

The Hyperbole of Dubai

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I twisted my palms into my arid eyes, a consolation for the sleep I'd never get. The cabin lights had been turned off for over ten hours, but I remained awake, daydreaming of slumber. The classmate to my left had been lulled into a fairytale-sleep by the drone of the plane's engine coupled with Tylenol PM. He drooled blissfully as I sat hunched with a travel guidebook, pouring over the statistics and fantastical descriptions of Dubai under a solitary bulb spotlighting me from above. There were sections that described the city as "a Disneyland in the desert," and others that insisted, "you haven't seen industry until you've seen Dubai; it's capitalism on steroids!" And, "This city is a testament to the fact that with enough money and governmental gusto, any architectural feat can be achieved." I had read many such descriptions of Dubai while preparing for a Peace Journalism course that took place that January in 2008. Yet, I remained uncertain as to what exactly to expect.

I leaned back into the stale Lilliputian pillow I was given before take off as images of King Ludwig's Neuschwanstein formed upon the rolling desert dunes of the Arabian Peninsula, cartoon fireworks searing the sapphire sky. Dubai's ruler, Sheik Mohammed, standing there on the man-made palm islands in the foreground of my mental mirage, sweeping his hand out toward the dreamscape and welcoming me to his prosperous metropolis. Just over his shoulder lay the famous Ski Dubai, one of the world's few indoor ski resorts, fused directly to the famous Mall of the Emirates: a sprawling mass of designer shops connected by a glossy pearl floor and enough gold plating to make King Midas weep. Its halls packed with men in intricately woven dishdashas and shimaghs that billow gracefully alongside their wives in jewel-studded burqas—a tangible manifestation of the East-to-West culture clash. I tried to imagine what their faces would look like, but because Dubai has a population of over 80% expat workers and less than 20% Emirati citizens, I couldn't fathom a typical face.

The mirage gradually dissolved as I opened my eyes, turning lethargically toward the open window. City lights crested the horizon.

What Does Dubai Represent?

Even now, three years after my trip to Dubai, it is difficult to make sense of the experience. The Emirati city underwent a full-scale transformation on fast-forward over the past 40 years, accomplishing in a few decades what most nations would have struggled to plan in the same amount of time. Dubai now exhibits such extremes concerning its architecture and general socio-economic structure that many writers have found it appropriate to comment on the city in an equally hyperbolic manner; an over-the-top story warrants over-the-top coverage. Those who employ hyperbole attempt to answer the questions of what Dubai signifies for the rest of the world and how we should make sense of its extraordinary expansion, which transformed the city from an undeveloped outpost on rolling dunes into a bustling mega-metropolis. The conclusions of Dubai's critics ultimately reveal their own motives; it is as if Dubai were some desert mirage, in which these writers sought to find their own reflections. Their conclusions can be seen as four responses to the question, What does Dubai represent?

- Dubai is an artificial cultural simulation, comparable to Disneyland or Las Vegas.
- Dubai represents a new progressivism in East-West relations, taking a step away from the extremism prevalent in the

- Gulf region.
- Dubai is an economic catastrophe, made visible by the economic downturn of 2009.
- Dubai is a symbol of exploitation, reducing construction workers to Bare Life, who are unable to do more than just survive.

Dubai as Sign of Cultural Simulation

Dubai has engendered many metaphor-laden comments as to the nature of its standing as a simulation of myriad cultural images and monuments from around the world. This critique is primarily informed by the postmodern philosophy of Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard. Debord, a 20th century French theorist, claims that the genuine experience of life has been replaced: “In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (7). Applying this to Dubai, one sees that the cultural aspects simulated in the city are copies of originals deprived of their contextual significance. All one encounters in Dubai is an accumulation of artificial representations.

Baudrillard, a French philosopher and contemporary of Debord, refers to Disneyland as the prototypical model of a simulated society that sustains no meaningful connection to the Real. Baudrillard comments on the implications of such simulation: “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double” (Simulacra 2). Baudrillard calls this operational double simulacrum, or an artificial semblance or representation that refers to something else. The problem within our society, Baudrillard argues, is that an endless string of simulacra have emerged, the referent of which cannot be found. The copy has replaced the original.

In 2003, Jack Lyne claimed that a Disneyland had been built in the desert. He was referring to the recent construction project, “Dubailand,” a five billion-dollar development that began in the early days of the Dubai boom; however, Baudrillardian explanations of Dubai as Disneyland have been employed numerous times over the years. Jana Shearer questions the values of a society that would construct a shopping complex by appropriating images of the many countries visited by Ibn Battuta in the 14th century to displace the need to actually visit those places. She writes, “According to locals you would never need to step on another airplane after visiting this complex, as even the smells of each land have been simulated.” Shearer highlights the fact that Dubai seems to have combined the Western world’s economic model with the cultural experience of the Orient as a whole. This can be seen as the postmodern appropriation of the exotic, oriental other in the westernized form of pure simulacrum—what Baudrillard refers to as the precession of the Simulacra. In Dubai, idealized simulacra of other societies’ cultures have been combined to constitute a new sort of culture that lacks a significant history.

Christian Steiner argues, in a manner similar to Shearer, that Dubai has become something of a commodified version of the hyperreal Orient, “the undisputed epicentre of an iconographic destination development.” Travel destinations such as Dubai, Qatar, and Oman have appropriated cultural features that have no spatial, historical, or social embeddedness within their own society. He is effectively saying that when a young nation attempts to appropriate everything from other societies, a hyperreal simulation is the inevitable outcome. This criticism recalls Baudrillard’s ruminations on the forthcoming simulation-based societies in his book, *America*: “In the future, power will belong to those peoples with no origins and no authenticity who know how to exploit that situation to the full” (Baudrillard 76). Indeed, Dubai has a number of cultural traditions that have been passed down over the years—including falconry and sailing—but it remains to be seen whether megaplex shopping malls and the cult of the celebrity will overshadow them. Visiting the famous Burj Al-Arab hotel convinced me that such an overshadowing may already have taken place.

The Burj Al-Arab

During our second week in Dubai, Peyman Pejman, a short and lively journalist friend of my Peace Journalism professor’s organized a last-minute tour of the Burj Al-Arab. He called the bus that had taken us from the airport to the hotel the night before and we made our way to Jumeirah Beach. Peyman’s eyes widened as he spoke of the new superstructure being built that, upon completion, would be even bigger than Taipei’s 1,670ft financial center

skyscraper. Peyman mentioned there was even an underwater hotel in the works. I was beginning to get the feeling that literally everything in Dubai is either the biggest of its kind, the first of its kind, or simply the most extravagant of its kind. It's no wonder so many architects see the booming city as the quintessential space to live out their wildest fantasies of structural design.

As we made our way to Jumeirah, the city layout became clearer. Before our arrival, I was under the impression that Dubai was a tight cluster, a large group of awe-inspiring skyscrapers crowded together. The reality is a wider spread; however, western tourists and business people tend to stay closer to Jumeirah, which was a relatively short bus ride to the Southwest from our hotel.

Once we arrived at Jumeirah Beach, the drive out to the Burj Al-Arab only exacerbated the excitement: there was an elongated bridge extending directly to the lobby of the hotel that dropped off to water on both sides. A small group of bellhops stood perched on the curb, hands clasped behind their backs, leaving their spots occasionally to run to and from arriving cars. They accomplished this with a sense of urgency fitting for the world's only 7-star hotel (self-proclaimed). They eyed us as we rolled up to the entrance, but their glances quickly moved to the next car when they saw our cameras and notepads.

As I walked into the lobby, a concierge standing in an enormous, golden seashell greeted me. "Welcome to the Burj Al-Arab, how may I help you?" Peyman took over at this point and we were set free in the atrium of that enormous structure. I nearly wrenched my neck gazing up at the 180-meter ceiling and the individual floors stacked carefully like so many layers of decadent wedding cake. The azure walls and amber-studded railings folded under one another and arched into the triangular hollow of what can only be described as an enormous sail. A modern-day ark dreamt up and constructed as a protective vessel to keep the royal family of Dubai afloat, above any potential loss in the area of oil production. Contemplating the elaborate edifice as a whole, it is evident they were banking on tourism to replace oil as the primary means of income for the city; this building was a testament to that fact. But at what cost? Marcus Westbury explores this question in his article, "Real cultural fusion cannot be bought."

Westbury sees Abu Dhabi and Dubai as a potential "melting pot of cultures and characters," but remarks that the two remain separated, a "generation or two short" of achieving palpable cultural fusion. The cities lack the imagination in their operation; their actions are grounded in the belief that there will "always be plenty of money," and that all things can be bought complete and fully formed. Westbury, as with Steiner and Shearer, sees Dubai as a culture-deprived society attempting to copy the structures and forms of other nations to make up for that lack. Stephen Zacks challenged these critiques in 2007, when he claimed that there is more to Dubai than meets the eye.

Dubai as a Sign of "Progressiveness"

Zacks urges the public to look "Beyond the Spectacle" as he outlines the "progressive" nature of Dubai. He insists the public is so hung up on the glossy, superlative cliché of Dubai that they have overlooked the liberal nature of the city, which "will one day replace New York as the economic and cultural capital of the world." Sheikh Mohammed commented on the implications of the city's development: "Progress provides power to politics. Without power, politics is a wretched business." Both Zacks and Sheikh Mohammed seem to be defining progressive as anything associated with new, contemporary ideas and governmental systems promoting the radical transformation of the cityscape; the connotations of increased protection of civil liberties and positive social reform, ideas usually tied to the word "progressive," are missing from their definitions. Zacks furthers his definition of Dubai as progressive by adding that it is a

rare example of social and economic diversity in the Arab world where the East is meeting the West on less fraught terms than the exchange of cash for barrels of oil—and where, in a region plagued by dictatorship and bad governance, the state as entrepreneur is being held to international standards by global consumers.

Dubai is thus progressive in that it has waged a "war of development," as opposed to a war on neighboring nations or jihad against the West (Maktoum). Dubai may not be at war, but the city's development has nevertheless brought about negative effects, and this raises questions about the implications of Dubai's progressiveness. I cannot help but wonder whether or not it is possible to successfully combine capitalism with Shariah Law. I met with Dr. Brenda Ihssen, a Visiting Assistant Professor of Religious History and Historical Theology at Pacific Lutheran University, to see if she had an answer to my question. I thought it would be beneficial to talk with her about whether

or not Dubai had strayed from the core values of Islam in favor of becoming a capitalism-powered entertainment oasis.

I sat down in Dr. Ihssen's office earlier this fall—nestled between overflowing cabinets and shelves that bowed downward from the weight of countless books on Middle-Eastern history and Islamic poetry—as she made room for my recorder among paintings and collections of Rumi that were spread across her desk. She smirked as she said, “You know, I don't do modernity; my area's Early Medieval.” I assured her that her comments would still be useful. One of the most recognizable features of Dr. Ihssen is her general enthusiasm for any subject you ask her about; however, her happy-go-lucky manner was offset by an earnest, critical assessment of my questions. In response to my question of whether or not the core values of Islam can coexist with the unbridled capitalism of Dubai, she said:

A capitalist culture is as successful as the amount that it can produce and the amount that it can make. A capitalist culture doesn't care about the human cost. Both the Christian and Islamic systems value the human, which doesn't mean that they're incompatible to Capitalism, but I question to what degree Capitalism can reach it's fullest expression if you have either of those religious systems in place. If Capitalism succeeds and religion doesn't, you will have a devaluing of the person.

It is not my place to judge whether or not Dubai truly embraces the values of Islam and Shariah Law; however, the way they currently operate nevertheless sheds light on how they seem to understand the principles of Shariah Law. As Dr. Ihssen explained that day in her office, an Islamic society operating according to Shariah Law “should benefit the Ummah, the community. If not, then it's violating the law.” One could argue that Dubai has indeed benefitted the community in the sense that enormous sums of money have been made, assuming that wealth trickles down to the expatriates there; however, that is most often not the case.

The situation in Dubai strangely mirrors the period of social upheaval the prophet Muhammad responded to in the seventh century. The established desert values of generosity, gift-giving, and equitable distribution of goods at this time were supposed to sustain the well being of all people. As Dr. Ihssen explained,

You don't want one family to have all the money and leave the rest behind, floundering in the wake... The earliest *Qur*anic verses reveal that the Prophet Muhammad's concerned with the widows, he's concerned with women who have been abandoned, with orphans, with the mentally ill, with all people on the margins.

She went on to add that in the seventh century it became all the more important to highlight these principles, as one family had gained control of almost all the wealth; this is what the Prophet Muhammad sought to change. Presently, in Dubai, the Royal Family has a majority of the wealth, and it is the construction workers who have been left behind. It would thus be difficult to argue that Dubai's progressiveness refers to anything outside of its architectural and financial success, a success that is contingent upon socio-political divisions and a general disregard for the humanity of the construction workers who are building the city. This issue was heavily highlighted in 2009, as Dubai was held under the searing magnifying glass of journalists speculating about the city's future. The economic downturn elicited new reactions to the city in the desert, which have since permeated the Internet.

Dubai as Sign of Economic Catastrophe: Enter Dubai-Bashing Articles

Johann Hari leveled a prototypical critique of this kind in his article, “The Dark Side of Dubai.” Hari insists Dubai looks less “like Manhattan in the sun than Iceland in the desert... the very earth is trying to repel Dubai, to dry it up and blow it away.” He charges that the city was built “from nothing in just a few wild decades on credit and ecocide, suppression and slavery,” going on to conclude, “Dubai is a living metal metaphor for the neo-liberal globalised world that may be crashing – at last – into history.” Sheikh Mohammed responded to this criticism by saying, “We don't deny that the financial crisis put us in a state of silence. We don't refute that an information vacuum followed. We are fully aware that this created a fertile environment for rumors to thrive. I say now that we must not allow this to happen again in the future” (Maktoum Quote Section). Sheikh Mohammed may be prepared to engage in a PR offensive, but just as Hari might have provided more evidence, neither is it fair to dismiss his critique as a thriving rumor.

Hari's analysis is an example of the hyperbolic rhetoric employed to illustrate the incommunicable exaggeration of Dubai. It reinforces the critique of Dubai as an ultra-capitalistic city bound for destruction. He is convinced that Dubai will not recover from the economic downturn, and he employs this assertion as proof of the impending

failure of Capitalism as such; Dubai has thus come to serve as a sign of the inevitable failure of the capitalist system. Hari was not the only one to level such a critique. Western reporters wrote hundreds of articles employing similarly ominous tones.

Simon Jenkins, in an article for *The Guardian*, reduced Dubai to “iconic overkill, a festival of egotism with humanity denied. An architectural chorus line of towers, each shouting louder and kicking higher... the dunes will reclaim the place.” In a similar tone, a reporter from *The Independent* referred to the city as “[an] awful lot of wreckage after an orgy of hedonistic excess” (AP). It may look like a modern country, notes Caroline Cadwalladr, “but it takes more than a few skyscrapers to create one of those.” Another called it “[a] tombstone for capitalist hubris and exuberance...” “Wall Street meets Las Vegas. Meets Xanadu. On crack” (Nobel). Mike Davis set aside a whole chapter of his book, “*Evil Paradises*,” to the topic. He diagnoses Dubai as not merely a hybrid of cities such as Vegas, Manhattan, Orlando, Monaco, and Singapore, but rather “their collective summation and mythologization: a hallucinatory pastiche of the big, the bad, and the ugly” (51). Therein lies one of the potential weaknesses of the hyperbolic arguments.

Although Davis does an exceedingly detailed job of pointing out the controversial characteristics of Dubai, he excludes the “attacked” from the conversation, effectively killing any chance for dialogue before it begins. At one point, he refers to the Sheikh as an “enlightened despot,” who has maintained ties with the Taliban and Al Qaeda (rumors we heard there as well, explanations as to why Dubai has yet to be attacked by terrorists) (51). The way Davis went about his critique leads the reader to believe it was perhaps neither his, nor the other hyperbole-minded journalists’ intent to open up a dialogue with the people who have a direct and immediate influence in the city. Their purpose, rather, was to draw attention to the topic using hyperbole, as opposed to carefully diagnosing specific problems with measured, accurate language. Todd Reisz and Rory Hyde pointed out the shortcomings of such articles in their piece, “*Abandoned Cars and Memories of a Bashing*,” by probing the particular flaws of one argument and shedding light on the general trend of Dubai-bashing articles as a whole.

Defending Dubai Against Hyperbolic Articles

Reisz and Hyde primarily challenge the conclusions of N. Raghu Raman and Cory Doctorow, who claimed that climbing debt and increased lay-offs after the economic downturn had led expatriate workers to drop everything and leave Dubai as quickly as possible. Doctorow wrote that in a four-month period, at least 2,500 abandoned vehicles were found outside Terminal III of Al Maktoum International Airport. Local sources told Reisz and Hyde that in reality a mere dozen had been found. The earlier pieces had hoped to employ the image of the abandoned car as a symbol of Dubai’s impending downfall. Reisz explains, “With the global economy in free fall, newspapers sought a tangible example of the effects of the financial crisis. Dubai, a city that seemed to best encapsulate the credit-fueled boom of the previous decade was the easiest target. It had London’s or New York’s avarice, but Dubai’s was less laced with ‘culture’ and ‘history.’” Reisz argues that the Dubai-bashing articles allowed the deficit-depressed western world to “bathe in smug schadenfreude and forget about its own troubles,” to regain confidence in the face of our own financial crisis.

The problem with Reisz’s analysis is it fails to address the legitimate concerns of the hyperbolic articles. After all, hyperbolic rhetoric is not meant to be taken literally, but employed to emphasize aspects of an assertion. In this case, the journalists were exaggerating the situation in Dubai to emphasize the government’s unregulated spending concerning architecture and their gross violation of human rights. Claiming that such acts of journalism were merely schadenfreude does not efface the fact that construction workers are being treated inhumanely, or that the government’s actions are contributing to the widening gap between the rich and poor that plagues East and West. In a recent article, “*Making Dubai: A Process in Crisis*,” Reisz comments on the present conceptions of the city:

No matter how many derisive labels one side of the world conjures up for Dubai, the city still stands for freedom, daresay hope, in a part of the world whose population (and growth rate) easily outstrips that of North America and the European Union. Dubai’s greatest export and perhaps its last chance at survival lie in this image. And it is one that no PR agent could ever take credit for.

It is noble of Reisz to defend Dubai as an image of hope for the countless individuals struggling in North Africa and Southeast Asia, but what of the fact that these dreamers have been systematically oppressed upon arrival to

work in this half-built paradise? Commenting on the potential dangers of capitalist societies based on the American model of cultural appropriation, Baudrillard insists, “it is this culture which, the world over, fascinates those very people who suffer most at its hands, and it does so through the deep, insane conviction that it has made all their dreams come true” (Baudrillard 77). If this image-fueled reverie signals the need for a safe haven in such a turbulent region, why not advocate for some level of oversight and security on behalf of those working there? There are clearly systemic problems in Dubai that must be addressed before any substantial reforms can be put into place. That is exactly what Sharla Musabih, an Emirati national who lived in Dubai for 26 years, attempted to do; shortly thereafter, she was forced to leave the country because of the smear campaigns leveled against her.

In Series 6 of the Doha Debates from 2009, Musabih responded to the question of why she had been living in the USA for the past year:

Because of my work defending victims of human rights violations as well as human trafficking, domestic violence, something that they don't want me to talk about, so when I speak out loud about victims of human trafficking, and when I speak out loud about the lack of a system for protection of these people, what do I get? I get accused of being a human trafficker in the media.

Musabih goes on to say that numerous workers pleaded with her to call attention to their dismal situation: “Please, you're speaking on behalf of the foreigners, can you be our voice?” The construction workers themselves have no voice in Dubai; their role in society is that of the silent worker bee. Their worth lies in their ability to work, often for 14 hours a day. A tangible example of the truly excessive construction in Dubai was visible from my hotel window on a daily basis during our time there.

The Plight of the Construction Worker

After our first night in the city, I awoke to the grinding clank of iron on iron a few stories below the window of my hotel room. Kyle stood holding back the lace curtain, peering downward at a mass of uniformed workers shuffling around a construction site with the resolve of subservient drones, laying heaps of metal pipes and two-by-fours into prearranged patterns. A foreman held an over-sized blue scroll, inspecting the margins as his eyes darted back and forth between the page and the site. The workers scurried to wherever his stabbing finger gesticulated. Kyle shook his head and asked, “Did they ever stop working? I'm pretty sure I saw people down there last night.” In the weeks that followed, it became something of a daily ritual to peer down at that bustling construction site that grew one story every couple of days, but the workers remained a mystery to us.

Try as you may to uncover the nitty-gritty of Dubai through talking to people on the street or to tour guides at resorts, the “official story” is generally all you will get. As if open, critical dialogue in the city would inevitably lead to your swift incarceration. I found out after returning from Dubai that the Royal Family actually has a zero-tolerance policy for dissent; protestors of any sort tend to be deported immediately. The laborers aren't even allowed to form unions. Peyman explained to me that various nations in the Gulf—Dubai included—do not allow labor unions because it is the government's duty to look after the well being of all workers. The fact of the matter is the Royal Family is not doing enough to protect their construction workers; the actions of the government have at times even contributed to the problematic treatment of the labor force in Dubai. This was clearly visible in the early days of the Dubai boom, around 2003, when The UAE Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs instigated a “cultural diversity policy,” which contributed to an influx of non-Asian workers. The ultimate result of this screening was that Asian workers who were already there had problems renewing their visas. Many construction workers thus decided to simply stay illegally without papers, as the risk of jail time was preferable to going to their home countries and encountering upset family members who depend on them for sustenance (Janardhan).

Thousands of North Africans and Southeast Asians have come to the city chasing what Reisz refers to as a last remaining hope. Dubai is a safe haven for migrant workers hoping to escape dictatorships. Lauren Greenfield quoted an American expat working in Dubai as saying that although Dubai's promise may have faded in the economic downturn, “people who dream of a better life dream of coming to Dubai. You can call it the American dream.” Dubai thus offers a sort of gulfanized version of the idea that all should have equal opportunity to work and succeed. It is as if Dubai were calling out across the Gulf and desert: Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, so that we can use them to build this fair city. Once the construction workers arrive in Dubai, their passports are confiscated for safekeeping to ensure they do not run away. Stripped of their basic humanity, these

workers enter a cycle of being bused back and forth between their barracks on the outskirts of the city and various construction sites. If they are injured on the job, they receive mediocre treatment and are frequently forced to pay for a ticket home. Some writers have claimed, however, that these conditions are changing. Piers Morgans' piece on Dubai seems to suggest that there have been improvements with regard to the construction workers' treatment since most of the Dubai-bashing articles were published.

Improvement of Conditions for Construction Workers?

In his analysis of the labor plight, Morgan insists that Dubai is no longer the great unspoken evil it once was, nonetheless acknowledging that "Tens of thousands of workers, mainly from India, Pakistan and China, get paid less than £200 a month and live in camps that could best be described as very basic," and then adding that

A significant number of them die or get seriously hurt during construction, too, though the exact numbers are kept secret by the authorities. But after the Western media exposed all this several years ago, Sheik Mohammed took action. There is now a hotline for any workers to call if they have complaints about their working or living conditions.

He goes on to say that, from what he could deduce, the complaints tend to be acted upon. Call me naive, but it may take more than the installation of a hotline in a few barracks to prevent the mistreatment of thousands of migrant workers. The bottom line is that present-day Dubai would not exist without the exploitation of this workforce. As discussed above, however, the possibilities for direct action to change the workers' conditions seem to be rather limited.

Aside from in the case of Musabih, often a conflict of interest prohibits those in Dubai from instigating an openly critical discussion about the city. Reisz, for example, is not a humanitarian, but an architect. His interests may therefore be equally as invested in the future financial success of Dubai as the next contractor. In any case, he has less interest in highlighting the labor problems in Dubai than organizations such as Human Rights Watch.

In 2003, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published an article and a few open letters to Jim Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, insisting the Bank "should be leading the way in international efforts to protect [foreign workers] from exploitation and abuse." HRW claim that the only real way to affect the situation in Dubai is to affect those organizations that give the country the means to continue its massive growth. If the World Bank were to grant money only to those companies that uphold humane standards for their workers, the problem would be solved. Nick Meo reported two years later that all of HRW's appeals went unaddressed by the UAE. It was not until 2009 that they would bring the issue back to light in an 80-page report, claiming that although minor improvements have been made with regard to the "timely payment of wages and labor conditions," the practice of withholding worker passports, imposing unfair fines, and charging unlawful recruitment fees is still taking place. HRW is using the same strategy they did before in 2003 by putting pressure on the construction companies active in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, as opposed to directly appealing to the government. The impact of the 2010 report remains to be seen. Cameron Sinclair adopted a similar angle as HRW in his article, "Dying to Work: Human Trafficking and the Construction Industry."

Sinclair points to the fact that the economic downturn has exacerbated the problems there, but that it is also a problem we have here, in the US. He refers to the Dubai workers as "boom and bust refugees." They were brought in for the boom a number of years ago, but as soon as the over \$80 billion of overspending in Dubai became known, and affected the global economic downturn, the workers were forced to start heading home. However, they were often too far in debt from getting there in the first place to buy a ticket home. We have encountered this story many times, but Sinclair takes it one step further, inquiring as to whether or not the private companies going along with this treatment of the workers should also be held accountable. Sinclair calls for building professionals to use their unique positions to support groups like Build Safe UAE, which would influence stronger legislation and use the obligation of contracts to ensure humane standards for the workers.

The Unlikelihood of Government-Instigated Change

There is little hope that Dubai as a whole will sign on to something like Build Safe UAE or the "International

Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families,” because they are violating many of the articles laid out. Article 13 of the “International Convention” states that

migrant workers and members of their families shall have the right to hold opinions without interference... shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any other media of their choice.

Not only are they not allowed to speak out against their conditions, but the construction workers have no recourse if they are severely injured on the job. HRW reported that there have also been high rates of death and injury on the construction sites. Dubai is thus also in violation of Article 16 of the Convention, which states that migrant workers shall have “the right to protection by the State against violence, physical injury, threats, and intimidation, whether by public officials or by private individuals, groups or institutions.” The list of violations goes on, however, there are also those who argue that the environment in the camps is simply not that bad, at the very least compared to the dictatorships in the surrounding countries.

Liz Ditz, a blogger who claims to have encountered the workers first hand, defends Sheikh Mohammed and the royal family. She claims that the construction workers are treated well in the camps, get three meals a day, and actually are paid 10 times more than in their home countries. Claiming the workers get paid more than they do at home may be an unsatisfactory defense of their conditions. As Sarah Whitson of HRW observed, “That’s what exploitation is — you take advantage of someone’s desperation” (Deparle). Ditz nevertheless insists it is more likely a result of smaller companies’ failure to maintain proper conditions for the workers that things have gone so poorly; this could have happened without the royal family ever learning about it. Their ignorance thus absolves their responsibility to protect the workers: not their company, not their problem. I asked Dr. Ihssen about this. She responded by addressing the implications of such a governmental move by saying, “I don’t think the government is ignorant, nor would I think the government would want to suggest it’s ignorant. If any government said, ‘Oh, we didn’t know,’ you’d have to question their legitimacy.”

This argument for innocence through ignorance is further undercut by the fact that, as Peyman explained to me, nearly all of the money funnels back to the royal family, as a vast majority of the private business sector is subsidized by the government. Conducting a comprehensive study of the extent to which Dubai’s government is responsible for the often-poor conditions of the camps would be nearly impossible; however, if the government continues to function as a private business, while claiming they are not responsible for the actions of the contractors they bring in from the USA and Europe, the problems will persist, the dreams of Dubai’s labor force will continue to be exploited, and the general humanity of the construction workers will not be recognized.

The problem here lies in the distinction between human rights and the rights of a citizen, which Hannah Arendt first addressed in relation to the refugees of WWII. Must the rights of all members of humankind be addressed, or is it necessary to first attain the legal status of full citizen? In Dubai, the latter seems to be the case. Those denied citizenship and relegated to a position on the edge of society risk losing their humanity all together. Arendt addressed this dilemma in her work, *On Totalitarianism*. She comments on those individuals forced to live outside of the immediate public sphere:

They lack that tremendous equalizing of differences which comes from being citizens of some commonwealth... The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general—without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself—and different in general, representing nothing but his own absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of all expression within and action upon a common world, loses all significance” (302).

The workers retain no ‘universal citizenship’ that would grant them human rights; there is no legal body of intrinsic human rights recognized within Dubai. It is up to organizations such as the UN, HRW, or individuals, such as Sinclair and Musabih, to address the issue. Giorgio Agamben furthers the idea that there is no permanent status of man in himself with regards to the law of a nation-state.

Dubai as a Sign of “Bare Life”

Agamben insists that we are all at risk of becoming Arendt’s “human beings in general,” who are not allowed

to pursue any self-actualization above work and survival. Agamben refers to individuals reduced to such a position as Homo Sacer. Sacer literally means “set aside.” Thus, a Homo Sacer is a “the sacred or accursed man,” a term used in Ancient Rome to denote banned individuals who could be killed by anyone, yet not sacrificed in a religious ritual (Agamben Homo 8-10). The term applies to the construction workers in that they have been set outside of society, subjected to dangerous conditions, and deprived of their humanity. Agamben goes on to claim that our task is thus to “find the courage to call into question the very principle of the inscription of nativity and the trinity of state/nation/territory which is based on it” and reestablish the old concept of people in place of our present concept of nation (Agamben “We”). Only through such an act, Agamben insists, can man’s political survival be realized in the present.

Slavoj Zizek, in his work, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, further explores the position of the tolerated “others” on the outskirts of society, who merely work to send money back home to their families. Zizek asks, what if “we are ‘really alive’ only if we commit ourselves with an excessive intensity which puts us beyond ‘mere life’? What if, when we focus on mere survival, even if it is qualified as ‘having a good time’, what we ultimately lose is life itself?” (88). The construction workers have effectively been reduced to the post-modern Last Men, who have no other option than to labor for their survival. They have not been granted any freedom of mobility, but are bused into construction sites early in the morning to work all day, and then bused to secluded barracks outside the city when their shift is over. They are “dying to work,” included in the legal order of society solely in the form of its exclusion. The coordinates for change are simply not present in the city’s current political situation.

In Dubai, a ruling family controls the entire country, so it is relatively easy to understand how they have gotten away with such poor treatment of migrant workers. This is what Zizek was referring to in his recent book, *Living in the End Times*, when he summarized Dubai’s present situation as “beyond corruption” (x). Agamben and Zizek are not, however, employing this argument with hopes of carving out a public space in which a democratic ‘renegotiating’ of the limits that prohibit the Homo Sacer from becoming a full citizen could take place. They are asserting that, far from being an isolated issue in Dubai, this problem speaks directly to those under the sovereign rule of a nation-state, insofar as their rights as human beings are contingent upon their national status.

It is at this point that we must reexamine the nature of the hyperbolic rhetoric employed to address Dubai and its implications for the Western world. It is not sufficient to conclude that we in the West are simply wallowing in schadenfreude by taking interest in the scathing articles of Haari and the “Dubai Bashers.” The question of whether or not it is fair to refer to Dubai in such a manner is, in the end, of little consequence. The consumption of these exaggerated, dare say commodified, journalistic images has obscured our view of the eerily similar problem in the United States and the other Western countries from which these articles come. The situation we see in Dubai concerning the rights of construction workers ironically reveals the paradigmatic structure of our own nation-state; we have averted our eyes from the plight of our migrant workers to lambast the actions of a young country bent on burgeoning to the point of hyper-realistic excess. Perhaps it is time to reposition the searing magnifying glass of our inquiries above that country, which ultimately provided the operative model for Dubai in the first place—our own.

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