

**SAMULI SCHIELKE**, *Migrant Dreams: Egyptian Workers in the Gulf States* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2020). Pp. 154. \$19.95 paper. ISBN 9789774169564.

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“Why don’t you come to work here? You could make so much money here!” Ali, an Egyptian migrant in Qatar asks Samuli Schielke, the author of *Migrant Dreams: Egyptian Workers in the Gulf States*. The author seems genuinely perplexed by the question; this discussion comes halfway into the book, after Schielke has detailed the plight of low-skilled Egyptians working across Gulf migrant host countries. But Ali is also puzzled by Schielke’s lack of enthusiasm, having spent years dreaming of working in Qatar himself. The author politely answers that he has a good, comfortable life in Berlin. Plus, who would want to live in Doha, anyway . . . ? “But you could work here for a couple of years to save money and then go back,” Ali replies, unconvinced. This short dialogue is emblematic of Schielke’s important ethnography of Egyptian migrants’ lives across Arab Gulf states and their return home. A social and cultural anthropologist, Schielke spent ten years with a group of Egyptian workers, all coming from low-income rural milieus, who travel to the Gulf in pursuit of temporary employment opportunities. These workers, he argues, live in a “permanent condition of cyclical impermanence” (xiv) that characterizes the realities of contemporary labor migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

The book’s main thesis is that migratory movements to metropolitan centers have come to dominate the dreams of countless people—both the socially conservative aspirations of yearning for a stable life in material comfort as well as broader social imaginations of migrants across the global South. Thus, migrants’ dreams depend on, and reproduce, the spectacle of Dubai, Doha, and other major cities as emblems of opulence that reinforce relations of power between citizens

and noncitizens. Across sixteen short chapters, the book takes us through this complex interaction of imagination and reality. In the first two chapters we are introduced to the trajectory of Egyptian migration to Qatar through Tawfiq, one of Schielke's main interlocutors across the book. Chapters three to six take us through the life of workers in a security company in Doha, while chapters seven and eight begin a discussion of how money features in migrants' dreams of marriage and future happiness, continuing on with a discussion of different powers of imagination and the senses of limitation and possibility in chapters nine to eleven. In the last part of the book, we follow Tawfiq back to Egypt as he experiences the uncertainties of life in post-2011 Egypt, while Schielke devotes some space to discussing the theoretical linkages between imagination, labor emigration, and social mobility on a global scale.

The point that emigration—or, perhaps more accurately, cyclical migration—shapes, and is shaped by, Egyptian workers' social imagination is not novel. From the early 1970s onwards, once President Anwar Sadat embedded emigration as key component of young Egyptians' socioeconomic trajectory, millions of workers have flocked to Libya, Iraq, Jordan, and the GCC states. Egyptians abroad pursued short-term employment positions that would grant them enough money to finance a wedding and allow for a family and a comfortable life back home. The experience of emigration and return have become key themes in Egyptian culture—prominent in a range of films, such as the 2010 comedy *Assal Eswed*, or Alaa al Aswany's novels. Unsurprisingly, as Egypt became the top exporter of labor in the Arab world, numerous academic works have explored Egyptian migration in terms of its social, economic, demographic, and political ramifications over the past few decades.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite narrating a story that we already know, Schielke's work constitutes a crucial contribution to the literature. For one, it fills a key gap in terms of existing understandings of Egyptian workers' lived experiences in the Gulf. The book offers a complex ethnography of migration that transcends rigid categorizations of mobility between migrant "sending" and "host" states; for example, the author does not examine Egypt or the Gulf states alone, seeking to understand "the interrelation of the two in a world where villages across the Global South are in the process of being transformed into suburbs of the Gulf" (xiv–xv). More importantly, throughout the book, rigid boundaries between moral and economic pursuits, normality and excess, alienation and camaraderie fall apart. Diasporic lives and informal

citizenship of Gulf migrants have been effectively examined in other work,<sup>2</sup> but Schielke's focus on low-income labor workers adds a necessary, heretofore missing component.

What I found particularly refreshing is the intimate knowledge of Egyptian migrants' experiences that Schielke is able to impart to his audience. Most readers of the book would know about the injustices that the *kafala* system entails, for instance, but Schielke expertly makes this come alive with a discussion of *Khalli walli* (a Gulf Arabic phrase that means "let him tend to his own affairs" or "who cares?") in chapter five. Schielke discusses the realities of Gulf migration management strategy of preventing fraternization between migrants of different countries of origin in order to prevent antigovernmental mobilization. He talks about social pressure to continue working in the Gulf despite harsh and cruel conditions; if you return immediately after emigration, one migrant recounts, "people say, 'you're not a man, you bring bad luck' [*fi wishak faqr*]" (54).

As academics begin paying more attention to the complexities of South–South migration, this book shines as a strong case of a critical, innovative, and timely contribution. Its multi-sited ethnographic approach, coupled with the sensitivity that the author demonstrates in his conversations with Egyptian migrants, make for an empirically rich account of labor migration to the Gulf. Its longitudinal approach—examining the same group's cyclical migration to the Gulf over a period of a decade—allows the author's thesis to become clear to the readers; the "hyperreal fantasy world of the Gulf is indeed a system of domination," in which migrants' dreams "reproduce and reinforce relations of power" (114). This is a book to cherish for scholars and students of labor migration across the global South.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For works on the sociological dimension of Egyptian emigration, see Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *The New Arab Social Order: A Study of the Social Impact of Oil Wealth*, Westview's Special Studies on the Middle East (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1982); Lucile Gruntz and Delphine Pagès-El Karoui, "Migration and Family Change in Egypt: A Comparative Approach to Social Remittances," *Migration Letters* 10, no. 1 (2013): 71–79. Research that addresses the economic aspect of the phenomenon includes Galal A. Amin, "Migration, Inflation and Social Mobility: A Sociological Interpretation of Egypt's Current Economic and Political Crisis," in *Egypt under Mubarak*, ed.

Charles Tripp and Edward Roger Owen (London: Routledge, 1989), 103–21; Gil Feiler, *Economic Relations between Egypt and the Gulf Oil States, 1967–2000: Petro-Wealth and Patterns of Influence*, (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2003). Notable demographic approaches are Ayman Zohry and Barbara Harrell-Bond, “Contemporary Egyptian Migration: An Overview of Voluntary and Forced Migration” (Working Paper C3, Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, University of Sussex, December 2003); Onn Winckler, *Arab Political Demography: Population Growth, Labor Migration and Natalist Policies*, 2nd ed. (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2009). For an analysis of Egyptian migration from a political science perspective, see Gerasimos Tsourapas, *The Politics of Migration in Modern Egypt: Strategies for Regime Survival in Autocracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> See Neha Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai’s Indian Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Andrew M. Gardner, *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2010).