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The experience society

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Some background

The history of the society Dubai represents today is fascinating. This is because it is relatively short but has undergone a rapid and spectacular development. One could say that the starting point was in 1966 when oil was found. At that time Dubai was not much more than a fishing-town and a trade center for regional goods. But the oil created an enormous cash flow that led the country into a phase of high-speed development. In about thirty-five years the city had gained in population from under a hundred thousand inhabitants to just under one million, and is now a financial and cultural hub of the region. This course of development cannot, as I see it, be understood separate from the processes of globalization that occurred at the same time. The economy, culture and society at large have been molded out by these flows, and adapted to fit into a global pattern of other translocalities.

Like I mentioned, Dubai has been depending on their oil resources, but now measures are taken to move into a broader and more sustainable base for its economy. Tourism is one of the big developing sectors and is seen as one of the major future industries. As an example, this can be read on an official informative web page: "With its oil resources running out, Dubai, part of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has launched a multi-billion dollar tourism drive in an effort to establish itself as the Gulf's leisure hub."

(www.dubaicityguide.com/specials/palmisland.htm) This statement is taken from a page informing about one of Dubai's new tourist projects: the building of an artificial archipelago in shape of a palm tree. Supposedly it will be big enough to fit 40 new hotels and about 2000 villas, of which the buyers can choose between Italian style, Tropical style, Colonial style and more than ten other options.

Experiences, Aesthetics and the Global economy

Even though this Palm Island project is extreme in many ways, it is never the less the norm of Dubai and a very characteristic example of the development taking place in terms of creating symbolically staged or thematic places. I want to argue that this aestheticization of the society, where symbols are used deliberately to assign a place a particular meaning, is a result from, or something that has developed in symbiosis with, globalization, and is a way of adapting to the current global economy and society. As a phenomenon it leads to the three issues that I find interesting and would like to investigate further in future research: The importance of global attraction, The public urban arena, and The importance of experiences to facilitate global business

Creating global attraction

First and maybe the most obvious point to make about the creation of something like the Palm Island is the attraction it has on people. Like the statement above showed, tourism is seen as something to replace oil as a major source of income. To accomplish this the attractions need to be competitive on a global scale. Spectacular infrastructure makes people around the world aware of Dubai as a place. The Palm Island or another example; the hotel Burj Al Arab - the worlds only seven star hotel, becomes icons for the whole city. In this way Dubai can create a symbolic representation on a global level and use it to form an identity of Dubai. The global story of Dubai is being spread and a myth about the place is put in circulation about Dubai being "spectacular", "a city of entertainment", "a place for exclusive shopping" etc. The term place myth is frequently found in the literature and refers to a representation of place often in the form of narratives.

(Meethan 2001).

But as I see it, this development of attracting people goes further than to only encompass the classical tourists looking for a vacation. The whole society of Dubai is depending on the ability to attract people to work in all other parts of the economy. As of now the population in Dubai consists of about 87 % immigrant workers. In the five-year period of 1975 to 1980 the population rose by 86 % due to immigration. Foreigners have consequently built most of Dubai, and the prosperity of today and in the future is depending on a constant ability to attract people. The "original" society itself does not possess the human capital needed to run the economy. This dependency applies both in terms of need for laborers and management.

The public urban arena

The extreme immigration situation has led to a very high cultural differentiation, which brings about the second aspect of interest. Everyone in Dubai belongs to one of many minority groups. To be able to attract all these peoples with different cultural backgrounds you must have the ability to make everyone feel comfortable and secure. The security needed that I am referring to would be when one feels some kind of connection to a place and finds it somewhat recognizable and predictable.

A situation that lacks this comfort and security occurs when people come as strangers and need to face the deep-rooted history attached to a place and the people there are living according to the historical heritage. In a place like that people coming from the outside would feel excluded from the local society. Dubai on the other hand can be seen as a place without a connection to history in the same way. There simply is nothing that precedes the high-rise buildings or an artificial palm island. They are all just objects put down where there otherwise would have been desert. We can once more think of the borrowing of cultural elements as some kind of base for the society of Dubai. The relationship between the surroundings of the city and the minds of people is like that of a no-strings-attached consumption, than a genuine feeling of mutual connection between subject and place. Featherstone (1995) talks about this connection to culture and tradition via consumption of symbols disconnected from a material substrate as an aestheticization of everyday life. And like Lash and Urry (1994) writes, this is the postmodern radical exaggeration of the modern trend of the commodification of cultures and symbols.

In Dubai, these features of life add up to that no one has a historically "natural" connection to Dubai, (or very few, nomadic Bedouins are the prime example), which also means that it is a locality very open to strangers.

A global business hub

Maybe the openness to strangers has not occurred by chance, maybe it is a place made just for the purpose of meetings between strangers, people without any bond in-between them other than their mutual subordination to a rational interest of doing business. Ultimately I see this as a third and final consequence of the aestheticization of Dubai. What is created is an environment where people all over the world can come and conduct business in an efficient way. By efficient I mean that the society is accessible for business people and does not impose problems of adjustments on them. From informants I know that they regarded adapting to society as quite easy, even though it is situated in an area of the world most Westerners know very little about. The lack of historical foundation, replaced by imported easy-to-identify symbolic and cultural goods, have favorable consequences in building an economy on global premises where you are depending on foreign labor and investors.

This type of accessibility is not the only development that has occurred to create a global business environment. To a large extent the economy is deregulated and taxes non-existing. It exists one regulating rule about ownership of firms within Dubai that says that at least 51 % must be controlled by a citizen or the state itself. But outside Dubai an area called Jebel Ali Free Zone has been established. This gigantic place with its own hand-made deep harbor, warehouses and factories, its own customs and "government", is

considered offshore. What happens here is regarded as occurring outside of Dubai, thus the laws do not apply here, and the firms can have 100% foreign ownership. But even inside of Dubai all kinds of measures are taken to attract business; freely converted currency, help with arranging offices and hiring of staff, just to mention some.

The point I want to make, which I now see as maybe a core of a future study, is the connection between the aesthetic organization of the society to create experiences and the deregulation of the economy, and this connection can be found in the need to localize the global flows of productive capital. In order to attract capital, people must also want to live in Dubai under some period of time.

Some theoretical implications

In the context of globalization another type of capitalist society has emerged in the sense of how the circulation of productive capital, financial flows and commodities have become more international in terms of global trade and foreign direct investments. The development can be called disorganized capitalism (Lash & Urry 1987). This stands in contrast to organized capitalism where the flows of capital, finance and commodities were concentrated to a national level. Like Lash and Urry (1994) points out, disorganized capitalism makes the objects and subjects of the capitalist economy not only extend over the world but also circulate at greater velocity. In turn this has led to an increased production of symbolic and cultural artifacts constantly converted into the every day experience of life (Lash & Urry 1994).

These theories have been developed to analyze trends within mainly the West and its historically rigid nation states. In the case with Dubai I find that the theories of disorganized capitalism, the increased speed of the circulation of cultural artifacts, and the disposability of subjects and objects are well represented, and can be empirically tested. And what is also interesting is that Dubai never has been anything like a traditional nation state. One could even say that Dubai of today is a direct consequence of disorganized capitalism, without a market interest it would never have developed into what it is today. It shows in the fact that there really are no efforts of controlling the territory from possible threats to a national order (except by the monopoly of violence), the very notion of what a nation state is about (Bauman 1998). The high rate of immigrant workers has led to the impossibility of sustaining a national culture and it is not possible to talk about a national economy because of its deregulated character.

The point to make here though is that I do not see Dubai as an uncompleted or malfunctioning nation state, because there simply is no wish to be one. The government consists of the royal leaders, which I believe more can be seen as stakeholders in Dubai as an enterprise than governmental representatives of the people. Dubai is not a democracy and the leaders do not need to answer to the people, only to the shareholders. Dubai does not relate to other places in the world through sovereignty, but through competition. They seem to be playing a global game where the object is to gain resources from the surrounding world and there for it has given up control to get access, or maybe more correct to attract, what they need. Organizing a state of this kind cannot be achieved by interrupting the flows of globalization; instead what needs to be done is to provide a platform where they can be localized. Dubai is a state of its time, a post sovereign glocal state.

Socioeconomic consequences and mental presumptions about "the other"

So far I have discussed different features of Dubai as a society developed in the wake of globalization. This second part will discuss some of the socioeconomic effects I have spotted and believe to be consequences of the described economic situation.

A striking feature of Dubai is the experience of safety because there is so little crime (an argument often used to persuade people to come). It could therefore be seen as quite strange to find high walls surrounding houses and neighborhoods, with guarded gates one has to pass to enter. I would say that for wealthier people in

Dubai these are normal living conditions. But if there is very little crime, what are they protected from?

Some of my informants talked about how people from all over the world was able to get along and share this place, but at the same time they were aware of the huge class differences. One thing I learned was that you get salary after the passport you carry: people with western passports are paid more than Asians, and Asians more than Africans etc. And there are also other issues of citizenship that becomes highlighted in Dubai. An important one is social rights. With a population where just a little bit less than 90 % have a citizenship the responsibility of providing social security is being moved to an individual level. Security is mainly obtained by private insurances, which makes a well-paid employment crucial. In this way the companies become the direct or indirect providers of social security, and thereby take over a function traditionally provided by the nation state. A society based on such a system will of course create gaps between the ones that afford private insurances and the ones that do not.

There are many contemporary theories about how inequalities between different groups are created in the wake of globalization and consumption culture. When describing the disorganized capitalism Lash and Urry (1987) focus on the emergence of what they call the "service class". This is a group of influential well-educated people conceived as a "third force" in-between the capitalist and the working class. There they have created domains and places of their own and legitimize their right to influence society by virtue of their education and therefore "know better".

In my former research in Dubai I was studying Swedes coming to Dubai because the husbands of the families worked as managers for different companies. You could say that they as a group fitted into the terminology of the service class. What I found was the existence of a felt community towards the company in terms of a give and take relationship. They had positions in the company that demanded a lot of responsibility and efforts. On the other hand the company offered a perceived good life to them as a family. It was also perceived that the children of these families needed a good education so that they could become successful in the future. They should acquire the credentials necessary to differentiate from the working class and give them the access to high positions and "better" jobs.

Bauman (1998) metaphorically uses the terms Tourists and Vagabonds to describe the stratifications of the global postmodern society. The Tourists, as characters, are hyper mobile individuals with a constant ability to choose one's experiences and have the opportunity to shape their lives through consumption of various symbolically loaded goods. The Vagabonds on the other hand lacks possibility to choose and do not have the ability to change their conditions. Instead they find time passing them by whilst trapped in the vacuum created by the disembedding forces created by the rapid circulation of the same symbols the Tourist is consuming. Therefore, the basic difference between the two characters is the ability to move at free will, and related to this ability, as we can see, is the ability to consume.

Through movement (consumption) people can fill life with meaning and give it a direction, at least a temporary one. But because the constant commodification of culture detaches it from its origin there is no foundation to lean on when the experience wears out. The emptying out of culture in terms of the stability it once provided leads mentally the Tourist to a constant urge to seek new experiences and always to be on the move. Vagabonds on the other hand do not have the same ability to consume. Instead they are the Tourists' constant companions as laborers and maintenance crew of the experiences sought by the Tourists, either as providers of a workforce or as objects as the exotic Other.

The biggest fear of the Tourists do is to become Vagabonds. The reason for this is that being locked in one place is a huge threat to their production of meaning and identity. To them Vagabonds are useful in terms of the production of experiences and also as an identity enhancer; the contrast provides the Tourist with a clearer picture of him or her self. One way of maintaining status quo is by keeping the monopoly of knowledge. The educational systems are becoming more globalized and there are fixed standards of academic achievements

necessary to advance in society. Lash and Urry (1987) points out that education is a great divider between people. Generally speaking the upper classes tend to define what is considered "good" knowledge in a way so that they can differentiate against the lower (Bourdieu 1984) This could explain the high involvement the parents I interviewed had in their children's education. Language skills were particularly emphasized as means of getting access to higher positions in firms.

In Dubai the Tourists and Vagabonds encounter each other, or; the service class and the global proletariat. What seems to be the case is that the relationship between them constantly is being reproduced. The walls around the houses and neighborhoods of the Tourists, as I interpret them, do not have the function of providing protection against a physical threat, but are rather a material manifestation of the walls within people's minds. I found very strong norms about how people should be separated on the basis of group belongings. For instance among the people I interviewed it was regarded more or less unthinkable to take the city bus. The bus was an area for the lower class, the ones that serve the rich, not a neutral means of transportation. Riding the bus together would mean finding one another at the same level.

What I have been trying to show in this part is that the society of Dubai is a society of visible stratification. This stratification is related to the economic system of Dubai, but as such, by definition also related to a global hierarchy between people. According to Bauman (1998) the stratifying element is the ability to be movable and that this requires different resources. Therefore I find it productive to ask; how do hierarchically different groups perceive their lives in Dubai when it comes to motives of coming, staying and leaving? This question is important because it relates to the global spread of resources. The reason for people to come and live in Dubai is to work, which is related to the economic situation a person had before. Poorer people come because they see Dubai as a solution to problems. Managers from the West often come because it is a form of promotion. An investigation of these groups can give information about people's background and their individual resource base.

Summary

I have now portrayed two different aspects of the society of Dubai - first the aesthetically based city for consumption and doing business. Secondly I have wanted to demonstrate the stratifications that exist between people. I have somewhat connected the two sides as depending on each other through the consumer culture and different mobility possibilities. The fact remains that the experience society only entertains some groups in the world. These groups are not the same as the ones doing the job of putting it together and maintaining the shiny façades. But they both have come to live in the same society because of different, but both globalized, circumstances. I imagine they see different things in this city. They both live in the aesthetically themed spaces, and both may search for a meaning to their lives, but they do not have the same possibilities to consume an answer.

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