

# Entry and Exit Points in Global Capitalism

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Ahmed Kanna. *Dubai: The City as Corporation*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 262 pp.

No doubt Dubai's image is one of its principal Siren-like allures, calling us to leap to a prelapsarian imagination, simply to swoon immediately at the site of architectural fantasies of the future. In these travels, what remains in commodity fetishism is nothing else than the refractions of consumers on the immaculate urban surfaces of the capitalist juggernaut, on which the empty seas and deserts are reflected. This said, I argue that Ahmed Kanna's *Dubai: The City as Corporation* misses a potentially fruitful opportunity to engage with current works in cultural studies that illuminate how the dialectics of the modern and the primitive telescope in capitalism (Smith xii). I believe that actively pursuing critical dialogue with such works would much more effectively achieve the author's worthy goal of demystifying state power, researching "the workings of the hegemonic family-state project of presenting Dubai as a synthesis between reified cultural values and neoliberal discourses of consumerist individualism" (xii).

Kanna's provocative work questions which voices and social formations are enabled and which are displaced when a city undergoes a transnational urban competition for real and symbolic capital (7). Responding to this question, Kanna illuminates the instruments of political hegemony, ethnic control, male domination and labor exploitation as contributing to Dubai's spatialization of the capitalist dream. Further, Kanna discusses how Dubayyans respond culturally to those state constructions. In his account, space refers to the spatial representations of institutional actors, the territorializing discourses of the term "culture" in the usages of Dubayyans, the varying types of state governance, and the social appropriations of these forms of governance. Following Michel Foucault, Kanna's anthropological perspective serves to demonstrate how spatial politics produces ethnic, class and gender identifications and thus regulates subjects in any political system, no matter its institutional configuration (x).

Kanna explains the processes constituting the city-state by examining the history of capitalism in the Arab Gulf. Drawing on Ferdinand Braudel's work, Kanna observes that the expansion of European capitalism was based on a network of trading cities

governed by concentrated institutions of power. Such towns functioned as socio-political entry points for capitalism. He notes that during the colonial period, the British co-opted through collaboration prominent tribal chiefs in the Gulf emirates and reinvented the latter as unitary, hereditary and absolutist sovereigns, such as the Al Maktoum's dynasty of Dubai (24). Later, in contemporary Dubai, the Executive Council—the effective state body that controls urban developments in the city, headed by Sheikh Muhammad Al Maktoum—came to closely resemble its previous colonial institutions, due to the hierarchal form of its governance (140). This approach successfully relates the current economically neoliberal and politically less-than-democratic city-state to its colonial history, although it does not clarify whether the current politico-institutional configuration is still a requirement of capitalism.

Another productive move made by Kanna is his claim that the very state form of Dubai depends on the social struggles within the Emirate. In chapter one, he argues that the reliance of the Emirate on ethno-nationalism is a result of its attempt to cope with the critiques of nationalist reformers who were inspired by Third World independence discourses during the period spanning from the 1940s until Dubai's independence from British rule in 1971. The reformers claimed the Emirate favored British interests over those of the local merchants. Against the dynasty's ideology of dependency, protection and co-optation, reformers proposed a conception of national sovereignty resting on participatory citizenship (26). In response, the family-state implanted and disseminated an ethno-nationalist discourse, one which was centered on a notion of Arabness and thus denied the existence of Persian and South Asian identities in Dubai. The family-state presented itself as protecting the Emirati citizenry from the threats supposedly posed by migrant South Asian or Iranian small-merchants and workers, who are excluded from citizenship (47). As result, citizens constitute only about the twenty percent of the total population of today's Dubai. Ruling families with Arab-Bedouin roots—a class that has retained the property of oil revenues and land—occupy the top of the social pyramid. Next, there is an elite population belonging to the administrative stratum and merchant class. This social sector includes descendents of Sunni Iranians (24, 54).

Pointing to this ethnic hierarchy, and following the approach of Abdul Khaleq Abdulla and Anh Nga Longva on politics in the Arab region, Kanna contends that Dubai is an ethnocracy where ethnic control, economic privileges and political domination mutually reinforce each other. The defining feature in this form of governance is citizenship, conceived in terms of shared descent: a society governed by an exclusive ruling ethnic group (30). This formation coincided with the intensification of oil production in the United Arab Emirates and the flow of petrodollars. The family-state in Dubai used oil-wealth to co-opt reformers, establishing a politics of “ruling bargain”: a construction of citizenship based on notions of protection, hier-

archy and charity (50). Specifically, Kanna demonstrates that this form of politics operates through spatial control: the ethnocracy represents the polity as homogenous and identifies migrant workers' spaces with moral degradation, legitimating its segregation of workers in labor camps (27, 68). This perspective helps to examine how modes of state authoritarianism relate to global capitalism, as an economy whose core components have the potential of working as a unit in real time on a planetary scale (Castells 102). Disappointing in the author's treatment of this topical subject, however, is the lack of comparative analysis of Middle-East ethnocracies with Western democracies. For instance, Kanna employs the category of hegemony without either exploring its Gramscian roots or analyzing the family-state's idiosyncratic paternalist practices of power.

Examining state hegemony in Dubai, Kanna argues that the family-state is reproduced through its policy of establishing neoliberal enclaves for attracting global capital and tourists. Since the 1990s, the Emirate engaged in an aggressive policy of the commodification of Dubai as a world-class tourist destination, a prime zone of real estate investment, a platform for global corporations and a hub in the re-export business. In turn, the family-state fused the ruling bargain ideology with a consumerist notion of Westernization (76). Kanna maintains that "urbanists" (state rulers, real estate managers, leading world architects) reproduce both neoliberal consumerism and the hegemony of the family-state: they conceive of Dubai's culture as identical to the stereotypes of ethno-nationalism. In "Going South with the Starchitects: Urbanist ideology in the Emirati City," for example, Kanna considers the cultural politics constituting New Dubai. Following Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, Kanna observes that late capitalism is characterized by various interconnected features—labor flexibility, capital mobility, a crisis of profit accumulation and a retrenchment of elite economic interests, and, what he finds more pertinent to his argument, "the spatial representation and spatialization of symbolic processes of culture and political processes of hegemony" (17). Yet, while Marxists consider the processes of capital accumulation and the contradictions between culture, politics and the economy, Kanna tends to isolate his study of culture from the dynamics of capital accumulation, thus leaving this influential factor unanalyzed.

Crucially, Kanna does not investigate the connections between oil trade, finance capital and real estate investments in Dubai (Davis 55), therefore missing the opportunity to analyze the issue of the value of land as a form of fictitious capital (Harvey 367; Jameson 43). Similarly, he considers neither the relationships of Dubai's airports to United States' geopolitics in the Middle East (Davis 58), nor how Dubai's free-market zones facilitate multinational corporations' exploitation of labor. According to Mike Davis, this latter regulation also permits the family-state to implant cultural restrictions out of those areas (Davis 63). Even so fundamental a concept

as neoliberalism is loosely defined in Kanna's text, which focuses on the neoliberal apotheosis of the entrepreneur, individualism and so on. Furthermore, drawing on Lefebvre, Kanna observes that "[s]pace [in Dubai] increasingly became an object to be visualized and abstracted from its more complex, multi-layered, and symbolically imbricated social texture" (78). However, while Marxist authors relate contemporary architectural forms (e.g., extreme isometric space, glass skin, enclosed skin volumes) to the abstractions of finance capital (Jameson 44), Kanna does not investigate New Dubai in adequate depth. While he notes that urbanists reproduce a reified version of Arab-Bedouin culture—images related to camels, *dhow*s, desert landscapes and mythical village life, it is unclear what Kanna means by reification and the economic aspect of this cultural problem. As a case in point, the author does not analyze any of Dubai's luxury sites representing capitalist fantasies: e.g., the World Islands, the Burj Khalifa or the Burj al-Arab Hotel.

For Kanna, urbanists polarize "Emirati culture between tradition and modernity. The former is equated with authenticity, the latter with its opposite" (97). However, it seems to me the vital task is to analyze the relationship between capitalist modernity and tradition. Kanna's reference of Siegfried Kracauer's insight that "surface-level expressions ... by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things" (112) suggests he wants to engage with Western Marxism. Yet while Kracauer locates appearances within the totality of the historical process and in relation to the underlying conditions (Kracauer 145), Kanna mostly describes fragments of such manifestations. For example, he observes in passing that "[a] wall of skyscrapers, one to each side of the highway, gives the passerby the claustrophobic impression of traveling through an interminable tunnel of mirrored glass" (77), without considering how this abstract space might shape narcissistic subjectivity, usually characterized by mythical and solipsistic refractions from the historical concreteness of the processes of capital and the state (Smith 42). Elaborating on this kind of interpretation could clarify how the Emirate obtains consent from consumers (fifteen million overseas visitors a year by 2010) and expatriates, a potent politics that Kanna mostly misses.

Kanna has much to tell us about the relationships between ethno-nationalism and neoliberalism. In chapter three, he endeavors to explain the neo-orthodox trend in Dubai's dominant culture. He argues that to assuage their anxieties regarding the impacts of the current financial crises, Emiratis have strengthened their Arab-Bedouin identity at the expense of migrant workers and women. For example, men within the dominant social strata demand gender orthodoxy: they blame Emirati women for supposedly having abdicated their family responsibilities for foreign consumer life-styles (127). Male neo-orthodoxy relates women's supposed nature as reproducers of the family with their ascribed role of reproducing the polity's moral and national

cohesion (129). Kanna demonstrates this discourse coexists with the hegemony of neoliberalism. In chapter four, Kanna argues that young “flexible citizens” construct their identities aligning Emirati and neoliberal values (135). Middle-class Emiratis not only devote resources to stage their Arabness, but also they emphasize what in Paul Smith’s terms we may call a neoliberal self-interested rationality (Smith 11). This coincides with the discourses of key parastatal companies owned by the ruling family. The family-state highlights individual values to compete in the global market, and stresses national belonging within the administrative-managerial stratum to cohere the dominant social group. In other words, neoliberalism does not emancipate subjects from the state.

In chapter five, Kanna observes that middle-class South Asians utilize values of neoliberal self-improvement to negotiate professional positions with the ruling ethnic group. They highlight their identification with neoliberal norms of merit to open the limits of civic ethnocracy that stigmatize them as foreigners, but without demanding political rights (197). Thus, Kanna explains that neoliberalism shapes Dubai’s project of class formation and ethno-nationalism legitimates the social inequalities of that project. He demonstrates how the family-state directs ethno-nationalism to control South Asian workers, who constitute about the ninety-five percent of Dubai’s working-class. In a strong but ultimately too-brief discussion, Kanna argues that unskilled workers get caught in a circle: they lack the political leverage to alter their material situation and their economic marginalization exacerbates their political vulnerability. Citing reports issued by Human Rights Watch, Kanna argues that Dubai exploits and controls migrant workers through its spatial politics: it segregates workers in labor camps, allows employers to expropriate workers’ passports, and authorizes firms to breach labor contracts in their benefit (35, 95). He calls particular attention to the situation of working-class women, observing that unlike male migrant workers, female domestics do not enter into a sponsorship relationship with employers but into guardianship relationships with the latter. This binds migrant women to Emirati male domination, making them vulnerable to be associated with threats to national culture, prostitution and adultery (64, 203).

Kanna’s book offers a critical examination of the state structures of domination in Dubai, a subject clearly in need of attentive scholarly investigation. His analysis successfully demonstrates how the cultural, political and economic practices of the ruling ethnic group are constitutive in reproducing the unequal city-state. A fruitful research task for the future would be to refine the materialist theoretical perspective of his work on the intimate relationship between reified traditions and neoliberal modernity, thereby generating greater analytical purchase on the empirical reality of Dubai’s fantasy.

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