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Etzold, Benjamin

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Violence, Mobility and Labour Relations in Asia

Editorial

Benjamin Etzold

Asia is a continent of mobility. In the course of its history, the region has been shaped fundamentally by the movements of hunters and gatherers, peasants and artisans, workers and intellectuals, traders and seafarers, pilgrims and soldiers. For these and many more groups moving to varying destinations, along diverse pathways and in different rhythms, the search for better lives and livelihoods as well as the flight from violent conflict and other existential threats have always been strong motives for mobility (Liu-Farrer / Yeoh 2018). Mobile populations have thus always contributed to defining and challenging the respective communities, pre-colonial empires, colonial states and, later, post-colonial nation states in Asia and have contributed to transforming them in terms of their ethnic, religious and social composition and their cultural, economic and political structures.

Today, Asia can be considered the most mobile region of the world. 100 million Asian people currently live in a country other than their country of birth, which is equivalent to 40 per cent of the world's international migrants. Almost 60 million Asians have migrated within the region, while 40 million migrants live outside of Asia, mostly in Europe (20 million) and Northern America (16 million). India and China have the largest number of emigrants, followed by Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Philippines (IOM 2017: 54–56). In addition, hundreds of thousands of people are (temporarily) mobile within their own countries. While internal mobility plays a significant role in people's lives and for the respective economies, the exact number of internal migrants can only be estimated (Charles-Edwards et al. 2019). Some of the most significant socio-economic transformations in Asia in the last decades are based on distinct patterns of and structures for labour mobility. The rise of China's industry has been driven by the integration of Chinese enterprises in global production networks, which rely on cheap labour provided through rural-urban

Benjamin Etzold, Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), Bonn, Germany; benjamin.etzold@bicc.de

mobility (Kilian et al. 2010, Bork-Hüffer 2016). The economic transformation and resultant construction boom in the Arabic Gulf rests on the exploitation of labourers and domestic workers from South and Southeast Asia (Malecki / Ewers 2007, Silvey / Parreñas 2019). Singapore's global city development is based not only on global linkages, but in particular on regional mobility and the newly emerging translocal livelihoods of workers (Budianta 2016, Peth et al. 2018). And the deforestation and "palm-oilisation" of Borneo and many other parts of Southeast Asia are related to large-scale relocation programmes and the displacement of local populations (Elmhirst 2017). It is thus not exaggerated to argue that labour mobility has become a defining feature of Asian economies and a transformative force in Asian societies.

Human mobility is, of course, driven not only by labour market needs and the search for better livelihoods. In Asia, existing transnational networks and family relations, educational, medical and social services, and the migration industry play a fundamental role in structuring migration (Christ 2016, Liu-Farrer / Yeoh 2018), as do environmental risks, natural catastrophes and climate change (Hugo / Bardsley 2014, Afifi et al. 2015). Violent conflict, political persecution, human rights violations and social exclusion have also forced tens of millions of people in Asia to become mobile (Ho / Robinson 2018). According to the latest data from UNHCR (2019: 74), at the end of the year 2018, 13.5 million people from Asian countries had fled across international borders and then been registered as refugees or were still awaiting their asylum decision. Moreover, 13.7 million Asians have been displaced within their country of origin due to violence and conflict. Generally speaking, people flee not only from persecution and violent conflicts, but also due to the destruction of livelihoods and the loss of economic security that are linked to conflicts and collapsing security structures. There is a growing body of scholarly work on the causes and dynamics of displacement from and within Asia, on refugees' protection and encampment in particular Asian countries and on the regulatory regimes that structure both the (im)mobilities and the everyday lives of displaced Asian people.¹

As mobile people – whatever their original motives for mobility – arrive and (temporarily) settle in mega-urban regions, cities and rural sites, they normally engage in economic activities to secure their livelihoods and to build their own futures. They thereby enter into local labour relations and navigate through place-specific policy regimes, modes of production and working cultures. While uncertain, instable, insecure, unsafe and exploitative labour rela-

1 For overviews see Ho / Robinson 2018 on the multiplicities of displacement experiences in Asia; McConnachie 2014 and Stange / Sakdapolrak 2018 on forced migration in Southeast and East Asia; Banerjee 2014 and Ghosh 2016 on refugee movements and statelessness in South Asia; and Monsutti / Balci 2014 on displacement dynamics in Central Asia.

tions prevail and have grown all over the world², precarious work can be considered as a particular challenge in Asia – a region that experienced an extremely rapid socio-economic transformation and incorporation into globalised modes of production over the past fifty years (Kalleberg / Hewison 2013, Cruz-Del Rosario / Rigg 2019). In Asia, informal employment is the norm rather than the exception, as more than two thirds of all workers work without a written contract, without access to social protection and without protection by labour laws. They are thus subject to excessive working hours and potentially to exploitation. Moreover, decent employment is also far from guaranteed even for those under formal contracts (ILO 2018: 37ff). Forced labour – an expression of particularly violent labour relations – is also commonplace, mainly in the fields of domestic work, sex work, construction and manufacturing as well as agriculture and fishing. Four out of 1,000 working people in Asia work under conditions of coercion and are exploited by their employers, in particular through debt bondage, but also in relation to human trafficking (ILO 2017: 10). In general, working poverty is widespread. Around eight per cent of all workers in Asia can hardly meet the needs of themselves and their families on the basis of their working income (ILO 2018: 12).

Amongst all labourers, migrant workers are often particularly vulnerable to unsafe working conditions, abuse and exploitation, a lack of rights and livelihood insecurity, in particular if they took out loans to finance their mobility through brokers and if they are locked into “highly asymmetrical, personalistic, and often violent relations of power and dependency” (O’Connell Davidson 2013: 176) with employers. Migration can thus be seen as a specific pathway into the precariat (Standing 2011: 90). Existing legal frameworks must be seen as the prime cause of migrant workers’ enhanced vulnerability. In many countries in Asia, labour migration policies not only fail to protect migrants’ rights as individuals and workers, but seem to be purposely designed as a way to limit access to citizenship or at least to secure legal status, to increase their dependency on employers and other facilitators of (temporary) labour migration and to allow for their systematic exploitation in a highly stratified international division of labour.³

2 See the work by Standing 2011 on the “precariat”, which occupies the lower positions in the fragmented global class structure.

3 See Samers 2010: 412ff. on the basic assumptions of the International Labour Market Segmentation Theory; see Standing 2011: 93ff. on the notion of the “denizen” as the working precariat with strategically limited rights; and Piper et al. 2017 for the case of temporary migrant workers in Asia.

Interconnections between violence, mobility and labour relations

Against this background of growing labour mobility, coupled with protracted violent conflicts that lead to ever new cycles of displacement and persistent conditions of insecure and precarious work in Asia, the contributions in this special issue address the multiple interconnections between violence, mobility and labour relations from various angles and disciplinary perspectives. They thereby clearly address a gap in current research. Scholarship that looks into labour mobility, migrants' livelihoods and precarious labour in Asia⁴ focuses on certain groups of mobile people, in particular temporary foreign workers, female labour migrants, irregular migrants and agricultural labourers. People who have been forcefully displaced in the context of violent conflict are, however, rarely mentioned in these labour-focused studies. In turn, while some scholars in forced migration and refugee studies look into livelihoods after displacement and the multiple barriers to accessing work,⁵ as well as employment opportunities for refugees and broader economic dynamics in receiving countries (Betts et al. 2017, World Bank 2017), explicit links to scholarly debates on labour mobility, migrant workers' agency or precarity are, however, rarely made.

Exploring the triangular relationship between violence, mobility and labour leads to some interesting research questions that would otherwise remain below the surface if only a two-dimensional approach (violence-mobility, mobility-labour, labour-violence) were used: 1) What defines local labour relations and livelihood conditions in situations of violent conflict, collapsing security structures and mass displacement? 2) How do migrants and refugees experience violence and labour exploitation during and after mobility? How do they cope with, adapt to and resist violence and precarity? 3) How do state policies and other regulative regimes that make use of their monopoly of violence in a given location structure (precarious) labour relations and workers' (im)mobilities?

To my knowledge, such connections between violence, mobility and labour relations are rarely explored – neither conceptually, nor empirically. From a theoretical perspective, the combination of concepts in three fields of scholarship – the “new mobilities” paradigm, labour geography and debates about violence in peace and conflict studies – might be particularly promising for shedding light on violence, (im)mobilities and labour relations in Asia.

4 See Siddiqui 2005, Breman 2010, Piper et al. 2017, Piper / Withers 2018, Cruz-Del Rosario / Rigg 2019.

5 See Horst 2006, Jacobsen 2014, Bohnet et al. 2015, Missbach 2017, Grawert / Mielke 2018.

The “new mobilities” paradigm⁶ considers human mobility as a distinct social practice that is interlinked with other forms of mobility (of capital, goods, information, ideologies, etc.) and yet is rooted in specific economic, political, social, cultural and material structures (“moorings”). Mobility can thus only be conceived of in its dialectic relation to immobility. In many, also Asian, contexts immobility is socially perceived as the norm and as an indicator of stability and security, whilst mobility – despite shaping the everyday lives of millions of migrant workers and refugees – is framed as the exception and as a “security problem”. The new mobilities paradigm is of great relevance for the study of labour mobility and forced migration (Gill et al. 2011), because it embraces the central role of multiple mobilities in the everyday lives of workers and refugees while nonetheless acknowledging the manifold borders, barriers, hurdles and selective filters that structure the direction, composition and velocity of the flows. The notion of the “politics of mobility” (Cresswell 2010) has thus been introduced to better comprehend the distinct political practices, instruments and discourses revolving around mobility and how they are rooted in societal power relations and nested in multiple scales – from the local to the national, the regional and the global level.

Every local labour market has its history, its specific working conditions, its local anchor points (“work places” or moorings) and is embedded in regional, national and global circuits of capital, information, goods and people as well as in particular power relations. Local labour relations are thus inevitably tied to places and to multiple mobilities. In “labour geography”,⁷ relations between labourers and employers, working conditions and workers’ everyday lives are seen as an expression of neoliberal capitalism and of ever new waves of structuring and restructuring modes of production and thus also of broader societal relations. Nonetheless, workers’ agency is being acknowledged (mobility being a specific facet of agency) as are their everyday practices that contribute to producing specific “places of labour” and that enable increasingly rapid circulation in translocal production networks. In this context, precarious work is seen as being directly related to the disadvantageous position of labour vis-à-vis capital – the employers, the investors and global market dynamics – and to the lack of protection by the state, and options are sought to enhance workers’ agency (Coe / Jordhus-Lier 2010).

Peace and conflict studies goes far beyond the study of war and other forms of violent conflict. While there is no uniform theory of violence, most scholars nowadays acknowledge violence’s manifold manifestations and consider violence as an inherent part of power relations and thus also as a specific mode of societal organisation (Imbusch 2003, Karstedt / Eisner 2009). According to

6 See Hannam et al. 2006, Sheller / Urry 2006, Urry 2007, Cresswell / Merriman 2011.

7 See Herod 2001, Castree et al. 2004, Lier 2007, Coe / Jordhus-Lier 2010.

Galtung's (1969, 1990) classic three-dimensional approach to violence, violence can first be understood as practices by actors that are aimed at harming or hurting an individual or group by physical and/or verbal means; such an understanding of "direct violence" is the most commonly used. Killing, rape, torture, pillaging and detention are particular forms of direct violence that are strategically employed in wars and violent conflicts and that often produce mass displacement.⁸ The second form of violence, "structural violence", manifests itself in specific forms of injustice, exploitation, deprivation and marginalisation that reflect unequal economic structures and power relations between different and within particular societies. Structural violence is a continuous process, rather than a singular event, in which the actors involved are often concealed (Galtung 1969, 1990; Bohle / Fünfgeld 2007). Precarity, insecure livelihoods and workers' exploitation, on the one hand, and unequal access to mobility options, for instance through border controls and highly selective visa regimes, can be seen as prime examples of structural violence. Thirdly, "cultural violence" refers to ideologies, discourses and institutions that produce, maintain and renew violent actions and processes and serve "to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (Galtung 1990: 291). This legitimisation of violence can result in the perception of existing patterns of both direct and structural violence as normal and inevitable – even by those who are most severely affected by them; violence becomes internalised (Bohle / Fünfgeld 2007). To give examples from this special issue, cultural violence might manifest itself in the justification of temporary guest worker schemes that lead to the marginalisation, immobilisation and exploitation of migrant workers, as in Malaysia (see Frank / Anderson), or in the discourses about the "necessity" to deport refugees whose asylum claims have been rejected, as exemplified in the case of Afghans' deportation from Germany (see Sökefeld).

Contributions in this special issue

The contributions in this special issue focus on different kinds of mobilities within and across Asian regions and draw on different types of material, mainly the authors' own empirical research. They all develop their own take on the triangular relation between violence, mobility and labour.

In the first paper, "The Cost of Legality: Navigating Labour Mobility and Exploitation in Malaysia", Anja Karlsson Franck and Joseph Trawicki Anderson explore the labour relations in which Burmese migrants working in the Malaysian city George Town are embedded and how they navigate rather con-

⁸ See Bank et al. 2017 and Etzold 2019 for a discussion of "migration out of violence" and other facets of the violence-mobility-nexus.

straining governance regimes. The migrant workers in their empirical case study all came to Malaysia in the context of “temporary guestworker schemes” through which they are allowed to work in manufacturing, construction, agriculture and selected parts of the service economy – all sectors in which Malaysia is in need of (cheap) labour. Malaysia’s Temporary Migrant Worker Programme ties the foreign workers to specific employers and limits their options to search for (better) work in other places – they become immobilised after moving. The labour migrants are thus extremely dependent on their employers, who also serve as the “sponsors” for their stay in Malaysia. Low pay, precarious working conditions and even abuse and direct violence are endured by many migrants as the constant threat of being deported looms large. The sponsoring employer can always withdraw her/his support and end the contract, which would lead to the migrant workers’ forced return. Even though the workers are in a weak bargaining position in these highly unequal labour relations, which could be understood as a politically designed form of “structural violence”, they are not without agency. Franck and Anderson present empirical evidence that some Burmese labour migrants nonetheless leave their employers, go to other places and search for jobs in the informal economy. They thereby lose both their residency and their working permit and enter into “illegality”, but gain in independence and sometimes even earn a higher salary. Some strategically “move in and out of legal status” several times, which the authors describe as “navigation” through the bureaucratic landscape, an approach that can contribute to reducing the migrant workers’ precarity.

The second paper “Cyclical, Temporary and Partial Return: Navigational Strategies of Displaced Persons from Myanmar” by Alexander Horstmann, Markus Rudolf and Clara Schmitz-Pranghe also highlights mobile actors’ manifold strategies for navigating through highly constraining conditions. The authors focus not on labour migrants, however, but on people who have been forcibly displaced within and from Myanmar and now try to eke out a living in the violent Thai-Myanmar borderlands. On the basis of comprehensive empirical research, they emphasise the fact that legal categories such as IDP, refugee, citizen, labour migrant and undocumented migrant hardly say anything about the cause of displacement or motivation for migration. Displaced persons – who mostly belonged to the Shan, Karen and Kachin ethnic communities in this research – make use of, switch and combine different socio-legal statuses in order to cope with displacement, ongoing direct violence and the protractedness of their situation, to enable physical security and to sustain their livelihoods.

Displaced persons from Myanmar are engaged in subsistence work in the fields of their “home communities” in Myanmar or (seasonally) as labourers

in Thailand's booming agricultural sector; they work in mining and road construction on both sides of the border as well as in factories in the newly established special economic zone in Thailand's city Mae Sot; they are self-employed in transport, trade and other enterprises in the border towns on the Myanmar side and have become part of the informal economy in Thailand; some of the better educated also work for humanitarian organisations and some as domestic workers in Thai urban-middle class households. All of these livelihood options go hand in hand with specific mobility patterns – including cyclical, temporary and permanent return, onwards-mobility and enforced immobility – that are constrained or enabled by control regimes that affect different ethnic groups and locations to a quite different extent. Making use of diverse options at multiple places – which can be understood as an expression of agency – many displaced families have become more flexible and less dependent on aid and other forms of external support. In most cases, however, they remain highly vulnerable to precarious, dangerous and exploitative labour relations without formal protection or any guarantee of minimum wages.

Elke Grawert, in her article “Coping with Insecurity: Labour Relations, (Im) mobility and Conflict-sensitive Employment in Afghanistan”, looks at the triangular relations between violence, mobility and labour from a different angle. She focuses on the operations of construction companies in Afghanistan in the mid-2010s and thereby exposes the particularity of labour relations in fragile and violence-affected settings and the prerequisites for “conflict-sensitive employment” (Grawert / Shirzad 2017). Based on comprehensive empirical research on construction companies and the livelihoods of local populations in Afghanistan, Grawert portrays how the companies “carefully negotiate access to the communities, try to avoid enhancing social tensions during construction projects and take various precautions to protect the staff, company facilities and the construction itself”. In order to do so, the companies need to invest in patron-client-relations with local powerholders – both politicians holding offices in government and Taliban leaders – i.e. those actors and groups that maintain a “monopoly of force” over a particular site or region. Respected elders of the local communities are important “gate keepers” in conflict-affected settings as they mediate between different political groups. They also negotiate wages, employment conditions and breaches of contract with the construction companies, always trying to ensure that the local workers and the wider community benefit from the temporarily limited construction site.

The article also points to the added value of looking at violent conflict, re-construction and peace-building through the lens of mobility and immobility. Violent conflicts alter the mobility patterns in the affected regions fundamentally, leading to the enforced mobility of some, while forcibly immobilis-

ing others. At the same time, the destruction of infrastructure is a central military strategy to harm societies and economies; rebuilding infrastructure – in this case roads as an example of a particularly vital mobility infrastructure – is thus an important element in the transition from war to peace.

Moreover, there is also a distinct (im)mobility dimension to the labour relations in such violence-affected settings. In case of the construction sector, mobile (international) capital is invested in particular places; large construction companies that often organise their work from the capital cities but are mobile in their operations then “have to temporarily integrate in local political-economic environments to implement their projects”. As Grawert’s case study shows, certain risks and conflicts but also a particular potential can emerge when construction companies bring together more flexible and skilled workers with local, often lower-skilled labourers. Importantly, while “decent work” is certainly an illusion under such conditions of violence and insecurity as described here in Afghanistan, the construction companies “cannot act arbitrarily upon local labour”. The local political alliances, in which the companies become embedded and upon which their own security largely depends, also protect the local labourers from the worst forms of labour exploitation.

The final contribution to this special issue, “Nations Rebound: German Politics of Deporting Afghans” by Martin Sökefeld, shows us yet another side of the turbulent relations between violence, mobility and labour. It traces the development of German politics of deportations – another form of enforced mobility – to Afghanistan over the past 30 years and exposes its underlying logic. Building on wider debates in the growing academic field of “deportation studies” (Coutin 2015), Sökefeld analyses the policy developments and narratives that underpin the current deportation discourse in Germany. He distinguishes two steps in the argumentation: “first, deserving and undeserving refugees have to be distinguished, assuming that a clear distinction between the two categories is possible, and second, those who are undeserving and therefore have no right to stay in Germany have to leave the country – if necessary, by being deported. According to this reasoning, the unrelenting enforcement of repatriation, deportations included, is the basis for the acceptance of the asylum laws in Germany.” The notion of deservingness relates to mobility and labour relations in many ways.

On the one hand, labour migrants are clearly distinguished from refugees – a far too simplistic categorisation that in many cases does not reflect the complex realities of trajectories of displacement (Crawley / Skleparis 2017, Etzold 2019). Those who are not accepted as refugees are automatically seen as labour migrants and thus as undeserving of protection under German law or the international asylum regime. On the other hand, deservingness addresses pathways of integration into German society and long-term perspectives for

remaining. Criminals and people who might pose a security risk are the first to be deported, yet their deportation is actually hard to implement. Ironically, those people who receive an expulsion order but who live a regular and “orderly” life by going to school or working are easier to find and thus easier to deport. Deservingness – in the sense that they deserve to stay, if they are “well integrated” and can live by their own means, as often expressed in the public discourse – cannot then protect them from deportation. Overall, the German state’s policies and the wider discursive framing of deportation as a necessary tool to being able to guarantee the protection of the “legitimate” refugees and as a means to re-establish and demonstrate state sovereignty can be read as a particular form of “cultural violence” through which the mobility of forced return – a form of direct violence – is being legitimised.

In the case of Afghanistan, the mismatch between state-driven discourses and the reality is particularly blatant and life-threatening. While the German government has repeatedly stated that “parts of Afghanistan are safe enough for deportees”, Sökefeld notes that given persistently high levels of generic violence and terrorist attacks “nowhere in Afghanistan is safe, particularly for deportees from Europe”. Deportation exposes people who are seeking protection and a better future to direct violence and livelihood insecurity. In the end, this not only jeopardises their lives, but also most certainly leads to new cycles of displacement.

To sum up, the contributions in this special issue cannot, of course, cover the full spectrum of topics and questions that emerge when interpolating the notions of violence, mobility and labour relations. They do, however, expose some fascinating research findings and point to some generic trends that are worth exploring further. First, mobility – for multiple reasons, in different forms, across diverse spaces and in various rhythms – is an omnipresent theme in Asia and has certainly become part of the normal way of life. Instead of “only” trying to explain mobilities and their multiple drivers, it is also necessary to better understand the conditions, meanings and effects of mobilities in people’s lives and the relations to different forms of immobilities.

Second, the relations between mobility and violence are not always straightforward. Looking at displacement as a form of mobility that is primarily driven by violence tells only one part of the story. While specific types of mobility such as labour migration and trade continue unabatedly despite violent conflicts in some contexts, in other cases immobilisation instead of forced mobility can be the result; or both may happen at the same time but for specific groups only. Generally, studies of forced migration and refugees should look deeper into changing patterns, rhythms and forms of mobilities – both within and beyond regions that are affected by violent conflict – rather than trying to explain mobility through violence.

Third, the same holds true for the relations between violence and labour. While studies into refugees' livelihoods, precarious work and conflict-sensitive employment are important and further studies are certainly necessary, they should not stop at the examination of only directly visible forms of violence in labour relations, such as the exploitation of workers by their employers. Violence – in the sense of direct, structural and cultural violence – is deeply enshrined in societal relations. The occurrence of violence thus always brings to the fore highly unequal power geometries. In the context of labour, we must be aware that deep inequalities – between people and across spaces – are an inherent part of the organising logic of capitalist modes of production and our world society.

Fourth, the territorial nation state has an important role to play in the triangular relations between violence, mobility and labour. The contributions in this special issue point to the great relevance of borders, policies, laws, government actors, governmental categorisations and also specific discourses fed by state agents in the everyday lives of mobile and working people. In largely sedentary societies that are believed to be clearly delineated by borders, people's mobility continuous to be seen as an exception that raises suspicion and inadvertently requires the categorisation of mobile subjects and tighter border control, or at least a "better management" of cross-border flows. In the 21st century, the territorial nation state largely derives its legitimacy from its ability to react to and direct mobilities to its own advantage.

Fifth, and finally, people are not passive elements being pushed and pulled around by structural forces. They possess agency. There are multiple examples in this special issue: Burmese foreign workers navigate constraining temporary labour mobility schemes, switch their legal status and thereby try to evade labour exploitation in Malaysia (Frank / Andersson); forcibly displaced people from Myanmar diversify their livelihoods, return cyclically and move on temporarily despite violence, social exclusion and mobility restrictions in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands (Horstmann / Rudolf / Schmitz-Pranghe); construction companies and workers build localised alliances in order to cope with insecurity in the context of cyclical violent conflict in Afghanistan (Grawert); and refugees and German citizens resist deportations to Afghanistan through acts of solidarity, civil protest and efforts to change the public discourse (Sökefeld). Such expressions of agency are needed to counter both policies and narratives aimed at restricting workers' and displaced people's mobilities, which in the end only contribute to deepening vicious circles of violence and precarity.

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