

## **We entrepreneurial academics: Governing globalized higher education in ‘illiberal’ states**

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### **Forthcoming in *Territory, Politics, Governance***

**Abstract:** The global landscape of higher education has been in rapid flux, especially apparent in the recent proliferation of new universities, international partnerships, and foreign branch campuses being established in various nondemocratic states across Asia. This trend is exemplified in the Gulf Arab monarchies of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have successfully managed to recruit Western-educated scholars to administer and staff these various higher education projects. In this article, I ask how Western-educated scholars narrate their motives for working in higher education in the Gulf, and what this can tell us about shifting modes of governance of globalized higher education today. Based on interviews conducted in Fall 2014, I illustrate how these diasporic academics are ‘normal’ entrepreneurial subjects acting on a wide range of opportunities and constraints, desires and aspirations. I also show how their decisions to work in illiberal states are deeply stigmatized ‘at home’, and argue that these interpretations are based on geopolitical imaginaries that counterpose liberal and illiberal states through territorially-based, normative mappings of space.

**Keywords:** higher education; academic capitalism; Arab Gulf states; Qatar; UAE; liberalism

### **I. Introduction**

Recent accounts of ‘academic capitalism’ and the so-called ‘corporatization’ of the university suggest that US and European academics – and social scientists in particular – are overwhelmingly critical of neoliberalism and the many financially-oriented entrepreneurial subjectivities that this it has brought about (e.g. CHATTERJEE and MAIRA 2014; FISHER and CHAN 2008; SIDAWAY 2000). Yet, more than ever, scholars today are firmly embedded in a capitalist system that demands that we become entrepreneurial subjects if we are to be successful

in our careers. Indeed, most academic posts explicitly demand that scholars actively seek research funds. Not only do more research dollars accord us more prestige, but successful grant applications bring with them personal financial rewards and factor significantly in faculty merit raises. Outside of private conversations among peers and advisees, however, scholars rarely discuss financial questions openly – as if speaking of money might taint the intellectual merit of our work. This taboo hinges on a denial (or at least, moral outrage) that we academics must all be entrepreneurial subjects – that we are all laborers in the capitalist system that is the contemporary university system.

But like all taboos, the academic silence on the financial dimensions of our work is lifted when it is employed to stigmatize the decisions of those whom we disapprove. Nowhere is this more evident than in interpretations of the recent proliferation of new branch campuses and other international partnerships in various illiberal countries around the world – ranging from Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia in the Gulf region, to Singapore and China in East Asia. These new ventures have been regarded with no small degree of suspicion by Euro-American academics. Not only have they been lambasted by in the media, but academics at home campuses have vociferously critiqued branch campuses and other international partnerships as indiscriminate money-making schemes and have expressed concern about the ability of Western universities to deliver on promises of maintaining excellence and academic freedom in states where democracy, freedom of speech, and civil society are actively discouraged (e.g. HARMAN, 2007; KAMINER, 2013; SIMON, 2012).

The Western stigmatization of these new globalized higher education institutions (HEIs) in illiberal states suggests a significant problem for the planners in charge of bringing them to life: recruiting top-notch faculty with locally-esteemed Western diplomas. Most of these projects

hinge not simply on importing ‘American-style’ or ‘world-class’ education, but on actually importing foreign academics to staff them (JONES, 2015; KANE, 2012; KOCH, 2014, 2015; VORA, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). However, Western-educated scholars are routinely warned by peers and advisors of the dangers of accepting a position at one of these foreign institutions, lest they risk committing ‘academic suicide’, citing the inability of HEIs in authoritarian states to protect academic freedom, among other concerns.

In response to this stigma and the difficulty of recruiting scholars with highly-coveted degrees from Western institutions, many of these aspiring new HEIs offer high salaries and a range of other financial incentives to entice faculty. Given the anti-capitalist narrative that prevails in much of academia, combined with the normative suspicion of working in a nondemocratic state, it is not surprising that the scholars who take up these positions find themselves to be stigmatized for ‘selling out’. Nonetheless, large numbers of Western-educated scholars – in both the social and hard sciences – now fill the faculty rosters at institutions like the National University of Singapore, NYU-Abu Dhabi, Qatar’s various Education City branch campuses, Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, and even the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia, as these institutions’ websites proudly advertise.

While it may be tempting to dismiss these individuals’ choice to accept an academic post in a nondemocratic context by financializing their motives, this article suggests that there are a larger set of geopolitical factors at work in explaining the puzzle of how such countries have been able to successfully recruit so many Western faculty members. With a focus on the Gulf states of Qatar and the UAE, this article takes seriously LARNER’S (2015, p. 199) recent injunction to consider diasporic academics not as ‘unwitting dupes of [...] wider institutional processes’ whose decisions can be reduced to ‘a straight forward analysis of marketization and

commodification’, but to treat them as situated actors whose ‘ambitions reflect, and are constitutive of, the diverse understandings of globalisation re-shaping strategic agendas and institutional structures in contemporary universities’ (LARNER, 2015, p. 199). While the question of how these globalized higher education projects are activated and experienced by *students* has been a growing theme of scholarly work (e.g. KANE, 2012; TETRAULT, 2011; WISEMAN ET AL., 2014), there is still a lack of research on the *faculty and researchers*, whose agencies, subjectivities, and affinities are of utmost importance to explaining the shifting geopolitics of global higher education. To that end, this article asks how Western-educated scholars themselves narrate their role at HEIs in Qatar and the UAE, and considers what this can tell us about shifting modes of governance of globalized higher education today.

Drawing on 20 in-depth interviews conducted in Fall 2014, I consider foreign academics’ motives, ideals, and experiences with working at HEIs in nondemocratic states. Based on my interest in the normative mapping of scholars moving from ‘liberal’ settings to ‘illiberal’ settings, all scholars interviewed had received their doctoral degrees from American or European universities (although there are many scholars in the Gulf who have degrees from Asian and Middle Eastern institutions). Respondents came from a wide range of disciplines: history, language and literature, political science, economics and business administration, Middle Eastern studies, anthropology, sociology, journalism, education, art and architecture, chemistry, biology, and mathematics. Aiming to sample a wide distribution of fields, this ethnographic exploration was not designed as a quantitatively-‘representative’ study of researchers working in the Gulf, but rather to develop a bottom-up picture of key narratives across disciplines, as well as to shed light on how the respondents narrated their own subjectivity in interviews with me, a US-based scholar. Given this positionality, it was essential for me to convey an empathetic attitude, making

it clear that I was not making any normative judgments about their decision to work in the Gulf states – which, as I show here, was a highly sensitive issue for these scholars. Withholding judgment was not only an important dimension of conducting this research, but as I further argue, is an analytical requisite for grasping the complex political geographies at work in the shifting landscape of globalized higher education today.

## **II. Imagining the ‘liberal’ / ‘illiberal’ binary**

By critically interrogating how liberalism is normatively constructed in opposition to ‘illiberalism’ in particular *places*, this article extends my recent effort to develop a critical geopolitics of higher education, which considers shifting modes of governing internationalizing HEIs and ‘the subjectivizing practices and geopolitical imaginaries that are arising through the new opportunities (intellectual, financial, political, etc.) they have opened up’ (KOCH, 2014, p. 53). This study builds on my broader concern with how the liberal/illiberal binary is constituted and mapped onto diverse places and bodies. Pushing beyond the assumed salience of master frames about individuals who were raised in ostensibly ‘liberal’ polities, I aim to preserve contradictions and struggles in the faculty and researchers’ narratives about place, politics, and the place of politics in higher education in the nondemocratic Gulf monarchies.

As I argued previously about the cases of Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia, it is important to see recent higher education developments in illiberal contexts not as aberrations or as occurring in isolation from or in opposition to transformations in the West. Rather, as liberalism’s quintessential ‘other’, illiberalism is the elusive specter that will never be eradicated but is the very condition of possibility for liberalism’s discursive construction. The prevailing illiberal political systems in places like the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan ‘are not exceptions

set outside of the hegemonic liberal system, but that they are intimately bound up with it' (KOCH, 2014, p. 53). This broader geopolitical imaginary is reflective of situated power relations and, as such, it must be produced through the actions and imaginaries of people like the academics I consider here – as well as by those who lay judgment on their life choices. The capillary power of this contemporary order works through their subjectivity – it 'reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 39).

As Michel FOUCAULT'S (2007, 2008) work so vividly illustrates, this form of capillary power is a hallmark of liberal and neoliberal arts of government. His interventions have precipitated an important analytical shift within the social sciences and, in various forms, scholars have productively adopted Foucault's insights to place stronger emphasis on *networks* of power relations and the *actors* that call them into being, effectively challenging statist approaches to political regimes and technologies of government (JESSOP, 2011; LEMKE, 2011; MILLER and ROSE, 2008; VEYNE, 1997). These shifts in the literature notwithstanding, statist thinking has crept into one common critique of Foucault's work on liberalism: that he rarely specifies the geographic context in which these new techniques are said to arise (e.g. LEGG, 2007). Although meticulous in his genealogical accounts, Foucault rarely suggests any geographic location besides the occasional reference to 'Europe' or 'France'. But when geographers and others fault him for this, their critique misses the point – namely, that liberalism did not arise in any particular *place* and certainly does not characterize a given *location*.

Rather than seeking to fix modes of government in particular places, Foucault shows how governmental rationalities are more about the shifting relationship between people and things. Instead of ascribing events and attributes to certain locations, Foucault is more interested in

tracing processes and modes of thought, which need not be fixed in space. Nor could any description of specific practices and rationalities ever be applied to an entire ‘country’ or ‘era’ – they are as contextually-specific as the individuals who give rise to them. At one level, scholars seem to be aware of this – evidenced by the extensive work on tracing the actor-networks and flows of neoliberal thought and practice. But at another level, there remains a deeply-ingrained tendency – both in the academic literature and popular imaginaries – to categorize entire countries as ‘liberal’ (democratic) or ‘illiberal’ (nondemocratic). This persistent habit is symptomatic of what John AGNEW (1994) has famously referred to as the ‘territorial trap’.

Not only is the territorial trap intellectually suspect, as Agnew has convincingly argued, it is intimately bound up with *moral* writings of space that entrench what he has also termed ‘spatial hierarchies’ (AGNEW, 2003). Spatial hierarchies are, like all geopolitical imaginaries, a form of geo-power: ‘the functioning of geographical knowledge not as an innocent body of knowledge and learning but an ensemble of technologies of power concerned with the governmental production and management of territorial space’ (Ó TUATHAIL, 1996, p. 7). In hegemonic political imaginaries of the day, in no uncertain terms, ‘liberal’ (democratic) is coded as ‘good’, while ‘illiberal’ (authoritarian) is coded as ‘bad’. Academics are overwhelmingly uncomfortable with challenging this normative mapping of liberal-good/illiberal-bad, but in many cases, this spatial hierarchy is simply taken for granted. Either way, many scholars struggle with the fact that Foucault was actively opposed to such a writing of moral geographies as such – those writings of global space that are required by policymakers and academics, who aim to make and act on normative judgments about state-defined spaces. The overarching effect of such proscriptive categories that slot each state unit somewhere on this normative spectrum is that it ultimately perpetuates statist thinking. While it is undeniable that certain states have a higher

‘saturation’ of illiberal practices than others, the trap lies in treating countries, *rather than practices of governance*, as liberal or illiberal. As I aim to show below, this is precisely the trouble that foreign academics working at Gulf HEIs find themselves coming up against when they find their decisions to work in ‘illiberal’ countries stigmatized.

### **III. We entrepreneurial academics: Governing globalized higher education in the Gulf**

#### *A. Intermingled motives: ‘Mercenaries, misfits, and missionaries’*

Among themselves, Western ‘expats’ in the Gulf actively situate themselves and others into the local cliché of being either ‘mercenaries’, ‘misfits’, or ‘missionaries’ (R1, R9). Each of these labels carries different normative significance for specific individuals, but they all emphasize and seek to explain one’s *out-of-placeness*: the implication being that ‘normally’, they should remain in their home country. In this section, I first consider the ‘mercenary’ label – of working in the region for the money alone – because this appeared to be the most common way that expats’ motives are judged, both by themselves and others. Not only is this stereotype the most stigmatized among academics, but it is also the stereotype that my respondents most frequently encounter among their friends, family, and colleagues. This is explained particularly well by one respondent in Qatar:

**R:** You do hear all kinds of stereotypes, right? So, yes, some will say, you know, ‘You’re in it for the money; you couldn’t hack it somewhere else; the standards here are very low’, or like, ‘In this part of the world they just need to get people who are willing to live here, so they’ll take what they can get’.

**Author:** *So you personally have been told that?*

**R:** Yeah. Sure. Yeah, you know, and I even hold those own stereotypes towards my colleagues. (R10, Male, American, Doha)

Speaking to me from his spacious office in Doha, the man quoted here was very open about how others stigmatized his decision to join an American branch campus in Qatar Foundation’s



Education City, and indeed, how he judged his colleagues for the very same choice. Despite feeling comfortable ascribing to others these common assumptions about foreign scholars at Gulf institutions, who are allegedly ‘in it for the money’ or ‘couldn’t hack it somewhere else’, he felt that it was not accurately said of his own motives for moving to Qatar. His case was exceptional, he argued, because he and his wife had ‘always talked about living abroad’, and with two small children, they thought, ‘while they’re young is the time to do it [...]’. So it’s kind of a ‘now or never’ given the age of my family. And so the opportunity came up to come here’ (R10). Despite his frustrations with his particular institution upon moving to Doha, which have only grown in his six years working there, he felt that the experience of living abroad outweighed any of the professional downsides. That said, he did also name professional motives for moving to the region, given his academic interest in Middle East since the early 1990s, which he saw as ‘coalescing’ with the unique opportunity to move there full time. He was, in short, clear that his choice to move to Qatar was based on ‘a combination of personal and professional motives’, but, most importantly, that he was not ‘in it for the money’.

This conversation pattern was common to most of the interviews I conducted with the individuals working at the Gulf HEIs. Of 20 total respondents, only 2 explicitly named financial compensation as the primary draw. As I discuss below, none of the respondents named any ‘ideological’ motives, such as bringing the liberal values of American-style education to Gulf students and societies. Instead, their explanations tended to focus on one of the following themes: (1) proximity to family abroad, especially in the case of dual nationals or those in mixed marriages; (2) proximity to field sites or a general academic or personal interest in the greater Middle East region; (3) the desire for adventure and experiencing life in a different part of the world; and (4) poor funding environments in the US and Europe, both in terms of access to

research funds, but also the lack of viable alternative posts (especially in the case of new Ph.D.s and two-academic couples seeking positions at the same HEI).

The first question I posed to all my respondents was: ‘What made you decide to take the position here to work here in the first place? What sort of push and pull factors influenced your decision to move to the Gulf?’ Despite my never asking about financial motives, all respondents brought up the issue of money without prompting. Though they frequently alluded to the material comforts afforded to them in the Gulf, as well as in the superlative resources of their particular HEI, they generally took pains to illustrate that they were not enticed there by the money. I believe this unprompted emphasis is partly a result of the interview method, which, as a formalized interaction with me as a fellow scholar, reflects the taboo on financial motives in academia that I noted at the outset of this article. Outside of these interviews, academics working the region have told me on countless other occasions of the financial rewards of working at certain Gulf universities.

However, the eagerness with which my respondents sought to ‘clear their name’ of being ‘sell-outs’ or ‘mercenaries’ suggests that these narratives are far from being an isolated product of my questioning. Like all academics, they are enterprising individuals seeking to make a living, be successful, provide for their families, and find stimulation in their career and personal life. But because they are seen as being outside of the ‘native habitat’, their career decisions are assigned a particular moral baggage – by others and by themselves personally. Being trained in academia in North America and Europe where, as I have already noted, financially-oriented entrepreneurialism is highly stigmatized, my respondents’ narratives reflected the very same discomfort with openly discussing financial motives for the work they do, and an overarching refusal to claim and accept their role as entrepreneurial subjects. One respondent, though, was

unusually forthright about naming financial rewards as his first motive for taking a position in the Gulf. Although he openly accepted his entrepreneurial subjectivity, he also underscored his reasoning with reference to his previous life experiences of growing up poor. When this now mid-career scholar first finished his Ph.D., he was deciding between three excellent job offers, including two in the San Francisco Bay Area. He explained:

I think that a good take-home-salary, as well as job security, are important for pretty much everyone. But for someone that grows up poor, it's probably more important than most people. So for me, the salaries of the positions were more or less the same, but as far as take-home-salary, the Gulf had big benefits in that it is tax free, I get free housing, I get free utilities, I get a flight home, and I have decent healthcare coverage as well. So overall, I realized pretty quickly that my take-home-salary, in terms of what actually ends up with my bank account, would be much better here than, I think, other positions. (R5, Male, American, Sharjah)

This scholar gave multiple other reasons for moving to the region, including proximity to potential field sites, as well as his preference to 'be a medium-sized fish in a small pond [rather] than medium-sized in a vast ocean' (R5) (he felt the latter would be the case if he stayed in the USA). But what made his narrative exceptional was that he so openly named finances, whereas most others would only allude to the financial benefits of their post, or mention this 'off the record' outside of the formal interview setting.

Overall, most respondents felt that their choice to move to Qatar or the UAE was stigmatized by friends and family 'back home', for a wide range of reasons, but primarily ignorance and lack of familiarity with the realities of daily life and working conditions in the Gulf. 'But pretty much everyone thought I was crazy', (R11, Female, American, Doha), was a common refrain. Professionally, many also expressed concerns that their academic credentials are not taken seriously by their colleagues at home. While many claimed to believe that this could be overcome by a stellar publication record or mitigated if they were at an American branch campus (i.e. rather than a national institute, like Qatar University, or even the American

University of Sharjah), they recounted the negative stigma they encountered at conferences, in job interviews, or in copious unanswered application letters:

When I say I'm at NYU, you see people's faces light up and half a second later, when you say Abu Dhabi, then they have a weird, like, confused face. (R5, Female, American, Abu Dhabi)

In interviews, it's been said to me, 'Why did you travel abroad for a job? Have you not been able to find work here?' (R14, Female, American, Doha)

Working in the Gulf, by the account of many, is almost a dead-end professionally and moving back to the US (or Europe) is basically near impossible. This was a major concern and also played a part in my decision to leave. (R16, Male, American, formerly in Sharjah)

Overall, there was a great deal of uncertainty about what employment in the Gulf meant for future career prospects 'back home', but this was really only a concern for the early- and mid-career scholars. In the case of those close to retirement, or already having retired, they did not personally feel impacted by the prevailing negative stigma of moving the Gulf. Some even gave up tenure to make the move. These individuals were also not concerned with one of the major sticking points across the American and American-style Gulf HEIs: that they do not offer the possibility of tenure. This issue did not come out as a major concern among the respondents, however, since the overall sentiment was that their stay in the Gulf was temporary – not only because most claimed to have no *desire* to remain long-term, but also because they understood that staying was simply not an option. Across the Arabian Peninsula, not only are non-nationals denied the right to naturalize, they also cannot own property (BABAR, 2014; VORA, 2013; VORA and KOCH, forthcoming). As one scholar explained:

I mean, because of the whole society structure over here, you can't really own property, and you're always dependent on your visa status. So I think that even the thought of [...] this as a long term goal really isn't part of the picture. You always see that, OK, you are eventually going to move from here. And consequently, even settling down, the notion of setting roots somewhere, or buying property, or starting to build a life is not really part of the equation. (R13, Male, Norwegian, Doha)

Those actively planning for retirement were already building homes abroad and had a clear agenda for where they were going next, whereas the others tended to adopt a ‘wait and see’ attitude about where they might move next. Most, it seemed, were crossing their fingers and hoping for the best. Whichever stage they were at in their career, these scholars were clearly entrepreneurial subjects like all academics, but their liminal residency status in Qatar and the UAE, they overwhelmingly lacked an attachment to *place*. This, I suggest in the following section, is a key factor explaining the lack of ‘ideological’ motives in the foreign scholars’ narratives about their jobs in the nondemocratic Gulf states.

*B. Ideological agendas: ‘Embracing diversity and spreading tolerance in the classroom’*

When directly asked if more ‘ideological’ motives related to advancing liberal models of education factored into their decision to move, the responses of the scholars I interviewed tended to be a resounding no – although many felt rather conflicted on this issue. One young scholar, for example, had just received her Ph.D. and felt ‘really ambivalent’ about her new job in the UAE. However, she did not have any alternative job prospects besides remaining as an adjunct lecturer at her Ph.D.-granting institution in the USA. Although she expressed a strong desire to move back to America as soon as possible, she ultimately felt that it was better to accept the job in Abu Dhabi rather than linger at her former institution ‘with a much heavier teaching load, and very limited options for research funds’, while her peers were already moving on in their careers: ‘I was worried about being left behind. That said, I was progressively convincing myself that this was a good option for a first job’ (R18). Conforming to the general trend of dismissing financial motives, as discussed above, this woman highlighted the fact that her decision was not influenced by economic incentives because, she claimed, her income is heavily taxed and

conducting her field research in Africa is still extremely expensive: 'I'm still able to go despite the expense from here, but I haven't felt like I'm just swimming in money'. When I asked about her role in promoting critical thinking among the students, and whether she felt students at an American branch campus in the UAE were coming away with more 'liberal' values that her institution is ostensibly pushing for, she explained:

I haven't thought about my purpose here being *that*, I guess, and it probably makes me a little uncomfortable to think about a kind of civilizing mission, in a way, you know, in those very colonial terms. But I guess that is what professors do anyway. (R18, Female, American, Abu Dhabi)

Although this researcher was still in her early days in the Gulf and thus had little classroom experience, she did have some hope that the institution might initiate progressive change in the UAE's political system. She provided evidence for this possibility by citing an example heard through the grapevine of 'one of the sheikh's sons or nephews or someone at the royal family', who had changed his mind about the region's ostensibly oppressive labor policies as a result of one of his courses at the university.

Such 'one-off' examples of faculty being able to change the attitudes of the national elites were actually common in my interviews, and typically repeated as hearsay rather than direct experience. Most of the respondents felt an overwhelming uncertainty about whether they were actually effecting change through the classroom experiences they were facilitating:

It's hard to give any sort of quantitative feedback, but the students often say to me, 'I've never thought about things like that before', 'I'll never see things like that in the way I used to', or 'You made me think'. But that's just in passing, so you don't know how many of them have are just taking [your course] for an elective and just forget everything they've been taught. I'm just hoping that one or two of them, especially one or two Qataris, are struck by what they're taught and help to make a difference, and don't just accept the status quo. (R1, Female, American, Doha)

Whether it is a 'one or two Qataris' or 'one of the sheikh's sons or nephews or someone at the royal family', these examples of making a small difference, whether real or fictional, is, for

some, a way of creating and sustaining hope about their ability to make an impact and to give *meaning* to their work. In this respect, the scholars I interviewed face a common dilemma of all educators: we typically lack the means to ‘see’ the difference we make through our teaching. And yet, we must somehow convince ourselves that our daily labor is meaningful.

As with the normative baggage that accompanies the ‘mercenary’ positionality ascribed to those who are seen as moving to the Gulf for the money, the ‘missionary’ positionality of being a loud advocate for democratization also carries with it a fraught moral politics, which depends on each individuals’ own affinities. Many that explicitly positioned themselves in the ‘missionary’ camp saw their role in the classroom as a potential agent of change – and some were clearly more attentive to the potentially paternalist or colonial tone of such a narrative. One respondent, for example, outlined the mercenary-misfit-missionary triad and saw himself fitting in the latter camp:

We [missionaries] generally have an interest in the nation. We believe in the ideas that are driving the nation. We don’t always agree with how it’s being done, but I think that those are the people that are reflexive, and I think they are the people that have been pursuing research projects that are embedded within communities of people that need voices. (R20, Male, Canadian, Doha)

Or in rather more ‘colonial terms’:

I think we definitely are pushing horizons here, extending boundaries. You know, ‘cause the local media isn’t really trained properly here. These journalists who do come over – I don’t know what their training is – but I get the impression it is really a second-rate kind of quality of journalism anyway. So first of all, just educating the local population about what journalism is and, you know, teaching how to do it right – I think that’s helping. And I think also having academic freedom here [at this university] and being willing to discuss anything in the classroom. Like 50% of our students are Qatari. So they are going to be the ones who are changing the society in the future. So I think we’re planting those seeds, you know. I think our students want their society to change, and they’re going to have to be the vanguards of that. So, you know, we’re trying to help. (R12, Female, American, Doha)

Or, as one individual puts it, in terms explicitly recognizing his subjectivity:

There is a desire [in the Gulf] to have educational institutions function both as symbolic capital in a certain way, but also in some ways to provide a mechanism for the social engineering of their own societies. That is to say, people are thinking as in a top-down planned fashion, planned economy of, ‘How will this institution move the society in a direction which we think is preferable?’ So in essence, am I used? Yes. Am I a willing subject in being used? Yes, because I believe that there are actual things that we can do that my interests overlap with the first ones because if I didn’t believe that, I wouldn’t be here. Well, I believe that we can provide young people from around the world with an education and with an ability to think critically and also to think about power. (R7, Male, Canadian, Abu Dhabi)

Most, however, generally saw their role as an educator to simply provide a positive example of ‘conveying of cosmopolitan attitude’, ‘embracing diversity’, and ‘spreading tolerance in the classroom’, but importantly, in the words of this respondent:

in a way that they feel not too uncomfortable [...]. So it’s kind of balancing of trying to be respectful of their culture, of their positions, [and] of the conservatism of some of the students – and at the same time I’m challenging them to sometimes to look at what’s beyond. (R9, Male, German, Doha)

Although common, many of my interlocutors would probably read this last quote as the product of local indoctrination and discursive disciplining that requires this ‘balancing act’ narrative: faculty in Qatar, for example, are contractually obligated not to ‘offend’ the citizens of the country (the meaning of this being left rather ambiguous; for more, see VORA, 2014b).

Some respondents – and especially those who explicitly rejected this ‘missionary’ attitude – were careful to note that the discursive environment is just as disciplined in the USA as it is in the Gulf states. For example, when I asked one respondent about whether he saw as fair the criticisms of American branch campuses lacking full-fledged ‘academic freedom’, he explained:

I think that they’re fair but I think you also have to balance that view with the bit of a reality check. For example, if I were an extreme right-wing conservative in a mainstream state university, there is no way I would survive tenure. I wouldn’t. I just simply wouldn’t. So without getting in to a longer discussion about political correctness, there are clearly things that are just not acceptable in higher education in America. Whether it’s



spoken or unspoken. And that's the same thing here: it's just the nature of what you can say is different. (R10, Male, American, Doha)

This respondent's ability to explicitly challenge the hegemonic rhetorical frames of 'liberal democratic' norms was somewhat exceptional across the interviews I conducted. However, it was apparent that many of my respondents simply refused to engage with the question of what role they were playing in promoting a particular *kind* of education in the Gulf. As suggested above, this is in large part connected to the lack of attachment to place – most did not feel personally invested in the system and they thus sought to focus on objectives that they did consider achievable. Whether it was pursuing an active research career, traveling for adventure and leisure, or enjoying a comfortable family life – these priorities are clear evidence of their entrepreneurial subjectivity and, importantly, this subjectivity is clearly mobilized to support the broader aims of the Gulf regimes to promote a particular agenda in the region. As the next section illustrates, these scholars' agencies show that the liberal/illiberal binary is a rather convenient fiction for sustaining the broader political configuration whereby possibilities for change are actually extremely limited.

### *C. Academic freedom and the freedom to live comfortably*

As a particular kind of 'temp' worker, the foreign scholars I interviewed had a palpable sense of resignation about their ability to effect change in the broader nondemocratic system. This was both implicit and explicit in their narratives. Implicitly, as I have just suggested, this was evident on the basis of their simple disavowal of 'ideological' motives for working in the Gulf, and their recognition that their presence in the Gulf was short-term only. Explicitly, this came out in responses to my questions about whether they personally felt any negative side-

effects of living and working in nondemocratic states, or if they felt in any way impacted by the nondemocratic political structure in the UAE or Qatar.

Some raised the issue of academic freedom of working in the Gulf, but there was a fairly even division into two camps: those who felt they had true ‘academic freedom’, and those who felt mildly constrained (neither the institution, country, nor the field of the individual was a predictor for which camp they fell into). However, none claimed to feel overly stifled in this respect, and most provided numerous examples of how they are able to discuss most topics that concerned them. That said, my respondents clearly knew the boundaries of what was socially- and politically-acceptable, and which topics to avoid. Overall, the weight of our discussions on this subject instead tended toward a stronger focus on the many material comforts available to them locally, and several respondents blankly stated, ‘no’, that they were not personally impacted by the prevailing political order limiting the rights of foreigners and free speech:

No, not really. I am single, by myself, and I’m relatively young. I’m 30. I’m not thinking about buying a house. [...] I value the freedoms that I’ve got here, you know, also the academic freedoms that my own institution, my own university supports. (R9, Male, German, Doha)

The principal way of which I interact with the so-called outside world is through shopping and taking my kids to school and then obviously going to malls, going to public parks, going down to the Corniche, going to the public beach. The Emirates is laid out in a way that would make most suburban Americans feel comfortable. [...] It is convenient and, until recently, I would have said a highly safe environment. But we have this business with the killing right next door [at the Al-Reem Mall in December 2014]. But that’s anomalous, and I feel safer here than I do in most places in United States. (R7, Male, Canadian, Abu Dhabi)

I mean, there’s things that, on a political level that maybe I object to, and a social level that I don’t agree with. But on the other hand, if I don’t see a realistic way for me to have an impact on those, I don’t rave about it or sort of – you have to, sort of, just, like, learn to accept it, I guess. (R13, Male, Norwegian, Doha)

The last scholar quoted here primarily rationalized his choice to move to the Gulf around the potential for a significant boost in his career in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Like many

others I spoke to, he felt that it was simply easier to focus on his work and the things that he *could* control, such as his innovative research agenda.

Even among the most critical respondents – those who had serious reservations about accepting a post in Qatar or the UAE – found life upon moving there to be extremely comfortable, frequently to their great surprise. The one respondent already quoted about her ambivalence toward the position in Abu Dhabi explained that despite feeling ‘simultaneously fascinated and disgusted’, she is nonetheless ‘learning so much being here’: ‘So I think like in that sense I’ve enjoyed being here just because I’m learning a lot about a place where a lot is happening’ (R20). There are many potential explanations for these individuals’ tendency to focus on the positives of their experience: they are a self-selecting crowd (*if they hated it, they would have left already*), they are coping with a sense of resignation or hopelessness about their present situation (*whether they acknowledge it or not, they have very little agency in the political broader context*), that they are part of a generation that deems being openly negative to be socially inappropriate (*as suggested by current marketing research on Millennials*), or they are simply optimists.

Not only could all of these explanations apply to a single individual, their ‘accuracy’ or ‘truth’, I would argue, is far less relevant than the question of how these conflicting ‘rationalities of the self’ coalesce into a set of practices that has particular political implications. That is, the pleasures they find in living and working in the Gulf, combined with the lack of attachment to place, is the crux of the system of governing globalized higher education in the region. Working within the entrepreneurial parameters of today’s globalized academic landscape, Gulf planners have been able to entice Western-educated scholars to move to the region through large salaries, research and travel funds, and impressive facilities. Coupled with local citizenship regimes,

which exclude possibilities for foreigners to naturalize and limit them to temporary and easily-revoked visas, these rewards are themselves a mechanism of control. Foreign workers of all ranks are continually reminded of their liminal status and the lost privileges that would result from political transgression.

As a particular political technology, elites in the Gulf strategically employ foreigners' constant awareness of being easily deported – which they also internalize through a wide range of self-policing tactics. But beyond simply fear of being deported or losing one's livelihood (and often relative privilege compared to alternative places of residence), Gulf elites also ensure that migrants are always aware that they are 'out of place'. In this system, then, the majority of their populations not only lack the formal mechanisms of effecting political change, but also lack the sense of attachment that might bring about a sense of change being *worthwhile*. Centrally, they are not doing so through repressive techniques in the classical top-down understanding of power, but through productive techniques that operate through the everyday pleasures and desires of ordinary individuals.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

On the surface, Western scholars at American-style universities in the Gulf may seem unique, but as this article suggests, in their varied motives and affinities, they are 'normal' academic subjects. Whether it was pursuing an active research career, traveling for adventure and leisure, or enjoying a comfortable family life – the scholars I interviewed are not very different from their colleagues who remain to live and work in their home countries. Reflecting broader trends within the governance of globalized higher education through entrepreneurial academic subjectivity, what we see in nondemocratic but resource-rich states like Qatar and the

UAE would seem to be a logical development accompanying the shriveling job and funding environment in Europe and North America. But despite being ‘normal’ academics, when scholars working the Gulf leave their ‘native habitat’, normative imaginaries of illiberal (bad) and liberal (good) get mapped onto their decisions. My point here is not that we need to ‘correct’ our understandings of illiberalism and liberalism, or show that the border between the two is somehow false, but rather that we need to consider *how those borders are drawn and with what political effect*.

Borders, in this sense, are immensely productive. With respect to the governance of global higher education, one thing they are very good at producing is the impression of institutions in ‘illiberal’ states being wholly removed from those in ‘liberal’ states. In this imaginary, some state spaces are conceived as clean and uncorrupted, while others are unclean and corrupt – despite the inarguable and prolific connections traversing and binding these spaces. This is especially pertinent to how we are to understand US and other foreign institutions that are setting up partnerships and branch campuses in the Gulf, which are so loudly critiqued in Western media. Like the ancient Greek purification rituals that Foucault discusses in his recently-translated *Lectures on the Will to Know*, what is at issue in the political readings of these projects is the ‘distribution of the pure and the impure’ (FOUCAULT, 2014, p. 175). Statist constructions of space are also essential to what I would call ‘sanitizing’ projects, whereby US and European institutions remain ‘clean’, while Gulf institutions are narrated as unclean. As geopolitical imaginaries, these spatial hierarchies should not be understood to be acting on some objective reality, but actively producing and constructing normative mappings of space.

In this paper’s focus on how Gulf regimes are mobilizing the entrepreneurial subjectivity of Western-educated academics in governing globalized higher education, my point is not to

place the blame on the shoulders of the foreign faculty at Gulf HEIs. The moral geographies I have explored here are crucially underpinned by of the globally-pervasive habit of categorizing *whole territories* as illiberal or liberal. Furthermore, when these normatively-laden territorial imaginaries are applied to interpreting the decisions of diasporic academics to work in nondemocratic states, it is easy to lapse into the extraordinarily powerful and pervasive tendency to see ‘liberal democratic’ countries as somehow exceptional and superior to ‘illiberal non-democratic’ contexts. Why else do we continue to ascribe more political significance to the decisions of an academic who chooses to work in the Gulf region for their complicity in a system that exploits migrant workers, but not none whatsoever to their counterpart somewhere like the University of Arizona, where academics in the city of Tucson routinely benefit from cheap undocumented labor – whether to keep up their yards, watch their children, or serve their food?

Illiberalism is, as I have suggested, the elusive specter that does not exactly haunt liberalism, but is actually its very condition of possibility. This broader geopolitical imaginary, whereby we are trained to label vast swaths of territory as liberal or illiberal, is realized not just in the words and narratives of intellectuals of statecraft – but is actively produced through normative readings of the choices and actions of people like the academics I have considered here. The territorial trap rears its ugly head when we treat them as inherently exceptional – and when they are, as individuals, written off as deviant or complicit in the illiberal states where they are working. Perhaps most curiously of all, while critics of these projects are still trapped in territory, planners in these contexts grasp this issue fully – evident from the way they are increasingly advancing their higher education agendas through a series of ‘exceptional’ projects, set outside the rules of their education ministries, spatially isolated on massive compounds outside city centers, or otherwise treated as islands where these scholars and their judges might at

least have the impression of minimizing their potential contamination from the prevailing illiberal order outside the university walls. Exceptionalism and entrepreneurialism: these would seem to be the primary mechanisms in governing globalized higher education in ‘illiberal’ states – a project that fundamentally hinges on territorially-based modes of imagining and politicizing space, meanwhile sanitizing ‘liberal’ spaces of their nondemocratic habits.

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