Migrating and re-embedding: Third world labour in a liquid modern world

Abstract

Bauman’s liquid modernity thesis has gained traction in contemporary sociological theory but its empirical credentials continue to be the subject of critique because of its tendency to universalise Europe’s particular experience. This article investigates the extent to which the concept of liquid modernity can make sense of transformations in the global south. By analysing the work biographies of fifteen respondents based in the Philippines, empirical manifestations of liquid modernity are observed, in terms of workers’ fragmented work histories, emphasis on self-responsibility and aspiration for global mobility. However, this article challenges Bauman’s description of liquid modernity as an era of “disembedding without re-embedding.” Aspirations for mobility are hinged on a desire to re-embed in a kinship network that was displaced by earlier generations of labour migration. Hence, solid structures and liquid worlds are closely intertwined in shaping the character of contemporary labour, for better or worse.

Keywords: Bauman; global south; liquid modernity; migration; Philippines

Zygmunt Bauman’s characterisation of liquid modernity has gained traction in contemporary sociological theory. The metaphor of liquidity has branched out to concepts of “liquid consumption” (Binkeley, 2008), “liquid surveillance” (Lyon 2005), “liquid terrorism” (Best, 2010), “liquid journalism” (Deuze 2006) and “liquid church” (De Groot 2006), all of which, in broad terms, make reference to the speed and disembeddedness of contemporary life. Bauman’s work has become influential in twenty first century sociological theorising, leading some scholars to declare him as “one of the most renowned and read sociologists in contemporary continental European sociology” (Jacobsen & Marshman 2008: 798).
In spite of liquid modernity’s impact in the theoretical literature, its empirical credentials continue to be the subject of critique. Its tendency to universalise Europe’s particular experience of deregulation, individualisation and depoliticisation has been questioned by theorists who view modernity as unfolding in a variety of ways in different social contexts. Raymond Lee, in particular, argues that realities of liquid modernity may be specific to Britain and a few other western countries as the sense of solidity in developing societies has not yet been proven to be on the decline (Lee 2011: 654). This, of course, is an empirical question, requiring a systematic examination of social currents that shape the character of modernity in different societies.

This article takes on this challenge by investigating the extent to which the concept of liquid modernity can make sense of social transformations in the global south. I contextualise my investigation through the case study of a workers’ community in Laguna, Philippines—the fastest growing region in one of Asia’s fastest growing economies. Through this case study, I aim to examine the precise empirical manifestations of liquid modernity’s characteristics among labourers as well as the prospects and limitations of using this framework in making sense of fast-changing societies outside Europe.

Findings from the empirical case suggest that the concept of liquid modernity resonates with the ways respondents narrate their work biographies. Although the articulations of their experiences vary, workers have a shared aspiration of global labour mobility, identify to the normalisation of flexible and short-term work contracts and place a strong emphasis on self-responsibility. However, Bauman’s definition of liquid modernity as the “process of disembedding without re-embedding” needs further nuance. In spite of capital and labour’s mobility, workers find themselves continuously “embedded” in strong kinship structures
which encourage and, in some cases, facilitate their movement. Agents are subject to the prevailing logic of liquid modernity in so far as overseas labour migration is understood as both desirable and possible. However, simultaneous to the aspiration of moving to a different geographic context is the motivation to re-embed with the same kinship network. Overall, this piece finds conceptual relevance in Bauman’s conceptualisation of liquid modernity although several theoretical interventions are necessary to situate its relevance in the global south.

**Modernity with adjectives**

The term “modernity” in contemporary sociological theory is often accompanied by adjectives. Post-modernity, late modernity, reflexive modernity and second modernity are terms used to mark the end of an era of institutional stability and social embeddedness. The term “liquid modernity” is part of this theoretical project. Unlike the work of Giddens and Beck however, Bauman’s theory does not appear as a coherent body of text outlining the contours of post-industrial societies in the twentieth century. Instead, his work appears in fragments—in short commentaries, interviews and passages in book chapters—as he contends that fragmented theorising is necessary “for the dialogue to be whole.” His work is meant to provoke rather than persuade, to invite conversation and break sociology’s romance with “managerial reason” (Bauman in Jacobsen & Tester 2007: 313-314; also Beilharz 2001: 1). This places Bauman in an uncomfortable position in empirical social sciences, as critics have interrogated his cavalier attitude towards systemic understanding of society through empirical evidence (Davies 2008).
This section critically engages with the fragments of Bauman’s work by first giving conceptual clarity to his characterisation of labour in liquid modern times and then identifying the main lines of critique against such theory. By mapping these debates, the aim is to assess the resonance and theoretical currency of Bauman’s work when measured up against systematically examined empirical realities.

*Liquid labour*

Bauman’s discussion of labour in relation to modernity is briefly laid out in the book *The Individualised Society* (Bauman 2001). The book opens with the chapter “The Rise and Fall of Labour” where he narrates the passage from “heavy” or “solid” to “light” or “liquefied” modernity as the framework in which the history of labour has been inscribed (Bauman 2001: 29). There are five parts to this narrative.

First, Bauman describes the period of “heavy modernity” as one where capital and labour are engaged in a relationship of mutual dependency. Workers depended on capitalists to be hired while capitalists depended on workers for the growth and maintenance of their business (Bauman 2001: 21). Bauman uses the case of Ford as an example. While Henry Ford was known for doubling workers’ wages in 1914 so employees themselves can buy the cars they manufacture, Bauman argues that such business decision was taken to arrest high rates of labour turnover. Loyalty to the company and employees’ consequent “immobilisation” was crucial in making employee training and investment pay. Under such conditions, it is customary for employees who have the same company as their first and only employer until retirement. Time horizons in the era of heavy modernity were long term (Bauman 2001: 23). The fate of both buyer and seller of labour are closely intertwined and it was in both parties’
interest to find mutual grounds for cohabitation. As Bauman puts it, “as long as staying in each other’s company was assumed to last, the rules of that togetherness were the focus of intense negotiations, sometimes of confrontations and showdowns, at some other times of truce and compromise” (Bauman 2001: 23). This explains why labour unions are particularly important in this period. Forming associations, acting in unison, engaging in collective bargaining and subordinating one’s individuality to group action are the ways in which workers can assert their autonomy (Bauman, 2001b: 87).

Second, Bauman explains the shift from solid to liquid modernity as a function of neoliberalism and the consequent decline of the role of the state. While the precise origins of such shift is underspecified, Bauman characterises this period as one where capital has become extraterritorial, light, disencumbered and disembedded to an unprecedented extent, and the level of spatial mobility it has already achieved is quite sufficient to blackmail the territory-bound political agencies into submission of its demands (Bauman 2001:25).

As the state’s power becomes increasingly undermined by transnational agencies, it is left with very few options but to “implore and cajole” capital to invest in “building sky-scraping offices instead of renting a hotel room” (Bauman 2001: 26). Capital’s mobility compels the state to use its regulatory powers to create conditions for free enterprise while finding ways of keeping investments within its jurisdiction—to build skyscrapers instead of renting hotel rooms (Bauman 2001: 26). As a consequence, the state has begun shedding its ambitions of introducing “the perfect society by design” through redistributive politics and the welfare state and replacing it with a laissez-faire faith in the market (Bauman and Tester 2001: 136).
Third, the effect of these changes to the workplace is monumental. The free movement of capital has placed greater value on transience over durability of relationships. One’s ability “to be on the move, to travel light and at short notice” have become desirable qualities (Bauman and Tester 2001: 95). If the place of employment during solid modernity has a fixed address where neither capitalists nor labourers could quickly move elsewhere, in liquid modernity, the workplace “feels like a camping site” where one stays for several days only to leave if one’s desires are not fulfilled (Bauman 2001: 5). The workplace has ceased being a shared space where troubles are resolved by mutual agreements and has become a space for transient transactions. There is an emphasis on “presentism,” where meanings and values are understood in episodic terms and dealt with one at a time (Bauman 2000: 137). Jobs for life are replaced with short term contracts. Rules of promotions and dismissals are altered instantaneously. Under such fluid conditions, there is no incentive to develop trust, mutual loyalties and dependencies as “intensive liquefaction” produces what Lee calls “corrosive individualism” which thrive on fleeting relationships (Lee 2011: 652). Liquid modernity ushers in an era of “togetherness dismantled” where weakening of social bonds appears to be the only stable trend in social life (Bauman 2003: 119). Collective identities formed through shared experiences of production are now replaced by individualised identities defined through consumption.

Fourth, this dynamic enforces the character of liquid modernity as an “era of disembedding without reembedding” (Bauman and Tester 2001: 89). Although solid modernity also involves uprooting individuals from beds where they sprouted, this was usually followed by re-embedding of identities in collectives, as in the case of feudal estates being replaced by class in capitalist times (Bauman 2001: 145). In liquid modernity, social identities cannot
keep their shape. Individuals have become chronically mobile and challenged to reshape their identities to meet the demands of the dominant market. As Bauman puts it

everything, so to speak, is now down to the individual. It is up to the individual to find out what she or he is capable of doing, to stretch that capacity to the utmost, and to pick the ends to which that capacity could be applied best (Bauman 2006: 62).

To choose has become “a matter of fate,” and to make such choices is one’s own responsibility. Solidarity is one casualty of constant disembedding, as the individualisation of society has created brittle bonds among groups constantly in-flux. Routine labourers in the assembly line are particularly vulnerable to this trend. As the most expandable parts in the economic system, workers find little value in developing attachments to their jobs and lasting associations to their workmates (Bauman 2001: 28).

Finally, liquid modernity creates new classes of “tourists” and “vagabonds.” The former refers to those who wander because they want to do so, those who move because it would be unwise not to take advantage of opportunities emerging in different parts of the world. To be a vagabond, on the contrary, is to move not out of freedom but due to the lack of choice. These are refugees, asylum seekers and displaced citizens who can neither stay put nor find a better place to be (Bauman 2000: 24). Bauman argues that it is tourists who stand to gain from today’s experience of globalisation while vagabonds are the “new poor” whose lives are condemned to be spent in faraway “no-go ghettos.” Such distinction makes Bauman’s account of liquid modernity conceptually robust compared to accounts of post-modernism that are generally oblivious of the uneven impacts of globalisation (Lee 2005: 62).
Although Bauman’s account of liquid modernity has gained resonance in a variety of fields in sociology (e.g. migration, identity, consumption and tourism), there are a number of pertinent critiques that cast doubt on its theoretical purchase in the study of societies from the global south. The main critique questions the degree to which solid modernity has taken an aqueous form. Part of this is a theoretical question, drawing on the literature on multiple modernities (see Eisenstadt 2000). Bauman is accused of representing the European experience as universal one, failing to acknowledge alternative expressions postcolonial social progress. Modernity is not a singular global condition but a “mutating project” that takes various forms and complexions in different societies (Lee 2011). Although Bauman does draw connections between tourists and vagabonds or mobile capital and wasted lives, the framework by which he anchors his understanding of social change continue to use the European experience as reference point instead of pluralising the experience of liquid modernity beyond themes of consumption and the decline of the European welfare state. As Lee argues, “unless these themes are taken to be equally relevant to the transformation of many societies around the world, they will be considered specific to Britain and some western countries” (Lee 2011: 654).

This challenge relates to questions about the precise empirical manifestations of liquid modernity in the global south. Lee cites the developmental experiences of East and Southeast Asia, where active government intervention, rather than rolling back on the state’s obligations, has come to define the political economy of so-called “Asian Tigers.” Government policies are intended to further solidify structures that are conducive for foreign investment to come and stay, such as investments in public education, infrastructure,
communication systems and good governance. There are, of course, practices of disembedding such as converting agricultural labour to industrial wage work. Workers may experience liquid forms of life but, as Lee suggests, “their survival could not be guaranteed without some form of re-embedding” (Lee 2011: 657). Religion, for example, has played an active role in forging social ties and collective identities among immigrant factory workers (Lee 2011: 657). Although workers are disembedded from their original communities, there remain social institutions that facilitate the re-embedding of their lives in organisations and social networks so they can re-engage the world in a meaningful way (Lee 2011: 658). The challenge is an empirical one—to examine the extent to which personal biographies of workers from the global south are shaped by currents of liquid modernity and the tensions and contradictions they face in a purportedly “individualised society.”

The empirical case

This article takes on this empirical challenge by investigating the precise character of labour among a community of workers in Laguna, Philippines. In 2013, the Philippines was declared as one of Asia’s fastest growing economies, registering a growth rate of 7.8% surpassing that of China. Economists attribute the Philippines’ strong economic performance to the service sector which accounts for almost 57% of the country’s GDP. The Philippines is the second largest destination of business process outsourcing next to India, generating over 800,000 jobs from call centres, medical transcription, legal and accounting services, among others (see Brooks 2014). Meanwhile, the industrial sector accounts for 32% of the country’s GDP maintaining its share in the lower 30% range as it has had since 2000; while agriculture has consistently been in decline from 11% in 2000 to its current 10% share (National Statistical Coordination Board, 2013). Also playing a major part of the Philippines’ growth story are
remittances from over ten million Filipinos working overseas. Remittances provide the engine for consumption-based growth and serve as cushion to global economic shocks.

The Philippines’ profile today finds some similarity in post-Fordist societies Bauman has identified in so far as it shares the experience of feminisation of the labour force, participation in the global commodity and service chain and relaxation of rules on wage. The Philippines’ development trajectory, however, differs from post-industrial societies as it appears to have “leapfrogged” the industrialisation phase. Unlike its neighbours Thailand, South Korea and Taiwan, social change in the Philippines is defined by a shift from being an agricultural to a service-based economy. For some economists (see Usui, 2011), this transition is one of the reasons why fast economic growth has no effect in reducing levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality. Growth is concentrated in the hands of Fortune 500 tycoons whose consumption-driven growth does not develop local industries’ production capacities (Habito, 2012). The Philippines poses a fascinating sociological puzzle of experiencing social transformation through a consumption-oriented society without going through a production-driven phase.

The precise empirical manifestations of this social transformation contextualised in the case of Laguna—a province that has been at the forefront of the Philippine’s growth story. Laguna is part of CALABARZON (an acronym for Cavita, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon), one of the Philippines’ fastest growing regions. In 2012, the region accounted for 17% of the country’s GDP, with some investors calling it the Philippines’ “industrial powerhouse” (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2014).
What makes Laguna a fitting case study is its history of being the Philippines’ economic laboratory. Seeking to resolve the developmental puzzle described earlier, the Department of Trade and Industry designed the region to be one of the country’s industrial base through the development of export processing zones (EPZs) that “produce goods cheaply and sold readily in the world market” (Edralin 2001: 23). This experiment has led to some success. Major manufacturing activities in the Philippines are located in CALABARZON, particularly, Laguna, mostly high-tech industries such as electronics, assembly of auto parts and food processing (see Annex O, CALABARZON Regional Development Plan, 2011). What ten years ago were sugar plantations are now sprawling residential and industrial enclaves, private schools and strip malls, which one developer describes as “a new chapter in responsible stewardship of the property” (www.nuvali.ph).

The conditions that led Laguna to these economic achievements are a function of an interconnected process of disembedding and consequent reembedding. Laguna has been “disembedded” from the country’s broader socio-economic landscape as EPZs create enclaves with world class infrastructure and selective application of labour regulations. Investors have been exempted from national policies including tax breaks in imported capital equipment and raw materials, simplified customs procedures and tax deductions for training labour and management (see McKay 2006: 59-60). The World Bank, as early as 1997, (1997: 88) has described the Philippines as giving “the most generous and flexible set of incentives” in the world to entice companies to build structures instead of staying in hotel rooms, to use Bauman’s metaphor.

Several scholars, however, argue that the attraction of foreign investors in the region is not simply due to the seduction of locating in a de-territorialised enclave providing top quality
infrastructure and cheap labour. Instead, production politics especially in advanced high-tech manufacturing is “place-sensitive.” Capital benefits from embedded social structures and localisation strategies that can leverage income inequalities to elicit worker consent (McKay 2004; Kelly 2001). McKay identifies several location-specific factors that entice investors in EPZs including political stability, regulatory environment, clustering of firms and an English-speaking workforce (McKay 2006:40). Kelly, on the other hand, describes the active role of local mayors in making EPZs a strike-free and union-free environment by using strategies of intimidation among union organisers to enforce a despotic labour regime (Kelly 2001: 18).

Recently, CALABARZON has revised its rules on wage by introducing a two-tiered wage system which distinguishes “floor wage” or entry-level wage for new low-skilled workers and a flexible wage based on workers’ productivity or industry performance subject to the negotiation of employer and workers (Department of Labour and Employment, 2012). Also part of “strategic localisation” are gendered recruiting strategies such as selecting female breadwinners who are not predisposed to join unions and locating in central areas where workers can commute to nearby residential zones, making it difficult for labour unions to make house visits (McKay 2006: 142-143).

Literature on economic zones in the Philippines suggest that rather than imposing a fluid and homogenising organisational model, Laguna’s experience constitutes both patterns of disembedding and place-making, of following the neoliberal logic of deregulation and flexibilisation of labour rights while tapping on the “solidity” of local networks and practices that are distinct to the place. In the next sections, this pattern is further investigated through the specific experiences of workers who have relocated to Laguna.

**Methodology**
The findings presented in the next section are based on a six-week fieldwork in a workers community in Biñan. By workers community, I refer to a cluster of barangays (villages) in the immediate vicinity of major EPZs in the region. This community was selected as part of a broader project of a team of researchers funded by (insert name of research council here), which aims to investigate the impact of EPZs to its surrounding communities. Interviews are conducted by myself and three research associates.

Data is based on researcher-administered questionnaires designed to track employment patterns of workers in these communities. The questionnaires were designed to gain an overview of employment patterns in the region (e.g. short term contracts, agency hiring etc). From the thirty questionnaires collected, fifteen respondents were selected for unstructured interviews to gain a more complex understanding of their work histories. Aside from listening to workers’ narratives about their experiences in their various jobs, they were also asked about their aspirations and plans for the future as starting point for investigating the precise empirical manifestations (or the lack thereof) of disembedding, spatial mobility and transience of relationships. Respondents are selected based on snowball sampling. As an area of tight labour control, respondents that expressed discomfort in answering questionnaires were not further pursued. Inviting respondents for interview was concluded as data saturation was reached. I organised and analysed the data using qualitative software (NVIVO). To ensure anonymity, all names of respondents are changed in this article.

**Liquid labour in practice**
The respondents profile in the study is as follows. Majority are male, their average age is 28. Their jobs vary—from drivers, assembly line workers to quality control inspectors. Most have short-term contracts.

One of the findings from the questionnaires relate to the fragmented quality of the respondents’ work histories. Below is an illustration that maps the length of time respondents worked in a particular company (see Image 1). Of the twenty four valid questionnaires, only five respondents have an average length of stay in the same employer for over one year beginning the year 2012. Most respondents worked in the same company for less than a year, partly because of the nature of short-term contracts. A number of respondents explained that most companies and manpower recruitment agencies cap the contract to eleven months, as employing workers for twelve months requires them to pay additional benefits including the mandatory thirteenth month pay.

[INSERT IMAGE 1 HERE]

“Endo” or end of contract is a slang respondents use to refer to the termination of their employment. There are several manifestations of how “endo” or labour flexibility has become a taken for granted phenomenon among respondents based on the manner in which they describe their employment patterns. One indication relates to the way respondents characterise the duration of their employment. “A long time,” or “quite a while” are phrases used to describe six to eleven months of employment in one company. Given that temporary contracts go for as short as three months and subject to performance evaluation before renewal, six to eleven months, from the perspective of mobile labourers, is considered “quite a while.” Moreover, there is a noticeable matter-of-factly tone when respondents were asked about their opinion on the terms of their contract. Phrases such as “it’s really like that,” “I’m
used to it,” and “almost everyone goes through it” are common responses when interviewees’ views were probed about such practice. These seemingly mundane articulations are indicative of “endo’s” normalisation and incorporation in respondents’ vocabularies. Liquid labour is manifest in the fragmentation of labour histories and the normalisation of such practice from the perspective of workers.

In some instances, however, indicators of normalisation were followed-up by narratives of discomfort. Tony, (31), for example, explains his disapproval towards such labour arrangements.

For me, it’s not [okay] that it’s always going to be like this. That I always think about endo after one year. So, right now, what I’m doing is I’m thinking about the future of my family… what is there left for me to do? Because I’m getting old. It cannot be that after one year, it’s going to be endo.

Joan, (28), an eloquent young mother, shares a similar discomfort, this time of moving from one form of work to another. Although Joan is an exception among the respondents because she has worked in the same pharmaceutical plant for eight years as an analyst, her narrative surfaces a sense of uneasiness about labour flexibility.

I was transferred to different sections. I felt incompetent because I haven’t even worked on the same task for three months, then I’m transferred to a different section… It feels like, it’s only now that I have started working faster, more efficiently, then I’m uprooted again… I was assigned in so many different divisions. It felt like I wasn’t able to master anything, that I didn’t excel. I felt so down.
Joan and Tony’s narratives, among others, implicitly uphold an ideal of labour where skill and permanence are prized while lack of craftsmanship and transience are sources of anxiety. For Joan, anxiety comes from her professional insecurity of failing to master a particular competence. For Tony, it is anxiety based on his ageing body and his inability to secure his family’s future. These narratives, among others, provide empirical indications of Bauman’s description of the workplace in liquid modernity as “camping site,” a space for transient transactions where meaning and pride of work characteristic of the modern era has been replaced by fast changing contractual arrangements that compromise the meaning of work.

**Ethos of self-responsibility**

Unlike Joan and Tony, however, some of the younger respondents judged labour flexibility as a welcome opportunity. Leo, (24), for example, does not speak negatively of short term contracts because he “easily gets bored” when working on the same task. Unlike Joan who has a fast-changing work environment, Leo’s work involves cleaning and maintaining machine parts, which, to him was generally unsatisfying. When asked whether he prefers to have a permanent job, he replied, “It can get dull working on the same thing every single day. I prefer this, moving around. At least, I don’t get bored.” A sense of restlessness can be observed from Leo’s interview, where he tends to characterise his work and leisure patterns of hanging out with friends, watching television and going online as mundane and unexciting, therefore undesirable. “It seems this man has no struggle!” states the researcher who conducted the interview in her field notes.
Johnny, (29), a graduate of BS Chemistry from a prestigious university, also welcomed labour flexibility before he ended up in a manufacturing plant’s quality control division. He narrates:

After university, I wanted to work in a call centre. It was trendy at that time, I was curious, I said “I need to try that.” I wasn’t in a hurry to take a chemistry-related job anyway. I was being practical, I needed a new experience, to learn new skills, to learn how to communicate properly. I was so sick of chemistry. How many years have I spent studying that in college? I was so sick of it.

He adds:

I really plan to work elsewhere, not to settle in this type of job. Perhaps some think it’s the most practical thing, to settle here, to have a family, to have a job, get promoted and retire. There are people like that at work. Like my boss. This is his first workplace, and until now he’s here. I guess he’ll retire here too.

The Filipino words Leo and Johnny used, which were translated to “boring” and “sick of it” were “umay” and “sawa.” These words refer to satiation or lost appetite for eating the same food. Their desire for experimentation and tendency to lose interest in the familiar approximates the ethos of a tourist more than it does a vagabond in liquid modernity. They describe their movements as deliberate, a product of choice than lack of agency. While their capacities for mobility are clearly more limited than the global elite which Bauman describes using the concept of “tourists,” they nevertheless espoused the virtue of opportunity- or, more accurately, experience-seeking in a world where capital is mobile and labour conditions are
flexible. Life course may be a factor, considering both have no children or obligations to provide financial assistance to their families. Ludwig, (24), for example, provides a different perspective from Leo and Johnny’s dispositions:

Well, when I was still single, I was working as if nothing was at stake. I was just working, I just wanted to earn money, to earn so I can have a bit of fun. But now, I’m working because of my wife and child. So now, I have to think about all their needs. I now have responsibilities.

This is not to insinuate that Leo and Johnny have no sense of duty. Even though they project a sense of restlessness, they place value on self-responsibility. Contrary to Ludwig, however, responsibility is articulated in terms of managing their fate as individuals. It asserts autonomy—that one is in-charge of one’s destiny as long as one has a reasonable decision-making set. Leo, for example, expresses contempt against fellow employees whose short-term contracts do not get renewed because of poor performance.

The problem with them [casual employees] is they’re too choosy. Some casual employees joining the plant, they don’t like being told what to do even if their task isn’t much. I told them, well, that’s not the way it goes. Once you take the job, you have to accept the terms.

He continues:
[Your contract extension] depends on your performance. If your performance is not good, then your contract will not be renewed. Nothing will happen. At least if you perform well, your contract can be extended.

This excerpt brings into focus the conceptualisation of individual autonomy in the context of labour flexibility. One should not be “choosy” and do as you are told, but within that limited context, one can shape the terms of employment by getting a contract extension should one “perform well.” Problematisation or enquiries about the fairness of such work arrangement was absent, and instead, the focus was on what one can do given current conditions.

These narratives corroborate Bauman’s observation that everything is down to the individual in a liquid modern world in so far as respondents interpret their work biographies based on individual skill and calculations, instead of understanding them in relation to a broader community of workers. In most in-depth interviews, references to co-workers are framed using the discourse of “help,” such as covering for a sick colleague or taking on additional tasks to lighten another’s work load. These ad hoc acts of solidarity—or, using Leo’s term, “charity,”—are not described in relation to collective political action among similarly-situated workers. This, however, is not to say that the respondents are apolitical or depoliticised. Surely, a number of interviewees have expressed dismay against “capitalists’ pursuit of profit instead of employees’ well-being” or government’s inutile attempts to help workers. Rusty, (37), an electrician, for example, reflects:

I can see that the city of Biñan is very wealthy. But those who are really from here, are those who were not able to take a good share of the city’s riches. It’s like that. They did not really benefit from [the wealth created.]
However, such critical comments are often followed up by a discourse of self-reliance, of not counting on the support of the state and others. “When your district is not allied with the local government, you really can’t count on them,” Rusty says, “so here I am, I’ll just work harder even if it is difficult.” It is in statements like this where Bauman’s observation of subordinating group action to individuality or self-responsibility becomes evident. Having the right ethos, skill and disposition to get one’s contract extended and avoid reliance towards an unresponsive state and, in the case of younger respondents, the imagination and energy to find something more exciting emerge as prized virtues in a liquid modern condition.

**Migrating and re-embedding**

Integral to Bauman’s characterisation of liquid modernity is the globalised character of labour mobility. Overseas labour migration was a central theme in all respondents’ narratives. When asked about their aspirations and plans for the future, all respondents made reference to “working abroad.” Some have firm plans, others have seriously considered, and there are those who describe it as an aspiration.

Part of the ethos of self-responsibility, labour migration has been identified as mechanism to overcome poor labour conditions in the Philippines. The virtue of self-responsibility, however, must not be immediately equated to the era of “togetherness dismantled.” While brittle bonds of (political) solidary among workers was apparent, Bauman’s characterisation of liquid modernity as a process of disembedding without re-embedding is in need of nuance. The character of labour may have been influenced by structures that promote fast-paced
global mobility but workers continue to remain embedded in strong kinship networks that encourage mobility.

Rusty presents a common narrative of economic pressures on domestic life as main impetus for labour migration.

My cohort at work got married at the same time… We were struggling then and no one helped us. Solo flight. You help yourself… One time, I got a Facebook message from my friend asking, “Brother, how’s life? Come here [at home], let’s have a drink.” His life coming from overseas is much better. I thought, had I only gone abroad… His job there was the same [as our job here]. We have the same job but the wage there is better… my dream is simple. I want to go abroad, make sure my kids graduate, live in [a house] that’s not flooded, no leaks, with electricity and water.

Similarly, Joan considers the financial pressures of raising a family as motivation for finding a job overseas, saying “I don’t see it [my current job] as enough to raise a family. So I’m starting to think of going abroad…either Canada, Australia or New Zealand.” These excerpts are consistent with numerous studies on Philippine migration, which explain both the pressures of providing better income for the household by working overseas while maintaining ties with members left behind (e.g. Parrenas 2008; Aguilar 2009, Piper and Roces 2004; Madianou and Miller 2011). However, after decades of labour migration, the Philippines has now reached a stage where family members working overseas are increasingly becoming the norm rather than the exception. The expectation that a family member abroad will eventually come has now become one of many options for family reunification. Leo and Johnny, the “young and restless” respondents receptive to fast-
changing work arrangements, consider labour migration as their strategy for family reunification. Johnny is seeking employment in Canada “because my two cousins are there,” while Leo describes a systematic and deliberate effort among his family to also relocate in Canada.

So, we’re [my family] really in different countries. My siblings are in different places. One is in a ship, another one is in Taiwan. Others are professionals here [in the Philippines]. Actually, I am supposed to go to Dubai. After Dubai… I’ll go straight to Canada. Our plan is my family will all reunite there… Endo in May. I’ll apply [for migration] then.

While agents are subject to the logic of liquid modernity which normalises migration as aspiration, such logic is complemented by the continuity of solid social ties that not only legitimise but also proactively facilitate movement. Joan, for example, considers her aunt as facilitator of her possible migration:

I have an aunt in California, she plans to build a care home for old people. So, she told me I can be a caregiver even just for three months. That way, I have foot in the door, she can get me a job.

Similar to Leo and Johnny who already have family members based overseas, Joan considers migration an actual possibility because of her aunt taking the initiative in organising her move. In this sense, respondents consider migration as a strategy to re-embed in a family network which provides order, security and predictability in a fast-changing world. While labour has taken an aqueous form—as in the case of Joan, a pharmaceutical analyst in Laguna
considering to become a caregiver in California—they continue to be firmly rooted in strong ties of kinship which serve as motivators for movement. The continuous resonance of these ties challenges Bauman’s characterisation of liquid modernity as an era of impermanence, where social relationships become frail and easily dissolved. Rather, it is these solid social ties that provide capital for labour to take another shape in another location.

Conclusion

The empirical case presented in this article aims to assess the conceptual value of Bauman’s characterisation of labour in a liquid modern world. The empirical credentials of Bauman’s thesis has been subject to numerous critiques, particularly its tendency to privilege Europe’s epochal shift from one form of modernity to another. By examining the case of the Laguna, Philippines, this article maps the empirical manifestations of Bauman’s thesis in the global south.

Three main observations are put forward. First, the concept of “liquid labour” captures the normalisation—in both empirical and normative sense—of fragmented employment patterns among workers. While some respondents welcomed and others felt discomfort over these trends, their narratives are consistent with Bauman’s description of work places today as “camping sites” or venues for transient transactions, instead of spaces to develop craftsmanship and deep solidarities with fellow labourers. The conditions that make this possible, however, are not de-territorialised but are place-sensitive. Distinct localisation strategies of union-busting, wage regulations, selectivity in recruitment and urban planning are some forms of state intervention that can entice capital to locate and stay in Laguna. To this extent, Lee’s insight on the role of solid structures such as state intervention in
facilitating “development” is useful in making sense of Laguna’s growth story but Bauman’s observation on the transience of employment relations also fits in such context. What Bauman’s theory brings in is the impact of these place-based strategies to labourers’ understanding of their work biographies, which, in the case of Laguna, are interpreted in individualised terms.

This is related to the second set of findings, where self-responsibility, instead of collective solidarity emerges as one of the prized virtues among respondents. A strong sense of autonomy was evident, articulated through the discourse of working hard, making the right choices and not relying on the state and others. Ideally, longitudinal data can provide some basis to examine whether this shared perspective is brought about by particular social or structural changes in the region. In the absence of such data, one reasonable conjecture for the emphasis on individualized rather than collective virtues relates to tight labour control in the region, where unions have become heavily monitored and, to a certain extent, delegitimised to workers as “troublemakers.” References to solid structures that can provide space for collective action are generally absent in respondents’ narratives, making this one of the many aspects of labour that is worth investigating in future research.

The strong discourse of self-responsibility, however, must not be taken to mean as indicator of Bauman’s conjecture of liquid modernity being an era of “togetherness dismantled.” The third observation relates to the continuous value respondents place on kinship ties, and how such solid ties have encouraged and facilitated global labour mobility. Bauman’s observation that “flexibility has replaced solidity as the ideal condition to be pursued of things and affairs” (Bauman 2012: ix) manifests in respondents’ shared desire to work overseas but such aspirations are contingent on re-embedding on a kinship network that was once displaced by
earlier generations of labour migration. While liquid modernity has normalised labour
mobility as an aspiration for workers who have the ethos of a tourist than disadvantage of a
vagabond, such aspiration is made real by the continuity of solid kinship structures that have
started re-embedding in other geographic locations. Overall, this article holds a sympathetic
position to Bauman’s conjectures, but argues that solid and liquid structures, instead of being
held in contraposition to each other, are deeply intertwined in shaping the character of
contemporary labour, for better or worse.

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Image 1: Fragmented work histories

Note: Figures at the end of each box indicates the number of months an employee worked for one company. Spaces indicate periods of unemployment.