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## Guests in the Machine

Guest worker programs may be the best hope many of the world's poorest people have for improving their lives.

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The towers of Marina Bay Sands will reach 50 stories into the sky, narrowing in the middle and splaying at the tops and bottoms, arching toward the water's edge like giant joysticks in play. A thumb shaped pier, known as the "sky garden," will hover above the complex, and a lotus-shaped museum will flower from the bay itself. Together the towers will house 2,500 hotel rooms and lord over the heart of the casino complex, a million-square-foot convention center that will sweep from the feet of the towers to the edge of the South China Sea.

Singapore's first casino, a \$5 billion project on some of the most expensive property in the world, has been billed as a microcosm of the city itself. Ambitious, futuristic, pristine, and not especially humble, it is the ideal urban physiognomy of a country straining to stand out among its much larger neighbors. "People know Singapore," Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong assured his countrymen in a 2006 address to the nation. "They no longer think that Singapore is somewhere in China. They know Singapore is special."

Three miles from Marina Bay, in Singapore's Little India, many thousands of young Bangladeshi and Malay men gather every Sunday—their one day off—to eat, drink, and spend. Weaving through piles of coconuts and stacks of steaming *naan*, men shout to one another across streets packed tight with bodies. Here the air grows sweaty, the streets smell of garlic, and incense fumes waft from vendor to buyer. This is not the aseptic, polished Singapore of Marina Bay. It is the muscled hodgepodge that will take the Bay blueprints, unload ships full of steel, and build a casino.

As the world gradually learns to locate Singapore on a map (it's on the tip of the Malaysian Peninsula), Little India is expanding. The Ministry of Manpower says the construction industry will need between 40,000 and 50,000 more foreign workers if projects like the Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort are to rise from the page. When the visas are granted, these workers will add to a non-resident workforce of 670,000. That may not sound like much by the standards of the United States, where 670,000 doesn't even capture the number of undocumented workers who cross the border in a single year. But Singapore is a city-state little larger, and far more densely populated, than the city of Chicago. Its growing foreign population is party to a radical experiment in labor mobility.

If any nation has reason to feel threatened by country-level disparities in wealth, Singapore does. The city-state is an oasis of prosperity in a region packed with countries far poorer than, say, Mexico. Yet it has shown itself to be more open to immigrants willing to work than is the relatively empty, relatively well-protected United States. Using the latest data available, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs puts Singapore's foreign-born population in 2006 at 42.6 percent. In the

U.S., the proverbial nation of immigrants, the foreign born comprised 12.9 percent of the population that same year.

That gap is likely to grow, as neighboring countries spill workers and Singapore's hungry economy sucks them in. The economy created 176,000 net new jobs last year, with foreigners filling half of those slots, and the Ministry of Manpower predicts that 450,000 new jobs will be created over the next five years. The country's birth rate is below replacement level and among the lowest in the world, offering little hope to Singaporean isolationists. Employers know they cannot rely on natives to fill their payrolls, and they will increasingly draw from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and elsewhere to stave off shortages.

If larger economies were to introduce guest worker programs like Singapore's, the impact on migrant welfare would be enormous. The number of foreign-born residents in the wealthy countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is now a mere 7 percent of the total population, as compared with the Asian city-state's 43 percent. The Harvard economist Dani Rodrik estimates that if OECD nations were to administer small temporary labor schemes, with the imported workers totaling just 3 percent of the countries' labor forces, the result would "easily yield \$200 billion annually for the citizens of developing nations," dwarfing the \$60 billion the same countries offer in official development aid.

Beneath these clean numbers lurks a tangle of ethical quandaries and unanswered questions. For those who want a less restrictive regime, these programs are a compromise and an accommodation. There is no constituency for a policy of open borders in any of the wealthy countries of the OECD, and government-run guest worker programs are a politically viable means of increasing mobility. Like tightly regulated medical marijuana dispensaries, they are a highly regimented alternative to prohibition. In a political environment where full mobility is as unlikely as full drug legalization, such incremental change may be the only alternative to stasis.

In the United States, where guest worker plans have been part of a heated conversation about immigration reform, supporters of mobility rights are operating in an extremely hostile political environment. The events of 9/11 have intensified American nativism, and age-old debates about collective identity are now infused with the lexicon of terror and national security. Five minutes of talk radio should make clear what pro-immigration groups are up against: a fear of chaos, an aversion to illegality, a need for structure and predictability. Singapore, a country best known in the United States for the caning of a graffiti artist, has found a way to combine an obsession with order and a highly fluid economy of movement.

But for supporters of immigrant rights, it has never been clear that this compromise is one worth making. In the United States, opponents of guest worker programs point to historical abuses of Mexican migrants, seemingly threatened ideals of political equality, and America's history as a land of assimilation and settlement. They question whether the United States can invest in such a program without losing the very values that make it a place worth breaking into. Such moral probity may be heartfelt and is surely anguished, but it ultimately does little to help the poor in the developing world make their lives even a little less wretched.

### **Guest Workers in Singapore**

Gener Manalac said goodbye to his children, and to the Philippines, on June 25, 1993. Things had gone sour for the family ever since the Filipino government refused to renew the lease for Subic Bay, the U.S. naval base where Manalac and his wife earned a solid living for his family of five.

He worked as a crane operator, and she in the military commissary. When the base closed following a

contentious political debate in the Philippines, he and his wife were immediately jobless. “The government closed the base,” he explains, “and offered no alternatives.” He describes it as the worst time of his life.

Manalac looked for work but never really expected to find it in central Luzon, where his family waited anxiously as money began to run out. When a recruiter from Bahrain showed up looking for construction workers, he knew his future was no longer in the Philippines. He tried Bahrain, hated it, and returned to look for something else. The something else was Singapore.

Fourteen years later, Manalac is still here. He is now a supervisor for a construction company, and he helps build condos and cluster houses for Singapore’s growing population. His family is still in the Philippines, and he has managed to keep his kids clothed and in school with remittances he sends home monthly. His older daughter is studying to be a nurse, his son a computer engineer. His youngest daughter is 17 and studying English. Manalac has seen his children three times since he left that day in 1993, and he winces as he talks about the separation.

It’s not the experience of fatherhood he might have hoped for, but Manalac is delighted with his good fortune. Fifty-two and no longer trim, he smiles broadly as he describes his climb up the ranks of the construction industry. In 2000 he was promoted; suddenly he was in charge of a team of newly arrived immigrants. He works 15-hour days, six days a week. In what spare time he has, he studies conversational Mandarin in hopes of better communicating with his Chinese coworkers.

And yet Manalac is very much a guest in this country. He says he’ll remain for as long as they’ll have him, though he doesn’t presume to have any right to stay. If he were fired or became unable to work, he’d have to leave within seven days. He is subject to regular medical examinations to ensure that he is HIV-negative. He can’t bring his children here. He can’t bring his wife here. Were his marriage to fail, it would be illegal for him to marry a Singaporean. Were he female, a pregnancy would mean repatriation or abortion. The Singaporean government has made itself very clear: Foreign workers are here to build a nest egg, not to build a nest.

Perhaps the most significant restriction on Manalac is the nature of his work permit and the limits of his freedom to find employment. Only select industries are open to foreigners. On my way to meet Manalac in his apartment in the suburbs, I asked the taxi driver whether he too was a guest here. He laughed. A foreign taxi driver? Absurd.

Manalac is permitted to work only in construction, and only for the employer who brought him here. If he is unhappy with his employer or feels he is being mistreated, he can return to the employment agency and request a new job, but the process is cumbersome and can be difficult to navigate.

None of this seems to bother him in the least. It’s just part of the deal, and the deal has worked out well for him. He says he harbors no resentment toward the government of Singapore: He is angry at his home government for depriving him of a job, not at Singapore for giving him one. He has never really had to wade into the bureaucracy; never had to fight to stay or to change employers. Those that have faced such problems have reason to feel more conflicted about the well-guarded doors Singapore opens for the region’s poor.

If there is one collective experience that should give the world pause about guest worker programs, it is the plight of Indonesian maids. Unlike male workers who are given housing, a day off once a week, and regulated hours, domestic workers often live with families with full control over the terms of their employment. They run a higher risk of abuse than other foreigners, and Asian tabloids are full of horrific

headlines to that effect. There are stories of maids being burned with hot irons, scalded with boiling water, sexually abused by male employers and then physically abused by jealous wives.

Behind a locked iron gate in one of Singapore's outer suburbs live a hundred or so women with stories that might not be quite so tabloid-ready, but painfully illustrate the vulnerabilities of foreign nationals at the mercy of hostile employers. Many claim they have not been paid or have been illegally deployed to do work they weren't contracted for, and some say they've been physically abused. Their cases are wending their way through the court system, and they are biding their time in a shelter set up by a privately funded NGO called the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics, or HOME.

Adjudication can take a long time. When I visited HOME, a 29-year-old Indonesian woman named Sri Uli Darti explained that she had been living in the shelter for a year and a half, before which she had been doing time in a Singaporean prison. Loquacious and poised, Sri was something of a media star in July 2007, and her self-possession distinguished her from many of the other women who quietly waited along with her in the Singaporean suburbs.

Two years ago, Sri ran away from the home of her employer, Tan Kok Quan, a prominent lawyer with a firm specializing in intellectual property and real estate law. She had been with him and his wife for nearly three years before she became exasperated enough to leave. The pay was too low, she thought, for a now-experienced maid, and Tan wanted her to do work she considered dangerous, like washing windows from perilous heights. She wanted out, so she went to the Indonesian Embassy and asked for shelter.

The embassy didn't want her; they gave her back to the employment agency that had brought her here. But she wasn't there long before the police showed up to retrieve her and place her in a cell at Changi Women's Prison. The lawyer who had employed her had accused her of stealing a bag of rare coins, and he said he could prove it with the remittance slips Sri had left in her room. The slips added up to more than they had paid her, he argued, so she must have been sending the stolen moneyback to her seven siblings and other family in Northern Sumatra.

Sri was terrified and desperately wanted to go home. She could explain the remittance slips: She had a boyfriend who had given her \$6,000, which she sent home to her family. Singaporean employers tend to frown on domestic workers with relationships; there is a fear that they will become pregnant and have to be repatriated, leaving their employers liable for the cost of the return trip. (There also seems to be an assumption that foreign maids are especially libidinous.) "No one would believe me," she recalls.

In Singapore, the state provides legal counsel to foreign workers only if they face the death penalty. Those who can't afford it, and few can, hope for pro bono help. As expected, Sri lost. She was sentenced to pay S\$3,000 that she didn't have—the equivalent of about \$2,050 in U.S. currency, approximately a year of her pay—and to spend two weeks in jail.

HOME volunteer Lim Tanguy Yuteck visited her in prison and offered to take her case for free, if she wanted to appeal. "She wept during the entire interview," Lim recalls, "and looked as if her entire world had collapsed." HOME paid her S\$10,000 bail, and Sri began a long period of waiting at the shelter.

Finally, on July 14, 2007, a high court reheard Sri's case. The judge deemed the prosecution's case too speculative, and she was acquitted based on lack of evidence. The *Straits Times* ran a picture of her bawling with relief under the headline "Maid's 2-Year Nightmare Ends with Acquittal."

## **Guest Workers in America**

“Give the Senate some credit,” James Surowiecki wrote in the June 11 *New Yorker*: “In shaping the current immigration-reform bill, it has come up with one idea that almost everybody hates.” *Hates* was an understatement. President George W. Bush had been pushing for some sort of guest worker program since before the 9/11 attacks, and as that idea inched closer to realization in 2007, his critics grew more vitriolic. Right-wingers who fervently believed the U.S. government would succeed in rebuilding the Middle East excoriated Bush for his starry-eyed idealism, and left-wingers who wanted amnesty suddenly came out against the entrance of hundreds of thousands of new immigrants.

*The New York Times* complained that no worker should be sent home; *National Review* complained that no worker would go home. *The New Republic* said the plan fell within “the tradition of the African slave ship,” and the right-wing Center for Immigration Studies, which wants more deportations of peaceful undocumented workers, called it “morally dubious.”

In Asia and the Gulf States, the term *guest worker* is most often associated with domestic workers like Sri and construction workers like Manalac. In the United States, the term is almost universally associated with farm workers, and very often with abused, impoverished, exploited farm workers. Memories of the United States’ largest experiment with transient labor have not aged well, and they haunt proposals to bring more workers, agricultural or otherwise, across the border.

The original Bracero Program was an exception to the restrictive 1917 Immigration Act, which prohibited both illiterate immigrants and those “induced...to migrate to this country by offers or promises of employment.” Mexicans, needed to tend farms and lay railroad track, would not be subject to these restrictions. The Bracero Program known to most came later, between 1942 and 1964, during which time millions of Mexicans found work on U.S. farms.

The second Bracero Program was an agreement between two governments. The U.S. government would permit entry of migrant workers and collect paycheck deductions of 10 percent to be deposited in accounts in Mexico. During their time here, migrants were at times housed in dreary camps, used to break strikes, and subjected to abuse. Many returned home to find their promised savings nonexistent.

When President Bush raised the specter of a temporary worker program in 2004, opponents were many and bracero was the first word on their lips. Opponents also spoke of Germany’s experience with Turkish guest workers in the 1960s, many of whom came on one-year visas and never left. As the novelist Max Frisch put it: “We wanted workers, but we got people instead.” The workers who stayed depended heavily on the German welfare state, but they were not granted the option of German citizenship until very recently. The program’s failures have contributed to the idea that “temporary immigration” is a bureaucratic misnomer, a utopian futility akin to a “drug-free zone.”

These historical examples illuminate the obstacles any guest worker plan faces, but they can obscure what we know to be possible in countries like Singapore: large-scale temporary migration. They also fail to account for the guest worker schemes in place in the United States right now. The H2-B Visa program brings thousands of au pairs, hotel workers, and farm workers to the United States every year. Aspects of the program are cumbersome and problematic, but it is not associated with high rates of permanent migration.

Any guest worker scheme is going to involve a large and fallible bureaucracy; such programs are an alternative to prohibition, and their terms must be made palatable to many constituencies if they are to survive. In order to placate Singaporeans who worry that foreigners will push them out of work, the government imposes levies on employers who hire non-Singaporean workers and sets limits on the percentage of a company’s workforce that can be foreign. Manalac, for instance, costs his employer \$80 a month in fees and contributes to the “dependency ceiling” on foreign hires.

Other functional programs have devised a series of incentives that encourage workers to return home. Some, such as South Korea's, involve some amount of money being withheld until workers leave. Other countries actively enlist the help of governments such as the Philippines, which has an incentive to maintain the goodwill of countries that employ Filipino citizens. Dani Rodrik, the Harvard economist, has suggested decreasing the sending countries' quotas relative to the number of immigrants who fail to return, which would in turn encourage such countries to provide incentives to returning workers.

In the United States, the plan President Bush was pushing drew crucial lessons from the bracero experience and other experiments in extending mobility rights. Immigrants would need a job offer in order to gain entry, but—crucially—they could change jobs once here. Employers would not be able to threaten workers with deportation, but only with unemployment, the same threat hanging over native-born workers' heads. The program was designed to maximize opportunities while minimizing abuse, affording foreigners the same protections as their American coworkers.

As originally conceived, the new program would issue 400,000 two-year visas, each renewable up to three times. In May 2007, the Senate slashed that 400,000 to 200,000. In June, they inserted a sunset provision ensuring that the program would end in five years if not renewed. Later that month, they put the whole tortured immigration bill, the largest proposed overhaul in decades, out of its misery.

If support for a guest worker program was hard to find among elites, it wasn't among Americans generally: A May 2007 *USA Today*/Gallup poll found 66 percent of the nation supporting "a program allowing people from other countries to be guest workers in the U.S. for a temporary period of time, and then be required to return to their home country." In 2006, 79 percent told Time pollsters that they supported a guest worker program for undocumented workers already in the United States.

But opposition to an American guest worker program is loud and deeply impassioned, if not broadly shared. Though it's probably the only politically viable way to significantly increase legal immigration, supporters of immigrant rights are as likely as not to oppose a program that invites immigrants to work but not to stay. "There is little that is more antithetical to the American ideal than a guest worker," explained the center-left editors of *The New Republic* in April of 2006, echoing a 2005 piece from the hard-right *Human Events* that explained, in fine detail, why the "guest worker plan is un-American," and foreshadowing a May *New York Times* editorial that called the guest worker program "a shameful repudiation of American tradition." The pieces referred to different plans, but none of them bothered with the details; the broad outlines of any guest worker plan strike many as offensive.

"Until now," the conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly wrote in 2005, "the American ideal of an immigrant has been someone who comes here with the ambition to work harder, earn more, save more, perhaps start a business, and succeed in the free-enterprise system." Guest workers also come to earn and save, but Schlafly was getting at something else: The American ideal of an immigrant is someone who becomes an American.

Because U.S. immigration is so readily conflated with Americanization, the mythology of America's immigrant past cuts against acceptance of a guest worker program. The story of the American Dream does not include a chapter for those who want to take the money they've earned and buy a home with a white picket fence and two-car garage in Mexico. The narrative allows no space for transience. Even the terms we use, from "anchor baby," to "chain migration," belie an inability to accept the essentially fluid nature of world migration patterns.

"There is that traditional mythology—that the rest of the world is just dying to be American," says the Princeton sociologist Douglas Massey. "In the past that wasn't true. There was heavy return migration

of Italians and Poles in the 20th century, but it gets lost in historical memory.”

Because the collective memory is largely shaped by the immigrants who stay, it's easy to forget how many came and left. According to the historian Mark Wyman, author of *Round-Trip to America*, at least a quarter of the 23 million immigrants who came to the states between 1880 and 1930 eventually made their way back home. The return migration rate for Italians was even higher, at 50 percent.

Statistics show a similar fluidity today, though these numbers tend to get lost in our culturally narcissistic debates over contemporary immigration patterns. Massey heads Princeton's Mexican Migration Project, which has been collecting data on immigration for 25 years. In 1997, the Public Policy Institute analyst Belinda Reyes used that data to conduct a study of 42,000 documented and undocumented immigrants from western Mexico. Fifty percent, she found, returned in two years; 70 percent in 10 years. The immigrants who decided to stay were also the most desirable from a policy perspective: the most educated and the most integrated into the labor market. Those most likely to leave were uneducated men—the demographic that peoples guest worker programs from Saudi Arabia to Singapore.

One would expect return migration to increase as the cost of travel drops, and indeed this is what researchers have found. But the cost of border crossing has risen sharply since 1986, when the Immigration Reform and Control Act militarized the border. Human smugglers charge more for their services, and the risk of death has trebled. The result, says Massey, is that return migration has halved. “People used to circulate, but now they don't, because the cost of reentry is too high. Rather than go out and have to face the gauntlet again, they just stay,” he says.

Massey attributes the growth in the population of undocumented workers over the past two decades to the fact that circulation is more difficult than at any point in history. “In-migration has been fairly flat for 20 years,” he explains, “The explosive growth we realized in the 1990s and 2000 is mainly due to a reduction in out-migration.” Militarization of the border has encouraged huge numbers of workers to stay up north, cementing the idea that American immigration is intrinsically permanent.

### **Tolerating Inequality**

HOME is one of a few new Singaporean organizations advocating improvements in the treatment of guest workers, and if the burgeoning immigrant support infrastructure in Hong Kong is any guide, there will be more to come. These nascent organizations suggest a decreased tolerance for the abuse of foreigners within Singaporean borders. “The Ministry of Manpower has been in the dark ages for the past century,” says Jolovan Wham, HOME's executive director. But as Jolovan deals with a phone call from a Bangladeshi worker on his mobile phone, an administrative call on his landline, and a family of Sri Lankan refugees in our presence, he explains that the concept of foreign worker rights is becoming slightly less alien.

For HOME, “equal rights” means a minimum wage, decent housing, and at least a single day off from work every week for women like Sri. They'd like foreign workers to be able to move between jobs, and to move into whatever sectors they like. As Jolovan tells it, the government has a total of two responses for everything HOME advocates: “social stability” and, oddly, “free markets.”

Employers are tied to the foreign workers they sponsor through S\$5,000 bonds they receive only when the worker is repatriated. If workers were allowed some amount of freedom to change jobs, there would likely be periods during which they would be jobless, leaving no employer responsible for them. “The government is afraid there will be riots,” says Jolovan, “afraid that large numbers of workers hanging around without jobs will lead to social unrest.”

The government's response to HOME's request for more regulation is to defer to the market. But given the state-created lack of mobility within the labor market, it's not at all clear that this makes sense. Workers can't shop for a good wage once they're in Singapore, so the usual reasons for giving competition free rein are not in play. "It's not free," says John Gee, president of Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), another foreign worker advocate organization. "That's the nonsense about the argument. In so many issues we come up with, we're told, oh well it's better left up to the market. But the market isn't operating."

Despite their criticisms, neither of the organizations that represent foreign workers is pushing for anything like an end to the program. It's easy to see why: The gains to the immigrants themselves are highly visible. Talking to immigrants in Singapore, it can seem as if the city-state is supporting all of Southeast Asia. Manalac lives with four other foreign workers in a spacious apartment in the suburbs; each is supporting dependents back home. Reyaz Uddin, a young Filipina accountant, is helping to send five of her seven brothers and sisters to school back home. "Also some nephews and nieces," she explains, "we're a close-knit family." Her pay doubled the moment she started working in Singapore, and she seems not at all perturbed by the responsibility of caring for her family. "Maybe I'll go to Hong Kong next," she says, with the air of a well-off retiree deciding where to summer.

Little India is dotted with remittance centers, small windowed shops with plastic chairs full of men waiting to send money home to mothers, wives, and children. The need to send cash home has spawned an industry in itself, with over 100 remittance transfer companies now competing to send cash faster, cheaper, and more reliably from Singapore to origin countries. According to a 2006 report from the Asian Development Bank, immigrants in Singapore are sending home between \$500 million and \$700 million annually.

Thanks to the efficiencies of the remittance system, these immigrants are able to direct their money to parents and children rather than watch it dissipate as entire villages stake a claim. Some guest workers hesitate to visit their homes simply because, as comparatively wealthy and newly high-status returning workers, they will be asked to share their new wealth with distant cousins and relatives they didn't know they had. In a 2005 study of Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore, the sociologists Md. Mizanur Rahman of the Asia Research Institute and Lian Kwen Fee of the National University of Singapore write that Bangladeshi villagers see money earned abroad as "easy money," to be generously expended.

The same analysis found that migrants spend a considerable amount of money on "prestige goods" that will help accord them high-status positions when they return. One of Manalac's five housemates has stuffed his closet-like bedroom with an electric guitar collection and a flat-screen TV. Migrants spend money "conspicuously in order to indicate that it has been earned easily (which is prestigious) and are lavish in their generosity to fellow villagers as well as to village causes in order to secure the goodwill of the community and a higher social standing." Back home in Bangladesh, prominently displayed Singaporean goods reflect "families' access to the foreign labor market, a source of prestige for their households." Families who have sent guest workers abroad are referred to as "Singaporean families." When outsiders visit a Singaporean family they expect to see goods bought in Singapore, all of which signal heightened status.

It is possible to acquire enough skills and time in Singapore to become a permanent resident, and therefore exempt from visa renewals or employment levies. The vast majority of low-skill foreign workers don't plan on it, and no one expects them to try to assimilate while they're here. No one demands that they learn English or teach their kids Singaporean history. "Hierarchy and segregation are part and parcel of the Singaporean psyche," says Leong Chan Hoong, a psychologist at Singapore National University and an expert in the public perception of foreign workers. "Because of that, you are able to accept foreign workers more readily. You are assured that you will have some space, that your



social, spatial identity will not be compromised with the huge influx of foreigners coming in.”

Superficially, it's strange that states like Singapore and the United Arab Emirates are more welcoming to large numbers of immigrants than the United States and Western Europe. Singaporeans exhibit personality traits that predict hostility to immigrants—a comfort with hierarchy and traditionalism, for example—while residents of the U.S. and U.K. are more likely to exhibit immigrant-friendly traits like egalitarianism and openness to change.

Partly, this is explained by contrasting modes of government. Singapore's authoritarian regime is unabashedly pro-immigration; it's not clear that a democratic Singapore would be so welcoming. As important, Chan Hoong explains, is Singapore's willingness to accommodate conservatives through policies of segregation that Americans would probably find odious. Singaporean conservatives mirror the American right in their fear of cultural erosion and social disorder, but they have largely been placated by a system that invites immigration while emphasizing legality and distance. A comfort with hierarchy expresses itself as a comfort with inequality, and countries that can tolerate inequality can allow huge influxes of poor people.

### **The Great Migration**

To liberal American opponents of guest worker programs, Sri and Manalac are branded second-class citizens, members of an underclass. The editors of *The New Republic* locate them within a tradition of slavery. It would be better for Manalac and Sri, in other words, if they'd never had the opportunity to come, best if they'd stayed home and scraped by. Their decision to renew their status simply signals the continuation of this confusion and a false consciousness that propels them toward exploitation.

This ordering of priorities—equality first, migration later—should strike students of American history as odd. Over the course of the 20th century, millions of America's second-class citizens made progress in just the opposite way. They moved north, to cities where they weren't always welcome and certainly weren't treated as equals. The story of black progress in America is intimately connected to their mobility rights, and a North that refused to let them travel until they had attained full equality would have greatly decelerated their political, social, and economic advance.

Between 1914 and 1970, 7 million Southern descendents of slaves left en masse for cities in the North and West. The changes wrought during these years—especially during the peak decade of the 1940s—would horrify anyone crying crisis in 2007. Chicago was 2 percent black in 1916, 33 percent black by 1970.

As in Singapore and the United States today, laborers were needed. The cause today is prosperity; the cause then was war. Soldiers heading to the battlefield left labor shortages behind, even as World War I was stimulating the industrial economy. Robert S. Abbott, founder and editor of *The Chicago Defender*, used his position at the country's most widely circulated black paper to launch a campaign encouraging the migration; or as he called it, the exodus. For Abbott, this was biblical—a “flight out of Egypt” and on to “the Promised Land.” Supplementing the rhetoric was practical information for helping the poor black Southerner move North: rail timetables and job listings.

White Southerners typically refused to circulate *The Defender*, and with good reason. The paper was encouraging their labor supply, once literally captive, to pack up and leave. Many of those who did leave were escaping a sharecropping system that often as not left blacks in deep debt at the end of the growing season. Southern whites threatened to throw recruiting agents in jails and arrested blacks near train stations for “vagrancy,” but were unsuccessful in stanching the flow of bodies. The gains for blacks were just too huge.

“That moment in the black rural South,” Nicholas Lemann writes in his history of the Great Migration, *The Promised Land*, “was one of the few in American history when virtually every member of a large class of people was guaranteed an immediate quadrupling of income, at least, simply by relocating to a place that was only a long day’s journey away.” In 1925 the Howard University philosopher Alain Locke wrote of the “New Negro,” a self-actualized, assertive, urban black man borne of a generation of serfs, elevated from the sad status of his parents simply because he fled the rural South. “Money and dignity,” writes Lemann, “were indisputably in greater supply in Chicago than in the [Mississippi] Delta.”

Not even the effusive Abbott would argue that the blacks who stepped off the train from the Delta during WWI, or at any point afterward, were stumbling into an egalitarian utopia. Housing and labor discrimination were endemic. Like Manalac and Sri, Chicago blacks could not drive yellow taxis or marry anyone they wanted. They had to be physically present to fight for space in white neighborhoods, to picket for equal pay, to agitate for their civil rights. It’s harder to demand just treatment from behind a fence.

The gains for immigrants today are at least as great as they were for itinerant blacks during the first half of the 20th century, simply because the differences in pay for the same work have ballooned. “The gaps in income across countries are now much larger than gaps within countries,” the Harvard economist Lant Pritchett writes in his book *Let Their People Come*. “Nearly all of the earnings gap between workers in poor countries and rich countries appears to be due to their location, not their personal characteristics.” Pritchett argues that no development intervention comes close to helping individuals from developing nations the way simple, temporary relocation does, and a guest worker program would allow these gains to be broadly shared.

### **Moral Harms**

This dynamic of mobility and advocacy has profound implications for the immigrants of the future. In Singapore, maid abuse is becoming less acceptable and is increasingly seen as déclassé. The government is insisting on better housing conditions for workers as NGOs draw attention to unscrupulous employers. And yet it’s not clear how much the government can liberalize its immigration regime without engendering a backlash that cuts against mobility. A U.S. program would require the same awkward balancing act between compassion and political viability. The existence of a program would depend on a supportive political constituency, but that constituency would likely erode if such workers’ advocates demanded that immigrants receive public services.

As Americans struggle with the implications of immigrants who come to live but not to stay, their single greatest objection to a guest worker plan may have nothing to do with migrant well-being. The gains for immigrants are demonstrably too big and the need too great to lend credibility to those who cast all guest workers as victims. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, migrants send \$62.3 billion in remittances to Latin American and the Caribbean last year, keeping 8 to 10 million families above the poverty line. The unexplored opportunities for mutually advantageous cooperation are massive and undeniable. But it seems dirty. “It simply feels exploitative and un-American to allow migrants in without giving them a shot at becoming citizens,” writes Jacob Weisberg in *Slate*.

The economist Lawrence Summers, a former president of Harvard, has expressed this objection in somewhat loftier terms. In a critique of Harvard’s Pritchett, Summers explains: “Lant’s kind of compassionate libertarianism carries the risk of a morally problematic coarsening that we resist in many other ways.” The problem with guest worker programs, in other words, has nothing to do with the good of guest workers, and everything to do with the moral harm that proximate poverty might cause to their hosts. Allowing workers entry to the United States might be mutually beneficial for employer and employee, all the while producing corrosive cultural externalities. Summers seems to think that guest

workers will inure Americans to a system of class stratification and undermine a shared, naive sense of global solidarity.

The moral calculus, then, is to be weighed between the welfare of potential workers and the preservation of an idealized American narrative. Does it reflect better on the American character to lock poor people out than to permit them entry on limited terms? Guest worker programs do clash with deeply held mythologies about our relationship to the global poor. We live in a state of relative political equality nested awkwardly within a deeply unequal world, and it can seem better, kinder, to keep the inequality outside, walling it off and keeping our hands clean. Perhaps American egalitarianism, like a dress too precious to be worn, is a value too dear to expose to the real world. As the essayist Richard Rodriguez, himself the son of Mexican immigrants, has written, “Americans prefer unknowing.”

In the end, the best argument for a guest worker program isn't Manalac's experience, but Sri's. I met Sri a few days after she had been acquitted. She was planning her first trip back to Indonesia in four years, two years of which she had spent battling false accusations in a foreign system stacked against her. Asked what she would do next, she said she'd like to earn some capital to start a business in Indonesia. How would she earn that capital? She smiled. “I'll come back to Singapore.”

Host countries are right to worry about the moral complexities of a legally divided society. But if they lock down the borders and slam shut the gates, it won't be Sri they are protecting.

*[Kerry Howley](#) is a senior editor at Reason.*

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