Laborers Before Sunrise

Contributed by Peter Goodchild
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In "developing" countries, not to mention a few that are never to be developed, the average laborer lives in a milieu of poverty, overcrowding, misery, and injustice. Here in Oman on the weekends I get up before sunrise, avoiding the heat, to go for long walks, encountering laborers from the Indian subcontinent on their way to work. Most of them are heading toward construction sites. At houses and similar buildings, that means working entirely without machinery, even when the temperature stays in the mid-fifties Celsius for days.

Their bodies are so thin that their clothes flap like flags. Their faces are devoid of any expression save that of fatigue. I am up early because I need exercise; they are up early because they have too much exercise. They will never initiate a greeting with me, because they know they must not speak to a westerner until spoken to. I am certainly physically safe among them at all times, however, partly because they realize that if there was ever a confrontation they would be deported -- the class structure in Oman is rigid, and no one would ever dream of questioning it.

I must admire them, though. Omani women are the physical property of their fathers or husbands, and they must be virgins until marriage, so Chinese prostitutes can make a fair living in this country. I have never seen prostitutes from the Indian sub-continent, however, although the opportunity is surely there. (In fact, I have never seen women of any sort among these manual laborers.) They will sell their work but not their women. Often, also, I see lineups at the currency exchanges in the evenings, when the laborers send money back to their families. When I deal with these men I must convert all my monetary concepts into their own terms, because their income is a tiny fraction of my own, but what is small change for me is treasure for them.

With my western preconceptions and prejudices, I had hoped for more when the landlord moved us teachers into the new building just south of the main mosque. At the north end of town, where we had lived before, although there were no shops to relieve the monotony of what a friend calls the "plastic-bag trees," the goat-tortured thorn-bushes hung with windblown garbage, I could at least walk across a vast but dead river valley, past stone walls that once held in the torrents that -- again, once -- made endemic Arab culture possible. Then I could climb the hills to find fragments of onyx, jasper, and chrysoprase, or explore the prehistoric tombs that are first encountered as black silhouettes against a skyline. My own students will not believe me when I tell them that I have seen, on the outskirts of town, gazelles leaping from ridge to ridge -- only a stranger ever sees a countryside.

I had been hoping, nevertheless, for a change from a year of desert solitude, and in comparison the new building seemed at first quite metropolitan in setting, but it is not. Around me are about twenty other buildings in a tight cluster between the town's main road and some steep hills of sandstone rubble. These buildings are mainly houses occupied by Omanis, although there are a few middle-class Indians in the neighborhood, and I know that Omani men sometimes marry Indian women.

Along roads that run south and west from this cluster of houses and apartments, there are small businesses run by people from various parts of the Indian subcontinent. Economically and socially these shopkeepers are somewhat above the manual laborers whom I pass on my walks, although they are well below the doctors and lawyers who compose the upper class -- relatively speaking -- of Indian life in this town.

Many of the shops, if they can be called such, sell only broken and rusty junk to those who are too poor to buy anything else. The motto, "Reduce, reuse, recycle," has here become a reductio ad absurdum. What kind of vehicle would run with the bits of iron that are lifted and shuffled within the ubiquitous concrete-walled yards advertising "used auto parts"? I ask myself a riddle: How many times should garbage be resold?

With all my elitist expectations, there is generally nothing for me to buy in this neighborhood. Even if I do, it is quite a gamble, because there are no rules regarding fair-trade practices, or at least none that are enforced. As it was a thousand years ago, trading and marauding are two sides of the same coin (no pun intended). I buy some printer

cartridges, and after hours of struggle with an already-ailing printer I realize that the cartridges I have paid for are far too old to work, and that they are probably items that were meant to be discarded. When I take them back and complain, I am treated to a sleight-of-hand that gets me nowhere. But another shop later sells me the same brand, and the owner, as I discover over the months, is quite honest and remarkably adept at recreating Bill Gates' electronic utopia in the midst of this vast and unforgiving wasteland. Generalizations are hard to make, or rather they are easy to make in a moment of anger but hard to unmake in a rational manner.

The sun's great yellow eye makes mile-long shadows, and I continue on my way, past cliffs and ancient water channels and palm groves. It is unfortunate, of course, that these impoverished and sad-eyed laborers can never understand that they are pouring into the Arab countries and elsewhere only because they are packed so tightly in their homelands. An Indian laborer has no kingdom except that of his own family. He has no police and no army, and no retirement home, except what he creates by having children. His wife might be more than happy to renounce the false wealth of children, and the pain of childbirth and child-rearing, but the laborer must be a man, and to be a man he must produce children, no matter what the final result may be.

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Peter Goodchild is the author of Survival Skills of the North American Indians, published by Chicago Review Press. His previous articles on Culture Change were The End of Electricity, Growing Your Own Grains, and After the Age of Exuberance.