

Cities of the South (Relié)  
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**Global City, tribal Citizenship: Dubai's paradox**

Dubai tries, quite successfully, to promote itself as the archetypal "Global City". This oil emirate on the south-eastern shore of the Gulf indeed attracts a continuous flow of visitors and customers from the whole world, while the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants are foreign residents. These range from the top executive of foreign companies and civil servants that make the City function under the control of the local Emir's family and its close local and foreign associates to huge masses of cheap labour originating mainly from South and South-West Asia: altogether, the foreign inhabitants are estimated to represent over 95 % of the total population. So the local population, usually called in Arabic "watani", meaning citizens, only represent a tiny minority. Obviously, it would seem that the clear demarcation between citizens and non-citizens should settle the question of who has a say in the city's public affairs. But the situation is more complex, since neither the local population on one side, nor the aliens on the other, enjoy a similar and equal official or non-official status and share of wealth and power. And these discrepancies play an important role, as the notion of citizenship appears more multifaceted than it looks at first sight.

The question raised by the extreme case of Dubai has to be looked into not only as a kaleidoscope or combination of immensely diverse social and juridical conditions, but in a more dynamic sense, as offering a good opportunity to clarify the question of the relationship between globalization and citizenship. It is widely considered that the process of globalization could lead to a weakening of the situation of the urban dwellers, which are in most cases, theoretically, enjoying a status of citizens: the functioning of large and increasingly heterogeneous urban fabrics might render the relationship between rulers and ruled more complex than the face to face of traditional government, and induce a widening variety of status and participation to the running of the city's public affairs.

In order to assess the real state of this notion in Dubai, one has to take into consideration its double meaning:

- 1) civil rights, that are universally admitted as fundamental human rights that are granted to anyone, and include the right to State protection, to participation in social life, to practice its religion and customs...and economic rights, that might be granted under specified conditions and restrictions, as the right to own real estate and property, to establish oneself on a more or less permanent and secure basis, to open, own and run a business...
- 2) Civic and political rights, which are only granted by citizenship *stricto sensu*: these might entitle to take part in the City public affairs, to vote and elect or be elected as representative to local or national consultative or deliberative Councils or Assemblies, or even to the executive bodies like the local

government, be it a Municipality or a State. It should be noted here that Dubai is not only a town, but it strenuously and to a large extent successfully attempts to assert itself as a quasi-State, maintaining a large degree of autonomy within the Federation of the United Arab Emirates, which it reluctantly joined at the eve of independence from the United Kingdom in 1971. So the question there is not only that of citizenship in the frame of a city, but within a larger body, which could include the question of a nation-building process, with its cultural and ethnic dimension.

Globalization is advocated by its idealistic supporters as bound to lead to the vanishing of national identities: the diversity of statuses should eventually melt in a comprehensive "world citizenship" uniting all "colors" in a Global Village<sup>1</sup>. But if the free trade is strongly enhanced by the rules of the WTO, that provide for a global market of goods and services, the mobility of human beings is strictly limited to the needs of manpower in industrialized countries and of tourism from those into specific spots in the poor countries. Be it in industrialized countries or in the oil states of the Gulf, the inflow and stay of manpower is severely controlled by state authorities, and their official status is kept as precarious and low as possible, so as to keep at their lowest the economic conditions of this foreign labour, in a context of fierce competition between wage levels from one country to another. In the case of Dubai, another factor that explains the denial of any form of citizenship to the huge majority of its dwellers is the demographic gap between the local population and the quantity of foreign labour needed to pursue the economic ambitions of the city's ruling elite. So Dubai, far from being a "melting pot", remains a patchwork of human groups ruled by a strict if non-official social and spatial segregation, where human beings interact solely in the prospect of creating and sharing profit and wealth, albeit on an extremely unbalanced footing.

But citizenship may also entail another meaning, that of one's feeling familiar to a place to the point of a sense of belonging to it, being part of its human spectrum, being part of what gives life to it, be it by one's living, working or just enjoying it, walking in its streets, interacting with other people that share the same feeling : there is the root of citizenship, a feeling of concern about the City's daily life and growth, of feeling concerned by the decisions taken to its future. This feeling is by no means linked with a juridical status, on the contrary, world metropolis had largely their destiny influenced by newcomers, devoid of any official say in the municipality's decisions. But in most cases, contrary to Dubai, several layers of migrants have stratified during long periods of time, the first ones acquiring a legitimacy to play a political and civic role, and enlarging their circle over time to those who followed, as in the case of New York and other North American cities...

## **I – What it needs to become a Global City**

Where usually the first question that comes to mind is: what does it mean to be Global? I would like to first tackle the question: what is it to be a City? The

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<sup>1</sup> MacLuhan

difference between a City and a town is well known to Geographers, the town being merely a human gathering that presents urban characters, while the City is a more political concept, as its own government is concerned, and also the dominant role it might play over the surrounding area or through its long range networks. The City has over time acquired another meaning, probably from the City of London, that is an economic and financial focal point. The question being then: is it possible to conceive globalization without democracy, or without any kind of participation of the workers to the shaping of their life's environment? Or more specifically, is not globalization an obstacle to democracy, or vice-versa? That is, is Dubai's thriving growth not due, at least for a part, to the absence of democracy? And in that case, is Dubai not showing the way for a successful globalization, which would imply the negation or suppression of civic and political rights in favour of economic competitiveness?

The first element to consider is that Dubai has from its inception be considered by its rulers as an economic tool before anything : hence the term of "Dubai enterprise" attached to it from the time of late Shaykh Rasheed (reigned 1959-1990), one of the firsts of a long line of Amirs of Dubai, that made its ambition come true. Dubai has been seen as a profit making business, rather than as a cradle for a local or imported society, before to be considered a City. If most towns owe their existence to the fulfilling of economic needs, this is often the result of a spontaneous aggregation of individuals and groups. They develop the skills and interactions needed by the surrounding environment and increasingly, by the needs of the town's life itself. In the case of Dubai, the beginning of the fortune came through free trade, imposed by colonial powers during the previous globalization phase. Far from the myth of "Merchant adventurers" that is promoted to invent an historical depth and an autonomous leadership comparable to that of Oman or Kuwait, the City is "born" at the eve of the XXth century, as a support to British imperial projects (when the merchants of Lingeh, on the Persian shore of the Gulf were attracted by the opportunity to escape the taxes that were about to be imposed on them) ; so this first success was at the expense of the attempt by a still independent State, Persia, to escape being subjugated by a World Colonial power<sup>2</sup>.

One century later, after having been successively a trading centre for Gulf pearls, a smuggling gate of gold for the Indian market and for various goods for Pakistan and Central Asia, Dubai has turned into a regional supermarket serving the poor or rigid outlets of vast and populous surrounding economies, first of all Iran and the neighbouring GCC countries. Its appeal extends even to increasingly remote markets of Africa and Central Asia, as provider of goods and services to war-torn or bankrupt economies. The consumer goods that are sold to those clients are mainly cheap and basic, manufactured in the Far Eastern and South-Eastern Asian countries. With its well known Free Zones, at the Airport as well as in Jebel Ali, Dubai started to manufacture itself some of these imported goods, using its assets, which combine modern infrastructure, efficient services and administration, cheap energy and labour, and low taxes. But it remains basically a regional and transcontinental hub, with its airport and its ports in town and in Jebel Ali further south, being connected

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<sup>2</sup> sur cette dimension historique, se reporter à Frauke Heart Bey, « Les Emirats Arabes unis », Karthala ; également Joffé...

with the whole world, and serving a wide array of surrounding harbours, that are not so well equipped and run. The know-how of Dubai Port Authority is so recognized, and its profits so large that it obtained the concession of several regional ports and recently attempted to acquire the portfolio of the old banner of the British Empire, the Peninsular and Oriental, which would give it free access to 29 destinations worldwide. So Dubai's development strategy, still based on the local scarce oil resources, but more and more on those lent to it by Abu Dhabi, the senior member of the Federation, goes farther, with the aim of establishing a solid and diversified industrial base, with the blessing and the participation of the world's larger transnational companies. Therefore, the rulers have well understood the necessity to go into more and more sophisticated activities: after the launching of an Internet City at the end of the 90's, comes the achievement of a Dubai Stock Exchange and the opening of Universities on the American model and curriculum (American University of Dubai, Dubai University College...). By offering these high level facilities and an attractive environment for business, up to a standard which fascinates visitors and observers from all the world with audacious achievements in urbanism and architecture, by even putting an emphasis on the development of a tourist industry, Dubai aims at attracting foreigners and at entertaining the most demanding residents: Golf courts are now common sight, and the last must of Dubai is the newly inaugurated Ski Dome. Far from being money waste, these, as the many world level Sport and Cultural events, serve to advertise Dubai as a booming enterprise and a promising investment.

### **What assessment can be drawn from this endeavour?**

No doubt, Dubai's success story is impressive and, let aside all favourable factors such as the ready availability of oil money, that makes the most eccentric projects feasible, one must recognize that all pessimistic provisions have been contradicted by facts. The vision and determination of the rulers are to be credited for this unabated growth. Dubai has been able to keep its pace, ahead of all competitors, through all obstacles and setbacks, such as slumps of oil prices or economic crisis, like that which hit emerging markets of South-Eastern Asia in 1998, not to speak about the turmoil caused by wars and embargos around Iraq since the early 80's.

Dubai enterprise has a manager, for each generation someone who leads the way, with new ideas and new plans to adapt to new challenges, and get the best out of Dubai assets in the prevailing conditions. It is the ruler or someone close to him by blood ties, like one of his brothers. But the ideas are either inspired or converted into facts by a small group of advisers who are still mainly foreigners, although Dubai started to produce its own young technocrats. These sons of the high ranking families are educated in the best western business schools and gain experience by completing their training in places like Singapore. And the old business community, mostly of Persian origin, that created precious local and overseas links during one century of legal and illegal trade around, still plays a major role.

But an objective observer has to pinpoint some weaknesses that don't appear clearly in the present enthusiastic atmosphere of hyperbolic laudation raised by the giant projects launched and blessed, one after the other, by success, in Dubai.

Firstly, Dubai had to overcome some setbacks and relative failures: industrialisation plans have not met the expected success, especially in Jebel Ali that remained for most of its activity limited to packaging of imported goods. And Dubai is now reviewing its plans, having realized that the import of additional unskilled labour would only widen the demographic gap between foreigners and nationals, for a not so important benefit in terms of financial gain, technology transfer or access to new markets and new partners. More significant is the half success met by the Internet City: the dream of building a new Silicon Valley, using brains drained from India and western capital, lacked what had been crucial for the Silicon Valley's creativity: a mix of individual freedom and contest of established rules and values, if not public order, and a fertile terrain for intellectual and philosophical exchange, and just a addition of money, technology and material comfort. In addition to that, the concentration in one place of various specialties dealing with communication and information is no more considered as a necessity. So behind Dubai's "Internet City" label is not much more to be found than a gathering of major world component manufacturers in the computer industry, in search of the incentives and facilities offered under this umbrella.

So, all considered, Dubai is still a rentier as well as a post rentier economy, and its GIP remains sensitive to the curb of the oil price. This shows that it did not acquire yet a full independence from this basic resource ; at least, that the confidence of foreign investors is still based to a large extent on the extraction of oil, or on the support and guaranty given by Abu Dhabi to Dubai's extravagances.

Second, Dubai's attractiveness relies on its customer's deficiencies, or on its position as an island of stability in the midst of a troubled world. It has for instance benefited from the Iraq-Iran war first, then from the violation of the UN embargo against Iraq, and has always managed to keep profitable commercial relations with Iran as well as with Iraq. Its economy is thus dependent on the difficulties and tragedies faced by surrounding countries of Asia and Africa at large. Therefore, its growth is linked to regional instability, which makes it itself unstable, while other competitors may emerge following the recipes of its model. For instance, new maritime hubs have recently started to divert part of the traffic from jebel Ali, like Salalah on the coast of Dhofar, which directly lies on high see, in a better position to provide a feeder service for transcontinental cargo.

One may not forget that Dubai owes much of its attractiveness to its role as a laundering machine for dirty money from the world around. Some light was shed to this aspect after September 11th, when the hunt for Al-Qaeda led to investigate movements of funds through Dubai's banking system<sup>3</sup>. But Dubai is not only a haven for terrorists or gangs like the Russian mafia that invests in the gigantic and flashy projects of Palm islands and the likes, it is also a safe place for "respectable" transnational companies to escape taxes in their home countries.

At the end of the day, the ruling elite indeed has some power of decision, and the financial means to achieve its plans, how ambitious and sometimes unrealistic as they may look. It shows an amazing ability to seize opportunities, to anticipate the demand of customers and consumers as well as that of the international companies

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<sup>3</sup> see i. a. R. Gunaratna : "Al Qaeda. Au Coeur du premier réseau terroriste mondial », Autrement, 2002 (french version)

at the world level, to feel new tendencies and to respond to those without any psychological or cultural hindrances.

But one may come to the conclusion that Dubai can hardly be considered a Global City: it lacks decisional and commanding functions of its own, since it depends much on the will of potential investors to choose this place instead of any others, and it lacks an internal substance and weight, be it demographic, social or even cultural. For that respect, Dubai shows a completely different case than that of Shanghai, with its huge hinterland, or even Hong Kong and Singapore, and is not part of the world network of leading cities.

The question still remains whether, like Palmyra or Petra in their time, Dubai doesn't enjoy an illusion of autonomy, while it only benefits of a temporary interest of foreign powers, at the heart of a strategic region for the world's economy and for the overall domination of western powers. So its own strategic choices in terms of development are kept under close scrutiny, first of all from Abu Dhabi, its senior partner and competitor, which becomes thanks to its immense wealth the banker of Dubai, and on a higher level, from the United States who are on last resort, the tutor of Dubai. So Dubai is not to be confused with a City State, like Petra or Venice or the Flemish or Hanseatic cities from the past.

If a will appears to fill the gap, what kind of a society, what institutional and juridical structures would have to be set in place to sustain the current project, in a word what City is to be shaped? This is now to be seen through a screening of the present human frame of the town.

## **II – A tribal society in a rentier situation**

### **1) The original tribal core**

The original population settled on the shore of the Khor Dubai in 1833. It was a branch of the Bani Yas confederation that split from the main group centred on Abu Dhabi and the Liwa oases. They made a living from the dates of their palm trees, from camel herding and sea fishing during the summer season. As any Bedouin society, this was a hierarchical, but fluid and so to say "democratic" group, where power on the tribesmen was shaky, often shifting between the major families, and where each family head had all possibility to quit the group to join another one, in case of disagreement over the policy implemented by the ruler of the day.

The power structure was stabilized by the intervention of the British agents that vested a family as their closer allies in the area, to counter the influence of the "Qawasim", strongly entrenched in neighbouring Sharjah and in Ras al-Khaimah, their maritime stronghold farther north. What was to become the Al-Maktoum family in the 1930's was reinforced by weapons and diplomatic support, and by the turn of the XXth century, by the adjunction of a merchant community that transferred itself from the Arab emirates on the northern shore of the Gulf. Their rule has been strengthened even more by the discovery of oil, whose royalties, in the hands of the ruler, frees him from the need of internal support and gives him the means to integrate all the citizens into his dependency, through the distribution at his goodwill of part of the rent, under the shape of the *kafala*, of import licences, of grants and subsidies.

Bedouins and merchants form the bulk of the local population who enjoys the Emirate's citizenship: they only represent 4 % of an entire population of roughly 1, 2 million inhabitants, i.e. 50 000 people. Considered that half of this amount is female, that do not count as far as citizenship is concerned, and children, one can estimate the total population of adult males, or potential citizens, at around 15 000. This tiny community is not well known to outsiders, since it tries not to be drowned by the influx of foreigners, and tends to limit its contacts with those foreigners to the needs of administration and business, keeping their social life as much as possible discreet. One can just guess, for the needs of this presentation, that this society is as diverse as others in the neighbouring countries of the Gulf. It is divided among clans and families that have an unequal status in the traditional society, from prominent and wealthy families to the domestic slaves. So, behind the apparent uniformity due to the affluent oil rent, not all enjoy the same prestige and say in the community's affairs. The primacy given to lineage and blood ascendancy should also limit the say of the immigrated merchant community that was granted citizenship by the rulers, be it of Persian or Hadrami<sup>4</sup> origin.

### *The privileges attached to "citizenship" and their limits*

The so-called Dubai citizens are granted rights: some of them are less and less distinct from those granted to all citizens of the Federation, like the nationality, the right to be protected by the authorities, which practically means to be considered as the victim in any contest with a foreigner, be it a car accident or a business dispute. Some others are peculiar to each emirate, like the allowances which are given to every family for its housing, the schooling of its children, the opening of a business: all seven Emirates are Providence States, but their generosity depends much on their oil revenues, or of the subsidies received by their ruler from the Federation, that is to say from Abu Dhabi's budget. Every ruler is expected to distribute some of the oil revenues for the welfare of its people, either directly or indirectly (granting of formal jobs in the public administration, access to the "tutorage" of the foreigners living in the country through the system of "sponsorship" or *kafala*). As a counterpart, the bulk of the local population cannot be said as benefiting of civic rights: to turn the saying in an appropriate way, "no taxation, no representation", and the nationals of Dubai could be in reality named more properly "subjects" than citizens. As long as oil or money flows, no official legislative or consultative councils have been set up through an election system.

## **2) The powerful and influential upper circles**

So, real power and say in public affairs is restricted to close circles of power and influence, around the person of the ruler. The personalities of successive rulers are surprisingly strong: several of them have had a true vision, seeing far ahead from local conditions of the time. But this gives the impression that Dubai's success story is tied to one man's ambition, which, if true, would weaken the prospect of

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<sup>4</sup> A merchant community originating from the Hadramaut (South Yemen), they were entrusted with the Dubai nationality at an early stage.

sustainability that it tries to convince of. The new ruler, Sheikh Muhammad, is definitely the key promoter of the new steps in which Dubai is engaging, and he has been in charge of economic development for a long time already, as a Crown Prince next to his less involved brother Maktoum; but his Heir Apparent is known for suffering addiction that would render him unable to properly oversee the Emirate's affairs. If the government remains a family business, the education needed to run a more and more complex "enterprise" opens the way for young technocrats, who serve as advisers to the new Prince's cabinet. This meritocracy, promoting an ideology of liberalisation and globalization, competes with elder tenants of power and influence, who are more wary, through their networks, of the cultural and social dimension in which the whole process takes place.

These inner centres of power should not let one forget that decision makers of Dubai's fortune are for a large part foreigners settled there or based abroad, in the major western metropolis: these are the heads or representatives of transnational firms, which operate strategic choices in favour or against any site in the world for their activities. The decision to establish an Internet City or an industrial Free Zone would be meaningless if those firms would not decide to transfer there part of their activities and the competition is fierce to attract regional offices, manufacturing or better, research and development centres, of those firms. Those decision makers are of course not citizens, but their weight is much heavier than that of most of the local actors.

A last factor that commands the path of development of Dubai is now the constraint set by the need for Dubai to abide by its image, in order to keep on attracting investors and building confidence. The heavy machinery is on its rails, and cannot be stopped, except at a price of a brutal economic slump, for Dubai's citizens, but also for the rest of the world. It would be hit by the in chain reaction that would follow such a crash. Dubai's image of modernity and success is that of triumphant world capitalism, and it is relayed by public opinion, customers and visitors, who are influenced by and influence in return the media, themselves targeted by the constant activity of the Dubai Marketing and Investment Board offices scattered around the world.

### **3) The birth of a complex civil society**

If Dubai's society has been up to now denied access to civic or political rights, still one may witness a recent move toward the rising up of a civil society that, apart from the power circles, dares to let its voice heard.

One should first notice that, if an implicit social contract exists between the ruling class and the nationals, based on a not too unequal sharing of the oil rent, nothing such has ever been set about the model and the speedy path of development that has been imposed from the top. The ordinary citizens start feeling anxious about the demographic imbalance between themselves and the migrants, and they feel threatened in their survival as a distinct group, financially privileged but suffering from a loss of identity: the generation gap is immense and cannot be filled, since the youngest, as in all Gulf countries, are educated by foreigners, be it at home or at school, and since dominant social values tend to be replaced by those of the

migrants. The sheer socialization of this society, which is the condition of the strengthening of family and financial bonds, is rendered more difficult by its drowning in the mass of foreigners. This all explains that associations have been founded, questioning the logics of importing more and more manpower, with the aim of increasing a GDP per capita that is already among the highest in the world. These resistances reach the Ruler's palace, through the traditional channels and the family or tribal links that knit this tiny society together. So if formal representation of the population is not yet in place, it doesn't mean that the population concerns are not taken into account.

A few years ago, along with the project of an Internet City, the Emirate had launched with much publicity the concept of "e-government", which, it pretended, would enable it to satisfy the administrative needs of its inhabitants and allow each one to have access to the ruling apparatus and express his views, suggestions, etc. Aimed at shortcutting possible demands for a larger participation in the Emirate's affairs, under the disguise of a fashionable and technically sophisticated Internet system, that was supposed to promote at the same time the openness and the modernity of the Dubai government, it proved soon to be just a technical way to simplify administrative procedures.

More seriously, there is a clear awareness, in Washington and in parts of the ruling elite of the Gulf, of the risks induced by trying to build up a globalized economy without establishing a strong social base, deemed to cut the grass under the feet of social upheavals in the form of the so-called "Islamic fundamentalism". In line with this, the then Heir Apparent, General Sheikh Mohamed al-Maktoum, Minister for Defence of the Federation, openly spoke about the need to open the society and "normalize" its functioning, in order to ensure its sustainability. One way that was considered was to organize elections and end up with a Parliament, which clearly would be a move, bound to reinforce the loyalty of the file and rank of Emirian Citizens to the system. But it should remain a rather artificial exercise, top-down organized, and probably also aimed at closing ranks of the nationals in front of the growing demand of other dwellers to participate in public affairs. It remains to be seen how this novelty will be put in application, and whether this will be sufficient to give Dubai's citizenship some consistence.

#### *The foreigners, the social diversity behind a unique status*

The foreigners do not benefit of any of the advantages granted to the citizens, and are not included in the political reform prospects. Their common feature is instead an absolute precariousness, since they can, whatever their origin, their professional or social position, be expelled from the country at any moment and for any reason. They are fully submitted to the goodwill of their sponsor, who is either an individual or a local private or public institution. The State's protection that should be granted to them is itself very limited, since, as said before, in case of a dispute with a national, local authorities systematically side against them. This precariousness certainly is an advantage for the easy control of the manpower flow, according to the needs of the economy. Indeed, the number of foreign workers varies in line with the oil prices, although an unknown number of workers stay illegally in the country, generally

after the end of their official contract<sup>5</sup>. But it is double edged, at least concerning the professionals, businessmen and highly qualified experts whose loyalty and long term involvement in Dubai's development projects would be an asset. Those benefit in fact of a large amount of tolerance and permissiveness, which goes together with a tight control of public and private behaviour by the discreet but efficient security forces. Their status reminds to some extent that of foreigners under the regime of Capitulations in the Ottoman Empire, where European consulates were conceded a judiciary and protective role to them and their local dependants and allies. But it is far from being enough to feel safe and induce oneself to a trust in the host country. The lesson of the invasion of Kuwait has not been lost. The Palestinians, who had settled there as soon as 1948 to help build the first oil emirate, and had lived there for several generations, with the feeling of having found a second home, were merciless expelled as soon as the Allied armies reconquered the emirate: they were accused to have supported and collaborated with the Iraqi occupants. The foreigners' length of stay in Dubai is for most of them not comparable, but the lesson goes also for the authorities, who lost a lot of Kuwait's attractiveness and dynamism with the flight of this active work force and of its savings<sup>6</sup>, not to speak about the image of ruthlessness and ingratitude dispelled on that occasion. Aware of that hindrance to the development of the economy, Dubai's authorities decided to open the real estate market to foreigners, in order to retain part of the expatriates' revenue and to ensure their deeper involvement in the future of the Emirate. This step cannot be but a first one, since it raises the question of the stay of those owners, and then of their participation in the City affairs, as owners financially interested in the urban projects. And therefore it may exacerbate in turn the fears of the ordinary citizen, who will feel his privileges endangered by these newcomers. A new status, intermediary between that of citizen and that of foreigner, may have to be invented to fit with that new situation...

On the other side of the spectrum, Dubai's boom rests on the harsh work of an army of modern slaves, the contract workers imported from the villages of the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia<sup>7</sup>. Those who execute the unskilled work in the building, manufacturing or service sectors, are not only deprived of any protection; they are, more often than not, denied basic human rights. Their passport being retained on arrival, they are subject to the goodwill of their employer, and their housing, transportation and working conditions are inhumane. They are usually not taken into account as part of the resident population, since they don't participate to a consumer's, or leisure's or social life, working day and night and being accommodated in squalid camps at the outskirts of the town. Nevertheless, a new phenomenon is the concern shown to their plight by some segments of the urban population. Some cases are raised in the Reader's mail of newspapers like the Khaleej Times, whose readership is mainly alien, and give floor to heated debates about priorities and actions to be taken to correct the misconduct of companies and the neglect of the State regarding those abuses. In some cases, the authorities even take

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<sup>5</sup> Local authorities turn a blind eye to the illegal migrants who help keep salaries low, until temporary economic slumps signals the start of mass hunts and expulsions.

<sup>6</sup> That gave a welcome temporary boom to the Jordanian economy in the following years...

<sup>7</sup> A new trend being the import of Chinese workers, who are deemed to be more docile and even cheaper than the India or Pakistani, Thai or Korean manpower.

action, like when Dubai's police force the payment of wages arrears. This shows that the foreigners may have their voice heard, even if not through official ways and that the authorities have to take into account their opinion, for the smooth functioning of the system, and out of their dependency on the world public opinion, which may be shocked or moved by TV reportages on the dark side of Dubai's "miracle".

This example shows that Dubai's foreign population is not silent and wants to have a say in public affairs, and an influence on the running of the City. How, and to what extent, knowing that it would not want to have to choose between its guest country and its motherland, but to enjoy more flexibility? The ideal being a dual commitment to both parts of its life and of its identity... I shall attempt to render these options more concrete through questioning Dubai's shaping and daily life, or how a feeling of etymological "citizenship" may emerge among the foreign population, independently from the official status enjoyed by its inhabitants.

### III – Urban life and social structures

#### 1) *A socio-spatial fragmentation quite at the opposite of a "melting pot"*

At first sight, Dubai seems to present a brutal duality: on one side, the narrow and bustling commercial streets of Deira and Bur Dubai, on both sides of the Creek, on the other, the strait and majestic alignment of office towers along Sheikh Zayed Road. Or the private sand beaches and the night clubs on the shore of Jumeirah, as opposed to the Shi'a mosque and Hindu temple of the Dubai old Souk...

What is the functional link, if any, between these two civilisations, these two urban concepts set side by side? How is the identity of Dubai shared between these two worlds, and how do the inhabitants move from one to other (if they do)? Is in Dubai a urban mosaic to be found, with an Indian town, an Arabic town, for instance, like as many China Towns or Little Italy? Or is it, for that respect, what might be called a World city? Some historical background might help to answer.

#### 2) *A short, but telling history*

Present Dubai is no more than 50 years old, that is, the buildings dating from the 70's are considered old, and indeed look often old and run out, due to the poor quality of the building material used at the time, and to the humid and salty atmosphere of the summer season. Only a few buildings are older (Sheikh Saeed Al-Maktoum's House, Dubai Museums Palace, old merchant houses with their wind towers, some mosques). They are now recognized as historical and rehabilitated in a process of gentrification of the old city centre, to be turned into trendy art galleries and cultural centres run by western ladies. But the backyards of Deira, behind the rehabilitated main streets of Al-Ras or Al-Buteen, are still the home of a crowd of poor Pakistani and Indian migrants that work in the nearby shops.

From that starting point, Dubai has extended in concentric circles: the 70's and 80's were the start of the boom, and the network of road infrastructure as of housing quarters was drawn then. Since the 90's, extension has been mostly toward the south and the jebel Ali port and free zones. The most impressive developments have been along the sea shore, and even now off-shore: Burj al-Arab, unique 6 stars hotel in the

world, with its characteristic shape of a sail, that peaks 321 m above sea level, is now already a classic, since the new projects reach new dimensions: the artificial Palm islands and The World, on the future "Dubai waterfront", aim to be the most exclusive private leisure resorts in the world. One may wonder on what self image is this new city conceived, or what image Dubai's promoters want to project of the place, with their rather childish and simplistic representations, confusing Disneyland with the real world? For our purpose, the question is indeed whether Dubai chooses to become a global icon that has a meaning for all possible clients, or whether it feels like being faithful to its roots with the emphasis given, in the architectural forms, to sails and palms? At any case, this new Dubai might well turn its back more and more to its past and to its arab-islamic identity, whatever it means. It has for some time been argued that Dubai's duality was in fact integrated in a single economic project, and that the wooden dhows that load their smuggled shipment of tyres and fridges to be transported to the northern shore of the Gulf were one and the same with the import-export companies housed in the modern CBD's at the crossroads of the 6-lane highways, and one of the strengths of Dubai was its ability to connect traditional and modern economic ways, using both high tech and unskilled labour, at the service of backward and deprived economies.

### 3) *A new orientation?*

The new orientation taken seems to widen the gap between these two sides of Dubai, with the emphasis on the futuristic look of the urban shaping and on "high tech" activities. If successful, this choice might change the ethno-social features of the city, distancing it from its arab-islamic roots, but also from its Indian subcontinent dominant "flavour", to turn it into a "tasteless" Monaco of the Gulf. The aim is also, no doubt, through this orientation, to reduce the need for imported manpower, and so to solve the question of citizenship, Dubai being then only visited by an exclusive cosmopolitan "jet society", with locally only the labour needed for their service and for the high tech industries and services that the city hopes to attract.

If this would amount to the apex of the globalization process, it would still not make Dubai a global City, for the reasons already given. But there is another element that differentiates Dubai from the globalized cities' model: the passing from a centralized authority to the concept of governance, which is the participation of the inhabitants to the city's management, as well as the privatisation of public services.

Up to now, the Municipality of Dubai, a powerful body, is in charge of all public services pervading to the city's daily functioning. Due to its oil revenue, Dubai has not felt the need to concede its public services to private bodies, and the municipality ensures an efficient service, and at the same time, allows the authorities to keep a close watch on the public and private spheres.

### 4) *A human patchwork where each community has its landmarks*

Each community, or better said, each social or ethnic group uses a Dubai of its own. For instance, everyone who is involved in or around modern business of all brands works in the same buildings, frequents the same clubs, lives in the same compounds and sends its children to the same schools. The middle class remains closer to its

national origins, following a strategy of social promotion back home: on the British model, the Indians have their own schools, clubs, shops and restaurants, newspapers and TV channels, etc., but with little or no mixing between Keralese and Gujaratis, for instance, nor between different social classes or religion-based casts, in order to preserve the homeland segregation and distinctions. Newcomers like the Uzbek community are organized differently: they come here for shopping mainly, as many Africans do; so their networks are built around hotels, translators and forwarding agents, air and cargo transport companies... With the tremendous growth of the city, it is more and more difficult for any inhabitant to have an overall view of the city, so it seems logic that people withdrawing on their own familiar places and networks. The fact that moving inside the City is only practicable by car, due to the heat as well as to the increasing distances and to the domination of a North American way of life, makes the chances for interaction ever scarcer.

5) *Is socio-spatial fragmentation compatible with an urban sense of belonging?*

Dubai's human mosaic is not composed of separate clusters; if some quarters, as said earlier, are more prone to shelter social groups than others, there are no ethnic neighbourhoods. The socio-ethnic networks are scattered, with their gathering points, like religious buildings, clubs and schools often far away from each other. So a level of interaction is secured, and, if not familiar with the whole city, everyone knows and frequents more than one place, especially the middle and upper classes that shuttle daily between their home, their school or place of work and their club or leisure place. This gives way to a sense of being at home; not the original home, but an *ersatz* of it, where life is often easier and comfortable, even if the nostalgia is always present, and where each one has its own landmarks and memories, with time passing.

One may even suggest that foreigners might feel more at home than the nationals. Those, at least the Bedouins, stem from a nomadic origin. Even after two generations, they may not feel at ease in the city, which was created by others for others, primarily. They have never been consulted on the urban shaping, or even that of their homes, which are designed for them by foreign architects and decorators, often after a brand of Indian and Egyptian tastes. Of course, the city belongs to them, but they don't feel as belonging to it, the more that they don't account for more than a twentieth of the population<sup>8</sup>. Living in compounds where they are intermixed with the foreigners of the same level of income, they don't have any separate schools or clubs, and even in the professional sphere, they have to deal with a majority of foreign colleagues. So, in order to meet as a society of its own, like in the "good old days" of poverty and deprivation, they have to retreat out of town, for instance, during the summer months, in their farms in the desert, where they find renewed opportunities to socialize. They may even enjoy more the time spent in their residences abroad, where they can live among themselves while avoiding the crowd

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<sup>8</sup> One may add that the Dubai's lifestyle is opposite to the Bedouin values and traditions of discretion, which is obvious if compared to Abu Dhabi. With no difference in the amount of wealth or in the natural conditions, the atmosphere of Abu Dhabi is much more rigid and restricted than that of the more cosmopolitan Dubai.

of their home city<sup>9</sup>. In short, precariousness is not only the lot of the foreigners, and the nationals share that feeling of anxiety, and tend to withdraw or to find a personal equilibrium in a foreign country. Modernisation and opening have had their cost. Mental diseases took their prey among the youth; wealth and related idleness has had another price, with the spreading of social deviances like drug addiction and homosexuality. Islamism may find a fertile terrain in such a situation, as in Saudi Arabia, when the expectations of the youth are met with a rising rate of unemployment. At the same time, the foreigners tend to assert themselves, and ask some rights linked with residence to be granted to them, to keep pace with the new economic endeavours that lie ahead.

To conclude with, the basics of globalization and the seeds of citizenship exist in Dubai, but the incautious connection of both could amount to a collective suicide for Dubai national population. The choice is therefore impossible, and therefore the momentum of Dubai's race for progress will continue unabated, but it could encounter a growing dissent from within the local youth, that will more and more strongly express demands of a full citizenship for themselves, in the political arena, while the foreigners will content themselves with the juridical recognition of their existence and of their rights to live and to express themselves about their daily life business.

Marc Lavergne  
8th March 2006

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<sup>9</sup> In their favourite homesteads in London, Paris, or on the French Riviera, and more and more since September 11<sup>th</sup> back in the heights of Lebanon or Morocco, they can find together privacy and its contrary, the anonymity of foreign metropolis.