Illegal but licit: transnational flows and permissive polities in Asia

Kalir, B.

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TRANSTINAL FLOWS are regularly studied in the social sciences ‘from above’, focusing on the power of states to regulate, facilitate or hinder the movement of people across borders. The research project ‘Illegal but Licit’, while sharing with other studies an emphasis on the changing role of states in shaping transnational flows, ventured into the exploration of flows of people from the bottom up. From two contrasting points of departure, the project deepened our understanding of the aggregated ‘big picture’ of state authorities and transnational flows.

The project resulted in a number of journal articles, an edited volume and a doctoral dissertation. It also led to a policy dialogue, held in Kathmandu, between academics, civil-society activists and policy makers from different countries in Asia. In what follows, I therefore draw from some of the project’s main empirical findings and analytical perspectives.

Thinking mobile, thinking multiple

Political order is commonly associated with the regulatory authority of states. This is not surprising in view of the fact that states have been defined as the exercise of an image of exercising full authority within national territories. According to the formal model, states enjoy a monopoly over the use of violence, the right to tax the population and the power to sanction offenders. Staying close to such a formal understanding, it is easy to conceptualise state authority as a fluid, and it is easy to conceptualise state authority as anything but a fluid, process and the habitual practices of inhabitants in borderlands thus appear as simple, everyday spaces – is predicated on the idea that states are entities habitually straddling the legal-legal divide – a divide of their own making.

Our case studies highlight how transnational flows generate zones of licitness that are located between the realms of state authority (legal vs. illegality) and social regulation (licit vs. illicit behaviour). Their creation – not as exceptions or surreptitious hideaways, but as everyday spaces – is predicated on political negotiations for which the state is one partner among others, resulting in state agents being routinely and profitably embedded in wide-ranging networks of informal transnational brokerage. State authorities are often important partners in these networks and active players in the ensuing politics of licitness.

Political organisations such as states and inter-state associations need categories and rules. They cannot govern without abstracting the representations of lived realities to create these categories. As our findings show, however, state categories often fail to capture the very phenomena they manifestly aim to order. For example, in both Israel and the Gulf States the category of ‘guest workers’, which is supposed to describe a secure relationship of employment under standardised working and living conditions during an agreed period, turns out not to be something else entirely. In practice it describes a relationship in which employers enslave workers and which does not provide even basic legal protection against employer violations of signed contracts. For these migrants, paradoxically, legality turns into a liability. Indian domestic workers in Dubai, and Chinese construction workers in Tel Aviv, who deliberately opt to become ‘runaway’ workers or undocumented labourers, find themselves in a surprising position. They are better off than their ‘legal’ counterparts who are tied to binding contracts, excessive exploitation and extreme social isolation. Under these circumstances absconding or fleeing a legal contract becomes a means of ‘countering subjugation’ rather than ‘subjugation itself’.

Permissive borders

Geographic proximity and trade links generate further transnational regimes of licitness. For example, in the border between India and Bangladesh, customary pathways and historic trade routes may persist in spite of more recently erected state boundaries. The habitual practices of inhabitants in borderlands lead them to perceive the crossing of state borders, on a daily basis and without formal permits, as unproblematic. State officials, on the other hand, may well consider such practices to be a dangerous subversion of state sovereignty, economic insubordination, or a potential security threat. But formal roles and stereotypical images may be negotiable, for example when state actors become deeply involved in facilitating unauthorised cross-border trade, or when they legalise ‘smuggling’.

Our studies advance that borders accommodate a vast range of informal flows, for example, in the Bangladesh-India borderland, the gendered nature of the local regime of permissiveness is pronounced. Here women traders and commuters easily navigate the high-security borderland amidst the construction of a new fence and increased patrolling, while men have to purchase a passage. State agents do not consider women traders, and the small quantities of goods that they carry, as a risk to either state. The presence of these women as permissible foreigners, illustrates how certain categories of mobile people may partially escape territorial and exclusionist discourses.

Finally, to people engaged in transnational flows in borderlands and beyond, authority does not radiate outwards from centres of power: strong at the centre and weakening towards the periphery. The findings of our contributors do not support that view. It shows that to mobile people, authority is embedded in persons and objects and therefore is movable. Authority is not restricted to a particular territory and may materialise in unexpected places. For example, there is no necessary link between being territorially peripheral or geographically isolated and being free from state regulation (or, put differently, being excluded from the state). To people who are mobile, regulatory authority appears as a fluid property that can move about, expand and retract.

Barak Kairi is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, and co-director of the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies. He was a post-doc researcher and the coordinator of the project “Illegal but Licit: transnational flows and permissive polities in Asia”. Willem van Schendel was the director of the program, together with Prof Li Minghuan from Xiamen University, China. Mallini Sur was a PhD candidate, and Bindulakshmi Pattadath and Srafraz Khan were post-doc researchers, at the time of the project (B.Kairi@uva.nl).

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