

## Laboratories of liberalism: American higher education in the Arabian Peninsula and the discursive production of authoritarianism

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**ABSTRACT:** American university globalization has increasingly targeted and been courted by authoritarian states. While the reasons for these partnerships are manifold—including the ease of top-down large-scale monetary investment, “knowledge economy” development strategies, social engineering programs, and other corporate and imperial entanglements—an overwhelming discourse has emerged around higher education initiatives in places like the Arabian Peninsula, China, Singapore, and Central Asia that juxtaposes liberalism (in the form of higher education) with the illiberal, authoritarian contexts it is supposedly encountering within the framework of neoliberal globalization. Through a discussion of American branch campuses in Qatar and the UAE, this article traces a more complex web of actors whose interests may include neoliberal and imperial inclinations, but are not reducible to them. By focusing on the discursive framings of these branch campus initiatives, we show how the notion of “liberal education” operates as a global discourse of power through American branch campuses in the Arabian Peninsula and, by extension, other nondemocratic states around the world. Specifically, we argue that the very concept of “authoritarianism” is discursively produced in and through these university projects, and simultaneously builds (upon) an idealized narrative about the national self in the United States that erases existing and emerging inequalities—indeed, authoritarianisms—within the home spaces of American academia.

**KEYWORDS:** higher education; authoritarianism; liberalism; Qatar; United Arab Emirates

### Introduction

At the bustling coffee shop in the conference hotel for the annual Middle East Studies Association meetings, Natalie and her colleague squeezed into a tiny table near the back where they would be able to hear each other away from the crowds gathered near the cash register and out in the common areas. “How is the conference going so far for you?” Natalie asked. Her colleague, a historian who taught at one of the American branch campuses in Doha’s Education City, frowned.<sup>1</sup> She was not having a good time. There had been several instances now, she said, where people had made rude comments to her when they found out that she worked in the Gulf:

You all must be billionaires, you know, and really, right? And this kind of assumption that you’re just, you’re just interested in doing this work for a lot of money. And then of course at these broader things with even at MESA, people are really critical about these projects, like, should you be promoting, should you be promoting authoritarian, you know, autocratic, non-liberal, illiberal states and condoning these societies by your presence there? So there’s a bit of that as well, right?

In an interview with a faculty member in an Education City branch campus in Qatar in 2011, Neha asked about the relationship between the home campus in the US and the branch campus. The faculty

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<sup>1</sup> Names, institutional affiliation, and other identifying factors have been changed in order to ensure the anonymity of our interlocutors. In some cases, we have created personas based on a composite of interviews.

member rankled at what he perceived as a hierarchy between the campuses, and that faculty in Qatar were not take as seriously:

...the main campus tends to kind of look down on what is going on here. Just general, you know, from the age of Rome looking out at the provinces. It's the same syndrome that goes on, oh, this is the provinces it's not really Rome. New York looking down its nose at Cleveland. But we'll take what you've got. So everyone thinks we are doing really well but nobody really wants to come. So main campus, even that phrase main campus, just call it the empire, you know fine. That goes with the territory.

We have both been conducting research on American branch campuses and the growth of knowledge economy and higher education in the Gulf region, particularly Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, for several years. Both of us have encountered these kinds of attitudes toward faculty who work in the Gulf in the process of conducting and disseminating research on higher education in the region to our US colleagues. We have also heard from Gulf-based faculty that they feel a sense of stigma around their jobs due to the presumptions that family, friends and "home" academics make about where their institutions are located, and by extension, their reasons for going there (see Koch 2016; Vora 2018). These presumptions generally include a criticism of authoritarian regimes, the financial motives of home campuses for expanding beyond American borders into such illiberal spaces, the quality of students and the education delivered in branch campuses, and by extension a moralizing judgment of faculty members who take positions in these institutions. We ourselves have encountered versions of these criticisms for taking the Gulf region and its residents seriously as ordinary rather than exceptional.

Outside the United States, American-style higher education has increased dramatically in recent years, as many US-based universities pursue serious internationalization campaigns and seek new revenue streams abroad. These opportunities have bolstered another key global trend: that the globalization of US higher education has been concentrated primarily in nondemocratic contexts. China and Singapore, for example, join the Gulf states in developing many new partnerships with US universities. It has become abundantly clear that these new partnerships are politically sensitive in the United States. A growing number of US-based academics have challenged their universities' internationalization agendas in nondemocratic states, pegging these projects to increasing corporatization of academia, and questioning how principles of academic freedom and equality can be upheld in such contexts (see for example Aksan 2010; Benhabib 2011; Ross 2011). Indeed, a prevailing critical discourse has emerged around higher education initiatives in places like the Arabian Peninsula, China, Singapore, and Central Asia, which juxtaposes liberalism (in the form of higher education) with the illiberal, authoritarian contexts it is supposedly encountering within the framework of neoliberal globalization.

This article builds upon our long-term ethnographic research on higher education and contributes to a growing body of research on how Gulf social engineering around nationally-defined visions of modernity meets American notions of liberal education and civic ideals within branch campuses, and how the overlaps and contradictions in those encounters reconfigure states, societies, and subjectivities (for example, Ewers 2013, 2016; Gray et al. 2017; Jones 2015; Kane 2012, 2015; Kelly 2010; Sulaiman and Al Muftah 2010; Tétreault 2011a, 2011b; Wiseman et al. 2014). In the course of our fieldwork within branch campuses in Qatar and the UAE, we have found that Western educators are motivated by a complex set of interests that include neoliberal and imperial inclinations but are not reducible to them (Koch 2014, 2016; Vora 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2018). Our findings are consistent with those of the more global literature on international branch campuses (see Lane and Kinser 2011, 2013; Purinton and Skaggs 2017).

In this article, we thus explore how the notion of “liberal education” operates as a global discourse of power through American branch campuses in the Arabian Peninsula and other nondemocratic states around the world. Specifically, we argue that the very concept of “authoritarianism” is discursively produced in and through these university projects. In the next section, we trace how the liberal/illiberal binary is imagined and narrated in discussions about and in American branch campus spaces. The discursive production of authoritarianism that results, we show, is built on a narrative about the idealized national “self” in the United States (Koch 2017), which erases existing and emerging inequalities—indeed, authoritarianisms—within the home spaces of American academia. The following section then considers the binary frames around “critical thinking,” which shape how authoritarianism is constructed as an other in discussions of and practices surrounding American branch campuses. Building on a large body of work on the internationalization of higher education, as well as our own ethnographic experiences in various Gulf institutions, we critique the way that narratives about American higher education’s developmentalist promise *and* its potential existentialist threat to liberal values and liberal subjects work to exceptionalize and spatialize the Arabian Peninsula as an isolated site of authoritarian power. As we show, there is far more complicity and entanglement than meets the (well-trained, Western) eye.

### **Liberalism and its others: Constructing a strategic binary**

Having recently accepted a faculty position at an American branch campus in the UAE, a young American woman explained to Natalie how her decision was received by her US-based colleagues:

I was just at that area studies conference [a] couple of weeks ago and I just felt like I have to justify my choice to people. I mean some people have really negative feelings politically because of the labor issues that [my university] is part of. It’s hard because perception matters. So even if you don’t get a better education at Princeton or Harvard, people imagine that you do. And I think likewise people imagine that this [branch campus] could be a second-rate university. It doesn’t really matter what the reality is. So there just biases and I think I try to argue against them [...], that this is a serious endeavor. It’s not just a symbolic gesture.

As Gulf studies scholars, we have both been struck by the ready presumptions that US-based colleagues have of our research sites and the people who occupy them, clearly illustrated in the stigma experienced by this American woman working in the UAE. Often their encounters with stigma manifest in little more than a raised eyebrow from a colleague, but can also be located in the seemingly innocent questions that scholars in and of the region receive. Neha, for example, has been asked if she can drive in Qatar. We have both been asked if we have to wear headscarves, if we feel safe traveling as women, and about the “slavery” in the Gulf. Innocent or ignorant, these questions are indicative of understandings of the Gulf region based on exceptionalist and Orientalist representations that circulate in media and scholarship (Le Renard 2014; Smith 2015; Vora and Kanna 2018; Vora and Koch 2015). In attempting to recruit a female faculty member to join one of us on an all-expenses-paid fact-finding trip to Saudi Arabia to explore the possibility of a partnership with our home institution, we met so much resistance that we had to travel on our own. Both the idea of Saudi Arabia and the idea of expanding American liberal education into the Gulf region feel anathema to many of our colleagues, who often refuse to even *consider* the possibility of experiencing these places firsthand. For both of our fields (anthropology and geography), which emphasize the importance of empirical evidence for making claims, this is rather disappointing to say the least.

For these reasons (and others), we have found ourselves drawn to develop individual and joint research projects at the intersection of politics, identity, and American higher education in the Gulf. Much of the existing scholarship and media commentaries on branch campuses and liberal higher

education forms in nondemocratic states centers on whether they have the potential to – and really do – transform social norms and civic practices locally. These are important questions. Yet this literature tends to assume the superiority of liberal norms that the American academy is said to represent and its ability to actually put those ideals into practice. In our work, by contrast, we adopt a discursive approach, which refuses to take liberal/illiberal or critical/uncritical categories in the sphere of higher education for granted, instead investigating the very *construction of these categories*, and asking how they are imagined, spatialized, performed, perpetuated, and otherwise inhabited. Drawing on recent theoretical work on authoritarianism as a practice (see Glasius 2018; Koch 2017, 2018), we begin with the premise that the liberal/illiberal binary is a mirage, that the borders between supposedly “illiberal” and “liberal” polities, moralities, and subjectivities are not only tremendously porous but strategically manipulated by certain actors (consciously or otherwise).

Narratives about and in response to American higher education “abroad” are exemplary of these dynamics. Both critiques of American academia “selling out” its liberal values by setting up programs in authoritarian settings, and the legitimating narratives of proponents as actually bringing liberal values to these places are implicated in maintaining and advancing a geopolitical imaginary of the world divided into binary opposites—liberal/illiberal, civilized/savage, rational/irrational, modern/traditional, West/East. These terms often break down along disciplinary lines, but they are familiar, interchangeable, and reinforce each other. Ultimately, though, these geopolitical narratives underpin the sanitizing – and sanctifying – practices that facilitate the mobility of American higher education as specific actors deploy its material and rhetorical power to diverse ends. These “sanitizing projects,” Koch (2016, 450) argues, are based on statist constructions of space (i.e. geopolitical imaginaries that presume a world “naturally” divided into territorial states), “whereby US and European institutions remain ‘clean’, while Gulf institutions are narrated as unclean.”

In the branch campuses in Qatar and the UAE, cultural assumptions about Americanness are also tethered to liberalism. Neither “Americanness” nor “liberalism” has an essence, of course. Rather both concepts function as a *strategic field of negotiation and contestation* in the planning and operation of American liberal education, as it is built, embodied, and imagined in international contexts. It is thus significant that these emerging university formations are underpinned by ideologies that are *perceived as* American and liberal, including multiculturalism, egalitarianism, secularism, democratic citizenship, liberal feminism, and increasingly, environmental consciousness. Yet there is no preordained or predictable outcome for how these diverse ideals and ideologies come to life on the ground (Sidhu et al. 2016; Staeheli and Hammett 2013; Vora 2015).

This is clearly illustrated in the emerging ethnographic research on Gulf universities. Vora (2018) explores how ideas about “Qatariness” and “Americanness” are produced – and contested – through encounters between students, faculty, and administrators within US branch campuses in Qatar. While (white) North American faculty understood themselves and their university’s mission as liberal, they simultaneously reproduced nativist understandings of who belongs to the Qatari nation and culturalist explanations for the effects of inequalities built in to university structures. For example, faculty narratives often attributed the widespread “self-segregation” of Qatari students to their religion, “traditional” gender roles (which are in fact quite modern), families, and culture while Qatari and non-Qatari students alike discussed how segregation was the effect of both citizenship privileges *and* othering practices of educators. In contrast to such grounded empirical research, much of the existing scholarship on higher education in nondemocratic states remains quite normatively-charged – perhaps predictably, given the Anglo-American dominance of scholarship on liberalism and higher education, the colonial pasts of many Global South education systems, as well as the global hegemony of English-language curricula and publications.

Many US-based scholars have raised concern about how academic freedom, job security, and commensurability of educational quality can be assured in non-liberal contexts where democracy, freedom of speech, religious plurality, and civil society are often actively discouraged by the state (e.g.

Altbach 2004; Aksan 2010; Cole 2009; Jones 2015; Lukose 2005; Morey 2004; Reeves 2003; Ross 2011). Relevant as these critiques may be, they silently map a moral geography onto debates about the role of American education and international branch campuses by assuming liberal and illiberal (or their variants) as either culturally or geographically pre-ordained categories. They reinforce what Vora describes as the “liberal piety” of Western academics. This is especially evident in the broader trend, found in academic scholarship and commentaries, of diagnosing a “crisis” in Western liberal education, and indeed in liberalism itself (Boggs and Mitchell 2018; Roitman 2014; Boyer 2016; Readings 1996; Vora 2018).

When used to critique American universities’ branch campus initiatives and other internationalization agendas, these projects are framed as indiscriminate money-making initiatives that reflect the increasingly corporate nature of academia and the erosion of liberal values. Just a handful of article headlines alone are suggestive: “Petrodollar Science” (Al-Shobakky 2008); “The Emir’s University” (Miller 2013); “Oil money cultivates a Mideast Ivy League” (Lewin 2008); “Qatar Sets Its Own Terms for U.S. Universities” (Lindsey 2013); “The Exploitation University” (Walters 2015), “N.Y.U. in Abu Dhabi: A Sectarian Bargain” (Bazzi 2017), “The Emir of NYU: Has NYU President John Sexton Sold Out With an Abu Dhabi Expansion?” (Krieger 2008); “Is NYU Expanding Abroad at the Cost of Free Speech?” (Schlanger 2014); “Qatar Reshapes Its Schools, Putting English over Islam” (Glasser 2003). While many of the challenges raised by the authors of these pieces and others are indeed important, the point that we want to emphasize is that they all fit a particular grammar, which ultimately builds (upon) a geopolitical imaginary of American exceptionalism, largely through Orientalist representations. Important as the *content* of the debates about American higher education abroad are, the *terms* of the debate are also essential. This is because they quietly work to construct the very categories of liberalism and illiberalism, as well as to map them onto a world divided between democratic and nondemocratic states.

The spatialization of these concepts works at multiple scales, but it ultimately normalizes an essentialist binary between liberalism and illiberalism. For example, in the headlines above, when NYU or other US-based universities expand abroad, they are assumed to bring their liberal values with them across borders, to a foreign country that is imagined to be entirely illiberal across its territory and encountering liberal ideas for the first time. In this imaginary, not only is the United States imagined to have exemplary liberal credentials, but authoritarianism is construed as a phenomenon that is located not in *practices* but in *territories* – confined within (and sometimes even endemic to) particular national boundaries *elsewhere* (Koch 2014, 2016, 2017). Such representations naturalize power territorially into supposedly distinct states, while also eliding longer histories of uneven imperial entanglement in the Middle East and Indian Ocean – encounters that were formative in producing the binaries and presumptions that scholars and journalists readily reproduce (Chalcraft 2010; Mitchell 2011). Most significantly, these border-producing narratives set the institutions apart from the mechanisms of autocratic government that prevail in the state at large, and which threaten to contaminate the legitimacy of the liberal enterprise. But as with all heterotopic spaces (Foucault 1986), they are only meaningful (or legitimate in the eyes of some administrators and others) in relation to their “other”: the nondemocratic polity, the illiberal citizen, the unfree society, the backwards Islamic culture.

### **Critical thinking and its others: Freeing minds (from what?)**

Research on modernization has long demonstrated how developmentalist agendas tend toward a form of authoritarianism. By setting out an “inarguably good” goal of “progress,” advocates of modernization often shut down conversation about the very definition of progress, silencing alternative ways of imagining the future and obviating the need for competitive politics (Buck-Morss 2000; Coronil 1997; Ferguson 1990). In analyzing how this works in diverse contexts, the literature on developmentalism tends to focus inward on the actions of state leaders. But what is so significant about American branch campuses in the Gulf is that a wide range of actors – foreign and domestic, state and

non-state – deploy this same moralizing rhetoric to legitimate their role in bringing them to life, as well as opposing them. As we show in this section, the “inarguably good” goal of teaching critical thinking and other liberal norms are core to the interlocking visions of modernization and development that are articulated in American higher education initiatives in the Gulf, as well as more globally.

Taking a variety of forms, Gulf partnerships with American colleges and universities include degree programs or portions of local institutions accredited in the US; consulting arrangements with US universities to design curricula and student exchange opportunities; and the building of full-fledged branch campuses of top-tier research universities, liberal arts colleges, and vocational schools. Although we have investigated a range of partnerships, our research has focused primarily on branch campuses. The Arabian Peninsula is now home to the highest concentration of American universities outside of the territorial United States, with Qatar and the UAE claiming the greatest number (Garrett et al. 2016). These variably-configured arrangements work to promote liberal citizenship models through student government and clubs, curricular offerings, and American-style mission statements. Yet even though liberal ideals are explicit in their missions, branch campuses of American universities directly link their agendas to local aspirations to build their “knowledge economy” and remain “grounded in the culture of the Gulf region.” The four examples in **Box 1** are suggestive.

#### **Branch Campus Mission Statements**

**Georgetown University in Qatar** (GU-Q) is dedicated to fulfilling Georgetown University’s mission of promoting intellectual, ethical, and spiritual understanding through serious and sustained discourse among people of different faiths, cultures, and beliefs. Embodying this spirit of the University, Georgetown’s Qatar campus undertakes education, research, and service in order to advance knowledge and provide students and the community with a holistic educational experience that produces global citizens committed to the service of humankind. We demonstrate the values of Georgetown University; seek to build upon the world-class reputation of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service; and work with our partner, Qatar Foundation, in its endeavors to achieve the Qatar National Vision 2030 and help develop Qatar’s knowledge economy. (Georgetown 2018)

**NYU Abu Dhabi** is pioneering a new model of higher education for a global world, dedicated at once to excellence in teaching and research and to advancing cooperation and progress on humanity’s shared challenges. Drawing on the strengths of the NYU global network, it offers an outstanding liberal arts and sciences education to students from the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and around the world, with a distinctive focus on intercultural understanding and leadership. It supports innovative research and graduate education programs that push forward the frontiers of knowledge and respond in powerful and interdisciplinary ways to vital global and local challenges. NYUAD advances NYU as a model university for the 21st century and contributes in multiple ways to the development of a sustainable, knowledge-based economy in Abu Dhabi. (NYUAD 2018)

#### **American-style University Mission Statements**

**American University of Sharjah** (AUS) is a comprehensive, independent, non-profit, coeducational institution of higher education that fosters excellence in teaching, learning and research. Based on an American model of higher education and grounded in the culture of the Gulf region, AUS fosters a community that embraces cultural diversity and whose members are committed to the ideals of open intellectual inquiry, ethical behavior, and social and civic responsibility. An engaged, productive and effective member of society, AUS educates lifelong learners who display mastery in the core competencies of their areas of specialization, and who communicate clearly, think critically and solve problems creatively. (AUS 2018)

**The American University of Ras Al Khaimah** (AURAK) is an independent, public, state-owned, non-profit, coeducational institution that offers undergraduate and graduate degrees. AURAK is an institution of higher education that provides comprehensive academic programs based on the North American model and the cultural characteristics of the Gulf region. Its undergraduate programs combine a strong grounding in the major subject with a broad general education, and its graduate programs prepare students for the demands of professional life. AURAK is committed to the highest standards of teaching, research, ethics, and service to the community, and its graduates are prepared to be knowledgeable, thoughtful, creative, and responsible individuals. (AURAK 2018)

This local rooting is significant because royal families and other parastatal entities fund and supervise many foreign universities, including the region’s most iconic American branch campus initiatives: Qatar Foundation’s Education City and NYU Abu Dhabi. Directly or indirectly, Gulf

governments pay for set up and operational costs, as well as faculty salaries and lucrative benefits packages (generally including free luxury accommodation, business class flights from the US, large research bursaries, and subsidized schooling for children) (Krieger 2008; Wasserman 2017). These arrangements have been a cash cow for American universities, not only because of this support, but because the US home campuses receive millions of dollars annually in management or consulting fees – something many US-based administrators are eager for in the context of budget shortfalls and shifts in university spending patterns, including austerity measures. The rapid expansion of such partnerships in the region has thus coincided with dramatic shifts within the American academy: increasing privatization, a decrease in funding for the liberal arts, and a focus on producing graduates who can compete in a globalized world have meant that American universities are looking beyond national borders for both curricular and profit-making ventures (Fisher and Chan 2008; Slaughter and Rhoades 2009). These themes are readily apparent in the mission statements in Box 1, and clearly work as selling points for prospective students who see being “more global” as a way to improve their career prospects (Lim 2009; Looser 2012).

The Gulf states offer key insights into how authoritarianism is produced discursively within American branch campus projects, rather than as a pre-existing mode of power into which Western notions of freedom and democracy are newly inserted, and upon which they will purportedly have a “civilizing” effect. However, the ideological entanglements between Gulf leaders, elite citizen and noncitizen residents, planners, and even scholars get lost in the focus on neoliberalism as the primary narrative for higher education’s internationalization and crisis. Similarly, casting these institutions as the wholesale product of imperialism or globalization erases local agency in shaping educational encounters, however uneven they may be. It is, after all, the leadership of Qatar and the UAE that are choosing American liberal-arts style education over other forms as the primary model of social engineering for the next generation of elites. Often these leaders have themselves also attended university in Western contexts (Jones 2015). As one of Neha’s interlocutors, a dean in Education City told her about Qatari leaders, “it could be some other world, it could be there were all the French universities, you know what I mean? Maybe 25-30 years from now everything here is high quality Chinese education, whatever. But they want that.”

The logic underpinning the dramatic shifts in the Gulf states’ higher education landscape is, in many ways, the latest iteration in the broader grammar of development discourse (Asmi 2014; Bayat 2013). Yet like all development discourse, it is shaped by – and shapes – a unique geopolitical context and its attendant moralities. So while the rise of American higher education in the Gulf is rooted in a long tradition of both Christian missionary and secular education in the Middle East (Anderson 2011), the *contemporary* geopolitical context is key to understanding how and why American institutional arrangements and partnerships are privileged in the region. A geopolitical lens emphasizes this temporality, just as much as it does the specific spatiality of American higher education as it “travels” abroad, asking how situated actors imagine the world, relations between states, institutions, and individuals, and their place in those networks.

The existing research in higher education tends to focus narrowly on students going through such institutions, but as we have found in our ethnographic research in the Gulf states, faculty, bureaucratic actors and other experts are critical in facilitating these processes. Key stakeholders extending well beyond the student population help to reproduce and reconfigure seemingly opposing value systems in developing and administering pedagogy, student affairs, career services, and recruitment. In both of our interviews at American universities in Qatar and the UAE, we independently found (Neha in 2014, Natalie in 2016) that many Western-educated faculty members understood their role in the classroom to be advocates of liberal ideals – most commonly “free speech” and “critical thinking.” For some, this was articulated more through the neoliberal language of the “added benefit” that set their American institution apart from its competitors, whereas for others it was articulated through an internalized value system that they felt compelled to share with students. Most often these

values were articulated in opposition to “rote learning” as a quality that was associated with education in authoritarian and non-liberal spaces like the Gulf, but also encompassed a sense that some faculty had that their teaching represented opportunity to challenge certain cultural norms in the Gulf.

For example, in reflecting on her own anxieties about being complicit in structural inequalities – especially of foreign workers – one professor teaching at an American branch campus in Qatar had the following exchange with Natalie:

**Prof:** But then I think, well, the people that I’m educating are perhaps the generation—the next generation of policy-makers and the people that I can open their eyes to these issues. So I play with these issues every day in my anthropology classes and bring them up all the time.

**NK:** *So you are talking about worker rights, etc.?*

**Prof:** I talk about that and I talk about male-female relations. I can get a lot information back from within the classroom setting as well, and push them to think about things and question the use of space and who space is allocated to, who can and cannot be in it, why that is the case, and what kinds of assumptions go on about different spaces.

**NK:** *So do you feel that the students receive that in the way that you would want them to?*

**Prof:** 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 it 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 or not just accept the status quo – especially Qatari females. I always say, “You know, you’re the next generation of people that can really make a difference, you’re the ones that can sort of make demands, open up an avenue for discussion on some of these issues.” But as long as you don’t say anything you’re complicit in it.

For this faculty member, teaching Qatari students (especially Qatari women) to challenge the status quo was essential to her understanding of her own agency within a context that she understood to be fraught. Both external claims and her own internal feelings about what it meant to be a liberal subject put her in a position of moral ambivalence vis-a vis her students and her teaching.

This implied need for liberal subjects, academic or otherwise, to *justify* their professional choice to work in the Gulf is encapsulated in a local cliché that circulates among Western expatriates, categorizing everyone as being there because they are either a “mercenary,” “misfit,” or a “missionary,” with the latter grouping primarily understood as those invested in Westernizing or liberalizing (not religious) proselytizing—or as one Northwestern Qatar faculty member described, “here to spread the American gospel.” While it was rare for individuals to claim one of these labels, some faculty did explicitly reference their missionary inclinations – as was the case with the faculty member just quoted. Usually introduced as a joke, they would nonetheless narrate their transformational role in the classroom as a way to reiterate a higher purpose in choosing to work at an American university in the Gulf. That the focus for most educators was on Qatari students and not the large number of non-Qatari students in their classrooms (who could sometimes constitute the vast majority) highlights how Qatariness is produced as antithetical to liberal values within branch campuses. Furthermore, the specific interest in Qatari women reproduces understandings of Middle Eastern and Muslim women as particularly oppressed and in need of liberal saving (Abu-Lughod 2013).

To a large extent, the view that some faculty had of themselves as carriers of Western or liberal values affirms what Song and McCarthy (2018) describe as a civilizational divide that is constructed by instructors in Australian higher education, which positions “critical thinking” as their *raison d’être*, as well as the unique offering they hold for international students from Asia:



The character of this othering has its roots in a form of culturalism that asserts Western civilisation as the pinnacle to which other civilisations should aspire. In this culturalism, the unevenness of domestic students is erased and in its place the backward and threatening international student is writ large as proof of the superiority of Western education. (Song and McCarthy 2018, 357)

This perspective does not acknowledge that faculty themselves may not possess the skills, knowledge, or inclination to practice, let alone teach, “critical thinking.”

While in the Gulf these universities have become unique sites to champion liberal higher education, in the United States they are increasingly stigmatized as examples of neoliberalism run amok. This is most evident in the case of NYU Abu Dhabi, which has received some of the most extensive negative media attention in the US (much of it fueled by vocal New York-based faculty opposition), with stories decrying free speech and labor rights violations in the UAE and at the university’s Abu Dhabi campus in particular (e.g. Kaminer and O’Driscoll 2014; Mangan 2015; Nir 2017; Schlanger 2014), underscored by the headlines quoted above (“The Emir’s University”; “The Emir of NYU: Has NYU President John Sexton Sold Out With an Abu Dhabi Expansion?; “Is NYU Expanding Abroad at the Cost of Free Speech?”). Although the challenges are real, the reporting on NYUAD fits squarely into a broader pattern whereby Western media “Orientalize authoritarianism,” and erase similar free speech and labor rights violations in the United States (Koch 2016, 2017), effectively sanitizing these institutions domestically and territorializing authoritarianism as something foreign to US soil (Vora 2018).

So while these narratives work to discursively produce the Gulf as an exceptional site of authoritarianism and unfree minds, they also reaffirm the idea that the Western academy is the benchmark and “heir to rational, critical Enlightenment thought” (Song and McCarthy 2018, 360), and gloss over the illiberal practices and authoritarianisms that are endemic to the contemporary American university system. These practices include – but are not limited to – nontransparency in hiring and tenure denials, which are tinged with white supremacy and misogyny (Gutierrez y Muhs et al. 2012), elite gatekeeping practices that make working class, immigrant, and first-generation students feel unwelcome on campus (Rosaldo 1994), entanglements between Greek Life and university administrations which lead to uneven adjudication of conduct violations (Armstrong and Hamilton 2015), the political role of trustees and donors, the policing of black and queer bodies on campuses (Chatterjee and Maira 2014), as well as the quiet but pervasive disciplining of institutional configurations along Western norms and values systems through international ranking systems (Hammarfelt et al. 2017; Jöns and Hoyler 2013).

Western (read white) faculty and administrators are not alone in producing this binary civilizational worldview, however. Students and their families also have a vested interest in the narrative, which is precisely what lends the desired prestige to an American diploma and what makes them competitive on the job market. This is a key logic behind the push to bring American branch campuses to the Gulf: national leaders and university administrators alike know that they are tapping into a market of their own, and investing in a branded education. So while it is incorrect to assume that Western instructors all “instinctively know what critical thinking is and can unreflectively teach such thinking to both Western and non-Western students” (Song and McCarthy 2018, 360), American branch campus administrators – and faculty themselves – have strategically operated with and indeed actively promote the fiction of a sanitized liberal education to their advantage. It is, after all, their primary selling point to Gulf states holding the purse strings. Neha has explored in her work how claiming gendered and racial inequality in branch campuses as the result of authoritarian state power and illiberal culture allows institutions to further the exploitative pay gaps, employment precarity, and implicit bias in hiring that are endemic to universities at “home” (Vora 2018).

Their grounded realities notwithstanding, American branch campuses in the Gulf are legitimated within a rather narrow discursive framework, which positions liberal higher education as a means to inculcate liberal subjectivities. The conceptual slippage across the various uses of “liberal” is not lost on us here: rather, that ambiguity is precisely what allows many of these projects to proceed, despite their highly-charged politicization among communities in the Gulf and the US alike. In a similar fashion, and working alongside discourses of liberalism, “modernity” is another key conceptual node that these projects are imagined to represent. American branch campus initiatives are framed as exemplars of modernization and knowledge-economy development agendas, allowing them to continue in the face of potential opposition in the US and abroad.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have taken a discursive approach to emphasize geopolitical questions of how space and place are structured – and given the appearance of structure – along national lines, as well as ideological and cultural ones, as in the liberal/illiberal binary. As Sami Moisió (2018, 49) notes, developmentalist agendas focused on promoting knowledge-based economies are *geopolitical discourses*, which are strategically produced in a select set of sites and institutions – universities foremost among them. Viewed thus, American education in the Gulf is a key site and discursive field, which opens up new perspectives on the cultural meanings and definitions of the liberal and the non-liberal. A geopolitical approach underscores the need to ask *who* is narrating the goals and visions related to these projects, where, and on behalf of whom. This is important because choices of higher educational models are in fact “choices about identity and geopolitical economy as much as they are problems of pedagogy and administration. They are intellectual and emotional investments not just in a particular way of doing things, but also in whole ways of being in the world” (Amsler 2009, 1192).

Notably, this conceptual blurring of the “foreign” and the “domestic” devolves responsibility for the ethical choices of all actors involved in bringing these branch campus projects to life. It also strategically cedes any responsibility for defining what actually constitutes “liberal” education, implicitly constructing an “illiberal” or “authoritarian” other in the nebulous non-West. The rhetorical construction of authoritarianism as a spatial phenomenon, we contend, is one key (by)product of these storylines. Just as Mosio (2018, 47) notes about geopolitical discourses of the knowledge-based economy, discourses about American, “liberal” higher education simultaneously construct and feature in a “relational yet territorialized spatial drama on a putative global scale,” which “provide a meaningful but highly demanding condition for political leaders to act upon and demonstrate their statesmanship, and for spatial planners to manage regional transformation.” That is, by subsuming a vast array of motives, aspirations, desires, and symbolic and financial capital among US- and Gulf-based actors into a “laboratory of liberalism,” discourses surrounding branch campuses simultaneously exceptionalize the Arabian Peninsula as a unique site of authoritarian repressive power and sanitize American institutions and actors of their own illiberal histories and presents.

Yet as scholars in science and technology studies (STS) have so vividly shown, laboratories are tremendously powerful for their ability to define and police boundaries demarcating science from non-science (Gieryn 1999; Secord 1994). To the extent that the American branch campuses in the Gulf states resemble laboratories at all, then, the discursive boundary-work undertaken by myriad actors deserves far more scrutiny than the easy frame of “liberalism” affords. That is, if STS would have us question how “science” – and *non-science* – is constructed in and through the idea of laboratories, we also need to question how “liberalism” – and *illiberalism* – is constructed in and through Western institutions of higher education. This is a project that might profitably begin in New York, just as much as Abu Dhabi.

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