

Dubai: globalization on steroids



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Dubai: Globalization on Steroids by William Morehouse in *The American Scholar*, Winter 2008, 1st December Promotions for Dubai on CNN, BBC World, and other satellite channels show a shimmering skyline of glass and steel office towers with their graceful curves and aquiline shapes, suggesting a distant galaxy where all the unpleasantness of urban life has been airbrushed away. But advertising almost always offers more promise than reality, whether the product is potato chips or a city or a country. Seen through the lens of the everyday, nothing in this city is so clear. It's hard to come to terms with Dubai, because there is confusion even in the way it is described by the media. It is often referred to as a Persian Gulf country (which it definitely isn't), or a city-state (wrong again), or a Gulf emirate (also not accurate, because Dubai, the city, is only part of Dubai, the emirate, which is an integral part of the United Arab Emirates). But one thing is clear: during the three years I've lived here, it has undergone the kind of transformation that a city might experience once in a lifetime. Each time I leave my apartment block, I drive past shells of unfinished buildings with piles of sand and rubble spilling onto the sidewalks, and I'm struck by another irony of Dubai- that the more the city aspires to be the premier megalopolis of the 21st century, the more it resembles 1945 Dresden. The pace of growth has left many residents wondering what the hurry is. Yet everyone seems to be in a rush. On Sheikh Zayed Road, the 12 lanes linking Dubai with Abu Dhabi, the UAE capital 100 miles to the south, drivers barrel down the fast lanes at 90 miles an hour. Late on a Friday night, drivers weave in and out of the speeding traffic, which results in an appalling accident rate that leaves crushed fenders and tangles of gnarled metal piled along the roadsides. Has any place on earth grown as quickly or been

transformed so completely? Aerial photos from the early 1960s show a dusty, ramshackle trading post tucked between the Persian Gulf and the Creek, Dubai's inland waterway and outlet to the sea. Ten years later it was beginning to take on the look of a prosperous city; a decade after that it had changed so much as to be almost unrecognizable. The one-runway airstrip had been replaced by an international airport, a forest of office towers had grown up along the Creek, and residential tracts had spread across barren expanses of desert that stretched to the horizon. Dubai today is often described as a Wild West town, and the widespread economic opportunism lends some truth to the description. Driving the expansion is neither natural resources nor old-world industrialization but rather the gears of a 21st-century economy—banking, technology, trade and tourism, real estate, and media outlets. The tycoons cutting business deals in hotel restaurants and on beach-club patios are representatives of this new global economy—Taiwanese bankers and Lebanese import/exporters, Russian oligarchs and Iranian property investors. But even Dubai is not immune from the vicissitudes of global economics—the September worldwide financial crisis drained almost \$6 billion from its financial markets. In spite of its rapid growth and the influence of globalization on Dubai, a bit of the old city can still be found. Walk through the covered market on the Deira side of the Creek, past spice vendors displaying their wares in 100-pound sacks; then go up winding, narrow lanes past the gold, silver, and textile dealers from Pakistan and Iran and the Indian merchants who speak fluent Arabic, their roots in Dubai reaching back generations. From there it is only a short walk up to the Al-Hamadiya School, now a museum, the first place to offer formal education in Dubai. Exhaust-spewing water taxis still shuttle commuters

across the Creek between the twisting streets of Deira and the traditional Bastakia quarter, home to the pre-oil ruler's palace, a covered market, and the site of a former fort. On the Deira side, ships unload pallets of cargo, just as they have ever since Dubai served as a convenient transit point for much of the trade that passed between India and Africa and the rest of the Arabian peninsula. In the neighbourhoods of Jumeirah and Umm Suqeim, quiet side streets lined with white houses topped with red tile roofs glisten in the afternoon sun, suggesting the placid tranquillity of southern California when southern California was tranquil and placid. Early in the morning, Indonesian housemaids sweep driveways with dried palm branches, and South Asian labourers still use these primitive implements to clear the paths in the local parks. It is hard to reconcile such images with those more popularly associated with Dubai. There is the Royal Mirage Hotel, whose silent, soaring hallways and courtyards have been designed in palatial Arabian splendour. Not far away is the Madinat Jumeirah, another hotel complex and an adjoining shopping arcade, where the tinkling music of the oud is pumped into the elevators and down the narrow, serpentine corridors in an effort to re-create the sensual mysticism of the Arabian covered market. But here, too, like almost everywhere in Dubai, the traditional clashes with the modern, and the uneasy blend is meant to serve consumerism: at the Madinat Jumeirah, restaurants and cafés surround artificial lakes, gift boutiques cater to upscale travellers, and live music echoes from the JamBase, one of Dubai's hot spots. All of the glitz has made Dubai trendy among the globetrotting business set and holidaymakers interested in a taste of the Middle East—as long as it is tempered with a hefty dose of Club Med— but the changing character of the city is not endorsed by everyone.

Among so-called locals, or Emirati nationals, there is increasing fear that their culture will eventually succumb to Westernization and foreign influence. Such apprehension is justified, for the demographics are not on their side. Emiratis now account for only 20 percent of the population (an official estimate, probably inflated); within 20 years, as more foreigners pour in from South Asia, the Far East, Russia, and Africa, the percentage is likely to fall to the single digits. But it is hard for locals to grumble too loudly when they have also been seduced by the global consumer ethos. After midday prayers on a blazing Friday afternoon, they head for the blissfully cool shopping malls, as do Indian and Filipino families and British expatriates, to scoop up the latest in mobile phones and other electronic gadgets. Women display designer handbags over their flowing black abayas but wear blue jeans under them, and many young men complement their crinkly clean kandouras with a baseball cap instead of the traditional white headdress. Out in the parking lot, families cram the backs of their Range Rovers and Ford Explorers with plastic shopping bags and a 2 month's groceries. The good life has created a sedentary life, and with it a sharp rise in obesity and diabetes. As though suddenly seeing the need to change direction, Dubai has begun making desperate attempts to preserve its past. In April 2007 the Dubai Municipality issued a ruling ordering the preservation of more than 2,000 buildings it considered "having historical significance in the United Arab Emirates." But the breakneck development all over the city makes this a fool's errand. Glossy advertisements for unbuilt real estate tracts cover the arrivals hall at the airport, fill billboards beside the highway entrance ramps, and push the news off the front pages of the local newspapers. The inside pages promise more: one full-page ad shows a Venetian gondolier, against a

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backdrop of faux Mediterranean chic, paddling along an artificial canal, past café tables with Western and Asian patrons relaxing beneath palm trees. The most widely advertised development is now the Lagoons, a name that, like the Greens, Springs, Lakes, and Meadows, belies the arid land it occupies. Indeed, image more than oil (little of which ever existed in Dubai anyway) is now the city's most valuable export. But what reality might that image exploit? The city was never one of the great centres of Islamic learning or Arab culture, like Cairo or Damascus. It has always been a centre for trade, a way station for commerce. Even today it boasts no impressive mosques; shopping malls are the grandest edifices, and the best-known universities are imported satellite campuses from the United States, England, and Australia. So with no great cultural legacy to celebrate, Dubai has embraced the culture of celebrity. Last February, Tiger Woods was once again victorious in the Dubai Desert Classic, and Roger Federer tried (unsuccessfully) to defend his title in the Dubai Tennis Championships. A year ago George Clooney promoted his movie Michael Clayton at the Dubai International Film Festival, and Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie have been spotted frolicking with their children on the beach of the Burj Al Arab, the sail-shaped hotel that is the city's current signature landmark. Dubai is often described as an Arabian Disneyland, and the characterization is not wide of the mark. Tourists, residents, and celebrities (including Michael Jackson and Rafael Nadal) have slid down the foaming cascades at the Wild Wadi water park. Across Sheikh Zayed Road, the enclosure for the indoor ski slope at the Mall of the Emirates angles into the sky like a giant airplane hangar tipped on end, glowing with a streak of lurid colour at nightfall. To accommodate the 15 million tourists a year that the city is planning to host by 2010,

another resort complex of 30 hotels and 100 cinemas was sketched out on the city planner's boards, but as a sign that even Dubai's aspirations have been tempered, the project has been put on hold. Not, however, the Mall of Arabia, which promises to surpass the West Edmonton Mall as the world's largest shopping and entertainment complex. The most impressive feature of Dubai isn't the George Jetson architecture, or even the Burj Dubai, destined to be the tallest building in the world when completed, but the fact that people who would normally be at each other's throats in their home countries—Indians and Pakistanis, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Serbs and Bosnians, Ethiopians and Eritreans—manage to live and work together in remarkable harmony. This is also part of the legacy of Dubai, that for generations it has served as a crossroads of cultures and a transit point for people as well as goods, and so it evolved into a tolerant neutral space where the petty feuds of other parts of the world have no place. The downside of this polyglot society is a paucity of the shared concerns that can form a social consciousness and hold a society together. " I don't want Hezbollah running my country, " the Lebanese receptionist at a medical clinic says when I ask her thoughts on the fallout of the Israel-Lebanon war. That issue is a nonstarter for the Asian staff who share her office. " She was a beautiful, beautiful woman! " the Pakistani security guard outside my apartment building croons, two days after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, who spent part of her political exile in Dubai. Being so far from the café tables of Lahore or Karachi, it is probably the first chance he's had to pour out praise for the populist leader. Dubai is just a short airplane hop from the crises in Sudan, Iraq, and Palestine, but in an odd irony, this global city remains blissfully alienated from the pressing global issues that surround

it. Car bombings in Baghdad and street battles in Gaza seem to exist in some parallel universe far from Dubai's beach clubs and poolside barbecues. If talk radio is a barometer of popular sentiment, Dubai lacks social angst, or even concern about the world's troubles. On Property Week, callers swap tips on the latest real estate investments. On another show, listeners offer advice on ways to kill time in traffic and compare the brunch buffets and weekend getaway packages offered by five-star hotel chains. One program is devoted to nuanced analysis of rugby, soccer, and cricket matches for United Kingdom and subcontinent expatriates. When the local English daily celebrated its 35th anniversary, readers praised the paper for its coverage of business, sports, and entertainment, but there was no hankering for more articles on international current events, some frighteningly close to home. Life in Dubai is not all whimsical indulgence, however, for vice has arrived as an inseparable part of the global village. Dubai's crime rate, still modest by Western standards, has risen to a level that would have been unknown a generation ago. Street crimes are still rare but drug seizures are not, and black markets in consumer goods have sprung up. (In a caper that Butch Cassidy would have envied, a gang of thieves drove two stolen cars through an entrance of the upscale Wafi City Mall, smashed a jewellery store display window, and made off with the goods.) Where economic adventurism thrives, so does the world's oldest profession. Prostitutes from China, the Philippines, Russia, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet republics hover near hotel entrances, hoping to snag returning guests. To its credit, Dubai can be called a true microcosm, but it's hard to believe that a coherent society can be composed of guest workers who have migrated solely for lucrative jobs and have no longterm stake in the city's future. Beneath the veneer of harmony

is the disturbing sense that everyone knows his or her place. Class asserts itself in an unsavoury caste system where national and ethnic identity determines whether one is offered employment or a lease for an apartment. The city's reputation as a haven of safety and security in a troublesome part of the world is upheld by affirming an "old world order" left by the colonial power Dubai would like to believe it has moved beyond. Social equality is a noble ideal promoted by the government but flouted in practice, proving once again that the democratic society is still a modern notion, at war with the more widespread tendency of human beings to create a hierarchy. A landlord may refuse to rent apartments to 4 "bachelors," the code word for men from the Asian subcontinent working in Dubai who may be supporting wives and children back home. The term would never apply to an unmarried German electrical engineer or a Canadian English teacher. "Eight years," a taxi driver replies when I ask how long he has been plying the roads of Dubai, and I know this means 12 hours a day, six days a week. On Friday afternoons he probably goes to the closest Western Union office, like hundreds of others, to wire money back to his family in Mumbai or Peshawar. Class asserts itself also in the division between servers and the served. I still feel a little awkward when supermarket clerks address me formally and the deliveryman from Pizza Hut ("Ahmad," according to his name tag) is overly grateful for a modest tip. But I remind myself that since Dubai is not a democracy and few of its residents come from democratic countries, there is no way its society could resemble one. If someone had to pinpoint one spot on earth that epitomizes the most unsavoury aspects of globalization, Dubai could be Exhibit A. It is a place where the whims of a consumerist society overwhelm a simple native Bedouin culture, the predilections of the affluent

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obliterate local climate and ecology, and the divide between rich and poor is unapologetically laid bare. Discussion points Read the above account of Dubai and discuss the following questions in groups: 1. To what extent can the Dubai story be regarded as the epitome of Globalisation? Explain your answer. 2. In what ways can Dubai be regarded as vulnerable? 3. What negative aspects of the Dubai story can you identify? 4. How might these negative aspects be mitigated? 5