

Locating Neoliberalism in Dubai: Migrant Workers and Class Struggle in the Autocratic City

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Abstract: In recent years, portrayals of neoliberalism in Dubai have often hinged on narratives about the hyper-exploitation of migrant workers in the city. In this paper I interrogate these narratives by exploring the governance of lower-waged construction migrants and their recent role in market-led processes of urbanization. Through a focus on the recent growth of private worker welfare initiatives and dozens of illegal labour strikes led by migrant builders, I draw attention to the fraught and contradictory character of autocratic neoliberalism that operates in the governance of these workers, and point to workers' bodily capital and the construction labour camp as two emergent sites in which these labour politics are unfolding. I argue that these social reproductive realms of the body and the mass-worker household have offered a temporary spatial fix to the limitations of autocratic rule in a neoliberalizing city, while also conjuring moments of political possibility for construction migrants.

Keywords: neoliberalization, Dubai, migrant labour, urbanization, autocracy, labour rights

Introduction

The migrant worker has been a central and recurring character in narratives about the city of Dubai in recent years. Fuelled in part by the immense urban development program and public relations campaign undertaken by the city's autocratic ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Dubai has garnered considerable attention for its twenty-first century city-making strategies. Efforts by urban scholars, journalists and bloggers to explore and define the character of Dubai's urban transformation have often positioned the city as a leader in neoliberal strategies of urbanization among other "emerging" global city contenders such as Mumbai, Shanghai or Beijing.

In many cases, these tales of Dubai's development have involved the telling and re-telling of a familiar narrative about the "divided city" (Marcuse 1993), in which the government's efforts to engineer an urban landscape designed for affluent consumers have been framed against the brutal and exploitative treatment of the poorer segments of the city's foreign workforce. Critiques of social and economic inequality have featured centrally in recent portrayals of the city; the low-waged and low-status migrant—frequently embodied by the South Asian, blue coverall-clad construction labourer enlisted to build the city's luxury high-rises—has become

a central archetype around which Dubai's global city story has come to revolve (see for example Caryl 2000; Davis 2006; Hari 2009; Molavi 2007).

In this paper, I locate processes of neoliberalization in Dubai through a case study of the local politics surrounding migrant construction workers in the city. To this end, I explore two questions. First, what specific strategies have characterized the contemporary regulation of Dubai's foreign construction workforce and what do they reveal about processes of neoliberalization underway in the city? Secondly, how equipped are critical theories of neoliberalism to make sense of these strategies, and how do they shape our understandings of the constraints and possibilities for labour justice in an autocratic, authoritarian city-state?

In addressing these questions, I suggest that depictions of autocratic neoliberalism in Dubai which view the state as territorially hegemonic tend to ignore the informal and fragmented labour politics at work in the city, and overlook some of the antagonisms between the state's autocratic and neoliberal interests. Drawing on some of the labour and urban studies scholarship on neoliberalization, I argue that interrogations of neoliberalism in Dubai need to be located to take account of the historically contingent and place-particular legacies of autocratic governance that have shaped the city's political economy. Through this, I seek to turn debates about migrant governance in Dubai towards questions about the complex intersections between autocratic rule, neoliberalized urbanization and the contradictory strategies mobilized by the state to govern specific segments of the foreign labour force.

I begin by examining recent popular and academic narratives about neoliberalism in Dubai. Following this, I pinpoint a number of active moments that have shaped the political landscape for construction migrants since the early 2000s. These include the proliferation of "private" labour welfare initiatives in Dubai which have been undertaken by actors such as affluent migrants and employers in the city's construction sector. I also revisit the dozens of labour strikes, demonstrations and other forms of informal organizing led by construction workers during this period in order to examine workers' own fragmented and often temporary efforts to contest and restructure the relations governing their working and living conditions. In examining these events, I attempt to both ground and prise apart the unstable—and at times conflicting—character of autocratic neoliberalism that operates in the governance of migrant builders.

Harvey (2005:19) posits that the restoration and maintenance of elite forms of class power, not the institution of market-oriented reforms, is the ultimate goal of contemporary processes of neoliberal restructuring. This is a reality evidenced, he argues, by the fact that "... when neoliberal principles clash with the need to restore or sustain elite power, then the principles are either abandoned or become so twisted as to be unrecognizable". I propose a third scenario: that they can be harboured within specific sites and spaces which enable these conflicts to be temporarily resolved. In this paper I highlight how the private spheres of social reproduction for low-waged migrant builders—chiefly, workers' bodies and the household space of the construction labour camp—have emerged as key sites in the state's efforts to reconcile its neoliberal and autocratic agendas, and in workers' own strategies to contest the unjust industrial and spatial relations governing their everyday lives.

This paper is based in part on 14 semi-structured interviews conducted in Dubai and the southern state of Kerala, India, between 2008 and 2009. Of this total, nine interviews were conducted with labour sending-country consular officials and construction contractors who have been involved in worker welfare initiatives in Dubai, and five interviews with workers who took part in the labour strikes. Interviews with welfare providers were conducted in English and lasted approximately an hour.

Interviews with strike participants, meanwhile, took place in two villages and one major city in the south Indian state of Kerala. The choice to interview strike participants who were not currently resident in Dubai was made out of consideration for the welfare and safety of interview subjects who may have either been reluctant to talk about their involvement or role in illegal labour organizing if they were still employed in Dubai, or who may have run some risk of reprisal from employers or state officials by agreeing to be interviewed. The location of Kerala was chosen as the state is the source of a large proportion of lower-waged construction migrants in Dubai. While these "off-site" methods of accessing respondents ultimately limited the number of strike participants interviewed, it also granted respondents more freedom in discussing their involvement in these illegal actions.

The strike participants interviewed ranged in age between 24 and 36, and had lived in Dubai on average for 3 years. All had returned from Dubai in the 6 months preceding the interviews. Interviews were conducted primarily in Malayalam with the assistance of a local translator, though all respondents spoke some English.¹ The interviews themselves were semi-structured, and lasted for roughly an hour. Participants were asked a number of similar questions, including what motivated them to become involved in labour actions, how they went about organizing or participating in the strikes and what kinds of outcomes arose from these activities.

From Deviant to Deity: Dubai and Theories of Neoliberalization

As neoliberalization has gained widespread purchase in the social sciences as an explanatory concept for economic reform, considerable efforts have been made to locate, ground and broaden its theorization through explorations of the "hybridized" (Peck, 2004; Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2009), "actually existing" (Brenner and Theodore 2002) and "variegated" (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2009) character of localized processes of market-led restructuring. Conceiving of neoliberalization as a process articulated through a diversity of place-specific strategies and grounded political economic realities, these theoretical formulations have emphasized the inevitably "mongrel" character (Peck 2010) of market-oriented reforms. At the same time, these perspectives are also intimately tied to the premise that neoliberalization has become a global phenomenon, in which the spread of neoliberal state logics has been depicted by some as a series of "mutations" as neoliberalism has radiated outward from the "heartlands" of Europe and North America (Peck and Tickell 2002:387; see also Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2009; Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2009).

In conjunction with this, a growing body of research has begun to highlight the particular ways that non-Western, and in a number of cases, post-Socialist historical

pathways are shaping and tempering the technologies, modalities, and outcomes of neoliberal policies and practices being enacted in different locales (Ong 2006; Smith 2007; Stenning et al 2010; Wu 2008, 2010). These perspectives have significantly broadened neoliberalism's theoretical geographies, which as others point out had until recently been shaped extensively, if not exclusively, by the study of post-1970s economic restructuring in economies of Europe and North America (Kanna 2011; Ong 2007; Wu 2009). As a result, processes of neoliberalization have widely been framed as a shifting set of market-led logics of governance that are distinctly "post-Fordist", "after-Keynesian" or "post-industrial", which in many cases have been concerned with how collective social contracts for labour or democratic and civic entitlements of residents have been dismantled. Indeed, Harvey (2005:11) broadly frames neoliberalism as a project primarily aimed at freeing capital from the constraints imposed by these "embedded liberalisms", and more directly as a process ultimately focused on restoring the class power of economic elites.

Analyses of market-led restructuring underway in Dubai—and the political implications these processes carry—need to take account of, and be differentiated from, longstanding state policies aimed at maintaining autocratic forms of class power and social difference. In contrast with meta-narratives of post-Fordist state retreat that run through some of the neoliberalization literature, in Dubai there are no Keynesian social contracts to break, no statutes governing collective labour rights to dismantle and no nineteenth-century regimes of industrial sweatshop production (Aguiar 2006) to resurrect. Like the other six federated territories that make up the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—a nation state that is barely 40 years old—the emirate of Dubai is governed by a monarchic system of rule that exercises autocratic, authoritarian and deeply anti-collectivist power over both foreign and national residents. Under the family dynasty that holds largely unelected control over the city,² no minimum wage has been instituted for foreign workers, labour unions are prohibited, and forms of civic political action, public protest or autonomous political organization and advocacy are generally not tolerated.

Chief among the state's technologies of autocratic power is the *kafala* labour regime that governs foreign workers in the city. Comprising nearly 90% of Dubai's population, foreigners dominate both the city and its workforce. As in the rest of the UAE, the *kafala* employment and immigration system requires every foreigner seeking to work in Dubai to be sponsored by a UAE citizen who assumes both legal and economic responsibility for the worker throughout the length of their contract (Willoughby 2006). Work visas under the *kafala* system currently may last no longer than 2 years, while national citizenship, particularly among lower-waged foreigners, is effectively impossible to obtain. This system forms a cornerstone of the autocratic state's efforts to retain power through the maintenance of a small and politically acquiescent *polis*,³ in that it has played a key role in placing very explicit limits on the state's responsibilities to non-citizen residents, while at the same time preserving the very generous entitlements—including free land, free education, subsidized energy, well-paying jobs and so on—afforded to the national citizenry.

The state's desire to develop and diversify its local economy in recent years, however, has entailed the adoption of a number of distinctly market-led strategies of political economic reform. Chief among these was the launch of a massive

urban construction program driven by newly commodified real estate markets, internationalized property ownership laws and an array of powerful state-owned and backed development firms. By 2008, as billions of dollars from state and speculative sources circulated through a purported 10,000 active construction sites across the city,⁴ real estate development and construction had come to account for close to half of the city's gross domestic product (Boald 2010; Wigglesworth and Kerr 2008). This particular form of neoliberal urbanism practiced in the city over the last decade, in which the ruling elite's aggressive free-market reordering of the urban landscape has run intertwined with autocratic forms of state capitalism, has come to be known as "Dubai Inc".

Geographically, Dubai lies far from neoliberalism's heartlands, yet it has at times been portrayed as the manifestation of neoliberalism in its purest form, stripped bare of the kinds of soft, coercive practices of negotiation, legitimation and co-optation that have come to accompany the "roll out" (Peck and Tickell 2002) strategies of contemporary neoliberalization in Western states. Some academic and popular accounts about Dubai's urban autocracy have advanced idealized and deified portrayals of Dubai, in which the city has come to represent "the ultimate neoliberal Utopia"⁵ (see also Molavi 2007). Similarly, in his dystopian appraisal of Dubai, Davis (2006:60) guides the reader on an imaginary bird's-eye tour of the city in the not too distant future, in which the emirate has become the hyper-capitalist:

apotheosis of the neoliberal values of contemporary capitalism: a society that might have been designed by the Economics Department of the University of Chicago ... Dubai ... has achieved what American reactionaries only dream of—an oasis of free enterprise without income taxes, trade unions or opposition parties (emphasis added).

As AlSayyad and Roy (2006:10) point out, what often underlies theorizations of neoliberalism is an assertion of novelty, in that "...what persists in the analysis of neoliberalism ... is a sense of newness: of a new mode of production, of a new production of space, of new forms of discipline and control". Narratives of novelty about Dubai are often closely linked to assertions that neoliberalization is engendering new forms of economic and urban "hyper-polarization" (Brenner and Mayer, cf Soureli and Youn 2009; Goos and Manning 2003; Sassen 1991), as most of these accounts make explicit reference to the oppressive conditions of employment and urban life faced by the city's low-waged migrant workforce. Tales about the "dark side of Dubai" (Hari 2009) chronicle the totalizing triumph of the neoliberal city over the migrant workforce, a gleaming modern metropolis built on the backs of "hapless Bangladeshis digging the trench..." (Caryl 2000:33).

While an array of scholarship which complicates these narratives has emerged in recent years, including Davidson's (2008) nuanced exploration of the political and economic histories of the city and Kanna's (2011) and Vora's (2010, 2011) excavation of the roles played by particular migrant groups in these processes of neoliberalization (see also Haines 2011; Smith 2010), notions of novelty and exceptionalism about Dubai endure (see in particular the critique by Kanna 2011:5–6). Most troublesome are those that advance teleological assumptions about processes of neoliberalization in Dubai, in which the city has purportedly "telescoped" past the "arduous intermediate stages of ... evolution" (Davis

2006:54) in Western democratic cities to arrive at a more fully realized neoliberal state. In these ways, Dubai occupies a somewhat contradictory place within debates on neoliberalism. On one hand, the corporatized logics of governance that operate in the city are used to justify portrayals of the city as a “deviant” state (Ong 2007) whose urban process and social inequalities are understood primarily in relation to their marked divergence from the civic traditions and class compromises of liberal democratic cities of the West. On the other hand, however, these constructions of Dubai also portray the city as a kind of political economic simulacrum, its autocratic free-marketizing a truer expression of neoliberalism, in some sense, than the Western heartlands from which it emerged.

These inferences about the past and the future that underlie visions of neoliberalism in Dubai deserve scrutiny because they construct particular understandings about poorer migrants’ political power, about Dubai’s trajectories of political economic change and about the possibilities for labour justice in the city. In what follows, I interrogate these storylines by examining the growing role of private worker welfare initiatives in shaping Dubai’s construction labour politics.

Realms of Reconciliation: Neoliberalism, Autocracy and Corporeal Welfare

A central problematic in labour geography literature concerned with neoliberalization relates to the proliferation of third-party and other private and voluntary programmes for labour safety, advocacy and welfare (Brown and Getz 2008; Herod and Aguiar 2006). At the same time, considerable work in urban studies has explored the growing de facto participation of informal actors in local governance as an inseparable dimension of formal processes of neoliberal restructuring by states (Alsayyad 2004; Alsayyad and Roy 2006; Roy 2004; Schechter and Yacobi 2005; Weinstein 2008).

Few national citizens in Dubai are willing or trained to do manual construction work. In addition to being considered “low status”, manual construction work in the city is largely poorly paid and dangerous. Wage theft by employers in the sector, meanwhile, who have been known to withhold wages from workers for months at a time, is endemic (Human Rights Watch 2006; Keane and McGeehan 2008). The sector’s historical reliance on cheap non-citizen workers, in addition to the sheer size of the state’s recent development agenda, required the importation of an immense amount of building labour. By the middle of the last decade, an estimated 700,000 construction migrants had entered the UAE from countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines; the majority were thought to have been concentrated in Dubai, a city with a population of 1.4 million (Khalil 2007).⁶

The presence of such an immense blue-collar workforce posed a dilemma for state officials whose city-building project was aimed primarily at attracting affluent residents and visitors. This prompted the adoption of a wide array of segregationist state policies aimed heavily, if not exclusively, at low-waged builders. Actions included municipal provisions to construct a host of barrack-style labour camps to house workers on the outskirts of the city or next to industrial lands, systematic efforts by local officials to evict or prevent “bachelor” migrants from being housed

together in villas or other “family”-designated neighbourhoods and policing efforts to actively discourage working-class, South Asian men from occupying tourist spaces such as beaches and café boulevards (Ahmed 2007; Elsheshtawy, 2008; Kanna 2007; Smith 2010). These new socio-spatial strategies of ordering the city encapsulate what Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009) view as the primary aims of neoliberal urban policies, which are to mobilize urban space as an arena both for market-led economic growth and elite consumption while securing order and control amongst marginalized groups.

Around the same time, the rapid influx of professional migrants, foreign firms and investment capital to the city—lured in no small part by the city’s speculative real estate development market—was contributing to double-digit inflation which was placing severe downward pressure on construction workers’ real wages. Unregulated growth in the cost of rent and food, alongside chronic wage theft by employers, was making it increasingly impossible for many lower-waged builders to survive in the city. Feminist scholars in particular have drawn attention to the ways that processes of neoliberalization have been fundamentally re-ordering not only the relations of capitalist production but those of social reproduction that underpin it (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Katz 2001; McDowell 2004; Stenning et al 2010); in Dubai, the extraordinary success of market-led property development was effectively spawning a crisis of social reproduction for the very workers required to institute it.

Growing awareness about the difficulties faced by lower-waged migrants prompted the emergence of a number of semi-formal private welfare initiatives. One British couple⁷ in Dubai, for example, who work in the city’s real estate sector, founded an organization that provides clothing and other basic necessities such as food, soap and toothbrushes to lower-waged migrants living in labour camps, where the vast majority of low-waged construction workers tend to live. They explained how their organization became established:

[w]e had heard from a friend of ours in the industry that there was a group of Filipino men who had not been paid in 5 months. They would rack up debt at the local store buying food on credit, and when they did get a donation, all of their money would go to pay that debt. So we raised some money and got them some food and basic necessities donated, and then others in the camp heard about us, and wanted help too. They were all in similar situations. So we slowly started to take care of the whole camp.

Like a number of other organizations interviewed for this paper, the state has been reluctant to grant their organization non-profit or charitable status.⁸ Now registered as a charity in Switzerland, the organization is not formally recognized in Dubai. Yet there was such demand for their services that in 2007 the organizers rented a warehouse to store donations and began holding weekly Friday collections in the parking lot of the Mall of the Emirates, a mega-mall and tourist attraction that boasts the city’s infamous indoor ski slope.

Other welfare and advocacy operations are run through even more autonomous and informal channels within the expatriate community. In the predominantly South Asian neighbourhood of Karama, an Indian doctor has been providing medical attention, food and in a limited capacity, consular assistance and temporary shelter

for illegal construction workers since 2007, when the government instituted harsh new penalties for companies found to be employing illegal workers. The vast majority of people that she helps, she says, are construction workers who lost their jobs and do not have the money (or their passports, which are often illegally confiscated by employers) to return to their home countries.

With help from other illegal workers and expatriate volunteers, the doctor works independently and informally to provide a meal to several hundred men most evenings. In addition, a mainstay of her work also involves connecting individuals to their national consular office for assistance, negotiating the return of passports, raising awareness about workers' plights with the media or visiting and advocating on behalf of workers who have been jailed as a result of their illegal migration status. Her work is primarily conducted outdoors in local parks, on the pavement outside construction labour camps and anywhere else that illegal workers congregate. The plain-clothes police who regularly patrol these spaces keep a close eye on her and her operations. As she recounted:

[s]ometimes I get a call from the CID [police] and they ask me what I am doing, what are my plans, and I get a little scared, but that's usually all that happens. It is not illegal to give food to illegal people ... some people get scared about it but they shouldn't; what we are doing is legal.

Here the politics of survival and subsistence meet with the informal politics of labour. To some degree, the informality of the doctor's activities are key to their persistence; lying within the liminal spaces of both the city and the law, the doctor's activities are tolerated, and for the most part, ignored. Workers themselves, meanwhile, are not simply passive recipients of these practices; many know that the relatively innocuous practice of gathering for free food and discussion is an important avenue to gather collective support for their individual campaigns to address problems with their employment and residency status.

Within the private sector, occupational charities and corporate social responsibility initiatives offer a rather different set of welfare-related supports for workers. In response to high rates of injury and death on the job in the mid 2000s, there was a concerted push—driven primarily by large Western multinational contractors—to improve health and safety practices in the sector. These include initiatives such as “Buildsafe Dubai”, a voluntary network of both local and foreign-owned firms who share best practices about safety, including accident prevention and worker training. The Lighthouse Club, meanwhile, is a charitable organization that is registered internationally but run locally by professional migrants employed in Dubai's construction sector. Raising funds through golf tournaments, barbecues, theme nights and other social events, the group provides financial support to construction workers who have been involved in workplace accidents. With chapters across the Middle East and Asia, the club helps to provide workers and their families with compensation in the event of an incapacitating workplace injury or to repatriate the bodies of builders killed on the job in Dubai.

While the rapid growth of these private welfare arrangements has occurred in conjunction with market-led reforms of the city's urbanization regime, to what extent should they be understood as “neoliberal”? Decentralized and non-state

forms of governance have long characterized the management of expatriate labour in Dubai and the UAE; somewhat paradoxically, these arrangements have played a crucial role in maintaining autocratic state power by devolving primary responsibility—though not ultimate power or authority—over foreign workers to a non-state elite. As Vora (2010:47) asserts, in addition to the *kafala* regime, which assigns private citizen-sponsors legal responsibility for specific foreign workers while they are residents of the city:

in Dubai ... it is most often *expatriate* elite managers and business owners who govern the day-to-day lives of migrant workers, thereby assuming responsibility for the migrants' well-being ... By relegating governance over labourers to wealthy elites, the state abdicates its responsibility over their well-being (original emphasis).

In this case, these private welfare initiatives have not emerged to replace a retreating state; rather, they can be read as an extension of the privatized arrangements on which the autocratic state already relies in the governance of foreign workers. With the lack of a state welfare regime for low-waged builders threatening to undermine the state's urbanization agenda, these initiatives offered a partial, non-state solution to the crisis of social reproduction facing migrant builders.

What is neoliberal about these initiatives, however, is the way they all serve in some manner to maintain workers' body capital. Strategies of marketized urbanization over the last several years relied not only on the material (re)production of the built environment, but also on the construction migrant himself; his bodily safety, nourishment, health and hygiene became centrally important to a highly speculative property development market that, by the mid 2000s, lay at the heart of Dubai's economy. Indeed, in any other circumstance, the proliferation of expatriate civil society groups might have been perceived by the state as a distinct threat. These organizations, however, have been tolerated precisely because they are in some way "embodied"; their explicit aims are to address workers' corporeal, not political needs. Groups' concerns with the daily challenges of subsistence and survival in the city reflected a focus on addressing—often on an individualized basis—the symptoms, not the causes, of the lack of an effective rights and welfare regime for low-waged workers. Corporeal welfare initiatives thus became sites in which conflicting neoliberal and autocratic state interests could be temporarily resolved; embodied mandates at once facilitated the non-state reproduction of the body capital required for market-led urbanization, while evacuating any overtly subversive political agenda regarding workers' rights and welfare that might challenge the structures of autocratic state power.

Transient Insurgencies: Mapping an Ephemeral Class Politics in the City

A second theme that transects accounts of neoliberalism in both labour and urban scholarship broadly concerns the growing "entrepreneurialization of the self" (Rose 1996, cf Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2009; see also Raco and Imrie 2000). Labour-focused research circumscribed by post-Fordist contexts has examined neoliberalization as a process of individualization, in which the growing

flexibilization of employment relations has served to undermine the historical gains of organized labour and replace the collective architecture of labour institutions with individualized channels for the negotiation of employment disputes, rights and entitlements (see for example Holgate et al 2011; Ryan and Herod 2006).

In contrast to the Fordist contracts between labour, capital and the state that were until recently in place in most Western democratic countries, individualized and institutionally private channels for labour arbitration, mediation and complaints have long been common features of labour regimes in many Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. As Longva (1997:181) suggests in her research on foreign workers in Kuwait in the late 1990s, the deliberately short-term and temporary nature of workers' *kafala*-based employment and residency visas have been very effective in discouraging the growth of collective labour practices:

expatriates practically always opted for individual action when confronted with the most diverse types of problem: collective action required lengthy organization; its outcome was, as a rule, protracted, so that by the time it materialized, even supposing that it was positive, the individual expatriate might no longer be in Kuwait to benefit from it.

It was all the more surprising, then, that in the mid 2000s, dozens of highly public strikes by migrant construction workers swept across Dubai. While there are no exact or official figures on the number of strikes that were launched during this period, members of the local media and international labour groups suggest that dozens of labour actions have taken place since 2005. These were a highly disruptive series of labour actions led mainly by construction workers not just in Dubai, but in neighbouring emirates in the UAE such as Sharjah, Abu Dhabi and Ajman.

The factors motivating the strikes were diverse. A frequent point of contention was the non-payment of wages (Human Rights Watch 2006). Improvements to employer-run labour camps in industrial and marginal sites in the city, where most lower-waged construction workers are obliged to live, were also a frequent subject of workers' demands as overcrowded and filthy dormitories, broken sanitation systems, over-priced camp rents and long waits for the company bus to and from work (for most workers, their only source of transportation) provided further impetus to revolt against employers.

The state's refusal to regulate foreign workers' wages, meanwhile, was exacerbating labour unrest. In addition to rampant inflation, rising domestic currency rates across South Asia in recent years were severely eroding the remittance value of Dirham-based salaries that had remained stagnant for many workers in Dubai (Bowman 2008a). Additionally, with more and more South Asian construction workers choosing to stay and work in booming construction markets at home, new recruits in Dubai were often being hired at higher wages than those of veteran workers in an effort to lure them to the UAE. One site manager of a mega-development project recounted how these dynamics were integral to a strike on the site in 2007 in which:

[one of the subcontractors on the site] had a two-day strike awhile back, when people got upset because there were people on the same site getting totally different wages. We had guys from [another subcontracting firm] coming on to the site who were getting

paid more . . . and older guys were saying “hey, this guy is fresh off the boat and he’s making more than me? I’ve been here for 10 years!”

These diverse and intersecting conditions for workers were in part behind the labour actions that took place across the city at the height of the development boom. Workers at times held public demonstrations along arterial roads, blocking traffic and in some cases marching directly to the Ministry of Labour to voice their complaints (Rahimi 2007a, 2007b). In other cases—which were far more likely to go unreported by the local media—strikes and protests took the form of peaceful refusals to go to work, with workers remaining at their labour camp until employers agreed to discuss workers’ grievances. Through these actions, an ephemeral and fragmented labour insurgency began to unfold across the city.

Urban space played a key role in shaping these politics. Workers’ ability to organize demonstrations and strikes was facilitated by the state’s systematic efforts to segregate working-class builders from the rest of the city. By sequestering and concentrating builders in and between spaces such as the construction site and the labour camp, the state’s efforts to spatially restrict and contain the mobilities of such an immense construction workforce had ultimately helped to foster a kind of shop-floor politics in which the workplace and the mass-worker household would become integral to the development of the labour movement.

The construction site provided opportunities not only for workers to communicate and plan but also for more spontaneous forms of contestation to develop; several instances of labour demonstrations and “riots” in Dubai and neighbouring Sharjah, for example, were reported to be the product of escalating unrest following some event in the workplace that day (Bowman 2008a; Roberts 2008). Moreover, workers’ geographical concentration meant that word travelled very fast between and within work sites and camps; information about strikes or other actions could be communicated without highly structured forms of organization. As Antony, an engineer’s assistant whose contracting firm had been withholding wages for several months recounted:

during tea time, the people gathered [on the work site]. And that was the best time that we used to inform the rest of the workers . . . We decided we would hold a protest. We would inform people the day before we would not go to work. And then the next day we would strike. We would hold a protest . . . at the labour camp.

In this instance, through communication at work-breaks and calls to others from workers’ mobile phones, approximately 300 workers on four different work sites were mobilized to take part in several strikes, which involved refusing to get on the bus to go to work in the morning.

The government’s initial response to many of these strikes was violently repressive, and involved the sweeping arrest, incarceration and summary deportation those taking part in the strikes and of “instigators” accused of participating in organizing strike actions (Menon and Issa 2007; Rahimi 2007b; Roberts 2008). The planting of plain-clothes police informants in the labour camps, other forms of worker surveillance and even beatings also characterized the state’s response (Fattah 2006). One strike participant, Dinesh, who had been employed as a steel fitter in Dubai,

recounted that when he and his co-workers first went on strike over the non-payment of wages:

[the employer] would turn off the generator during the sleep time. The [air conditioning] at night time . . . as a punishment. The company also sent some CIDs, some of the plain-clothes police. And they pretended to be workers in the camp. But they informed on us.

Despite the state's efforts to undermine and halt a rapidly growing labour insurgency, labour actions continued across the emirate, culminating in a remarkable 2-week strike by an estimated 30,000–40,000 workers from the city's largest construction labour employer, Arabtec, in early November 2007 (Bowman 2008a; Surk 2007). Among them were the workers employed on some of the city's most iconic mega-projects, such as the Burj Khalifa.

Highly public events like this one contributed to tensions between private contractors and the Dubai government about how best to respond to labour unrest. Relations between contractors and the state were already strained following the government's decision to hold a voluntary amnesty for illegal migrants the previous summer in response to skyrocketing numbers of illegal workers in the city. The amnesty, which resulted in the unexpected exodus of several hundred thousand illegal migrants in just a few short months (Rahimi 2007c), was devastating for contractors who were already facing severe labour shortages. It was a move, moreover, that would serve to significantly strengthen striking workers' bargaining power. While these actions risked undermining the city's urban development markets, they reflect the enduring primacy of autocratic state policy directives aimed at discouraging permanent settlement by migrants and maintaining rigid *kafala*-based structures of control over foreign workers.

These tensions between the state and the private sector were palpable during the Arabian World Construction Conference held in early 2008. An elite gathering of key corporate and governmental players from construction sectors across the Gulf, the summit was held at the very peak of the construction boom. Optimism, as well as anxiety, was running high as key multinational construction and development firms and government officials gathered at the lavish Emirates Palace Hotel in Abu Dhabi to devise ways of preventing newly liberalized real estate and construction markets from collapsing. Throughout the conference, issues such as working conditions, wages, labour shortages and the strikes were central and recurring topics of discussion. As the head of a Belgian multinational construction and engineering firm argued:

[our company had] a very violent strike back in 2006, and now that the rupee is rising, if we don't pay labour more we won't get the good skill we need. This is key. We need to think about paying living wages, about quality of life for our workers. And we need the government's support to do it.

This echoed a growing sentiment among private sector contractors; two-thirds of participants at the conference voted in favour of instituting a minimum wage for construction workers; not only would it potentially halt costly work stoppages due to strike actions, but it might also serve to place some limit on the "acceptable" terms of

negotiation, as workers were in some cases demanding the doubling of their wages. It is a move, however, that state officials unequivocally refused to consider. At one point during a plenary discussion about the future of the construction industry, an agitated participant stood up and suggested that:

what has happened in Dubai with the strikes should be a wake-up call for us all—this is a major warning and something needs to happen to deal with it right away. The last strike was extremely organized, and if they start organizing more it could seriously stifle growth—I think we need to wake up and realize that this is a serious warning to all of us.

These closed-door debates about migrant builders' agency contrast starkly with the tales of abject labour that run through some of the neoliberalism literature on Dubai. They also, moreover, draw to light the distinct limits of autocratic state power. By 2007, it was clear that the government had been unable to halt the spread of labour actions among the construction workforce. Herein lay a fundamental dilemma for state officials: amidst rampant speculation that the city's property bubble was about to burst, any further spread of construction labour unrest risked toppling the city's fragile property market. At the same time, however, any continued attempt to quell the strikes using the only tools of discipline and coercion available to the autocratic state—chiefly, mass incarceration, police violence and deportation—might equally bring an end to a building boom that could not afford to lose any more workers. These conflicts would give rise to a new set of strategies by the state in which the labour camp would become a crucial site in the mediation of migrant builders' struggles.

Privatizing Protest: Discipline and Resistance in the Mass-Worker Household

In the wake of their failure to control the growth of construction strikes, the state subsequently became increasingly lenient towards "private" collective labour actions. According to accounts by interview respondents and migrants' rights groups, if workers raised their grievances through non-violent actions in the spaces of the labour camp, strike actions, while still illegal, were in many cases allowed to proceed as discrete and informal strategies to prompt negotiations and the voicing of grievances to individual employers. As Mahesh, who worked on a number of building sites in Healthcare City explained, "they [government officials and the police] allow strikes if they are in our work camps. Only a protest. We are allowed to gather. Outside of the site, no. Not in the streets. No shouting."

One strike participant, James, recounted the strike he and his co-workers waged following months of not being paid by their employer. Aided by a local Emirati journalist who commissioned buses for workers at all four camps, he explained:

[a] newspaper person was a mediator in the camp. From one of the Arabic newspapers. She helped us. She sent a bus for us, and to each and every camp. And we went together to the city, to the labour court . . . About 2000 people . . . We went and walked on the labour court. We were not allowed in. They said the labour officers, they would not send us inside.

James and his co-workers were told that negotiations would only proceed if they returned to their labour camp. A mediator provided by their employer was subsequently sent to the workers' camp and spoke at length with them, however nothing was ever resolved; the main strike organizers were quietly paid off, while workers' demands for back wages were never addressed. James recounted what transpired after the company mediator had met with the strike organizers:

The company sent a mediator to our camp after that, and they tell our mediator that everyone is going on duty, that the strike is solved ... The mediator came to our camp and said "we will give you all the benefits [you asked for] if you start going on duty" ... And the next day the paper [news media] showed like that, that the problem was solved. But we never got any benefit.

James' account reflects the ways that struggles over urban space have been key to the unfolding of these labour politics. While the political impact of some demonstrations stemmed partly from the fact that workers occupied "public" spaces in which they were not normally seen, such as busy downtown streets and outside government buildings, James' account of the labour camp as the primary site of negotiation—as well as co-optation and confinement—reflects the state's growing efforts to use workers' households as a means to curtail the labour movement's emergent agenda.

In this sense, spatial containment served *inter alia* as a strategy of political containment. Demonstrations in the streets or marches to the Ministry of Labour could only too easily leave the terms of debate open to the failures and responsibilities of the state. A protest held in an employer-run labour camp, meanwhile, was effectively transformed into a "private" matter between workers and their bosses. Collective bargaining could proceed without the state having to consider legalizing unions or institutionalizing other collective powers for workers. Relegation to the household, meanwhile, served to render the strikes both *discreet* and *discrete*: not only was labour unrest largely removed from the view of the media, the public and real estate investors, but privatization also served to separate and divide striking groups from the actions of workers from different companies or projects who might otherwise have had an opportunity to join forces.

Simultaneously disciplining and capitulative, this uneasy socio-spatial compromise arose out of the state's attempts to resolve the disconnections between the logics of autocratic rule and the requirements of speculative, marketized urbanization. Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009:56) suggest that the adoption of neoliberal policies gives rise to a process of creative destruction that requires, at its heart, diverse acts of institutional "dissolution", in which established structures of governance and power are destroyed and recast in the making of new institutional realities. This is never a simple or linear process, they argue, but one which occurs "across a cluttered and contested institutional landscape in which newly emergent 'projected spaces' interact conflictually with inherited regulatory arrangements, leading in turn to new, unforeseen and often highly unstable layerings of political-economic space". The intersection of existing and emergent arrangements, moreover, leads to a redefinition of the political arenas in which struggles over the regulation of capital accumulation play out.

In Dubai, the household and the body constitute two such arenas in the governance of construction labour. While a number of GCC states in the region—notably Bahrain—have in recent years abolished rigid *kafala* labour rules or have instituted more market-oriented frameworks for the management of expatriate labour, rulers in Dubai and the UAE have in most cases unequivocally sought to hold onto traditional autocratic structures of governance while at the same time enacting aggressive strategies of economic liberalization and marketization. Somewhere between moments of institutional destruction and creation, corporealized welfare and the mass-worker household have offered a set of spatio-political fixes for the state's autocratic institutions and neoliberal aspirations to exist side by side. It is within these realms of reconciliation, moreover, that transient moments of political possibility have emerged in the neoliberalizing autocratic city.

Conclusions: Searching for Class Possibilities in the Autocratic City

In this paper I have argued for the need to conceptualize neoliberal urbanism in Dubai as a hybridized, shifting and often conflicting set of strategies aimed at producing specific industrial and urban subjects. Teleological portrayals of the neoliberal autocratic state's totalizing conquest over poorer migrants in Dubai can serve to mythologize (Wright 2006) lower-waged foreign workers in the city, thus evacuating any consideration of the opportunities to bring about meaningful changes in their working and urban lives. These accounts also miss an important occasion to explore what Dubai's urban and class politics, so far outside the confines of the liberal democratic city, might reveal about the place-particular conflicts and antinomies created by the intersection of neoliberal urbanism and monarchic autocracy.

In focusing on the specific political possibilities for lower-waged construction workers, my aim has been to open up debate on class possibility in Dubai by decoupling understandings of neoliberalized labour relations from post-Fordist-inspired storylines about the erosion of formal, Keynesian labour power. At the same time, I have attempted to locate, both historically and spatially, the collectivization and privatization of construction labour politics in Dubai in order to explore the place-specific political implications these processes carry. The emergence of collective expatriate welfare initiatives and the strikes mark both the emergence of a contradictory and informal collective politics of labour in the city, as well as a shift from heavy-handed state policies of discipline to multiple acts of "supportive neglect" (Weinstein 2008) aimed at migrant builders. These active moments in the city's labour politics highlight both the limits to autocratic power in neoliberalizing Dubai, and unstable strategies mobilized by the state to manage the conflicting amalgamation of old and new institutional architectures.

Despite the lack of unions and formal organizations for collective bargaining, it would be a mistake to conclude that there have been no meaningful counter-politics at work in Dubai. The spontaneous wave of worker actions that spread across the city between 2004 and 2008—and which are ongoing—had a real and tangible effect on the conditions for many lower-waged builders in specific companies and

on particular projects. In a number of cases, labour actions enabled workers to successfully negotiate a pay raise, receive unpaid back wages, and in some cases win other concessions such as bi-annual plane tickets back home to visit family. Institutionally, these actions also had a significant, if limited impact; as a direct result of labour demonstrations and unrest leading up to 2005, for example, the Dubai Government established a governmental committee on labour affairs (what respondent James referred to above as the “labour court”) and a human rights department to assist in the arbitration of disputes between individual workers and their employers. These agencies have since handled thousands of cases and have played an important role in collecting unpaid wages (Bowman 2008b; Human Rights Watch 2006).

However, I have sought to draw attention to migrant builders’ agency here not to romanticize or overstate workers’ very limited gains, but because the challenges for migrant labour justice in Dubai and across the Gulf region are so great. It is precisely these moments of contestation, however fleeting, that deserve careful excavation and explanation if we are to understand what opportunities for meaningful change exist in a non-democratic city like Dubai. To this end, and in the spirit of pleas by urban scholars such as Elsheshtawy (2008) for “everyday” urban geographies of Dubai, debates about the city’s neoliberal urbanism must also be a mundane task of exploring the shifting, contradictory and day-to-day processes contributing to the formation of working subjects in the city—efforts which serve in part to disrupt clean aerial snapshots of the relations between capital, class and the state.

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Endnotes

¹ Due to these language differences, these interviews were recorded with the consent of respondents. My interviews with expatriate welfare providers, meanwhile, were not recorded but were captured in writing directly afterwards; this largely reflected welfare providers’ wishes, all except two of whom were resident in Dubai, not to have interviews recorded.

² The very first federal elections in the UAE were held in 2006, however the electorate is made up of a minority of national citizens who are hand-picked by the state. Voters, meanwhile, take part in electing half of the 40-member Federal National Council, an advisory body with limited parliamentary powers.

³ Obviously in reality the relationship between national citizens and ruling elites is more complex than this; for example, following accusations of criticizing state rulers, the incarceration of Ahmed Mansoor and four other pro-democracy activists in 2011 highlights not only an increasingly vocal politics of dissent among nationals in Dubai and the UAE, but also state officials’ deeply repressive response to it.

⁴ This figure was provided by the head of an international consultancy firm hired by the government of Dubai to reform the city’s health and safety inspection protocols for construction sites. Their identity has been withheld by request.

⁵ The Errant Aesthete: <http://theerrantaesthete.com/2008/03/21/dubai-ultimate-neoliberal-utopia/>

⁶ These estimates were corroborated by Hadi Ghaemi, researcher for the Middle East and North Africa Division, Human Rights Watch. Phone interview, September 2008.

⁷ Where appropriate, interviewees’ names have been changed or withheld.

⁸ Respondents typically explained that the government's reluctance to grant non-profit or charitable status to groups like theirs was due in part to the recent scandals that had plagued Islamic charities in Dubai that were charged with channelling money to terrorist groups in the region. Most respondents, however, felt that this was little more than a cover story to mask the state's enduring antipathy to the growth of an autonomous expatriate civil society.

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