



Book Review

Does Skill Make Us Human? Migrant Workers in 21st-Century Qatar and Beyond. Natasha Iskander. 2021. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 360 pages, ISBN 978-0-6912-1756-7 Paperback (\$29.95)

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Qatar is home to some of the most impressive architectural wonders of our time. Yet, construction industry leaders describe the workforces who built them—and whom they comprehensively trained to construct these marvels—as “unskilled.” Natasha Iskander’s *Does Skill Make Us Human? Migrant Workers in 21st-Century Qatar and Beyond* unpacks this curious anomaly, and shows how skill transforms more than just blueprints into buildings in a tiny Gulf nation.

Considering skill and its meanings is not new. Social scientists have long studied and analyzed how conceptualizations and categories of skill as high, low, and un-skilled, organize labor processes, migration schemes, and global relations of power. *Does Skill Make Us Human?* builds on these conversations and brings fresh insights into the consequences of skill as a political language for the organization of work and workers both in and beyond Qatar. Skill, as Iskander so vividly describes, is the “marrow of production” (5), a vital part of Qatar’s construction operations. Yet, what skill does—what makes its articulation so consequential—reaches far beyond technical know-how. Rather, skill serves as a vehicle and process to reconfigure and strip workers of their humanity—the recognition of their personhood—in and beyond the workplace. In so doing, skill



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transforms men into labor inputs: bodies that can be moved and managed to construct Qatar's infrastructure accordingly.

Researching and writing at a time when Qatar was garnering significant global attention and notoriety for its treatment of migrant workers building facilities for the 2022 World Cup in Doha, Iskander explores how power relations embedded in national labor regulations, the kafala system, manifest in worksites throughout the country. She asks: How does

the content of work, patterns of labor exploitation at the worksite, and forms of worker resistance play out within the parameters defined by the kafala system? What did these labor relations reveal about the consequences of bondage for production, work and the migrants who were, formally and contractually, bound to their employer? (5)

While the kafala system indeed shapes the legal bonds and relations between migrant workers and their employers in these worksites, Iskander finds that it is the politics of skill that constructs the many—and even contradictory—meanings and value of work, jobs, and migrants as workers.

Drawing upon an impressive corpus of ethnographic and interview data, Iskander reveals how skill manifests as an organizing logic both in and beyond the workplace in Qatar. Workers articulated skill, for example, when they learned and developed techniques and strategies to construct and scale scaffolds that transformed raw materials into architectural marvels. Yet, government officials, city planners, construction firms, and recruiters also invoked skill and “unskill” to regulate workers’ movements on and off the job and to “reframe[e] ecological damage as business opportunity” (259). Drawing upon these and other narratives, Iskander eloquently argues that skill is at the “core of all work and relations” (5), and manifests as a “flow” which is brought “alive through practice” relationally (15). The book’s continuous exploration of how the politics of skill shaped both exploitation and resistance in Qatar’s construction industry illustrates the relationality embedded in skill as a political language. It is not a fixed asset or a static entity that any one person simply “has.” Skill-as-flow “created uncertainty about the humanity of workers” (9) that dehumanized and transformed men into bodies: disenfranchising them from their personhood and “capacity for freedom” (13). Yet, it also “cultivat[ed] resistance through a shared language of skill” which opened “narrow sliver[s]...to allow for fellowship, expression, and the imagination of the unexpected as well as surprising” (183). While Iskander notes the latter with what some readers (like myself) might perceive as lukewarm optimism, her overall argument and the urgency with which she makes it is undoubtedly assertive, blatant, and convincing. That is, understanding how skill is both constructed, but also “broken apart” in relation to political personhood is a vital resource for “the envisioning of new political possibilities” both in and beyond Qatar because such an approach “affirms embodied imagination as the essence of individual and collective freedom” (263).

What I found particularly impressive while reading this book was how Iskander so thoughtfully and carefully situates and connects her conceptual and theoretical arguments with vivid descriptions and depictions of the everyday relations and work routines that construct Qatar’s

physical realities and imagined futures. With a literal starting line of a marathon in a desert as the text's point of departure, Iskander prepares readers for more surprising "starting points" of analysis. Weaving detailed narratives of workers' scaling scaffolds and managers manipulating timelines to navigate various aspects of turbulence shaping the country's construction scene, with theoretical reflections on conceptualizations of embodiment, expertise, and learning, Iskander broadens our empirical and theoretical understandings of the contradictory social processes, emotions and literal heat that structure and shape political personhood in the global economy. In so doing, Iskander seamlessly brings attention to the humanity embedded and produced from the relations and operations that "skill" organizes, while at the same time exposing "skill" as the vehicle through which workers' humanity is reconfigured and deprived. The chapters are organized according to neat, one-word themes, designed to succinctly capture the wide array of historical ("Regulation"), geographical ("Production"), technical ("Skill"), embodied ("Body"), ecological ("Earth"), and collective ("Protest") dimensions and effects of the politics of skill that are embedded in and manifest from Qatar's construction industry. Yet, the complexity and scope of Iskander's discussion throughout the book show how the ultimate stakes of the politics of skill for the economy, environment, collective action, and future calculations of human worth are not just for Qatar. As the "beyond" in the book's title emphasizes, Qatar is "only a local expression of a global practice" (258).

Iskander's historically-grounded and ethnographically-rich chapters are refreshing and humbling precisely because of their willingness to engage with the details and complexity from which skill manifests as a vehicle of power. I also enjoyed reading the postscript of the book, which provides comprehensive details about the author's experience conducting research in an authoritarian context. Iskander's discussion of arbitrariness and "moving red lines" that shaped the research process for her project provides not only an important "guide" for scholars conducting research in authoritarian spaces, but holds important empirical and theoretical insights for advancing understandings of research relations as social processes embedded in global relations and divisions of power broadly. Especially amidst a global political climate in which spaces for critical work seem to be increasingly shrinking, Iskander's text provides a sober reminder of the latter, but perhaps some hope and imagination for the possibilities of research in the future, too.

Academic scholars will appreciate the rigor of Iskander's research and analysis that advances various threads of scholarship including, but not limited to classification and socialization processes, social inequalities, transnational labor, urban studies, migration, authoritarianism, environment, and embodiment. Iskander's thorough historical analysis also distinguishes this text, advancing scholarship on the role of colonialism(s) and Gulf relations in shaping global patterns of power, including gendered and racialized hierarchies of social worth. Yet, what makes this text truly a standout is its humble, dignified, and thoughtful approach in which it accounts for the human relations and humanity that shape our understandings and answers to the book's question "Does skill make us human?". Overall, *Does Skill Make Us Human?: Migrant Workers in 21st-Century Qatar* is a much-needed and welcomed text that will be of great interest to various audiences.