

## **A politics of non-recognition? Biopolitics of Arab Gulf worker protests in the year of uprisings**

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### **Introduction**

The Arab region is undergoing a potentially world-historical transformation. The Tunisian street vendor Muhammad Bouazizi's self-immolation, following mistreatment by a state functionary in late 2010, sparked a deluge of populist anger and activism that has toppled the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively, soon to be followed by street demonstrations and battles across the region.<sup>1</sup> The analogy has been made between these events and the Prague Spring of 1968, both with its hopes for popular challenges of illegitimate state power, and its warnings about the cunning and brutality of such power arranged against popular movements.<sup>2</sup> Yet along with these mass acts of resistance there have been others, arguably more modest in their aims and undeniably less noticed by the world media. For years, workers, predominantly South Asians, have been taking to the streets in the United Arab Emirates and other countries of the Arab Gulf. What have these protests been about and why have they been ignored? How might they inform future scholarship on the Gulf, on urban and cultural geography, and on activism?

In this essay, I offer some explanations of why these uprisings have been marginalized in the discussions of the "year of uprisings," 2011, in which some

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is an expansion of Kanna 2011b. I have benefited immensely from the engagement with another version of the essay by panelists and discussants at the plenary session on the 2011 Arab uprisings, American Anthropological Association, Montreal, which was organized by Julia Elyachar, Farha Ghannam, and Jessica Winegar. The comments of Steve Caton were also tremendously helpful. My thanks also to Beena Ahmad, Fahad Bishara, and Nelida Fuccaro for their engagement of prior versions of the essay. Magid Shihade's editorial guidance on this version of the essay has also been invaluable. My thanks to him as well.

<sup>2</sup> This sentence, which I wrote in May of 2011, seems to resonate especially with the unfolding of events in Egypt, where the very hopeful events culminating in the toppling of Mubarak in early 2011 have transitioned into a much more unclear if not ominous period in which the Supreme Council for the Armed Forces (SCAF) has sought, with some vicious success, to divert and undermine the democratic energies of the uprisings by continuing and even intensifying Mubarak-era police state practices. Elections held in December 2011, the time of this writing, yielded a striking, if predictable, victory for the Muslim Brotherhood, who in coalition with a Salafist bloc, received a majority of the vote. The timing of the elections was, however, contested by secular and other opponents of the Brotherhood (and of Mubarak's former NDP) on the grounds that this timing disproportionately advantaged the already very well-organized Brotherhood and NDP. At the time this article was submitted to *Interface*, the Egyptian military under the command of Tantawi had just brutally put down another round of protests centered on Tahrir Square in Cairo, killing several people and injuring many others. State responses to the uprisings in Bahrain and Syria have been perhaps even more brutal, the future trajectory there still very uncertain. In Libya, the Gaddafi regime responded similarly, but his opponents, aided by a NATO bombing campaign, toppled him. Only in Tunisia is there some semblance of stability, with elections returning a victory for the Islamist Ennahda Party.

observers have noted the transformation of the global arena into a “protest planet” (Cole 2011, Engelhardt 2011). While such observers point out resonances between protests, and underlying political-economic contexts of an emerging political consciousness, from Tunis, Cairo, and Manama to Madrid, London, New York, and Oakland, there is at least one assumption that needs to be recognized and reflected upon in this discourse, important as the discourse is in providing intelligibility to the justified waves of discontent spreading across the globe and in expressing excitement about and solidarity with them. There is a problematic way in which this discourse claims for the category of “uprising” a specific kind of uprising, the state-reformist uprising which aims at a rights-based political recognition by a state. Important though this is, and though it is arguably the dominant form that the uprisings of 2011 have taken, I argue in this essay that we should expand our definition of uprising to include activism that does not seek recognition of equal citizenship rights by a state. This in turn will commit us to think about linkages between citizen uprisings and uprisings by non-citizens, the latter often agitating for rights, such as economic remuneration, decent working conditions, and dignity, that are not necessarily tied to citizenship status or recognition. It will also commit us to look at the less palatable aspects of at least some citizen-rights uprisings, which have had the effect of further excluding the claims of non-citizens (Chen 2011).

Moreover, the novelty of the activism of 2011 (implicit, after all, in the word “uprising”) tends to be overemphasized in this genre. This can have pernicious consequences, as in the United States, where the alleged novelty of the Occupy Movements ends up marginalizing the long, continuous, and arduous path of reform and radicalism blazed by minority and working-class activists, in turn privileging the voices and positions of middle-class, white actors. In fact, activism is usually an ongoing process, whether in Cairo or New York or elsewhere.

Long histories and traditions of activist practice have in some cases – Cairo being an excellent example – helped to prepare the ground for the 2011 uprisings (Elghobashy 2011). In some cases, as in ethnic-minority activism in the United States, this work has often had both broader, more radical, and more concrete agendas than merely expressing the meliorative reformist voices of the “99 percent” (a rather homogenizing term, after all). In contexts such as the Arab Gulf, uprisings and activism have been both, as in the case of Bahrain and Oman and as the protest planet discourse acknowledges, about equal citizenship rights, but also often not about this at all, as the case I will discuss here will show. We should not assume, in other words, that the uprisings of 2011, or uprisings anytime, are only about what some have called a “recognitive” politics, in which the aim of protesters is to secure abstract equal citizenship rights, thus recognition as full citizens, by a state.<sup>3</sup> The types of protests I discuss here are

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow the terms “recognitive” and “non-recognitive” from the comments made by anthropologist Suad Joseph on the panel on the anthropology of subjectivity in the MENA region, organized by Sherine Hafez for the 2011 meetings of the Middle East Studies Association. But the concept of “non-recognitive” politics has been pioneered by scholars such

largely “non-recognitive.” They seek not citizenship rights, but rather, economic rights. Indeed, these uprisings seem to want, at most, a *limited* recognition by the state, the recognition that that they are *not* citizens. In seeking such limited recognition, workers communicate a desire for narrowly defined non-citizen rights carrying specific non-citizen obligations in a country and to a state and society of which they are not citizens.

## **Biopolitics, Space/Spatialization**

In this essay I try to articulate in a general and preliminary way the thinking and rethinking I have been doing in relation to issues of space, urbanism, and citizenship in the Arab Gulf since my earlier forays into the region in the period 2002 – 2007. In particular, I see the case of urban space in the Arab Gulf as a productive site from which to develop ethnographic anthropological and cultural-geographic projects on kinds of subjectivity and subjectivation not entirely or even significantly attached to citizenship rights-based, recognitive politics.

Rather, as I suggest in my concluding thoughts, the case of the Arab Gulf brings to light in a striking way Agambenian notions of biopolitics as a crucial process of modern spatial subjectivity/subjectivation.<sup>4</sup> As both Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (Agamben 1998) and Foucault’s recently published (in English) lectures on biopolitics and security (Foucault 2007, Foucault 2008) show, politics in (Western) modernity is dominated by an increasing emphasis on the governance both of individual bodies and of populations. As is well-known, Foucault has argued for a shift from an agentive, state-centered, and repressive framing of power, to a notion of power that is concerned with the productive capacities of individual bodies and populations, a type of power that is, thus, emergent from the social arena of discourses and practices.

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as Aihwa Ong and Monisha Das Gupta. See, for example, Das Gupta 2006. As an example of the “recognitive” assumptions of writing on the 2011 uprisings, see the recent essay by the blogger Tom Engelhardt. He writes, for example, that “on the streets of Moscow in the tens of thousands, the protesters chanted: ‘We exist!’ ... Think of it as a simple statement of fact, an implicit demand to be taken seriously (or else), and undoubtedly an expression of wonder, verging on a question: ‘We exist?’” (Engelhardt 2011, emphasis in the original). Both recognition and the evocation of the awakening of a people, their consciousness of being a people, are explicit in this construction.

<sup>4</sup> There is a distinction that should be made, as anthropologist Omar al-Dewachi points out, between the concepts of subjectivity, rooted in a phenomenological tradition concerned with imagination, intuition, and perception, and notions of subjectivation, which emerge from the Butlerian and Foucauldian understanding of power as a matrix of subject-constitutive processes embedded in social contexts (personal communication, April 9, 2011). To my knowledge, the two traditions have not been synthesized in any sustained studies. While a promising theme of research, this is beyond the scope of this essay. It will suffice to claim, here, that processes of subjectivity and subjectivation are both at play in migrants’ experiences of life in the Gulf. This will, I hope, at least be implicit in the examples to follow.

The role of space in both Foucault's oeuvre and that of Agamben is highly suggestive. It is, for example, implicitly at the center of and interwoven with Agamben's argument in *Homo Sacer*. Indeed, in critiquing Foucault's distinction between "political techniques" and "technologies of the self" and integrating them under the more general concept of the "structure of the exception," Agamben brings space more precisely into the analysis of power (Agamben 1998:5, 15). At the beginning of the book, for example, Agamben notes in a classic formulation that the establishment of sovereignty, of a juridical order, consists of imposing a "sovereign exception" (Agamben 1998:15 – 16). Quoting Carl Schmitt, Agamben points out that

The exception appears in its absolute form when it is a question of creating a situation in which juridical rules can be valid ... There is no rule that is applicable to chaos. Order must be established for juridical order to make sense. A regular situation must be created, and sovereign is he who definitely decides if this situation is actually effective. All law is "situational law." The sovereign creates and guarantees the situation as a whole in its totality. (Agamben 1998:16)

This in turn implies an "ordering of space" (Agamben 1998:18 – 19): "What is at issue in the sovereign exception is not so much the control or neutralization of an excess as the creation and definition of the very space in which the juridico-political order can have validity" (Agamben 1998:19). Space can be understood in three senses in these passages. First, space plays a figurative role: it refers to the arena of life – juridical, territorial, institutional, etc. – delimited by the authority of sovereign. Second, space can be read in the imagined geography of order, an imagined geography that hinges upon distinctions between chaos and order, a "fundamental localization (*Ortung*), which ... traces a threshold (the state of exception) ... on the basis of which outside and inside, the normal situation and chaos, enter into those complex topological relations that make the validity of the juridical order possible" (Agamben 1998:19). Third, space is meant more concretely, as place-making, as can be seen in Agamben's excursus on the camp as the signature place of modern sovereignty.

These three senses of the term "space" may be subsumed under a more general notion of spatialization, an active, imaginative constitution – *Ortung*, or "localization," in Agamben's terminology – of a space of the inside that is, in turn, fundamental to the mobilization of sentiments of national identity and belonging. The case of foreign workers in the Arab Gulf is, I am suggesting, an example of the "bare life" through which Gulf sovereignty, both in relation to state and to citizen, is constituted. For in the foreign worker can be seen the three senses of space through which sovereignty is constituted: the constitution of an arena of order, the imagined geography of the inside and of belonging, and of place-making.

It is often suggested that Arab Gulf countries are merely "tribes with flags," that they are somehow inauthentic nation-states. The national populations of these countries is much smaller than that of foreigners, a fact that puzzles not a few observers, who wonder how we can properly talk about a nation-state in the virtual absence (demographically, economically) of a national population. The urbanscapes of the cities of the region seem to supply further evidence. They

are fragmented, it is often said. Citizens live in their own exclusive enclaves and seldom interact with foreigners, domestic laborers in households excepted. Indeed, in the years I spent in Dubai, the overwhelming majority of the time I, as an American of Iraqi extraction and thus a foreigner, spent was with other foreigners. Only at the end of my longest field trip in 2003 – 2004, a period of ten months, was I invited to the home of my closest Emirati interlocutor, a visit that was fraught with awkwardness for the interlocutor's family and thus very brief. How can we speak of a nation-state the majority of whose economically productive population is foreign and in which foreigners are the most visible part of public space and the public sphere?

This is compounded by the fact that the "state" in the nation-state is actually a dual structure. The formal state with all its trappings – territorial claims, maps, flags, bureaucracies, etc. – is shadowed by a ruling- and notable-family patronage structure in which the more important business of the "state," primarily the arrangement of practical rights and duties of governors and governed, takes place. Not a few interlocutors told me that when they need specific things done, such as getting funding for a specific project, assistance with a health problem, navigating the bureaucracy of the formal state, etc., they attend the ruler's or urban notable's *majlis*, reception, for an audience with a potential patron (the ruler, a notable, etc.)

We therefore cannot speak of the political scientists' or juridical theorists' "state" in this context. Bureaucracy and centralization, the monopoly of violence and the state as an agentive headquarters of power, to adapt Foucault's terminology, are both too superficial and too static as framings of power. This is neither new nor insightful. After Foucault, this way of thinking has been evident in much important work on the state. What I am adding here is a small nuance to this tradition, specifically, that we should think of sovereignty not in terms of the static imagery and nomothetic sociology of national territories, maps, flags, coercive institutions and bureaucracies, but as a constitutive relation. The basic dimensions of sovereignty such as state power and the agency conferred by citizenship rights should be seen as situated and practical rather abstract and transcendent. Sovereignty *emerges*, it is a process. Moreover, it emerges, in this Agambenian reading, in constitutive acts in specific sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts.

Let me now turn to my empirical case before returning to a more speculative terrain. It is, to reiterate and expand upon my earlier point, the relationship between citizen and foreign worker, and in particular, the spatializing practice that helps to constitute this relationship – and not the institutions of governance or the space of governance in itself – that produces sovereignty in Gulf societies. From this spatializing process emerges the space of juridical order, the imagined geography of belonging, and place-making in Gulf urban contexts.

## **Worker Uprisings in the Arab Gulf**

The states of the Arab Gulf region have been remarkably enveloped in the mists of myth and ideology, even in relation to other states in the region. To casual observers, they are the “popular” or, at least, “stable” states of the Arab region. Their ruling families, it is believed by many, have had a relatively easy time winning over their peoples with welfare gifts funded by petrodollars and successful, hegemony-building campaigns of cultural persuasion, as can be seen, for example, in staged displays of their authentic Arabness such as camel races, poetry competitions, and so-called folk dance and sports. This view is underpinned by an assumption that Gulf ruling families have been the only actors capable of bringing modernity to their “tribal” and “backward” peoples (Vitalis 2007).

In fact, as many examples from across the region show, the rise of the family-state in the Gulf was never uncontested. The story of Britain’s great power game, with the Hashemites of the Hejaz and the Al Saud of the Najd as pawns, is well-known. The broad outlines of the alliance between U.S. oil corporations and the Al Saud soon after the founding of Saudi Arabia is as well. But stories about nationalist and worker resistance against the Al Saud, and comparable ones against dynasties such as the Al Sabah of Kuwait, the Al Maktoum of Dubai, and the Al Bu Said of Oman are hardly known at all.

It is important to point out that these uprisings, while often led by merchants, technocrats, or students, also often involved, instrumentally, the participation of workers. Saudi workers, for example, rebelled against the U.S.-based ARAMCO oil company’s Jim Crow style policies in the 1940s and 1950s (Vitalis 2007). More recently, during the 2011 Arab uprisings, Omani workers in Salalah, Sohar, and Sur agitated en masse against stagnant wages, runaway inflation, and exclusion from jobs, which they accused the Qabus bin Sultan regime of handing out to favored Muscatis and foreigners (Escobar 2011). The regime met these protests with live ammunition and tear gas, killing a fifteen year-old boy. Meanwhile, in Bahrain we saw the Gulf’s most serious threat to family-state power. The ruling Al Khalifa was saved by the Saudi Arabian army, which allowed the Bahraini royals enough space to pursue a sinister campaign of persecution of their opponents, real and perceived.

The recent Omani and Bahraini demonstrations, however, also shed light on how rare agitation by indigenous Gulf people has become in recent decades.

The years 1930 to 1970 were ones of frequent and active opposition movements in the Gulf: from the merchant-led, reformist *majlis* (quasi parliamentary) movements in Kuwait and Dubai in the 1930s, to the anti-oil corporation movements in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and the Dubai National Front, in the 1940s and 1950s, to the Arab Nationalist and Marxist liberation fronts of Bahrain and Oman in the 1960s and 1970s (Abdulla 1980, Al Rasheed 2002, Casey 2007, Davidson 2008, Halliday 2002, Kanna 2011a, Vitalis 2007).

Since the occupation of Mecca’s Great Mosque in 1979, however, the countries of the Gulf, especially Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE as well as to some extent Saudi

Arabia, have been able to avoid mass uprisings and to utterly crush populist formations, largely because of demographics and oil (the exception here is relatively and oil-poor and ethno-religiously diverse Bahrain, where uprisings, especially by the politically and economically marginalized Shi'a majority, have been frequent during this time period). Once oil was discovered, the Gulf states could create new dependent classes of citizens who were bought off with relatively generous handouts. In some parts of the Gulf, the hegemony of the oil-fueled family/security state was not entirely complete, such as in Bahrain with its institutionalized sectarianism and aforementioned marginalized Shi'a majority, and Oman, with its particularly fraught history of Arab Nationalist and Marxist resistance movements. In general, however, with oil, the more unappealing kinds of labor on which any society depends—from construction to police work to the maintenance of urban infrastructures—was increasingly done by foreigners.

Foreign workers in the Gulf, while certainly marginalized and exploited, are far from the silent, passive wage slaves of popular imagination. During my own research on Dubai, at least nine worker protests broke out in just one month, September to October 2005. These protests ranged in size from about ten workers to about 1,000 workers. The Dubai protest by 1,500 "low-paid Asian workers," reported in March 2008 by Agence France Presse, was far from atypical in scale (Agence France Presse 2008). In the same year, the online *Epoch Times* reported a 3,000 worker strike in the emirate of Ras al-Khaimah, east of Dubai (Jones 2011). Occasionally, however, strikes are much larger. For example, in late 2007 (according to the UAE daily, *The National*), approximately 30,000 workers struck for 10 days against the large Dubai construction firm Arabtec (Issa 2011).

The UAE, the country where I did most of my anthropological and urban field research, is in fact a revealing case study, because of all the Gulf states, it is seen as the most stable, a stereotype that only seems to have been buttressed by the relative lack of recent drama within its borders. In reality, however, worker unrest in the UAE is routine, and it paints a more complicated picture of so-called UAE stability. Let us look at only one month (again, not atypical for the UAE): this December 2010 to January 2011, the same time period of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. In December, writes journalist Stephen Jones, reporting for the *Epoch Times*, almost a thousand workers blocked a busy roundabout in an industrial area of Dubai (Jones 2011).<sup>5</sup>

The Risk and Forecast website (a far from politically-radical consultancy firm which analyzes political risks for global investment) reported another strike against Arabtec in the middle of January<sup>6</sup>: approximately 5,000 mostly South Asian workers, struck for nearly two weeks to demand a pay raise from about

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<sup>5</sup> Jones does not report against whom the strike was organized or in which specific neighborhood of Dubai it occurred.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.riskandforecast.com/post/united-arab-emirates/labour-demonstrations-as-dubai-deports-striking-asian-workers\\_649.html](http://www.riskandforecast.com/post/united-arab-emirates/labour-demonstrations-as-dubai-deports-striking-asian-workers_649.html)

\$200 to about \$250 per month. The website describes the UAE government's response—the deportation of 50 workers—as “alarming” and adds that “it undermines efforts that the country was moving towards modernizing its labour laws. Those have been described by international human rights groups as forms of modern slavery” (Risk and Forecast 2011). These strikes were no mere fleeting occurrence either. They were a common response by workers fed up with systematic, tacitly authorized expropriations of material welfare and dignity. As detailed by Human Rights Watch in a 2006 report on the UAE construction sector, foreign worker grievances do not only relate to wages, but result from the intersection of workers' structural vulnerability in the global political economy and local, on-the-ground practices by actors both in the UAE and in the workers' home countries (Human Rights Watch 2006, see also Human Rights Watch 2009). This is a situation which adds to non-payment of wages such practices as deceptive recruitment by labor agents, contract switching by employers, uninhabitable, isolated labor camps, and passport confiscation.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the media, whether in the UAE or outside it, has tended to ignore workers, both South Asian and Arab (the latter also constituting a major part of the labor force in the UAE). While UAE English-language journalism tends to give migrant workers more coverage than does Arabic-language journalism, in both cases, the perspectives of workers are at most provided general and very brief outlet. Most of the copious newspaper and online journalism that I read from 2003 to 2007, when I was researching Dubai most intensively, in fact never bothered to talk to the workers involved in strikes. These journalists inevitably chose, instead, state or municipality officials—for example, the head of the police department's “human rights” division, an academic “expert,” or a labor ministry official—who were somehow appointed to speak for the workers. Aside from the work of Human Rights Watch and a few scattered bloggers, workers are always represented as a homogeneous mass, and nearly always as a threat or a public nuisance. It should be added here that these journalists, “experts,” et al., tended to represent themselves as pro-worker. While they saw themselves in this way, however, they seemed to share with the political opponents of labor a set of discursive assumptions in which the workers themselves are incapable of giving voice to their experiences.

Why this consensus, this doxa, of worker marginalization? Why the blithe assumption that workers cannot or should not speak for themselves? Why the

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<sup>7</sup> A more recent Human Rights Watch report, entitled “The Island of Happiness,” details nearly identical structures and practices in the construction labor regime in Abu Dhabi. The report does note some improvements since the time of the 2006 report, especially in housing and access to healthcare. In spite of these, and assertions by the UAE labor ministry that reform is occurring, the report notes that “abuses continue, as the reforms have failed to address the fundamental sources of worker exploitation — employee-paid recruiting fees; visas controlled by employers; very low wages often far below what was promised workers in their home countries; and restrictions on organizing and no real access to legal remedies. As a result, the abuse of workers remains commonplace (Human Rights Watch 2009:1)



seemingly inevitable recourse to homogenizing them in both by self-described “pro-worker” journalism and anti-worker state and local actors?

Admittedly, while the mass actions in Egypt, Tunisia, and the other countries of the 2011 Arab uprisings have been political protests, the actions in the UAE are labor strikes. We should not conflate the two: the stakes in each kind of demonstration are different. The foreign workers of the UAE are citizens of another country and they will eventually return to their own countries. Yet while foreigners in the UAE do not envision being part of the imagined community, their protests nevertheless resonate in some important ways with those of the Arab uprisings (not least, those of the indigenous Gulf Arabs whose own voices and protests have been suppressed by the GCC family-states in response to the uprisings). Both the “Arab Spring” and Gulf worker actions are, broadly, about dignity and justice; both challenge the status quo of unaccountable family/security-states; and both are met with ferocious responses by those states. Yet, the Gulf worker actions are ignored or displaced from the center of discussions of contemporary activism. This is partly because, as mentioned above, these uprisings do not conform to the recognitive – political structure of their more well-known siblings from Madrid to Cairo to New York, etc. In the following, I delve more specifically into why the Gulf uprisings have been ignored, and conclude both with a reflection on the implications of this displacement and some thoughts on how to theorize the differences between the uprisings.

### **Migrants in the Gulf: A Double Bind**

In the world in which we live—one where nation-states are the “natural” carriers and guarantors of individual rights—the relationship between citizen and nation-state is normalized. Claims by non-citizens on nation-states are not. While people obviously do make claims on nation-states of which they are not citizens, such a process is usually a complicated, uncertain, fraught proposition. It is, at least, indubitable that the juridical rights of non-citizens are almost always more limited than those of citizens in any given state. As Kuwait scholar Anh Nga Longva has put it, “from the perspective of capitalist and national logic, the political exclusion of expatriates rests on a double rationale which is widely and unquestioningly accepted [...] some criteria for exclusion are seen internationally as more acceptable than others.” Exclusion upon the basis of citizenship “strikes most observers as a ‘normal’ state of affairs.” It appears “rational and justifiable in our world of nation-states” (Longva 2005:118 – 119, see also Kanna 2011a:176). While taking nothing away from the democratic surge in the Arab countries, one has to admit that this nation-state logic does go a long way to explaining why Arab protests in Arab countries are celebrated while South Asian protests in Arab countries are ignored.

Second, in liberal Western media discourse, as alluded to earlier, only those protests aiming at reforming or toppling a state tend to be viewed as “political.” While this has salutary effects, such as highlighting the fraught and contested

process of political legitimacy in the Arab states, a more problematic effect becomes evident in the marginalization or erasure of issues of class. While it would be unfair to critique the protest planet discourse as unaware of or unallied with class-based or status-based protests, and analytically inadmissible to clearly distinguish class and citizenship in the 2011 uprisings, it is fair to say that the protest planet discourse paints with too broad a brush, extrapolating a bundled notion class and citizenship as the normative spirit of the uprisings. Sometimes, class, status (e.g., subordinate foreigner or migrant worker) and citizenship can and should be clearly distinguished, and they often inform activism in complexly different ways. In the UAE, for example, reformist activism, anemic as it is, tends to come either from a nationalist or a pro-ruling dynasty perspective operating within a patronage-based, ethnocentric-citizenship doxa.<sup>8</sup> In this discursive formation, the ruling Arab ethne is territorialized as the normative subject of the nation and the national territory is ethnically constructed as Arab (Kanna 2011a, Longva 2005). Seldom, if at all, do struggles of citizens for reforms in prevailing autocratic political – economic arrangements make common cause with the struggles of working class foreigners.

The discourse of political rights as a function of national citizenship (Longva 2005:118) is made even more problematic when we consider how Gulf migrant workers, the majority of whom are South Asian, are entangled in complex webs of material and social structures, such as class and kinship, and cultural expectations such as familial obligations. Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are major labor source nations for the Arab Gulf countries.

Sri Lanka, though perhaps an extreme case, is in not atypical. Ravaged by a 30-year-plus civil war, its rural economy in tatters, the island nation depends heavily on remittances from migrant workers. So do the other South Asian countries. This is both for economic reasons – a significant percentage of Sri Lanka's GDP is comprised of remittances – but also for social, cultural, and political reasons. Migrant work is a lifeline for enormous numbers of workers who would otherwise be unable to provide for families at home. In South Asia, where kinship structures tend to be far more elaborate than those based on Western norms of the nuclear family, it is not only the spouse and the children of the migrant worker who are dependent on remittances. Mass popular welfare and political stability are also partly dependent on the remittance economy, hence South Asian governments are hesitant to, or lack the capacity to, intervene forcefully on behalf their citizens when these citizens encounter abuse or exploitation in the country of migration. In a new book on Indian migration to Bahrain, anthropologist Andrew Gardner summarizes the situation in the following way:

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<sup>8</sup> Longva 2005 has defined ethnocracy as a construction of citizenship in which belonging to the nation-state is based upon shared origin or ethne, rather than language, national territory, or shared abstract values such as rights.

Households may decide, for strategic financial reasons, to end one child's education so that he or she can enter the workforce and help with the burden of debt incurred by another's trip to the Gulf. Farmland and other productive resources are put up as collateral [for loans] ... the individual laborer is deeply enmeshed in a complex web of household relations and dependencies. (Gardner 2010:61)

Failure to meet economic goals in the Gulf, writes Gardner, is a "potentially cataclysmic financial event." Migrants who do so return home to families "stripped of key productive resources and burdened by the additional debt incurred in sending them to the Gulf ... These forces compel the foreign worker to stay in place, to endure the suffering at the hands of exploitative and abusive sponsors, or to flee those scenarios in search of work as an illegal laborer" (Gardner 2010:62)

The situation becomes even more complex when we consider that working class migrants in the Gulf context are further excluded from discourses of citizenship rights, when their case is situated in relation to their own countries of citizenship. In the case of Dubai, for example, middle class Indians are torn between a vague sympathy for and a neoliberal classism towards working class compatriots. As anthropologist Neha Vorahas described the situation, middle class Indians often say that because unskilled workers comprise the majority of Indians in the Gulf, non-Indians and non-South Asians come to view all Indians as unskilled and uneducated.

These middle class Indians, writes Vora, took pains to assert their middle class status, distancing themselves from their compatriots and in turn expressing the expectation of less racism directed towards them by Arabs and white expatriates. Middle class Indians "suggested that if only [working class Indians] practiced self-management and greater self-respect, the system might not be so discriminatory" (Vora 2008:390-391). The research by Gardner and Vora, among others, suggests that working class South Asians face a double bind. One the one side, they are excluded by the Gulf nation-state logic from rights discourse; on the other, as subordinate class actors in relation to other South Asians, their struggles are less prioritized, and their mobility (both in terms of class and space) more restricted, than that of middle and upper-middle class South Asians.

South Asian domestic and construction worker interlocutors in Dubai who helped me learn about the realities they were negotiating told me about children, parents, and cousins whose education, domestic survival, and welfare depended upon income earned in the Gulf. They also told me about the material, physical, and psychological challenges of migration to the region, from exorbitant (and under UAE law, officially illegal but tolerated) labor recruitment fees to the vagaries of living with and working for more or less sympathetic "host" families to the emotional toll of living for years, sometimes decades, far from home.

One particular interaction, moreover, conveyed to me the more nuanced aspirations of migrant workers. The interaction, which resulted from my own

obtuseness, made me appreciate more specifically the skein of material deprivation, middle-class aspiration, economic strategizing, and knowledge of the local social and urban maps that is woven out of the experience of people of limited means and limited access to the discourse of citizenship rights in Gulf.

As my wife and I were preparing to leave the field in the summer of 2004, we had to figure out what to do with the few items of furniture – a couch, a wicker armchair, shelves, kitchen stools – that we had purchased from IKEA Dubai to furnish our small studio apartment. I asked around and found a few furniture resellers in Deira neighborhood of the city. After calling a few of these resellers, one agreed to come out to our apartment in the Bur Dubai neighborhood to appraise the furniture. The man turned up with a partner, quickly glanced at the stuff, and offered me the equivalent of about US \$50 for it. I was very disappointed with the offer, but being desperate, I shuddered at the thought of a deeper excursion into the labyrinthine world of Dubai wholesalers and re-exporters, a proper anthropological topic of research in itself. So I agreed to this particular buyer's princely offer.

A few days later, I visited my family in another part of Dubai (though Iraqi, my family lived and worked for a few years in Dubai, a period with which my field trips coincided). At the home of friends, I reconnected with the friends' housekeeper, an Indian woman, who I call Rachel, with whom my wife and I had a warm relationship. Rachel spoke Arabic very well, and during the year of my field work in 2003 – 2004, over many cups of tea, I translating between my German wife and Rachel, she told us many stories of her life back home and in Dubai, stories that often revolved around her children and her aspirations for them to have life chances greater than were available to her. At the family visit a few days after I had sold the furniture, Rachel and I spoke about my imminent departure from the field. With laser-like precision, she asked what my plans were with the furniture. When I told her I sold the stuff, her response was a mixture of head-slapping disappointment and irritation. "Why would you do that, Ahmed?" she exclaimed. "Don't you know those people will always cheat you? I would have given you 200 dollars!"

That Rachel was so precise in her readiness to volunteer what would have amounted to nearly a month's salary (and more, if shipping is accounted for) to stylish furniture with which to furnish her own home back in India with a sense of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) is significant. Here is a hint at what the worker uprisings are partly about. We are now familiar with images and other representations of Gulf migrant workers as "victims," "wage slaves" and such. Images in the media, both Western and local-Arab, usually show workers as a homogeneous mass. Phrases like "modern slavery" or "workers incited to violent rampage" are often used to describe, and thus limit, migrant working conditions and lived experiences.<sup>9</sup> It is, however, supremely important that we

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<sup>9</sup> See my more detailed discussion in Kanna 2011a, in which I compare these discourses to British Empire period colonial discourses which delimited local nationalist and reformist activism within similar discursive confines: either these reformist movements were

move away from such essentializing, perhaps even orientalizing, victim narratives and their like, while at the same time acknowledging the often horrendous working conditions under which many if not most migrant workers toil in the Gulf. What the examples of Rachel and numerous other workers with whom I had more casual encounters suggest is that migrant worker aspirations are, for lack of a better term, in significant part about a desire for a solid middle class life, a mixture of hopes for material stability, increased life chances, and a chance to participate in an ideal of the good life shaped in part by global commodities and images supplied by firms such as IKEA.

Worker desires for mobility – class mobility and spatial mobility – and enactments of agency (even very modest ones) thus encounter local structures of governance organized by a discourse of immobility and essentialized images of the worker either as lacking in agency or, as discussed in the essay's last section, as vaguely threatening, a troublesome target of governmentality. This discursive structure in turn helps to generate imagined geographies of the city and the nation as spheres of potential insecurity whose source is the allegedly dangerous body of the foreigner. Let me clarify with further examples from my research.

In late 2006, the project manager of a Dubai development firm invited me on a tour of a large new gated community which was being built on the city's rapidly expanding exurban frontier. The project was a typical large mixed-use (retail and residential) development aimed at the expatriate professional middle-class which constitutes a main pillar of the Dubai consumer market. As we drove from the residential part of the development to the enormous shopping mall the firm was simultaneously constructing nearby, I noticed a fairly imposing fence that had gone up around the grounds of the residential part of the project, and asked the manager why this fence was necessary. The manager responded that, well, obviously, it was a security fence. I said that this was puzzling to me. This project was so remote from the rest of the city that it could only be accessed by a major highway. Well, he answered, there are camels that sometimes roam around the area, after which, he paused and admitted that the fence was a bit overkill.

This was at a time when one could read, almost daily in the press, "wanted" notices alerting the public of absconding workers and supplying their passport information. For example: "Notice: This is to inform all concerned that the persons, whose photographs appear above, are under our sponsorship and are absconding. Any person/firm dealing with them will do so at his/their own risk. Kindly inform us or the concerned authorities of their whereabouts if known." Moreover, a constant stream of stories about national security, in which the protagonists were invariably state border agents battling against so-called illegals, infiltrators, and smugglers, invariably from Iran or South Asian countries, helped to reinforce images of a nearly ungovernable border,

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manifestations of local irrationality, or they were the result of external provocation (see also Davidson 2008).

threatening outsiders, and a vulnerable inside of “home” and “authentic local culture.” The border between the two, interestingly, was not significantly a national border, but a regional and ethno-linguistic one: on the one side, the Arabic-speaking, Sunni Muslim western side of the Arab Persian Gulf, on the other, the frontier beyond which lay a homogeneously foreign and dangerous, Shi’a – Iranian and Hindu – South Asian world.

A revealing and far from atypical expression of this cultural – geographic sensibility can be seen in the letter to the editor of a major Arabic-language daily. A UAE citizen writes that he was shocked to discover the pitiful state of hygiene at a local vegetable market. “Vegetables are being stepped on by people’s feet. No one cares about this.” Indeed, he continues, this is normal “from the perspective of the [South] Asians and their nonchalance with respect to cleanliness.” “Cleanliness,” he continues, “is a necessary and basic element in the life of peoples (*hayāt al-shu’ūb*), so it is not right that you have a people (*sha’b*) that does not care about cleanliness. The Department of Health must punish the careless Asians and introduce them to the concept that health is the most precious thing in existence, and that the Emirates are not India” (Humaid 2004). At this time, it was also not uncommon to hear or read about foreigners bringing “communicable diseases ... like AIDs, Tuberculosis, Hepatitis B, and Leprosy” into the UAE.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as both I and Longva found for our respective cases of Dubai and Kuwait, there is a sexualization and gendering of these conceptualizations of external threat. For example, foreign domestic workers are especially vulnerable to charges of sexual immorality and prostitution (see Kanna 2011a:127 – 128). A connection is made in such a view between the foreigner’s allegedly loose sexual morality and the infiltration of culturally corrosive influences by way of the domestic space of the family.

### **Spatialization, Biopolitics, and the Structure of the Exception**

Particularly striking is the way in which discourses of foreign threat are linked to what Agamben would call biopolitics. In Hal Foster’s recent adaptation of Agamben (Foster 2011), this entails “the administration of human life as so much vital matter,” or “the total management of biological life.” For example, descriptions of illegal immigration in the UAE media during my research period, as mentioned, evoked and imaginatively constructed a nearly ungovernable mobility, a chaotic frontier against which the state struggled to impose order, in which the bodies of working class foreigners were connected to disease. Successful governance, as one official put it in an interview with the local media when I was in Dubai, is about “keeping the country clean of illegal immigrants.”

Thus, the relationship between foreign workers and local Emirati actors is about more than rights. It exceeds or spills over our usual framing in which problems arise simply because non-citizens demand rights which citizens see as belonging

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Gulf News 2003.

only to members of the nation-state. The foreign worker is situated in a *biopolitical* relationship to the state and to citizens.

According to Agamben, biopolitical sovereignty is established upon a fundamental exclusion, that of the so-called *homo sacer* or "sacred man." The attribute of being "sacred" is here meant not in its contemporary modern sense, but in a sense more familiar to the ancient Roman world (the source of Agamben's genealogy of the *homo sacer* concept): that of being "accursed." According to Foster, *homo sacer* was "the lowest of the low ... [he] may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (Foster 2011, see also Agamben 1998:8).

The Roman social order was defined at its limits by both the sovereign and *homo sacer*, complementary figures which constituted the structure of exception through which a juridical order (*Ordnung*) and thus sovereignty could be established (Agamben 1998:15, 18 – 20). The sovereign claimed an exceptional right to make at will any of his subjects a *homo sacer*, while all subjects of the sovereign could themselves behave as sovereigns in relation to the *homines sacri* at the lowest rungs of the social order. Agamben further argues that the condition of *homo sacer* and his "bare life"—his being qua his "animality"—are becoming the norm in a world of detention camps and states suspending their laws "in the name of preserving the law" (Foster 2011). Agamben takes the experience of Jews during the Nazi Holocaust as emblematic of bare life, but Foster calls to mind more prosaic examples, such as the "terroristic Muslim" or the hooded prisoner from Abu Ghraib. One might add another, perhaps even more prosaic example, the accursed foreign worker in the contemporary Gulf states.

In some ways, Agamben's theory applies literally to foreign workers in the UAE. In Dubai, for example, they live either in a vast system of labor camps on the peripheries of the city or within the domestic sphere of the household, perpetually in informal and temporary status and subject to any of the aforementioned privations of national-citizenship or economic rights, arbitrary acts that deprive them of full humanity and reconstitute them, for the duration of their stay in the Gulf, as bare life. It is significant that domestic workers are the only category of foreigner to be allowed access to the private spaces of the Gulf home (bedrooms, bathrooms, domestic—rather than public-living quarters): as bare life, they are seen as lacking the moral subjectivity that might threaten the privacy of the domestic sphere. Whether in the intimate spaces of the household or on the remote edges of the city, such workers become effectively invisible.

Both cognitively and spatially, it seems, the foreign worker in the contemporary Gulf societies constitutes the limit of sovereignty, the figure in relation to whom both citizens and, in some instances, more privileged foreigners take on the role of the sovereign. It is thus also interesting that there are two ways that foreign workers do become visible: debates about threats to national culture (already mentioned) and incidents which call upon the authorities to reassert state sovereignty. An example of the latter are the periodic so-called scandals revealed in the local press in which a company is discovered to be abusing

workers. State authorities intervene and promise to punish the offending companies. Seldom, if at all, are workers allowed to speak about their experiences. The incident quickly recedes from public discussion. These incidents enable the state authorities to periodically display their legitimacy and fairness, and also, in turn, to quickly reassert the state's right to constitute anyone it pleases as homo sacer.

In my Agambenian reading, we move away from seeing sovereignty as a static socioculturally disembodied phenomenon, and instead move towards viewing it as situated and relational. In particular, sovereignty consists in an active constitution of spatial and social relations through spatializing acts. A tripartite sense of the spatial is implicit in the constitution of the sovereign order: the sovereign order is a spatial figure of order, an imagined geography of inclusion versus exclusion, and underpins a place-making process in which, as in the Gulf, protected urban enclaves and camps predominate. *Ortung*, "localization," argues Agamben, is presupposed in *Ordnung*, in the process of "ordering", and vice versa. I have tried to complement this view in this essay by arguing that this localization/ordering is a necessary part of the mobilization of sentiments of national identity and belonging, that is, of the creation of an imagined community. The practical making of the category of foreign worker becomes the occasion for the localization of order and the construction of imagined geographies of inside and outside.

It is important to keep in mind that the biopolitics I am sketching here are not entirely unique to the contemporary Gulf. Indeed, Gulf societies seem very similar to other ethnocracies, such as Israel, and share much as well with the states of the global north in their biopolitical constructions of citizen and non-citizen.<sup>11</sup> Biopolitics, after all, is crucially keyed to uncertainty: the sovereign uses uncertainty—the threat of terrorist attacks or the cultural threats allegedly posed by nonconformist or categorically excluded people—as a pretext to make more sweeping claims to exemption from the law, in turn subjectivating an acquiescent population. This seems to be the common situation in the global north and south.

What seems to be significant about the Gulf, however, is the amplified, central place of spatializing biopolitics to the maintenance of sovereignty. In the absence of strong institutions of centralization and endowed with scarcely persuasive founding national mythologies (Clifford Geertz might call them interpretively "thin" stories), the process of exception takes on a visceral, daily, spatially palpable character in the Gulf countries. Given how entrenched the structure of the exception is in this context, it is predictable that worker uprisings are largely "non-recognitive." They do not assert that "we exist" (Engelhardt 2011). Rather, they seek a clear(er) demarcation between the

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<sup>11</sup> Similar to, but not identical to, Israel, which is, unlike the Gulf states, a settler colonial state in which the logic of ethnocracy has significantly different territorial and racializing functions alongside the general processes of the constitution of sovereignty by construction of an Other as "bare life."



sphere of citizen and that of non-citizen, mutually agreed upon between host or “sponsor” (the Gulf national or employer) and the foreign worker, a binding contractual relationship in which the responsibilities and obligations of each side are clear. Thus, Arab Gulf worker uprisings seek to shape and limit the recognition by the state, to get it to agree with the implicit acknowledgement that those rising up are not citizens and do not want citizen rights or obligations.

Ultimately, as politically active scholars, however, we should not content ourselves with pointing out the specificities of and differences between the citizen uprisings and foreign worker uprisings of the Arab region. The similarities are also important, and should be the occasion for thinking of the resonances and perhaps even potential linkages between the different kinds of movements. While the Arab Spring rebellions and the Gulf labor strikes are so different in so many ways, they ultimately both reject the self-exemption of sovereign power from the obligations of the law. In both the Arab uprisings and the South Asian strikes the assertion that the individual is not the mere subject of the sovereign power, not mere bare life, has been prominent. Both kinds of mass action should be situated in the development of the family/security state in the modern, postcolonial Arab world, as distinct phenomena that nevertheless each aim, in their own ways, to expand the rights and of the region’s citizens and workers.

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