the labour market, we cannot avoid comparing them to the importance of segmentation in Syria, Lebanon or Jordan. In these countries, indeed, such segmentation was reinforced and nurtured, by the effects of the appropriation by the state elite of part of the oil rent, as a contribution from the Gulf countries to the struggle against Israel.

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<sup>4</sup> See Saïd K. ABURISH, *Confessions d'un homme d'affaire au Moyen-Orient*, Paris, Plon, 1987.

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