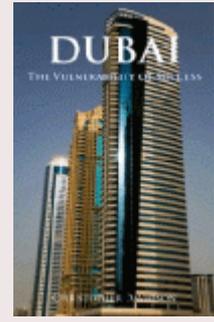


Dubai: the Gulf between development and freedom

With its soaring architecture, the Arab emirate is a two-fingered salute to sustainability. But Christopher Davidson's book, while supporting economic growth, reveals little sympathy for the workers building the post-oil economy.

by Vicky Francis



Vince Acors and Michelle Palmer made international headlines this month when Dubai courts sentenced them to three months imprisonment for having sex on the beach.

Sections of the British press had an ambivalent response to these high-profile convictions for public indecency and extra-marital sex. While the Dubai authorities were praised for getting tough with behaviour more commonly associated by Middle England with a Saturday night out for drunk, working-class teenagers, the Sharia-influenced prosecution for extra-marital sex made for slightly more uncomfortable reading. No doubt these punishments are lenient compared to those dished out when local Dubai families accuse their unmarried maids and gardeners of fornicating in private.

Journalists wanting to attach a wider meaning to the case deployed the clichéd theme of Dubai as a city of contrasts, counterposing bikinis and burkhas to express the tensions present in the former pearling village that has become a major tourist destination in less than a decade (1). In order to beef up such reporting, or at least consult someone who knows that the national dress worn by Emirati women is called an *abaya*, reporters have been turning to British academic Christopher M Davidson.

Davidson has had his own run-ins with the Dubai authorities in recent months, including a ban on his book *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success* (2). This, in itself, is one reason to review the volume: if readers are prevented from reading it, how are they to make up their minds about its arguments? Subsequent reports suggest that the ban is now rescinded, but the chances of getting hold of a copy in Dubai remain slim. The lack of clear street names has chaotic consequences for national postal carrier Empost, while the arbitrary intrusions of Dubai Customs can quickly disrupt the simple process of ordering books online. The

combination of cutting-edge architecture and creaking infrastructure is just as symbolic of Dubai as the ins and outs of the 'sex on the beach' prosecution.

Official unease over an academic monograph highlights the vulnerability of the Dubai elite. Indeed, journalists wanting a more original metaphor for the contradictions of Dubai would do well to have a close look at Du, the parastatal telecoms company. Du is characterised by terrible mobile reception and the promise of extremely sophisticated internet censorship software, rolled out in officially designated 'free zones' such as Media City and Knowledge Village. As Davidson states here, 'true freedom of speech remains a distant prospect, with a mixture of formal and subtle controls still being applied to those who choose to question or criticise the polity in any manner that is more than just superficial' (3). Little wonder the author uses several opportunities to recount his own experiences of academic censorship (oddly referring to himself in the third person throughout).

“Dubai’s ruler asks why his people should have to wait 20 years to enjoy Western standards of living”

Writing as a 'loyal but critical friend' of Dubai, Davidson has put the work in to make sense of the Emirate's peculiar political arrangements. In ways that suggest unwittingly the shifting terrain of acceptable criticism, the opening chapters provide a chronological account of Dubai's history, which for reasons of space I will not recapitulate here. It is striking how few of the protagonists come out of this well, with British contempt and high-handedness ruling out the setting up of a colony on the creek. Instead, the empire relied on gunboat diplomacy and the work of its local appointee, the political resident, to keep the natives in line. Rather than fighting back, Davidson describes how supine tribal chiefs tried to attract the support of those same British gunboats in order to reinforce primogeniture and maintain a semblance of political power. Assassination, fratricide and the use of mercenaries are simply the dramatic expression of elite politics in the Arabian Gulf.

Even with the emergence of Dubai as 'the principal commercial

port on the Gulf coast', this pattern continues into the Trucial States era, prior to the foundation of United Arab Emirates in the early 1970s. British control offered 'sustainable development' in a rudimentary form, by restricting the import of many of the material prerequisites for modern life. Often the tribal leaders welcomed this, as it prevented the spread of modernity, much to the exasperation of merchants attempting to exploit Dubai's advantageous geographical location. Although the British set out to destroy the limited influence of Arab nationalism in the 1950s (p.52), within two decades their client Gulf state rulers were begging for further British assistance. The discovery and exploitation of significant oil reserves did little to fundamentally change this relationship: Britain sought concessions that would create favourable terms for exploration and extraction, with one eye on the burgeoning, lucrative relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

One striking indicator of the shifting political landscape is the frankness of the historical chapters. Prior to the first Gulf War in the early 1990s, a book like *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success* would have startled mainstream readers with what seems like a full-blooded anti-colonial portrayal of British rule. Thus, Davidson shows how the high-handed colonial power snubbed the sheikhs by keeping them waiting for hours before an official meeting, while saving the biggest tribute, the 21-gun salute, for its own political resident.

Needless to say, for the mass of the population, things were much worse. Davidson's historical chapters might remind older, leftist readers of Fred Halliday's *Arabia Without Sultans* (1974), written in solidarity with national liberation movements and in anticipation of a pan-Arab working class taking control of the hydrocarbon resources. These days, Halliday has dropped much of his youthful Marxism, but the type of gory details of colonial rule that once illustrated his polemic can now be painlessly included in mainstream scholarship such as that of Davidson (4).

Davidson's scholarship is solid; much more impressive than the hack journalism of pretending that a taxi ride from Dubai International Airport gives a profound insight into the place. Some authors would focus on oil wealth, but this energy source plays more of a bit part in recent Dubai history - the lion's share of the fossil fuel reserves are offshore or in neighbouring Abu Dhabi. Dubai's rulers are acutely aware of the brief window open for development; the assumption that just 20 years worth of oil and gas remains prompts current attempts at economic diversification.

Given this, Davidson considers what he sees as both the long-term and more immediate sources of Dubai's present day prosperity, namely the development of modern port facilities and an innovative programme of pro-business reforms, including permission for foreign freehold ownership in the real estate sector. Davidson welcomes the dash for growth in Dubai, which contrasts with the carping of its environmentalist foes who see nothing but unsustainability in the gleaming towers arising from the sand.

“The workforce, some who face deportation on reaching retirement age, are treated as mere mercenaries”

Pre-credit crunch, external critics of Dubai echoed the broader hostility to mass prosperity endemic in mainstream thinking. It is not clear what their alternative economic model is. The excruciatingly hard life observed in Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands* (1959) represents a waste of human potential, Thesiger's love of the 'noble savage' notwithstanding. Unfashionably, Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum has gone on record as asking why his people should have to wait 20 years to enjoy Western standards of living, when they could have it now. If the stereotype of the Gulf Arab national spending his oil wealth on high levels of conspicuous personal consumption caused controversy, Dubai's development strategy causes even greater international unease. By prompting explosive growth in real estate investment and tourism, Dubai draws upon enormous volumes of water, fuel and labour. Leo Hickman's *The Final Call*, is fairly typical of the backlash this has provoked (see [Holier-than-thou holidays](#), by Peter Smith).

Davidson makes it clear that Dubai is no free-market paradise. State intervention pervades every aspect of Dubai's expansion into a self-styled cosmopolitan city state. While government PR points to hundreds of diverse nationalities working side by side, it does not take a huge leap of the imagination to envisage the UAE military turning the fruits of its disproportionate arms expenditure on the vast numbers of expatriates who, even by conservative estimates, outnumber the Emirati population four to one.

In supporting the developmental goals of Dubai, Davidson does not seem like someone to let ecological arguments get in the way. His core concern seems to be with the human impact, a 'rentier pathology' which, he argues, leads to a dependency culture of mollycoddled, unemployable men among the tiny minority who are entitled to a form of citizenship and don't live under the constant shadow of deportation. If anything, the author misses just how far the Al Maktoum clan has adopted environmental rhetoric as part of its fusion of business, government and family ties at the heart of the Dubai story (5).

What it means to be a 'critical friend' of Dubai becomes clear on the specific issues of labour and culture where, despite the fleeting book ban, the argument takes on a decidedly reactionary turn. Like smarter outside observers, Davidson recognises the consequences of a system where the national population get cradle-to-grave subsidies while sitting atop a hierarchy structured around nationality. The Al Maktoums, Emiratis, Gulf Arabs and Brits - in that order - are at the summit of the pyramid, irrespective of talent; blood ties determine a citizenship that confers privileges, but not rights (6). As a consequence, a sense of wasted time, wasted individual potential and a sense that the soft UAE armed forces would desert if presented with a real challenge is never far away. But the obvious solution to this problem - making the non-national population into citizens with democratic rights - is a step too far for the beleaguered British academic to countenance.

It's easy to come to Dubai and cry crocodile tears for the non-resident Indian construction workers continually creating a new skyline on the Sheikh Zayed Road, or the ill-looking Chinese street prostitutes working Deira and Bur Dubai, all under the blistering sun. Many writers, myself included, have done the 'labour story' with varying degrees of insight (7). Such arguments are more often than not a vehicle for complaints about contemporary capitalism, with sentimental portraits of crane operators disguising an underlying hostility to material progress. But it's much worse to echo Sheikh Mohammed by criticising workers' protests and treating the workforce, some of whom were born in Dubai yet face deportation on reaching retirement age, as mercenaries out for higher incomes than they could get back home. The cost of living in Dubai means that *everyone* there needs Dubai wages.

The same limits appear in Davidson's treatment of democratic rights. While he rightly treats the 'ruling bargain' as a trade-off between prosperity and democracy for UAE nationals, democratic reforms for existing assemblies would not address the

central issue. Having a policy on immigrant labour that leads to the 'indentured globalisation' of some 80 per cent of the population makes the UAE government inherently undemocratic, no matter how it repackage itself.

The reactionary character of a politics based on cultural differences becomes clear when Davidson discusses what he calls 'worrying' foreign influences. This has been the UAE's 'Year of National Identity', and the reliance on carefully controlled foreign labour and its associated demographic imbalance has been a source of concern. Reading between the lines of *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success* suggests just how much of the 'traditional lifestyle' is a recent invention. For instance, the wearing of national dress in public has taken off in the last 20 years, reinforced by rules obliging bank staff to don the garb. Preserving the local culture means preserving local privilege and continuing the segregation of Dubai. It is clear why the Al Maktoum organisation would want to combine this with economic transformation: the rest of us should welcome the modernisation, not least because it could break up the parochial ties of kith and kin that form the basis of UAE domestic politics. If laws criminalising sex outside marriage, for example, were abolished, that would be a step forward for individual freedom.

Dubai is what we make it. The 'sex on the beach' case was an opportunity to discuss declining morals and marvel at Dubai prosecutors who, it seems, at least believe in something. Davidson rightly implies that many of these so-called traditions are recent concoctions, but still seeks to protect them from the foreign influences that Dubai devours at an ever-increasing rate. When he concludes by predicting that a couple of well-placed bombs could cut short the investment boom, perhaps he too is projecting the west's heightened sense of insecurity onto Dubai.

Vicky Francis has worked as a freelance writer in the Arabian Gulf.

***Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success*, by Christopher M Davidson, is published by C. Hurst & Co. (Buy this book from [Amazon\(UK\)](#).)**

(1) See Carole Cadwalladr on 'the dark side of Dubai', *Observer*, 5 October 2008

(2) Roy Greenslade, *Guardian*, 15 September 2008.

(3) Andrew Spooner. 'Arabian Nightmares'. *Journalist*. March

2008, pp. 20-21.

(4) See Halliday's recent thoughts on *Arabia Without Sultans*

(5) See for instance the Blue Communities project, an offshoot of Nakheel, the corporation behind the Palm Jumeirah

(6) Mike Davis, Fear and Money in Dubai, *New Left Review*, 41, September-October 2006

(7) Report from Dubai and Dubai labour fighting back vs 'indentured globalisation', Vicky Francis, *Against the Current*