Illegal but licit: transnational flows and permissive polities in Asia

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TRANSMISSIONS are regularly studied in the social sciences ‘from above’, focusing on the power of states to regulate. Facilitating or hindering 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 mobile people’s everyday pathways and points of departure. First, the project treated the state, however important, as just one source of authority among many, to which mobile subjects potentially belong. Secondly, the project championed ethnographic methods for getting a better understanding of the aggregated ‘big picture’ of state authorities and transnational flows.

Conducted over the course of five years, from 2006 to 2011, the project included studies of transnational movement in various societies across the vast continent of Asia. Two of the case studies examined a long distance migration; female domestic workers from Kerala to the Gulf States, and male construction workers from rural China to Israel; while two other case studies focused on movement in borderlands; between Bangladesh and Northeast India, and between India and Pakistan. The insights that the ‘Illegal but licit’ project generated have benefited, in addition, from close collaboration with many other scholars working in Asia on transnational movement.

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 Katmandu, between academics, civil-society activists and policy makers from different countries in Asia. In what follows, I think it important to highlight 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 are traditionally seen as 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 an absolute and omnipresent property that can move about, expand and retract. 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 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’.

Fashioning licitness

Millions of mobile people live their lives in the dim interface between legality and illegality. Rather than seeing this as a failure of the state system itself, we advance that the ‘failure’ is systemic because it is part of ongoing practical negotiations to establish social order. State categories and rules are never straightforward, let alone set in stone. States make many rules only to break (or forget) these, either routinely or in specific circumstances. Examples from states as unique as Israel, Pakistan and India show that we must conceptualise states as entities habitually straddling the legal-illegal 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. illegal behaviour) 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 categories 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 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 borders. 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