



Kafala as fatal strategy: a historical and critical analysis of the Qatari kafala system

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ABSTRACT

This article applies Jean Baudrillard's principles of hyperreality and fatal strategy to the Qatari kafala labor system. First, it defines the Baudrillardian terms of hyperreality, fatal strategy, and hypertely. Then, it provides an overview of the kafala labor system, analyzing its history and present scope. Through comparative analysis with Baudrillard's work, this analysis finds that the kafala labor system objectifies workers and places ethnic Qataris within the category of the subject, thereby constituting a system of objects. By exploring how the kafala labor system of objects has proliferated beyond the realm of human control, demonstrated by the inefficacy of reform efforts, this analysis identifies the Qatari state's system of immigration and labor as a hypertelic fatal strategy. The identification of fatal strategy within the kafala system broadens the principle's scope and offers a practical and pertinent application of the concept of hypertely.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 May 2024
Accepted 23 November 2025

KEYWORDS

Kafala; Qatar; baudrillard;
Labor; Immigration; Fatal
strategy

1. Introduction

In a recent article, "Ascetic Protestantism as Fatal Strategy", Goff (2024) outlined a conceptual framework for understanding capitalism's religious origins, secularizing influence, and consequent qualification as a Baudrillardian fatal strategy. This inquiry endeavors to apply the preceding article's theoretical framework to *kafala*, Qatar's immigration and labor system. This contribution to the study of Baudrillard's thought is notable because non-Western states are conspicuously excluded from his original works. Baudrillard, when asked whether his work was regionally or globally applicable, asserted that,

"The masses are not locatable in terms of population, they are not the sum of locatable individuals. It's the mass effect, the mass forms that I analyze, and which, somewhere, no longer produces any difference ... My analysis, if you put it back into a realistic, geographical frame of reference, is not going to apply any more or less well to such and such a model" (Baudrillard 1993, 45).

Despite his assertions of universality, Baudrillard almost exclusively engages the United States, Britain, continental Europe, and his native France as the primary focus of his analysis of consumption and culture, and when he addresses non-Western regions, he does so from a Western perspective. However, in the decades since Baudrillard's first criticism of Western hyperreality and fatal strategy, those trends have pervaded elsewhere. In his analysis of American culture, Baudrillard wrote "[Europe's] is a crisis of historical ideals facing up to the impossibility of their realization. Theirs is the crisis of an achieved utopia, confronted with

the problem of its duration and permanence” (Baudrillard 1999, 77). A contemporary audience without the benefit of context could be forgiven for assuming he was writing about the nation of Qatar. The Persian Gulf state is globally recognized for its vast energy resources, conspicuous consumption, and kafala labor system. Hyperreality is prevalent in the West but is not an exclusively Western phenomena.

This article’s first section will define relevant Baudrillardian terms and concepts. The second section will then define kafala, identify its origins, summarize Qatari history before kafala’s implementation, and provide an overview of the contemporary kafala labor system. The third section will then consider the kafala labor system within a Baudrillardian context, analyzing kafala as a system of objects and examining the kafala system’s hypertely, irreversibility, and the impossibility of reform. Collectively, these sections will demonstrate that *the kafala labor system, which places workers and their sponsors in an object-subject dichotomy, is a hypertelic fatal strategy that has surpassed its own point of reversibility.*

2. Defining hyperreality and fatal strategy¹

“Baudrillard posits that a quality’s antithesis is not its opposite, but its fullest realization. Sex is opposed by pornography, rather than celibacy. Violence is opposed by absolute destruction, rather than peace. Hyperreal objects assume antithetical qualities and become oversaturated with their own characteristics: ‘The real does not efface itself in favor of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favor of the more real than real: the hyperreal’” (Goff 2024, 285).

Hyperreality’s fundamental precept holds that antithesis is paradoxically found in realization, rather than opposition. An opposed quality retains qualities of its inverse, but a quality’s true hyperreal constitution is all but qualitatively antithetical to its real configuration. Consider the previous quote’s dichotomous reference to sex and pornography. Sex may immediately seem opposed by celibacy. However, celibacy retains the qualities of “sublimation, repression, and morality”, which are themselves inherently sexual. Rather, the antithesis of sex is “porn, the hypersexuality contemporaneous with the hyperreal,” which reduces actors to the commodified interplay of their symbolically related anatomical features. Pornography is sex’s true antithesis, as celibacy retains sexual qualities while pornography is mere commodified, exaggerated symbolic interaction imitating sexuality (Baudrillard 2008, 30).

Hypertely is the process whereby a system “goes further than its own end” (31). Etymologically derived from the Greek *telos*, or, “end”, the now-obscure entomological term referred to insects’ “development of certain organs ... up to the extent of a certain monstrosity” (Jolivet 2008). In *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard repurposes the term to refer to “the passage from growth to excrescence ... from organic equilibria to cancerous metastases” (Baudrillard 2008, 46). Baudrillard references the moai of Easter Island as an example of hypertely, as the statues provide a microcosmic representation of a system of thought and behavior surpassing its own utility by virtue of its continued growth, becoming self-destructive (31). The hypertelic “has no other end than limitless increase, without any consideration of limits” (52).

Lastly, “fatal strategy is a system’s inevitable inclination toward the escalation and subsequent implosion of value through ‘the deepening of negative conditions’” (Goff 2024, 286). Fatal strategy is essentially a system that undermines its own framework. For example, ascetic Protestantism is a fatal strategy because it “creates the moral and social conditions necessary for the establishment of a capitalist economy that propagates hyperreality and ultimately negates its own religious foundations”, through the mechanisms of hyperconsumption and ubiquitous labor (285). Essentially, hyperreality, hypertely, and fatal strategy are conceptually interrelated. Hyperreality describes how an object or system loses meaning through exaggeration, and hypertely describes how an object

¹Readers interested in a more detailed discussion of Baudrillard’s concepts of hyperreality and fatal strategy may wish to consult “Ascetic Protestantism as Fatal Strategy” (2024), which elaborates on the theoretical framework employed here.

or system loses its utility and becomes self-destructive through limitless growth. Fatal strategy describes how systems decay when undermined by the hyperreal implosion of quality or the hyper-telic self-destruction of utility through metastatic growth.

3. Defining and contextualizing Kafala in Qatar

Kafala is the Persian Gulf's predominant system of immigration and labor policy. Implemented in varying fashions by the Gulf Cooperation Council states of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and neighboring states like Jordan and Lebanon, kafala's central component is the requirement that migrants secure sponsorship from a domestic entity to enter, work, and reside within the state (AlShehabi 2019). Although the kafala system is utilized by many states across the Middle East, this analysis is solely concerned with its implementation in Qatar, as a wider analysis would be prohibitively lengthy.

Sponsors, known as *kafeel*, are responsible for maintaining the legal status of the *makful*, or sponsorship recipients. Residents, companies, and government agencies are the largest sources of sponsorship and are expected to subsidize travel, provide housing, and cover transportation expenses in their capacities as *kafeel* (Malaeb 2015). Upon arrival, migrants' identification records are typically confiscated by the sponsor to assert legal authority over their sponsored workers and ensure the fulfillment of the employment contract. Migrants who desire to switch occupations or exit the state must obtain their sponsor's consent through no objection certificates (NOCs) and exit visas, respectively. NOCs document that a sponsor or government entity authorizes a migrant to perform specified actions, including entering the country, changing employers, or terminating employment (AlShehabi 2019). Sponsors retain the right to reject identification document requests, and workers possess no means of legal recourse, rendering them uniquely vulnerable to exploitation. The power imbalance between sponsors and migrants has been consistently linked to widespread abusive labor practices and substandard living conditions for workers (Towe 2022). Political momentum for reform has dwindled since the conclusion of Qatar's 2022 World Cup, and kafala's systemic exploitation of migrant labor currently commands minimal attention relative to other human rights issues.

3.1. Origins of the Kafala labor system

Kafala's marginal status in academic circles has contributed to the lack of consensus on its origins (AlShehabi 2019). There are two prevalent theories concerning the origin of the contemporary kafala system: first, the contemporary Gulf state system of kafala is enshrined in, or is a consequence of, Islamic tradition; or second, the system is a consequence of British imperial policy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Recent research suggests that the current system of kafala proceeded from the British weaponization of the Islamic tradition of kafala to exert greater control over strategic states and their labor markets (Jureidini and Hassan 2020).

The first recorded implementation of individual sponsorship, the principal characteristic of contemporary kafala systems, is attributed to the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. Bedouin tribes assimilated strangers into their communities through tribal members assuming personal responsibility for a foreigner's wellbeing. The Bedouin tradition became rooted in Gulf cultures for centuries, and while varying theories exist, it is generally thought to be the basis for the concept of kafala (Cabruja 2021). The Prophet Muhammad played an integral role in the development of the concept, as he proposed Kafala as a legal solution to the Islamic prohibition of adoption. Muhammad taught that only God could ordain a parent-child relationship. Thus, adoption, a secular institution, interfered with God's design by attempting to replicate the natural relationship between parent and child. Muhammad viewed guardianship as fundamentally different than adoption since it served to prioritize the child's care, rather than imitating a biological relationship. In fact, Muhammad pronounced that an orphan's

kafeel would walk alongside him in the afterlife as a reward for their voluntary generosity (Bargach 2002; Le Boursicot 2010).

Muhammad's support for sponsorship of the orphaned introduced kafala to Islamic society as a means of assisting the downtrodden. Kafala was thus enshrined in Islamic tradition as the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence established the definition of kafala as an enforceable guarantee with legal and economic applications under Sharia law. Legally, kafala entailed a guarantee for someone's behavior before a court, and economically, it entailed a guarantor's liability for defaulted loan payments, or a business owner's guarantee to deliver goods or assume another party's financial responsibilities (AlShehabi 2019; Azhari 2017). Consistent across legal and cultural interpretations was an altruistic intent on behalf of the sponsor. The kafeel was expected to protect the vulnerable or impoverished obligee by virtue of their own philanthropy rather than for social or monetary gain (Jureidini and Hassan 2020; Truluck 2023). In this capacity, kafala was intended to facilitate communal trust and solidarity. Indeed, the traditional conception of kafala bears little resemblance to its exploitative contemporary counterpart (El-Daly and Khalil 2017).

Kafala's application to labor and migration in the Persian Gulf likely originated in the Kingdom of Bahrain. By the end of the nineteenth century, Bahrain was the British Empire's key strategic interest in the Gulf, and the British influenced King Shaikh Isa's economic and political policies for decades. Attracted by the lucrative business of pearl diving, the British used immense diplomatic pressure to compel the king into signing a treaty of exclusivity that confined Bahrain's diplomatic relations exclusively to the Crown. By the 1920s, Britain reached a deal with Bahrain that established British hegemony over the immense population of foreigners in the state and restricted the king's authority to ethnic Bahrainis. Influxes of foreign workers during the pearling season became the British Empire's chief concern, as migration dramatically oscillated by season, and British officers struggled to control migrant movement (AlShehabi 2019).

The British Empire consistently manipulated native populations under their influence to enhance their imperial control. Foremost among their tactics was appropriating local traditions familiar to the population, thereby weaponizing social structures against the societies that constructed them. The most notable example is the British Empire's implementation of divide-and-rule policies in India that capitalized on division in the caste system and fomented considerable civil conflict, dividing and incapacitating factions opposed to imperial rule. Kafala's philanthropic connotation in Islamic cultures throughout the Gulf likely aided the British in establishing highly restrictive immigration policies in Bahrain in the name of a familiar tradition. Kafala's sponsorship system was both administratively simple and understood by the Muslim majority in Bahrain, which allowed the British to track migrant mobility more efficiently and preempt Bahraini objections to abuse under a kafala system (Deshpande 2010).

In 1928, a system of kafala was established that placed pearl divers under the legal guardianship of their ship captains, who oversaw their legal status, including the approval of their entry and exit of Bahrain. Under the law, ship captains would be legally liable for their divers' actions and were subject to punishment if workers did not comply with regulations. Thus, many inflicted harsh penalties on migrants and used violence to ensure subordination. The British supplemented their visa requirements with no objection certificates and sureties, requiring proof of employment before entry. NOCs documented that a sponsor or government entity authorized a migrant to perform specified actions, including entering Bahrain, changing employers, or terminating employment. To acquire an entry visa, migrants had to correspond with a sponsor and ensure the British approved the patronage. If approved, the sponsor would provide a surety, or a down payment, to the British, which compelled sponsors to retain the migrant employee to make a return on their investment. The requirement of entry and exit visas, NOCs, and surety payments ensured Britain's complete control over migration and established the core tenets of the modern kafala system (AlShehabi 2019).

3.2. Pre-Kafala Qatari history

Before Britain restructured Bahraini migration policy in the late 1920s, it extended its influence over neighboring states like Kuwait and Qatar to protect its diplomatic and economic interests in the Persian Gulf. At the turn of the twentieth century, due to Qatar's comparative geopolitical obscurity, Anglo-Qatari relations were comparatively less prioritized than those of other Gulf states. However, during the First World War, the British recognized Qatar's strategic geographical importance as they sought to restrict Ottoman activity in the Persian Gulf, facilitating the first chapter of Anglo-Qatari relations. Britain, conscious that it was ceding regional influence to the Ottomans in Saudi Arabia, understood that Qatar's geographic location posed a strategic advantage in protecting and policing maritime traffic in the Gulf. Due to its marginal population and underdeveloped military, Qatar was vulnerable to invasion by the Ottoman-backed Saudis. Britain feared that such an annexation would force an Anglo-Saudi conflict that would divert British resources from their military campaigns in Western Europe and Turkey, benefiting the Ottomans. In 1916, Britain and Qatar preempted a Saudi invasion through a defense agreement, where the British assured Qatar's security in exchange for control over Qatari foreign affairs. Aside from Qatar's retention of its domestic sovereignty, this agreement closely resembled previous Anglo-Arab treaties throughout the Gulf. Consequently, the Anglo-Qatari Treaty of 1916 would not yield substantial British interference in Qatari politics; instead, it ensured that the sparsely populated and largely undeveloped peninsula would be free to grow without the destabilizing threat of foreign invasion (Fromherz 2012).

The small Gulf state's growth continued incrementally for much of the twentieth century until the discovery of Qatar's immense hydrocarbon resources. As the pearl industry declined throughout the 1920s, Qatar invested extensively in the exploration of potential oil reserves within its territory. Oil was first discovered in 1939, and Britain secured a concession agreement for Qatari oil rights, as Qatar lacked the financial resources, industry, and legal autonomy to develop its oil fields independently. Investment was delayed by a decade, as the British were preoccupied with the Second World War and its aftermath throughout the 1940s. Oil shipments became commercially viable in 1949, yielding immediate profits for the Qataris and the British. By the 1960s, British influence over Qatari politics had gradually dwindled, and most oil profits were enjoyed exclusively by Qatari nationals (Fromherz 2012). The Qatari population edged slightly above 30,000, and Qataris amassed considerable wealth. Qatari independence from the British protectorate in 1971 coincided with the discovery of the world's largest single reservoir of natural gas within the young nation's exclusive economic zone. This natural gas reservoir, now known as the North Field, would eventually parallel oil production in its profitability and form the second prong of the Qatari economy, facilitating Qatar's meteoric economic ascent (Kozhanov 2021).

3.3. The contemporary Kafala system

Sponsorship requirements were first implemented in Qatari law in 1984, likely in response to demand for the construction of energy infrastructure. *Law No. 3 of 1984: Regulating the Sponsorship of Expatriates and Their Exit*, mirrored the core tenets of the British sponsorship system used in Bahrain. Entry visas, exit visas and NOCs were first outlined in Articles 1 and 7, respectively, and sureties were introduced in 1998 under Law No. 20 (Gulf Labour Markets and Migration 2014). Population records by the International Labor Organization note a close correlation between the discovery of hydrocarbon resources and periods of high migration. Despite a lack of Qatari transparency concerning historical records of foreign labor's use in the development of the nation's energy sectors, migrants were the indisputable drivers of infrastructure construction, as native Qataris lacked the necessary workforce to manage their immense energy resources. Qatar's use of cheap foreign labor since the 1980s has substantially enhanced the profitability of their energy sector. In the absence of migrant workers, Qatar would have been economically dependent on foreign contractors, as in the 1940s, dramatically slowing their economic growth. With booming

profits and marginal labor costs, the vast majority of energy sector profits are enjoyed by a small population of ethnic Qataris (Iskander 2021).

Contemporary Qatari population figures oscillate dramatically on an annual basis due to the mass migration of foreign workers. Between 2004 and 2010, Qatar's population increased by roughly 113 percent, from 798,061–1,699,435 – an average annual population increase of 12.7 percent (Garrett 2020). Foreign workers from India, Nepal, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka constituted nearly 95.4 percent of the population increase. A similar trend was observed between 2010 and 2015 when the population grew 35 percent to 2,404,774 (Bel-Air 2017). Non-nationals uniquely dominate Qatar's demography, even compared to other Gulf states like the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, whose populations are 70 and 68.8 percent nonnative, respectively. By 2020, an estimated 2.2 million of Qatar's total population of 2.6 million, or 84.6 percent, were migrant workers (Garrett 2020; Syed 2017).

4. A baudrillardian analysis of the Kafala labor system

Proceeding from the definition of relevant terms and concepts, the assertion posed in the introduction demands reconsideration: *the kafala labor system, which places workers and their sponsors in an object-subject dichotomy, is a hypertelic fatal strategy that has surpassed its own point of reversibility*. This section will first analyze migrant workers within the Baudrillardian category of the *object*, detailing their commodification through the assumption of debt and deprivation of individual autonomy. Second, it will analyze Qataris within the category of the *subject*, considering their technical manipulation of the kafala labor system of objects toward the construction of the Qatari nation. Lastly, it will consider the hypertelic attributes that ensure the kafala system's irreversibility, thereby demonstrating the kafala labor system's qualification as a fatal strategy.

4.1. Migrant worker as object

Traditionally, objects were bought in full, on the spot, and were thus owned by the individual who purchased them. The degree of one's consumption was in direct proportion to the value of one's labor. The individual and object were distinct categories, with the individual in the distinct and privileged position of ownership. Baudrillard describes this ascetic mode of consumption, writing, "People worked dreaming of what they might later acquire; life was lived in accordance with the puritan notion of effort and its reward – and objects finally won represented repayment for the past and security for the future. They were, in short, a capital" (Baudrillard 2005, 172). However, those societies transitioned toward consumption's precession of production through the establishment of various consumerist mechanisms, including credit. Systems of credit enable consumers to live beyond their means; "*their consumption precedes their production*" (172). In this upheaval of the traditional ascetic individual-object dichotomy, "they buy so that society can continue to produce, this is so that they can continue to work, and this is in turn so that they can pay for what they bought" (173–174). It is from the point at which consumption and production are separated that this analysis diverges from its predecessor, as the kafala labor system imposes additional degrees of abstraction upon migrant workers, their sponsors, and the society they compose.

Under kafala, production itself is consumed: for laborers, through the consumption of their labor, and for sponsors, through the consumption of laborers. Under kafala, migrant workers must provide proof of employment before entering the state in which they are to work. They receive their proof of employment through entering suretyship, paying a fee, often through the assumption of debt, in exchange for a surety that proves their employment status. Many migrants are financially bound by the debt they incur upon entry into Qatar. Private recruitment agencies and their subsidiary brokerages often charge separate fees for their respective roles in the migration process, and seven out of ten migrant workers assumed debt upon their entry into Qatar at an average of \$1,095 per worker (Jureidini 2014). For the average migrant, this would constitute half of the

earnings they were projected to make upon completing their contract, not including the wage deductions many experience during their stay. In the extreme cases, migrants have accrued over \$3,000 in debt, rendering their travel to Qatar a net financial loss and burdening them with interest payments for years after their contract is fulfilled. Despite the risks, workers agree to contracts with inflated wage promises in hopes that they might financially support family members in their homeland through remittances, or to flee conflict in their nations of origins. In many cases, they find themselves financially ensnared, and in more dangerous conditions than before (Gardner 2012).

Baudrillard's aforementioned quote on the circularity of consumption and production within systems of credit becomes unintelligible upon the introduction of the additional stages of debt incurred to pay for a right to labor, and the repayment of that debt. Migrant workers *sell the right to their labor, this is so they can ensure their right to labor, and this is in turn so that they can pay for the labor that they bought*. The confusion is redoubled when considered from the perspective of a kafeel, who *buys the right to the labor of their workers, this is so they can ensure the worker's right to labor, and this is in turn so that their workers can labor to pay for the labor they themselves bought*. Through selling and purchasing their labor in abstract terms, workers enter a phase of objectification. The financial constraints of indebtedness, the requirement of NOCs, and passport confiscation, collectively deprive migrant workers of their autonomy and agency, reducing them to a pure, commodified, and objectified form of labor. "Such objects together make up the system through which the subject strives to construct a world, a private totality. Every object thus has two functions – to be put to use and to be possessed" (Baudrillard 2005, 92).

Upon their arrival in Qatar, migrant workers are possessed through the mechanisms of indebtedness, caused by sureties, and the requirement of NOCs and imposition of identification document confiscation, which demonstrates their objectification. They are secularized, in Baudrillardian terms. Secularization in this sense refers to the process of depriving something of its connotations. Lacking the capacity to leave, change professions, renegotiate contracts, hold their employers responsible for arbitrary wage deductions, or engage in activities aside from work, migrants are reduced to their labor power alone: "all such objects ... no longer resemble even what they are; they have been stripped down to their most primitive essence as mere apparatus and, as it were, definitively secularized" (16).

Their possession and objectification are redoubled by the living conditions workers endure within Qatar. Migrant workers are often kept in confined and inhumane conditions, reducing them to their labor power and depriving them of the amenities typically afforded to autonomous individuals. 74 percent of male migrants, mainly construction workers, live in large-scale complexes isolated in the desert where reports have found that anywhere between 8–12 men may be crammed into small rooms with insufficient sanitation and ventilation. Reports found that workers were malnourished in camps surrounding World Cup arena construction sites and given salt water to drink (Bel-Air 2017). The complexes and the workers within them metaphorically "... fold and unfold, are concealed, appear only when needed," more similar to storage facilities for collections of objects than apartments for workers (Baudrillard 2005, 15).

Human rights groups criticizing workers' living conditions have likened labor camps to prisons. However, their criticisms are understated; Qatar's singular prison facility, located in Doha, guarantees prisoners an ample living space, three meals a day, running water, electricity, operational restrooms, and even a prison shop with household items for comfort (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office 2025). Living conditions in Qatari prisons are far preferable to labor camps, but not because prisoners are held in higher regard than migrant workers. Rather, this disparity is because prisoners and migrant workers are different categories altogether. Prisoners are entitled to conditions befitting an autonomous and complex individual, even if they face penalties as harsh as the amputation of a hand for "stealing a sum equivalent to at least one gram of 24-carat gold (around US\$40)" (Hassanein 2018). Conversely, migrant workers are to be used and then stored in the most efficient way possible.

Objects, as previously established, have “two functions – to be put to use and to be possessed” (Baudrillard 2005, 92). As objects, they are possessed through legal, institutional, and spatial mechanisms that both literally and figuratively restrict their autonomy. How, then, are they put to use? Migrant workers are put to use exclusively in the specialized field they are placed in. Domestic workers remain in their sponsors’ home and perform their work within that sphere. Construction workers simply construct, and then are returned to their storage facilities, as it were. “... these objects emerge absolutely clear about the purposes they serve. They are thus indeed free as *functional objects* – that is, they have the freedom to function ... that is practically the *only* freedom they have” (16).

Abusive labor practices are most pronounced in construction due to the size of the migrant workforce and the industry’s inherently physically demanding nature. Private companies, which control the bulk of the construction projects in Qatar, consistently overwork migrants at an average of 14 h per day, with some averaging around 20 h daily. Workers are forced to remain at their posts and are given few breaks to rehydrate or relieve themselves despite enduring some of the hottest average temperatures worldwide (Bel-Air 2017). Under these conditions, as with an engine tasked with hauling an inordinately large load or a lightbulb left on around the clock, workers “technical deficits”, so to speak, become apparent. As with all other objects, a worker “breaks down or wears out at a given time, usually not too distant”; indeed, “the object cannot be allowed to escape death” (Baudrillard 2005, 156–157).

Inhumane living and working conditions are inextricably linked to the prevalence of death by “natural causes,” the only consistent cause of death that Qatar attributes to its migrant workers. Understood by many experts as referring to heat exhaustion, it is estimated that “natural causes” claimed the lives of 80 percent of the 6,500 recorded South Asian migrant workers who died in Qatar between 2010 and 2021. The actual number of migrant deaths is undoubtedly far higher than this figure suggests, as totals can only be determined by families who received notice of their relative’s passing. The extent to which migrants are reported missing rather than deceased, employers cover up accidental deaths, or families with confirmation records are not reached by researchers is unknown, indicating that more accurate tolls could be far higher (Towe 2022). Within the context of migrant workers’ objectification, the use of the term “natural causes” in reference to a worker’s death is not euphemistic, but uncharacteristically transparent. Workers’ deaths are, in fact, a natural and predictable consequence of their objectification and abuse.

4.2. *Qatari as subject*

The System of Objects considers how “an object [is] abstracted from its function and thus brought into relationship with the subject” (Baudrillard 2005, 91). The subject in a Baudrillardian system of objects is primarily tasked with the manipulation of objects. For example, the modern homemaker’s responsibility is not to build a house, but to arrange the objects within it to fabricate ambiance and atmosphere. The subject’s task “is neither possession nor enjoyment but responsibility, in the strict sense which implies that it is at all times possible for him to determine ‘responses’. His praxis is entirely external ... Instead of consuming objects, he dominates, controls and orders them. He discovers himself in the manipulation and tactical equilibration of a system” (25). Essentially, the subject’s role within a system of objects is the manipulation of objects toward the system’s creation, modification, reorientation, or expansion. In practical terms, the subject can be likened to an engineer who operates or optimizes a machine towards a particular end.

Within the kafala labor system of objects, migrant workers are the “object” by virtue of their secularization and reduction to pure labor power, while the ethnic Qataris that oversee the system’s implementation are the “subject”. By the end of 2020, the Gulf Research Center concluded that 95 percent of Qatar’s employed population was non-national, the highest employment discrepancy between foreign and domestic nationals in any workforce worldwide (Gulf Labour Markets and Migration 2022). The overwhelming majority of migrant workers perform tasks classified as

unskilled labor. Conversely, over 80 percent of ethnic Qataris hold management positions over migrant workers, and the remaining 20 percent are nearly exclusively employed in white-collar occupations (Bel-Air 2017). The prevalence of ethnic Qataris in management is institutionally mandated, as ethnic Qataris enjoy statutory quotas that assure their employment in the highest professional strata.

To what ends does the subject manipulate objects? Production through manipulation and reorientation, which “implies practical computation and conceptualization on the basis of a total abstraction, the notion of a world no longer given but instead produced – mastered, manipulated, inventoried, controlled: a world, in short, that has to be *constructed*” (Baudrillard 2005, 28). The subject has, in fact, used the kafala labor system in the realm of production and construction to a staggering extent. Its migrant labor force has been instrumental in the construction of the Qatari nation itself. In the twelve years between being awarded the right to host the 2022 World Cup and the opening ceremony, Qatar spent an estimated \$300 billion on infrastructure projects in preparation for the tournament. From 2013 to 2022, Qatar constructed 1791 kilometers of roads, 2131 kilometers of bike paths, and 200 bridges. This furious rate of construction and expansion is believed to have continued after the conclusion of the World Cup due to Qatar’s ongoing \$50 billion program to double liquid natural gas production by 2030, as well as the continued construction of Lusail City at a cost of \$45 billion (Foxman and Nair 2022).

The construction of Lusail City was announced in 2005, and it is projected to house 36 schools, a giraffe zoo, water parks, a golf district, an island housing an enormous museum, verdant parks, extensive sports facilities, and a now-idle stadium where the 2022 World Cup final was played, among other attractions and novelties. Lusail City is expected to accommodate a population of “450,000 people, 250,000 of them its privileged residents, the other 200,000 service people and workers” (Ronay 2022). Built on land that was desert as recently as 2010, the second largest city in Qatar was built, not constructed organically, or in response to public demand for housing. Rather, it is, “the lego-city of the gods” – a status symbol, and a perfect representation of a nation “no longer given” but instead “constructed” (Foxman and Nair 2022; Baudrillard 28).

Migrant workers compose 84.6 percent of Qatar’s overall workforce and 80 percent of the skilled work force (Bel-Air 2017; Garrett 2020; Syed 2017). Given this fact, it would appear that Qatar’s economy could even continue in an effective manner in the absence of ethnic Qatari involvement. Indeed, it is possible that the purpose of ethnic Qataris’ involvement in their own economy may be primarily psychological. Writing of the subject’s diminished relevance in the face of the profusion of rationalized and self-automated objects, Baudrillard asserts “Man has to be reassured about his power by some sense of participation, albeit a merely formal one. So the gestural system of control must be deemed indispensable – not to make the system work *technically* ... but, rather, to make that system work *psychologically*” (Baudrillard 2005, 51–52).

Baudrillard observes that the apparent self-automation of complex systems of objects, despite their possession, culminates in the subject’s “spectacular alienation”, as the subject feels superfluous before objects’ rationality, scope, and primacy (52). Polling data supports this observation, as many ethnic Qataris attribute the state’s threats and shortcomings to the prevalence of migrants despite their essential economic roles. Eight out of ten Qataris feel that non-Arab migrants erode Qatar’s traditions and cultural values. Migrants are stereotyped as committing disproportionate rates of crimes, inhibiting economic growth and endangering youth, despite substantial evidence to the contrary. While 85 percent acknowledge the historical role of foreign labor in developing and strengthening Qatar, barely a third of Qataris feel that contemporary mass migration yields economically beneficial outcomes for themselves (Diop et al. 2017). That nearly two thirds of ethnic Qataris believe that contemporary mass migration yields outcomes that are detrimental to themselves, despite only composing 5.2 percent of their own workforce, 20 percent of their own skilled workforce, and 15 percent of their own nation’s total population is absurd. The subject’s “role does not go beyond a mechanical control which may well ultimately be taken over by the machine itself”, and the subject would appear acutely aware of this fact (53).

4.3. Hypertely, irreversibility, and reform

Despite recent international scrutiny, recent reforms to Qatar's kafala system have failed to produce substantive change. This section examines why. It finds that kafala is hypertelic, exceeding its original purpose to the point of self-perpetuating excess. Thus, as the system metastasized, its core components became structurally irreversible, rendering reform efforts largely symbolic.

Ahead of the 2022 World Cup, many believed that the tournament's exposure could catalyze institutional change in Qatar and potentially lead to the dismantling or reformation of the kafala system. One study claimed that global attention could incentivize Qatar to reform kafala, allowing Qatar to enjoy recognition for hosting the tournament while establishing a legacy as the forebearer of liberal labor reform in the Persian Gulf (Crocombe 2014). Another suggested that external pressure from "labor advocates, human rights organizations, governments and other assorted governing bodies" might compel Qatar to enact substantive change (Romano 2023). Hopeful prognostications were seemingly validated by the Qatari government's implementation of the first substantial reforms to the core components of kafala between 2017 and 2020.

Requirements for exit visas and NOCs were revoked under Act No. 13 of 2018 and Decree Law No. 19 of 2020, respectively. The abolition of exit visa requirements initially only applied to specific sectors like construction but was expanded to all others, including domestic services, under Ministerial Decree No. 95 of 2019. Qatar also passed laws that purportedly extended labor rights to migrants. Passport confiscation was banned in 2015, a minimum wage was established in 2020, and work environments received numerous changes in 2017, including maximums for hours worked, mandatory rest breaks, and provisions for necessities (Garrett 2020; Hofverberg 2022).

These structural reforms have proven tragically ineffective, revealing the limits of legislation in promoting meaningful change within hypertelic systems. Qatari legislation in 2015 forbade the confiscation of identification documents but reports from 2022 confirmed that the practice remains pervasive (Graneli 2022). Passport confiscation severely hinders the mobility of migrants and effectively neutralizes the ban on requirements for exit visas and NOCs. In the years immediately following the legislation's enactment, migrant workers on construction sites for World Cup arenas were denied minimum wages, worked 18 h on average per day, and were rarely provided with fresh water and rest. Sponsorship requirements for entry remain in place for all workers, and the government has given little attention to recruitment fees and their associated induced indebtedness. Although Qatar officially prohibited recruitment agencies from attaching fees to the primary employment application that migrants complete, fees remain disproportionately high compared to worker's wages due to the prevalence of informal agreements (Riazantseva 2016). To increase bilateral cooperation between Qatar and South Asian states, six Qatari visa centers have been established, purportedly enabling workers to digitize their contracts to prevent falsification practices (Jeremiašová 2021). This measure's effectiveness is undermined by the underground broker networks that offer migrants lower fees, and Qatari visa centers have done little to reverse this trend.

In a system as hypertelic as kafala, reforms are ill-fated. Importation and exploitation are not merely systemic, but cultural, social, and existential. Over time, the system has reached what Baudrillard calls its "dead point", a threshold beyond which reversal is no longer structurally feasible. It has surpassed its own "subtle limit of reversibility", not merely in scale but in saturation (Baudrillard 2008, 32–33). Irreversibility is not just a matter of scale, but of saturation. When migrant labor not only underpins but constitutes the demographic core of a society, any structural reform begins to resemble a self-erasure. If Qatar's migrant workers were repatriated, the country would no longer function, and if they were integrated, Qatar would cease to exist as a distinct ethnos. Reform efforts presume that a system can be de-escalated, dismantled, or restructured. Instead, kafala has entrenched itself so deeply in Qatar's institutions and demographic structure that even reform efforts risk reinforcing the very mechanisms they aim to constrain. It is no coincidence that the highest rates of reported abuse, the largest kafala projects, and the largest reforms in the system's history all coincided.

This is why kafala is *fatal* in both the literal and technical senses of the word. In a literal sense, its continuation seems inevitable, as if ordained by fate. In a technical sense, it is fatal because it pushes itself past the realm of human or institutional control. Indeed, what state of 2.6, 2.2 million of whom are migrant workers, can fundamentally alter its system of immigration without dismantling the demographic and economic structure on which it stands? The point of reversibility was traversed long ago; “Beyond this point there are only inconsequential events ... precisely because they absorb their sense into themselves” (Baudrillard 2008, 35).

Kafala has entered the realm of the transpolitical, where “there are only catastrophes. Perfect is the event or language which assumes its own mode of disappearance, knows how to stage it, and reaches maximal energy of appearances” (36). The reform movement has been a perfect “event without consequence”, which appeared to stage the death of the system, and then disappeared into itself (36). Migrants are governed by the subjects that control their wages, movement, and legal status, while the Qataris are bound by the objects who compose their labor force, and both are beholden to a system that has metastasized beyond them, and itself. What is left to control or reorient? “There is nothing left to negotiate between two partners who are, in fact, each other’s hostage ...” (67).

5. Conclusion

Since its origins in British imperial policy, the kafala labor system has become the basis for the contemporary Qatari state. Through the oppressive mechanisms of sponsorship, suretyship, and passport confiscation, among others, migrant workers are reduced to their labor power. Conversely, ethnic Qataris perform administrative and managerial tasks, manipulating the kafala labor regime towards the very construction of the Qatari nation. The system has rapidly grown since its initial implementation, and migrant workers now compose the overwhelming majority of Qatar’s labor force and general population. Reform efforts have proven unsuccessful, despite formally dismantling the core aspects of the kafala labor system, which continues to grow and metastasize. *Proceeding from the consideration of these concepts, and their subsequent analysis, it is clear that the kafala labor system, which places workers and their sponsors in an object-subject dichotomy, is a hypertelic fatal strategy that has surpassed its own point of reversibility.*

Theoretically, this conclusion affirms Baudrillard’s own assertion of fatal strategy’s universality (Baudrillard 1993, 45). While he confined his analysis to Western societies, the kafala system illustrates how fatal strategies can emerge in non-Western contexts. Kafala demonstrates that fatality is not solely cultural, but structural – the outcome of hyperreal systems pushed beyond their original ends, irrespective of geography. In that sense, this study does more than apply Baudrillard’s framework to a new setting; it retroactively substantiates his claim of global applicability, filling a gap he left unexamined. Moreover, this raises unsettling possibilities for the future: if hypertelic fatality can take root in a system as culturally distinct and geographically distant from Western capitalism as kafala, it may signal a broader global condition – one in which irreversibility becomes systemic rather than exceptional.

Practically, this analysis raises a paradox for critical scholarship. On the surface, declaring a system irreversible appears to preclude further critique. The opposite is true. Identifying systems as fatal refines theory as a critical tool. When a scholar only has a hammer, every problem looks like a nail, and critical scholars today too often wields a singular hammer: the assumption that every problem can and should be theorized toward reform. But not all problems have solutions, and to insist otherwise risks intellectual overreach. Fatal strategy, as a theoretical orientation, marks the point at which critique must withdraw from prescription and instead illuminate the limits of intervention. Kafala, as demonstrated here, is insulated from exogenous influence and resistant to institutional reform. In such cases, theory becomes the final tool available.

This article’s broader contribution is the delineation of the limits and utilities of critical theory. The themes explored here, such as power asymmetry, relational dependency, and structural

irreversibility, are present across many global structures. Some, like kafala, are terminally hypertelic, while others remain amenable to disruption. Where systems still respond to shocks, empirical analysis, which exploits exogenous shocks to operationalize theoretical tests, may be both possible and appropriate. Thus, the broader task for critical scholarship is to differentiate the fatal from the reformable, and to deploy theory or empirics accordingly.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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