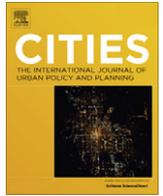


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# Cities

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## Book Review

### Dubai: Gilded Cage, Syed Ali. Yale University Press, New Haven and London (2010).

Within the context of the growing interest in Dubai as a hyper-modern metropolis that simultaneously incorporates the glittering results of neoliberal city structuring and its human costs, this book is a remarkable contribution to the literature. It provides insight into the diverse lives of expatriates and local citizens and their sense of relatedness to the city. The severe inequality in the daily life of the city is insightfully highlighted through references to the lives of individuals from different socio-economic and/or ethnic backgrounds. The most important contribution of the book is that it reveals the diverse effects of governance strategies on these different social groups and their experiences in the city, particularly in the last two decades, as part of an agenda to establish Dubai as a global brand.

In the initial chapters of the book, the author discusses how this process of establishing Dubai as a global commercial site has gained speed since the 1990s, accompanied by the importance given to the tourism and entertainment sectors. Light-speed urbanization and construction activities were inevitably accompanied by immense immigration rates. Expatriates from various countries of the Gulf region and Asia began working in construction businesses and low-level service sector jobs for salaries less than \$200–400 a month. The consequent relationship between massive immigration, the overcrowding of local citizens by expatriates and migration policy is a subject that has been addressed in previous—but insufficient—literature on Dubai. This book can be considered a successful attempt to go beyond these generalized discussions with a specific and in-depth reconsideration of two strategies by city officials to counterbalance this demographic shift: (a) the visa system in Dubai, which does not grant a permanent position to expatriates but offers a permanent feeling of temporariness and (b) the *Kafala* (sponsorship) system, which requires all businesses to have nationals as business partners (without the need to put up any capital of their own) and requires all expatriate workers to be sponsored by their companies or by their private employers. Through a survey of daily social life and individual cases, the author demonstrates the diverse consequences of these two strategies on the lives of expatriates and local citizens. The main premise of the book is that the temporary visa system and the sponsorship system not only help city governors to maintain social control (particularly regarding low-income expatriates) but also give urban culture a temporary form in which consumption and entertainment constitute the focal point of social interaction, particularly for professional expatriates.

Although the author does not explicitly discuss the issue of informality, the book uses exemplary cases to examine to what extent the strategies of governance are fed by informalities in the legal system (ever-changing rules and ambiguities in legal statements) and to what extent these strategies lead to an informal basis for social control and surveillance. As described by the

author, the relationship of dependency created by the sponsorship system and the permanent threat of being deported due to the visa system constitute the backbone for maintaining social order and protecting the image of the city. In this context, the author provides a remarkable example of the self-censorship of journalists working in local newspapers. Part of this relationship of dependency involves regulations that inflict high fines and potential deportation on journalists who write news that may harm the reputation of the city because almost all of the journalists are expatriates.

In the chapters “Iron Chains”, “Living in ‘Fly-By’ Dubai”, “Guests in their Own House” and “Strangers in their Own Land”, the author notes the impact of all of these factors on different socio-economic groups: the workers at the lowest socio-economic level, the professional expatriates (mainly from Europe), the Dubai-born expatriates and the local citizens of Dubai. The visa and sponsorship system has had a significant and devastating impact on groups at the lowest socio-economic level. The construction workers (mainly from India and Pakistan), domestic workers (mainly from the Philippines), female victims of human trafficking and camel jockeys (child laborers) are mentioned in this chapter in terms of their imprisonment in informal mechanisms of social control and domination.

According to the author, a second group, the professional expatriates from Europe, are affected by the visa system and the feeling of temporariness, mostly regarding their consumption and entertainment habits. The book refers to exaggerated amounts of alcohol consumption and a hedonistic lifestyle as side effects of this feeling of temporariness. The author also elaborates on the condition of a third group, Dubai-born expatriates, and the nature of their relatedness to the city. Unlike the other chapters, this chapter seems to be based on more systematically gathered data, collected from interviews with Dubai-born expatriates. This group, which has no additional rights or benefits from being born in Dubai, feels most of the effects because of their in-between situation. Dubai is their “home”, but they are guests in it; the idea of returning to their country of origin seems quite alienating to them. Finally, the findings of the book regarding the local citizens contribute significantly to the literature, in which data on the Emirati population and its relatedness to the city is largely absent. According to the author, the amazing welfare opportunities that the governors offer the local citizens alienate them from regular working life. The *Kafala* (sponsorship) system contributes to this condition by offering many people an enormous income with no effort or capital. The state jobs offered to citizens by the government do not demand much labor, but they promise a prosperous life. The unwillingness of the local citizens to work in competitive jobs in the city estranges them from the international business space of the city and deepens their feeling of being strangers in their own land, a land that is overpopulated by migrants from all over the world.

The main criticisms of the book are related to the methodology of the study. The author explicitly states from the outset that he

has adopted a readable style rather than a mainstream academic one. This style offers an enjoyable reading experience, particularly in the introductory chapters, which offer a general view of the history, spatial development and daily life of the city. However, when reading the empirical chapters, one feels the need for methodological guidance. The author's information sources include news, journalistic articles and findings from previous empirical research on Dubai, including first-hand interviews and observations as well as third-party accounts of events and individuals. The sources, however, are not transparent, and nowhere in the book is there an explicit reference to the data collection methods. This omission may be related to the difficulties of collecting data in Dubai while conducting critical research. Nevertheless, the unsystematic and journalistic style of the book gives the reader the feeling that some of the book's arguments and important analytical connections are not sufficiently supported by the data.

The author's style also risks oversimplification and easy generalizations considering that the subject matter of the book is quite broad. For example, when the author depicts the transitory and fluid character of consumerist culture in Dubai, he refers to some expatriates' definitions of Dubai as having no "real culture" (p. 68), and he supports this argument by pointing out the poverty of artistic life in Dubai. He makes a comparison between SoHo in New York City and Dubai regarding the lack of art-related happenings in Dubai (p. 71). This comparison seems quite superficial due to the absence of contextual considerations. It is true that the city space in Dubai is, to a large extent, artificially constructed for entertainment and tourist purposes. However, there are many neighborhoods in the city where one can trace the transient but "real" cultural space produced and enlivened by the local and

migrant population. The active presence of Middle Eastern artists in Dubai, in particular, brings a certain dynamism to artistic life on the local level in addition to the commercial artistic happenings that the author mentions.

Despite its methodological weaknesses, the book is an original contribution to the literature in its explicit description of the role of the temporary visa system in maintaining social control in the face of an overwhelming majority of expatriates and the severe social inequalities of daily life. The book suggests that the feeling of temporariness and non-belonging on the part of the expatriates contributes to the governors' agenda of creating a consumerist global city space. The study transcends the mainstream definition in the literature of the social groups (western professional expatriates, construction/domestic workers and local citizens) living in the city with its references to the conditions of female sex workers, child laborers and Dubai-born Arab expatriates. There is further need in the literature on Dubai, first, for studies on ethnic, educational, occupational, economic and age/gender-related identity positions that crosscut mainstream social categories and, second, for in-depth ethnographic studies on specific aspects of social life in addition to broad depictions of the city.

Neslihan Demirtas  
Izmir University of Economics, Department of Sociology,  
Sakarya cad. No. 156, 35330, Balçova Izmir, Turkey  
Tel.: +90 2324888452, mobile: +90 5322057691.  
E-mail addresses: neslihan.demirtas@ieu.edu.tr,  
nesli\_demir1@hotmail.com

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