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Spaces of work and everyday life: labour geographies and the agency of unorganised temporary migrant workers

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Abstract

In this paper I focus on the agency of unorganised temporary migrant workers – people who travel away to work for just a few weeks or months. Such workers have been relatively neglected in labour geography. Perhaps surprisingly, given the focus on the agency of capital in much of his writing, I build on two arguments made by David Harvey. First, workers' spatial mobility is complex and may involve short as well as longer term migrations, and secondly that this can have significance both materially and in relation to the subjective experience of employment. The spatial embeddedness of temporary migrant workers' everyday lives can be a resource for shaping landscapes (and ordinary histories) of capitalism, even though any changes may be shortlived and take place at the micro-scale. The paper is illustrated with case study material from research with workers in the agriculture sector in India and the UK, and concludes with more general implications for labour geographers engaged with other sectors and places.

Introduction

In an insightful recent review of labour geography for this journal, David Lier identified three important omissions. He argued that labour geography tended to “overlook worker agency that is not articulated as collectively organised”; contained too little discussion of migration; and that “often-neglected groups, voices and places” were missing from its analytical framework (2007, p. 16). In this paper, I seek to contribute to geographical thinking precisely in these areas by focusing on the agency of unorganised migrant workers, employed for periods of just weeks or months away from their usual place of residence. Agency is understood here as both the intention and the practice of taking

action for one's own self-interest or the interests of others (Castree *et al.* 2004, p. 159-160). My emphasis is on the exercise of agency in spaces of production and especially employment, rather than of consumption or of unpaid reproductive work (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003; Gidwani and Chari, 2004; Mills, 1999). For temporary migrant workers, these spaces can include makeshift eating and dwelling places, as well as travel routes and locations for recruiters and workers to meet and bargain over terms. In contrast to the more familiar labour geography subject of unionised workers, the subject here is the agency of individual migrant workers and of gangs formed casually for the purpose of seeking work, or brought together by a labour contractor for a particular job.

Such agency is informal in nature and has diverse manifestations. It may involve anything from the act of migration itself through pushing employers for particular forms of payment, such as piece rates, or shifts away from specific job roles. As we shall see, over a longer period it can also mean migrating for wage work to be able to invest in a mini-business and thus avoid having to work under an employer's gaze altogether. Because unorganized temporary migrant workers are mostly 'agency poor' (Hobson, 2000, p. 242), these practices may only achieve incremental changes in conditions at micro-scales such as at work-places, or in the provision of food, accommodation or transport. Moreover, any change may be short-lived. Nevertheless, I argue that the influence of such agency on workers' spatially embedded everyday lives can be significant to workers themselves both materially and in relation to the subjective experience of employment.

Lier is right that such concerns are omitted in Herod's (2001) work, which has been identified as defining the sub-field of labour geography. Herod *is* centrally concerned with workers' agency, but for him this refers to the collective agency of organised workers with a history of living close to their workplaces. Herod's central point is that workers – usually operating as trade unions – can and sometimes do make landscapes of capitalism, for example through disputing the scale at which pay bargaining takes place, through variously supporting or undermining the efforts of labour unions in other countries, through forms of international solidarity, or through hanging back from industrial action, prioritising the prosperity of their own place over class solidarity and engaging in local “boosterism” (1998a, p. 2; 2001, p. 34). Economic geographies – both neoclassical and Marxist – had been, argues Herod, too entranced by the power of capital. Yes, capital sought its own “spatial fix”, but so did labour. To emphasise this, he suggested a move away from a “geography of labor” to a “labor geography” (2001, pp. 18 ff).

However, although Herod has paid relatively little attention to workers' spatial mobility or to the individual and collective agency of unorganised workers in his own research, other geographers deeply engaged in the study of labour *have* done so (see for example Pratt, 1999; McDowell, 2005; McDowell *et al.* 2007; Waite, 2009; Wills *et al.*, forthcoming). Moreover, Herod has himself edited collections and engaged in collaborative writing which have included such perspectives (on migrant workers, see for example the chapters by Mitchell and by Savage in Herod, 1998b; see also Herod *et al.* 2003). Chapter 7 of Castree *et al.* (2004) is dedicated to migration, which the authors see

as one key strategy – “movement *across* space” - that workers can use “to improve their life conditions” and “command space” (p. 185, emphasis added).

While McDowell criticises the self-identified labour geography literature for failing to engage with feminist writings (McDowell, 2008, p. 20), there is a sense, as Wills puts it, of a maturing of the labour geographies sub-field, a moving away from its initial focus on trade union organizations to speak to most of the significant debates in human geography as a whole... contemporary research includes a focus on the dynamics of labour migration, the extent to which labour is able and willing to take its place in a multi-scalar civil society that includes the emergent global justice movement, the way in which class and identity are changing, as well as questions of globalization and its implications for work, wealth and power relations (2009, p. 404).

Indeed, in her critique, McDowell has argued for a scholarship that sees class through the lens of gender and race relations, that constructs class not as categorical positions but as active, ongoing and negotiable sets of practices that vary across time and space (McDowell, 2008, p. 21). If we accept this broader perspective on labour geographies, the gaps are less than implied by Lier.

The problem therefore is not so much that migrant workers as a whole have been omitted from labour geographies,¹ but rather that when migration is considered, the focus tends to be on those who settle, on immigrants. This fits with an overall bias in the sub-field towards settledness, an emphasis on “labor’s relative day-by-day immobility” (Storper & Walker, 1989, p. 157, cited in Herod *et al.* 2003, p. 178). The spatial embeddedness of the lives of workers who are mobile for relatively short periods of time – weeks or months - where accommodation will necessarily be makeshift and temporary, *has* tended to be neglected.² Moreover, the analysis of much that has called itself labour geography has focused at the regional, national and global scales, drawing attention away from workers’ everyday micro-struggles over space and time.

David Harvey, an unlikely labour geographer?

In setting out the rationale for the sub-field of labour geography Herod describes David Harvey and other “Marxist-inspired” geographers, as “capital-centric” (2001, p. 33).³ Clearly he has a point. Yet at the same time, a closer look at Harvey’s writing on worker mobility and worker agency is suggestive of a more ambivalent and complex view, one which may account for individual and unorganised collective worker agency and its spatial embeddedness under capitalism more fully than the union-dominated labour geography of Herod himself.

To start with, it is important to reemphasise that Harvey insists on considering space and time together.⁴ Assessing evidence of “time-space compression”, for example, requires specification of the time period under consideration (1990, p. 240). More than this, drawing on Marx (2006 [1982], p.108) and on Thompson (1967), Harvey shows time to be socially constructed – it has been viewed in different ways at different points in history and its construction can be a tool in the hands of individual capitalists seeking to control their workforces (1990, p. 230-231). According to Castree’s reading of Harvey’s *Limits to Capital*, “an abstract, decontextualized measure of time (the clock time with which we are all intimately familiar) becomes a material force that exerts a disciplinary pressure within capitalist societies” (2009, p. 36-37).

What is perhaps surprising about Harvey is that he seems to believe in the agency of individual workers in shaping micro-landscapes of space and time. Moreover, in his summary of Marx's *Capital*, agency seems to be deeply connected to workers' spatial mobility. At the same time, Harvey shows how, because capital has the upper hand, Marx is sceptical about the power of organised labour. Capitalists in this view seek to encourage competitiveness between workers and to nurture a 'reserve army', simultaneously requiring workers to move between work-places, roles and tasks and to develop a flexible disposition. Yet, we are also forced to consider how all of this creates opportunities as well as dangers and difficulties for working-class people precisely because education, flexibility, and geographical mobility, once acquired, become harder for capitalists to control (Harvey, 1990, p. 187).

True, Harvey emphasises workers' lack of choice in selling their labour power: "most labourers have no option but to sell their labour power to the capitalist in order to live" (2006 [1982], p. 380). Like Marx he holds that conditions are not of workers' own choosing. Herod is right to identify this position of Harvey's as more pessimistic than his own. However, Harvey's insistence on analysing space and time together provides further insights into the emancipatory potential of migration for workers:

As creative subjects..., labourers perpetually roam the world seeking to escape the deprivations of capital, shunning the worst aspects of exploitation, always struggling, often with some success, to better their lot. *Capital must necessarily accommodate to this process, and, to the extent that this is so, labourers fashion both the history and geography of capitalism* (Harvey, 2006 [1982], p. 380, emphasis added)

Harvey could not have put his particular brand of labour geography more explicitly – it is labour geography in Herod's sense of the term because it involves workers' shaping landscapes of capitalism. But the differences are i) that these are not organised workers, and ii) that the making of history, of what happens over time, in keeping with Harvey's overall orientation, is kept in the frame, alongside the production of space.⁵

There is a sense in which workers' spatial mobility becomes a much more widespread experience for workers in Harvey than in Herod. Importantly for the analysis that follows, Harvey does not restrict himself to permanent processes of migration and settlement. The image of workers perpetually roaming the world carries forward into a more catholic orientation towards mobility, within as well as across borders (as argued for by others including Feldman, 2007; Skeldon, 2006), for varying lengths of time. Harvey sees the complexity and multiplicity of people's moves:

The upshot is that labour, if it cannot escape entirely from the clutches of capital, is faced with a bitter choice. It can flee and seek the better life elsewhere, or it can stay in place and fight. The choice is not all or nothing – *seasonal, periodic and even relatively long-term migrations (together with remittances to take care of families left behind) are some of the intermediate solutions.* (Harvey, 2006 [1982], p. 385, emphasis added).

At times, Harvey is too reductionist, for example in his use of the phrase "bitter choice" and when he holds that, for workers, geographical mobility "represents the possibility of escape from tyranny and oppression, including that visited on labour by capital." (2006 [1982], p. 384), as if that were the only meaning of spatial mobility for workers. There are clearly many and changing meanings of migration even by poor workers with few

choices (see, for example, Rogaly & Coppard, 2003). Yet, although Harvey does not dwell on other *motivations* for spatial mobility, such as intimate personal entanglements, a desire to rebel against patriarchal pressure from within a family (see Shah, 2006), or knowledge of higher wages elsewhere, he does explicitly recognise the ambiguity of the outcomes of the migration for both labour and capital (2006 [1982], p. 385).

This ambiguity is chiefly analysed using a materialist framework. It concerns, for capital, the contradiction between the interest and practice of individual capitalists in restricting labour mobility, on the one hand, and the necessity of worker mobility to accumulation by capital as a class, on the other (2006 [1982], p. 384). For workers, spatial mobility may not only represent potential liberation or escape (a view that I have argued is too limiting), but at the same time migrant workers can be used to keep other workers oppressed.⁶

However, in spite of the over-riding materialism in the analysis, there are references elsewhere in Harvey to the importance of worker subjectivity, something to which Herod gives relatively short shrift (2001, p. 7). Directly contradicting Herod's reduction of his approach to seeing workers as passive (2001, p. 14), Harvey writes that 'workers are more than mere objects for capital. Geographical mobility has quite a different meaning for them... *It represents the hope and striving for a better life*' (2006 [1982], p. 384, emphasis added).

In later work, Harvey takes the subjective aspect of human agency further. In a complex discussion in which he tries to suture his own explanation of the concepts of absolute, relative and relational space onto Lefebvre's foundational work on the production of space, Harvey dwells on one of the three prongs of Lefebvre's framework: spaces of representation. Here he lends credence to the idea that space is emotively and affectively as well as materially lived by means of poetic images, photographic compositions, artistic reconstructions. The strange spatio-temporality of a dream, a fantasy, a hidden longing, a lost memory or even a particular thrill or tingle of fear as we walk down a street can be given representation through works of art that ultimately always have a mundane presence in absolute space and time. (2006, p. 131)

Spaces are experienced through the psyche as well as the body; the experience and meaning of space are subjective and do *matter*. I would like to argue that, for individual migrant workers, temporary employment away from home not only involves *commanding* material space (Castree *et al.* op cit), but potentially changing the meaning of space for those individuals at particular moments in time.

Space, time and workers' agency in temporary agricultural wage work

To illustrate my argument, this section draws on examples from research with workers in a particular sector – agriculture - not much discussed by other labour geographers, who according to Castree *et al.* have an "undue obsession with manufacturing" (2004, p. xvi). Most of the evidence comes from recent research in one village in eastern India with men who combined crop production on tiny subsistence plots, local wage work and temporary migration for agricultural work. For these migrants, mobility was found to be materially

essential, a “reluctant choice” (Rafique *et al.* 2006). At the same time, it was a move across space and time that involved knowing agency regarding the particularities of employment relations at home where paid work was scarce, and away in “bidesh” (the foreign place), where there was large scale demand for temporary workers.

The discussion of the material from India needs to be located in a broader understanding of the scope for agency in agricultural work-places. The organization of production in capitalist agriculture varies across historical time and geographical space, including the degree to which agricultural production is labour-intensive and whether and to what extent wage workers are employed.⁷ However, there are some commonalities and continuities worth drawing attention to. Firstly, agriculture is very often seasonal. In labour-intensive agriculture, this seasonality makes for an uneven demand for workers in tasks such as ploughing, planting, weeding and harvesting. Secondly, workers will need to *move* continually across space because the exact place of work will vary between days and even within a particular day. As they move, agricultural workers literally produce space, for example the Californian rural landscape in the twentieth century (Mitchell, 2008).

The rurality and seasonality of much labour-intensive agriculture have led employers to seek relatively large numbers of workers for intense bursts of activity on particular plots. Workers may rely on employers for transport to the work-place and for housing. In his historical work on agricultural labour relations in Suffolk, England, Newby found the organisation of work and of employer-provided housing, to have brought about the development of a working-class sub-culture, which in turn affected the subjective experience of being employed in agriculture. The spatiotemporality of agricultural wage work in the nineteenth-century context discussed by Newby provides a sectoral example of how worker agency can be generated. In this case it was the working together on the land with regular rest breaks in the fields that created the capacity for workers to take some action, however subjective, in their own interests.

Farm workers... worked together in groups... While ploughing the field it was customary to break for short ‘breathers’ every hour or so, during which gossip and chat would be freely exchanged... the kind of workplace camaraderie which supported informal work values and norms easily developed under such conditions... In particular it was possible to maintain some degree of usually covert antagonism to the injustices of employers... [F]armer-worker relationships tended to be viewed much more as antagonistic, in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – us, the workers, *versus* them, the bosses. (1977, p. 34).

Arguably, such covert antagonism provided a means of surviving the degradation of self that wage work under an employer’s supervision could entail. However, in agriculture, there are only relatively rare examples of successful union organising among agricultural workers, for example the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union in 1870s England (Newby, 1977, p. 67) or the United Farm Workers in 1970s California (Wells & Villarejo, 2004). Consequently, if agricultural workers, whether or not they are migrants, contribute towards shaping aspects of the landscape of agrarian capitalism in particular times and places, such as the terms and conditions of employment, accommodation or modes of transport to the workplace, they are more likely to do so as unorganised workers.

Moreover, the life-worlds of *migrants* working temporarily in agriculture are characterised by distinctive spatio-temporalities (Rogaly, 2008a; Rogaly *et al.* 2001), which make union organising even more unlikely. Spending shorter periods of time working together than settled workers, and living in temporary accommodation, mean fewer possibilities for developing the kind of camaraderie and class-based antagonism of the kind described by Newby.⁸ Nevertheless, migrant workers' agency, both individual and collective, remains present in everyday life, and is deeply related to space and time.

Migrant agricultural workers that I interviewed in the UK in 2004, who had entered through the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme, tended to have greater economic security than the migrants in India, because at that time the scheme was restricted to students in higher education. The mainly eastern European young men and women I spoke with were not, in the main, seeking respite from harsh employment relations, but rather, using favourable currency conversion rates and higher hourly pay, were saving money for planned uses such as future studies, house-building or renovation (Barrientos *et al.* 2005).⁹ Working in intensive work-place regimes driven by supermarket retailers' pressure on horticultural growers (Rogaly, 2008a), these workers nevertheless shifted landscapes of agrarian capitalism through their temporary presence in local labour markets, often made visible, for example, through employers' building of makeshift accommodation in rural areas of England and Scotland close to fields where soft fruit, top fruit, salads, vegetables and ornamental plants were grown.

In contrast, for some poorer agricultural workers, temporary or longer term migration may be the only way to get away from the harshness of local forms of agricultural employment or from material poverty (Harvey, 2006 [1982], p. 384). For example, according to Newby, in the second half of the nineteenth century, "rural Suffolk was one of the poorest areas in England... there was little escape from unremitting poverty, except by emigration to the north or to the colonies" (1977, p. 38). Yet here too migration as a spatial strategy can be seen as contributing to the production of landscapes of capitalism, filling and emptying with people, causing shifts in the number of workers available and, where there were shortages, consequent pressure on employers to improve working conditions or even to consider mechanisation.

In what follows I draw on life history narratives of poor migrant workers in India to illustrate three ways in which their agency variously responds to, and produces, the spaces in which agricultural production takes place: temporary migration as an intentional move to counter entrenched inequalities with more powerful people at home; negotiation and contestation of employment arrangements; and the deliberate seeking of non-wage based livelihoods so as to avoid being subject to an employer's control.

Moving away to work

Space and time in the Indian village, to which we have given the pseudonym Jalpara, were both gendered and classed, as was the migration process. It was mainly men who worked for a wage in the vicinity or travelled away to work as a migrant. Women only rarely did wage work in others' fields, and very few women moved outside the village for

this purpose. However, their time was packed with both unpaid reproductive work and mini cash-generating enterprises such as crop processing (Massey, 2008).

One man resident in Jalpara, Anwar Sheikh,¹⁰ talked about a difference in the sense of urgency over time between people like himself, who combined wage work with farming on a micro-scale, and the rich of the village, who had more land and regularly employed people to work on it, and on whom, in their role as political leaders, poorer people often depended for loans or access to state resources:

If we call them asking for [anything], they will say, “I don’t have time now; I’m off to [town]. I don’t even have five minutes to spare. So I can’t do anything today.” But I need him on that day and he says he’ll come the day after. How can I get my [own] work done? This is how the village “heavyweights” behave with us, the poor.

Another Jalpara resident, Badshah Ali, described how wage work for local employers involved much longer waits for payment than when he’s worked in a neighbouring village:

the problem is that wages aren’t always paid regularly if you work in your own village. Some pay but often you don’t get any wages at all on the day of work... When I go to work in the neighbouring village, there are some landowners whose houses I don’t get to see; they pay you in the field. We don’t have that kind of people [in Jalpara]. If I work one day, I have to wait ten days before asking for my wages. Even then I might not get paid.

For people like Anwar and Badshah, temporary migration for agricultural work elsewhere represented a chance to escape, for a while, such relations of locally embedded patronage, where those working for a wage may not have been able to risk an overt challenge when payment was delayed. The quote from Anwar also suggests a class-differentiated experience of space, with the ‘heavyweights’ moving in urban as well as rural circuits to manage diverse livelihood portfolios. The agency involved in moving for a few weeks for seasonal work elsewhere can be seen as both productive of and responsive to socio-spatial relations in Jalpara.

Spaces of negotiation

Cash earnings were of prime importance to temporary migrant workers from Jalpara, although other arrangements mattered too – how and what they would eat and where they would live while working away – and workers found spaces for negotiating their informal verbal contracts of employment.¹¹ Sabir Mian described the labour market place at Katwa railway station

In Katwa, a large number of labourers and landowners gather. That’s where we haggle over the wages. Sometimes we take the initiative and sometimes the landowners do. When there are fewer landowners, the labourers run after them. And when the landowners are in the majority, then they come up to us and say: “Will you come with me? I need ten people and I’ll pay you so much”

Although workers were often coming from situations of great material need, they could take advantage of employers’ desperation when it showed itself, related not only to the state of the labour market but also to employers’ compulsion to harvest perishable crops on time.

Almost all of those migrating from Jalpara, and from other villages in the *bagri* region of Murshidabad District where it is located, were paid a mixture of cash and cooked food. The space for eating was frequently contested, with strong implications for the subjective experience of being an agricultural worker 'abroad'. Mobin Sheikh, for example, who, like many research participants was a Muslim, described how for him this came down to the ignorance or ill-will of Hindu employers. Like others (see Rafique and Rogaly, 2005), he spoke of his gang's objection to having to clean the eating space with cow-dung and remembered the protest they made being answered with a deterioration in both the quality and the quantity of food. The workers continued to object, using their mobility as a threat:

We said to the landowner, "Are we human beings or cows, how can we survive on this food? There are ten of us. How do you think we can work for you with such a small quantity of food? If you don't need us, then let us go. We'll find other landowners to work for." After that the food was good.

Being away from home could make seeking redress more feasible when things went wrong in *bidesh*. The determination to do so could be a result both of a harsh work regime and the spatiality of collective living arrangements. Badshah Ali spoke about both having had to speed up time and then losing it as a result of the work's bodily effects. 'We keep working and don't think about the food break, because the work is contractual, so the sooner you finish the better... One day's work eats away six months of your life...' ¹² In spite of having worked so hard, the employer concerned did not pay him, nor any of the other six workers from his neighbourhood who had been involved in the same job. He described how their collective response involved temporarily commanding space: One day we saw [the employer] on a motorbike. So we laid a rope on the ground. As he was passing, we tightened the rope and he fell. We then tied him up and took him to his house. When we reached his house, his eldest son started chasing us with a gun. And we said, "If you kill us it won't be much good for you. See, your father is lying here. If you shoot us, we'll draw all his intestines out. Just give us the money. We have worked very hard. We've come here to feed our hungry stomachs. We haven't come to steal. We are here to help you and you are being unhelpful." The whole village was watching us. In the end he gave us the money.

Such stories are not uncommon (see Rogaly & Rafique, 2003). They could be seen as informal mechanisms for achieving justice in employment, or alternatively as subversion. If this is subversion, it is deeply connected to the spatial mobility of the workforce. ¹³ The battles over time (Anderson, 2007) and space experienced by temporarily migrant agricultural workers, in negotiating with employers that migrants may never previously have met, over accommodation, transport, cash wages, food provision and working conditions, contained both material and subjective dimensions. There was, moreover, relish in the telling of this story, a space of representation allowing for some of the dignity sacrificed in working and living in such difficult conditions to be recovered.

Self-employment

As Harvey has suggested (see above), the decision to work away from home need not be an all or nothing one, and most of the wage workers in Jalpara had multiple occupations. Building up a small business, usually as a mobile trader, was seen by several men as preferable to the lower earnings, rudeness and lack of autonomy involved in wage work. It was perhaps ironic that the spatial strategy of working for a wage as a migrant was one

of the few ways to raise the necessary resources to start trading, and thereby to become less dependent on being a migrant wage worker. While still involving hard work and often difficult journeys, and in spite of the business risks, the shift to being a trader was experienced as taking greater control over the times and spaces of work.

Any individual's mix of activities was likely to change over a lifetime (Rogaly *et al.* 2009). Several men talked of moving from being a regular migrant wage worker when younger to starting their own businesses as travelling traders, cycle-van drivers or ploughmen. Like migration for wage work, the businesses were seasonal. Crucially, however, they meant not being beholden to 'rude' employers in *bidesh* and were often portrayed as more lucrative. Again both subjective and material factors were involved for those able to make the choice to switch away entirely from waged to own account work.

Badshah Ali had a plough and two oxen that he rented out, along with his labour, to other residents of Jalpara, as well as working as a migrant in rice transplanting and harvesting: I find it very difficult to maintain this pair of oxen as you can tell. You might wonder then why I keep them: so I can work whenever I want to. A family might give eighty Rupees for ploughing a *bigha* [one-third of an acre]... and when I'm ill I can come home... and be at peace.

Ajinul Shah, who in 2005 often worked as a spice trader, remembered with much pain the work he had done previously as a migrant worker in a potato cold storage: I'm actually scared to work in the cold storages. It's very heavy work. If you work for three or four days at a stretch, then you won't be able to stand up. Someone will have to lift you up. It really takes five days at least for the aches to subside. Initially you can't even urinate by yourself. You do little at a time and need someone to help you. Neither can you lie down to sleep, you feel like you're suffocating. This is all because you're carrying loads of fifty to sixty kilos for a stretch of three to four hours.

Ajinul also undertook dangerous journeys seasonally as a date sugar trader sleeping at night on trucks loaded with stones to avoid both losing the day's trading and paying a higher rate (400 Rupees instead of 200 Rupees). These were spaces over which small scale traders such as himself had little influence and he had been fearful 'because the number of truck accidents on the road had increased.' However, returning to the subject of food – and by extension dignity - he concluded with a reference to how the agency involved in becoming a trader, rather than a migrant wage worker meant that he no longer had to put up with the revulsion he associated with the meals provided by employers in *bidesh* and the spaces workers were given to eat them in :

I don't like working in *bidesh*. I've been to places where I didn't even feel like eating. For example, I've been to Bakreswar, and would eat in a place surrounded by human excrement. In some places I was given rice of such poor quality that I decided not to go there anymore.

Conclusion

In this short paper I have examined some of the key omissions that were identified in the sub-field of labour geographies by Lier (2007). Any judgement on whether or not migration, individual agency, and unorganised workers really have been omitted depends on how widely one casts one's net to define the sub-field. Yet, this is not the issue that will be of concern to most readers. More importantly, I have tried to argue here that small victories are possible even for poor, unorganised workers in labour market places, fields and work-places. Going beyond Scott's (1985) analysis of *Weapons of the Weak* in rural

south-east Asia, however, I have used material from research I have collaborated in in India and the UK, to show that such changes made through workers' agency have *spatial* as well as temporal implications.

This analysis suggests that there could be more emphasis in labour geography on how the temporal intersects and combines with the spatial to a) produce particular subject positions and b) to enable and constrain workers who are travelling away for employment for short periods of weeks or months, and whose struggles have not yet received much attention. While continuing to study the role of trade unions in shifting landscapes of capitalism, labour geographers also need to focus on the low-key and often invisible ways by which people with very limited material means make viable lives (Butler, 2004: 2). This will require fine-grained ethnographic and life-history approaches attuned to different sectoral contexts, with time for and commitment to workers as research participants and to a collaborative process of research. One example of this is the work of geographer Ayona Datta (2009) with migrants employed in house-renovation in London.

Finally, it is perhaps surprising that this discussion of workers' agency has been inspired by a geographer who has been emphatically identified with a Marxism that is really only engaged with the agency of capital, David Harvey. Harvey explicitly writes of workers shaping histories and geographies, of the ubiquity of migration of various sorts, and of subjective as well as material life-worlds. Neither he, nor I in this paper, intend to *celebrate* agency, however. Agriculture, the sector which I have drawn on to illustrate workers' agency in everyday life, is notorious for having some of the harshest and most unsafe working conditions. The point rather is that unorganised migrant workers as subjects may still play a role in seeking, and obtaining, incremental and sometimes highly significant changes in microspaces of work and living, albeit it in a world dominated by capital.

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¹ They could not be with any credibility given that they play such an important role in classic works on labour and capitalism. After all, the workers employed by Henry Ford using management methods that gave rise to Gramsci's discussion of Fordism were largely immigrants (Harvey, 1990, p. 126) and Marx himself dwells on why employers seek to bring in migrant workers in *Capital* (1976 [1867], p. 690-1).

² Though Mitchell (1996) is an important exception.

³ In making the case for labour geography, Herod critiqued other Marxist work in economic geography too, such as that by Massey (1984) and Smith (1984), as well as neo-classical industrial location theory.

⁴ For a recent endorsement of this position, see Castree (2009).

⁵ Of course, this is not Harvey's only take on the agency of workers. For an example of his engagement with the agency of a unionised workforce, see Harvey (1995).

⁶ Harvey quotes Marx as making this point regarding employers' role in maintaining antagonism between English and Irish workers in English cities in the nineteenth century (2006 [1982], pp.236-7)

⁷ Throughout the paper agriculture refers to crop rather than livestock production.

⁸ The example from Newby is spatially and historically specific. Newby's work also emphasises other moments and places in English agriculture at which the day-to-day interactions were much more between employer and worker than among workers.

⁹ In contrast to Mexican and Caribbean workers in the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, which used poverty as a selection criteria and permitted repeated return (Bauder, 2006; Preibisch, 2007).

¹⁰ Like the other names of individual workers used in this paper, Anwar Sheikh is a pseudonym. All life history interviews quoted here from the India study were carried out, taped and transcribed by Abdur

Rafique in 2005 and 2006. An edited collection based on the transcripts is available electronically (see Rafique, 2009).

¹¹ In the context of British horticulture I have also found both that cash earnings were a high priority and that workers attempted to negotiate the details of their role – for some, this meant being able to gain spatial advantages such as working indoors during rain and outdoors rather than in greenhouses during hot weather (Rogaly, 2008b). See also Simpson (forthcoming) for a study of the everyday lives of migrants on the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Scheme in 2007.

¹² Waite (2006) observed individual agency of quarry workers in western India through practices of intentional body management that minimised the depreciation of their body capital.

¹³ See also Mitchell (1998) on mobility as subversion in early twentieth century California.