Seeing Like an Autocrat: Liberal Social Engineering in an Illiberal State

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Recent studies of autocratic liberalization adopt a rationalist approach in which autocrats’ motives and styles of reasoning are imputed or deduced. By contrast, I investigate these empirically. I focus on liberal social engineering in the Persian Gulf, where authoritarian state efforts to shape citizen hearts and minds conform incongruously to liberal ideals of character. To explain this important but understudied variant on autocratic liberalization, I present evidence from rare palace ethnography in the United Arab Emirates, including analysis of the jokes and stories ruling elites tell behind closed doors and regular interviews with a ruling monarch. I find that autocrats’ deeply personal experiences in the West as young men and women supplied them with stylized ideas about how modern, productive peoples ought to act and how their own cultures underperform. The evidence also reveals that such experiences can influence autocrats, even years later, leading them to trust in Western-style liberal social engineering as the way forward, despite the risks. Ethnographic findings challenge the contemporary scholarly stereotype of the autocrat as a super-rational being narrowly focused on political survival, illustrating how memory and emotion can also serve as important influences over reasoning and can drive liberal change.

When autocrats introduce liberal change into their societies, what are they thinking? Because autocrats can be difficult to access, our knowledge of their motivations and reasoning is limited. This limitation is especially noticeable in recent work on the puzzle of autocratic liberalization, which illustrates how the liberal act in question—such as holding an election, relaxing media censorship, or establishing a legislature—is actually a rational one that serves the autocrat’s interest in staying in power, thus solving the puzzle. Good theoretical reasons are provided why the liberal move could serve an autocrat’s interests, and subsequent predictions about behavior are said to be successful. But evidence is missing that autocrats actually reason in such highly-calculated, narrowly self-interested ways. As a result, as David Art complains, such work “has the feel of a mystery that is never entirely resolved.”

I address this gap by offering more direct evidence of autocrats’ motivations and reasoning when it comes to liberal change. To do so, I go to “the source,” using an ethnographic approach to elicit thoughts, feelings, and ways of reasoning from autocrats themselves. Ethnography, of course, is not mind-reading. But, where other studies must infer autocrats’ motives from official actions or scripted speeches, or else impute them, I tap more direct ethnographic opportunities arising from an unusual degree of access to ruling circles in the authoritarian regime under analysis. In so doing, I offer a valuable look into the “black box” of autocratic reasoning.

My substantive focus is an enlightening, but lesser studied, manifestation of autocratic liberalization—liberal social engineering. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other Persian Gulf monarchies, recent state efforts to shape hearts and minds conform, incongruously, to liberal ideals of character. Consider the strangeness—in the context of authoritarianism—of official symbolism and propaganda, glittering state-sponsored spectacles, radical education reforms, and new civics curricula glorifying the liberal virtues of individual empowerment,
personal choice, and critical thinking. Such “liberal” social engineering, as I will discuss in more detail, falls short of full-blown democratic citizen-building. Still, under autocracy, it is puzzling for some of the same reasons that elections, legislatures, media freedom, and other types of liberal change are also viewed as puzzling: it could threaten autocrats’ hold on power, so why should autocrats initiate it? To wit, why cultivate a creative, critically-thinking, autonomy-minded citizenry, when one might cultivate a collectivist, unreflective, unquestioningly obedient citizenry? Neoliberal economic rationales suggest themselves, but these are not straightforward, and require empirical investigation. After all, authoritarian regimes have been modernizing for decades without turning their citizens into plucky critical thinkers.

As I will show, liberal social engineering in the UAE is a particularly striking or “muscle-bound” manifestation of a broader phenomenon. In its exuberance, it suggests a mutated form of “high modernism,” displaying the classic self-confidence about the state’s ability to foster progress and to redirect human nature through top-down social engineering that James Scott famously identified with high modernist ideology. Yet this high modernism is a curious amalgam of Western-style liberal culture, neoliberal enlightenment, and continued authoritarianism, and so it stands apart from the types of authoritarian social engineering that Scott investigated. It therefore deserves careful analysis.

Liberal social engineering is particularly puzzling in the UAE because of rentier theory, which does not predict it. Resource-dependent states have incentives to diversify, of course, but diversification need not involve the mass cultivation of liberal ideals of character. In fact, rentier state leaders, especially rich ones like those in the UAE, have strong incentives not to push citizens to think or work very hard, let alone reflect critically. That is because their legitimacy is seen to rest on a rentier social contract in which citizens trade political rights for an easy life of state-sponsored welfare, with little asked of them. As I show, UAE leaders have already provoked criticism for their increasingly invasive efforts at liberal social engineering, yet they continue to forge ahead. Why?

Like all good social engineers, these ones have a highly rationalized vision of progress. But the ethnographic evidence suggests that the reasoning behind such “rational” planning is better explained by ruling elites’ emotional investment in a certain stylized idea of the West than a detached consideration of costs and benefits for themselves. Indeed, I do not find evidence that autocrats have fully considered the ins and outs of liberal social engineering, coolly weighing the costs and benefits of controversial institutions like New York University–Abu Dhabi. Rather, I find their reasoning about liberal change to be rooted in deeply-felt personal experiences living and studying in the West as impressionable young men and women. Such experiences supplied them with powerful, sometimes uncomfortable, ideas about how their own societies underperform and fail to win international respect. Crucially, they also led to the belief—seemingly naïve yet staunchly held—that Western-style liberal culture is a solution that might, with sufficient resources and political will, be detached from its democratic moorings and reconstructed in their own societies, laying the groundwork for a productive post-petroleum future. Thus, instead of the sophisticated calculations about political survival emphasized in recent work on autocratic liberalization, I stress memory and emotion linked to the West as important influences over reasoning, fostering an eccentric, high modernist-like desire to impose a liberal culture purged of politics.

I first review theory on the puzzle of autocratic liberalization, drawing out assumptions about how autocrats reason, and then discuss my conception of liberal social engineering as a variant on this puzzle. Next, I document liberal social engineering in the UAE, bringing to bear over fifteen months of fieldwork, and present my main ethnographic findings. Using extensive palace-based ethnography and interviews with ruling elites, including several with a ruling monarch, I adopt an openly interpretive approach, aiming to unearth meaning and see liberal change as the autocrats do—to “see like a sheikh.” I show how such evidence can fill gaps in existing theory on autocratic liberalization. Finally, I discuss reactions to the liberal campaign, and offer concluding thoughts about generalizability and implications for further research.

My approach builds on valuable recent work seeking to clarify and extend the role of ethnography in political science. As Schatz argues, “whether ethnography is recommended depends . . . less on the topic being studied and more on how the topic has been studied to date . . . Like the proverbial drunk who searches in vain for his keys only in the light of the streetlamp, we must search beyond what is currently illuminated.” What is invisible will depend on where our spotlight shines. In recent work on autocratic liberalization, the “spotlight” shines on a rationalist approach that imputes or deduces autocrats’ motives and styles of reasoning, leaving invisible the question of what those motives and styles of reasoning really are. As I will explain in more detail, my ethnographic approach emphasizes immersion in palace settings to gain insider knowledge about how ruling elites themselves understand liberal change—to “glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality” in ways that can enrich theory.

Findings should interest scholars of authoritarianism, normative and ideational influence, and political learning and socialization. For Middle East specialists, the UAE effort is intrinsically important, arguably a “test case” for successful adaptation to globalization. However complex
their motivations for liberal social engineering, UAE rulers are doing precisely what many critics have long demanded is necessary for the region’s revitalization. As argued in the UN’s 2003 Arab Human Development Report, written by Arab scholars and heralded by many Western observers, the region needs a “creative Arab renaissance,” fueled by “an enlightened Arab knowledge model that encourages cognitive learning, critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity.” As violence continues to wrack the region, the findings should interest those who agree with these recommendations as steps to an alternative future for the Arab world, and wish to see how they are being interpreted by rulers and citizens alike in a country that has the wealth, political will, and stability—rare in the region—to carry them out.

**How Do Autocrats Think about Liberal Change?**

When autocrats introduce liberal change of any kind, what motivates them and how do they reason about it? Contemporary theories on the puzzle of authoritarianism, which seek to explain such phenomena as “competitive authoritarianism,” argue that liberal change by autocrats is a rational strategy aimed at maintaining power, thus perpetuating authoritarianism. In so doing, scholars suggest a highly calculated, narrowly self-interested reasoning process: autocrats weigh the costs and benefits of liberal change, and conclude that, on balance, such change will serve their interest in political survival. Motives, perceptions of threat and opportunity, and reasoning are typically deduced. In some cases, scholars adopt a “weak” functionalist logic. This view, autocrats may not have originally intended liberal changes to benefit them in so calculated a way, but the reforms benefit them all the same—thus, the reforms become a “strategy without a strategist.” Still, to the extent that scholars claim that these benefits become apparent to autocrats who recognize, value, and proceed to maximize them as a means of political survival, a similar reasoning process is implied.

The image of the autocrat emerging from this literature is that of a highly evolved rational being, an advanced player in the game of autocratic survival always adapting and plotting how to stay in power through ever more ingenious means of social control. Hence, elections, counterintuitively, are found to be “in the interest” of autocrats, helping them gain legitimacy, co-opt the opposition, gather information about opponents, and ease distributional conflict over the spoils of power. Political parties and legislatures may also represent rational strategies of political survival. Relaxing media censorship, too, may benefit autocrats, channeling criticism toward lower-level bureaucrats, incentivizing efficiency. Even protests, previously seen as a sign of instability from below, are now viewed as a potential “mechanism of authoritarianism.” This rationalist approach, functionalist variations aside, reflects a “logic of consequentialism,” in which instrumental reasoning about anticipated consequences and prior preferences drive action. Narrow self-interest, defined as political survival, is typically viewed as the primary motivation. By contrast, ideational and normative accounts of autocratic liberalization emphasize a “logic of appropriateness,” in which ideas and norms of appropriateness tied to conceptions of identity may loom larger than narrow self-interest. Here, reasoning is often viewed as less manifestly instrumental, as actors internalize roles and rules as scripts to which they conform, though it need not be: ideas and norms may shape actors’ preferences and conceptions of self-interest, which then direct action in calculated and instrumental a way as ever.

Much of the diffusion literature on the puzzle of autocratic liberalization embraces this alternative logic. Meyer et al. have famously shown, for example, how an outwardly diffusing “world culture” setting standards for legitimacy and appropriateness helps explain why countries with completely different political and cultural histories adopt similar policies and institutional models, even when these do not fit local needs. Liberal change by autocrats may thus be driven by a desire to conform to such world cultural norms, establishing what it means to be “modern” in ways that confer status or prestige. Other scholars emphasize the role of “norm entrepreneurs,” who actively expose autocrats to alternative norms of appropriateness. In the literature on Latin American liberalization, for example, Western-educated technocrats are seen as playing a key role in pushing autocrats toward liberal change, albeit of a neoliberal variety.

Both the rationalist and the ideational and normative accounts leave us with important questions about how autocrats think about liberal change. In the case of the rationalist perspective, there are theoretically plausible reasons why liberal change might serve an autocrat’s interests in maintaining power, and subsequent predictions about behavior may be successful. But evidence is often missing that autocrats actually reason in such highly-calculated, narrowly self-interested ways. While the normative and ideational accounts reveal more about the potential origins of preferences, the reasoning leading to specific courses of action, particularly when they appear to conflict with narrow self-interest, is not always clear. Mere exposure to an alternative logic of appropriateness, even if it conforms to a desired identity, does not fully explain why autocrats should embark on a potentially self-defeating course of action, or broaden their conception of self-interest to encompass it. Activists, technocrats, and other norm entrepreneurs can be ignored as easily as heard.

An ethnographic approach investigating how autocrats reason vis-à-vis liberal change can help answer these questions. For example, ethnographic evidence can fill gaps in the rationalist perspective by verifying that
autocrats do, in fact, reason in the highly calculated ways that are suggested. Such evidence may also provide support for ideational and normative accounts, and enrich them by illuminating how logics of appropriateness might override narrow self-interest. In practice, of course, the “logic of consequentialism” and the “logic of appropriateness” need not be mutually exclusive, and the central question is not which one applies but how they intertwine. An ethnographic approach attuned to how autocrats actually think is well-suited to these questions, and may reveal how differing motivational logics interact to produce liberal change.

**What Is Liberal Social Engineering?**

Recent work on the puzzle of autocratic liberalization focuses on liberal political institutions. I focus, by contrast, on liberal social engineering—a less studied, but important, manifestation of autocratic liberalization that requires some elaboration. I define social engineering as efforts by state elites to mold the culture of the societies they rule, principally by influencing the hearts and minds of citizens through mechanisms like education, propaganda, and public symbolism. By liberal social engineering, I mean social engineering efforts that conform to liberal ideals of character. In political theory, these include, but are not limited to, individualism, personal autonomy, critical thinking, secularism, and tolerance or open-mindedness. Such ideals may be imparted to citizens through education (civic and otherwise), public symbolism, and other mechanisms of social engineering.

Liberal social engineering in this sense of liberal character formation is commonly associated with liberal democratic regimes, where it is believed to play a role in cultivating good democratic citizens, though—to anticipate my argument—it is possible to imagine it divorced from that end. As Aristotle argued, a state’s social engineering efforts typically reflect the nature of its regime. Thus, authoritarian regimes are expected to fashion authoritarian citizens (or “subjects”) with limited critical faculties, who obey without question. Many empirical studies of authoritarian social engineering confirm this expectation, identifying aims such as obedience, conformism, an unquestioning acceptance of the political status quo, ignorance of outside knowledge sources, and a low capacity for independent thought, often accomplished through relentless memorization of “approved” material and rote learning in the education system.

Democratic regimes, by contrast, are expected to encourage the development of individuals who can participate effectively in the polity; thus, in theory, they are more likely to encourage critical thinking and a genuine thirst for knowledge.

By this logic, we should not expect to find liberal social engineering under autocracy. Like liberal institutions, liberal social engineering may threaten authoritarianism, not so much by creating space for opposition as by motivating it in the first place by cultivating a reflective citizenry. And yet, in varying degrees, we do. For example, progressive educational techniques, focused on developing children as autonomous, creative individuals by tapping into their natural motivation to learn, were and continue to be an important aspect of liberal social engineering. John Dewey and other liberal philosophers of education viewed these techniques as essential for molding good democratic citizens. Yet many of them were originally developed in largely autocratic German speaking lands in the nineteenth century. Today, examples of liberal social engineering can be found in autocracies ranging from China and Singapore to Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia, where ruling elites can often be heard clamoring for more creativity, critical thinking, individualism, and open-mindedness, for economic and other reasons.

Liberal social engineering is perhaps best viewed on a continuum, just as scholars view liberalization in the political institutional sense as existing on a continuum. And, just as authoritarian regimes may hold elections, form legislatures, or relax censorship, yet simultaneously seek to control these liberal openings, they may do the same with liberal social engineering, hoping to skate at the edges and somehow limit it to the sciences, for example. In this regard, it is also important to recognize that authoritarian regimes may be quite “modern” in many senses of the word without engaging in liberal social engineering. The sciences can be taught, children can learn, skyscrapers can be built, economies can grow, and citizens can be “useful” without such an ideology in place. Thus, the bulk of Soviet education reform, while technically sophisticated, did not encourage individualism and personal autonomy; rather, it embraced collectivism, seeking to bring “young people to an unquestioning understanding and appreciation of the ideology.”

Clearly, citizens may be knowledgeable, hard-working, and loyal without liberal character traits.

**Liberal Social Engineering in Practice**

What does liberal social engineering under authoritarianism look like? In the UAE, in its mechanisms of implementation, it looks oddly like social engineering in any other modernizing authoritarian state: widespread “re-education,” or education reform, is underway, a new symbolism is being devised and projected to the people, and lavish state spectacles are proclaiming these changes to the world. In this section, I document these efforts, drawing from fieldwork conducted in the UAE between 2010 and 2014 during which I interviewed education reformers, observed state-sponsored spectacles, and studied public symbolism. I illustrate how UAE efforts are analogous to historically more familiar mechanisms of authoritarian social engineering in form but not in...
substance. I also highlight their scale and cost to show that they are not mere window-dressing for appearance’s sake; some initiatives are spectacular, yes, but many are also substantive and far-reaching, and cannot be dismissed as simply cosmetic.

But first, it is important to place the UAE in context. The UAE is an oil-rich state in the Persian Gulf, founded in 1971 when the British withdrew from the region. It is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and a federation consisting of seven emirates of which Abu Dhabi and Dubai are the most prominent. Although each emirate has its own ruling family, Abu Dhabi contains the vast majority of the country’s oil reserves and its rulers are therefore the most powerful, having centralized their control even more so since the 2009 financial crisis. Like many rentier states in which rents constitute a substantial portion of government revenue, the UAE has a small citizen population, for whom citizenship provides access to social and economic privilege via a rentier social contract. Most citizens who work are employed in the public sector, boasting high salaries and short working hours relative to the private sector. The private sector, by contrast, is dominated by a large and multinational expatriate population with few rights, which dwarfs the citizen population and can trigger tension. As I will show, liberal social engineering directed at the citizenry has provoked significant local criticism, in part because it is associated with this expatriate population.

In recent years, research on the Gulf has flourished. Rich, valuable work addresses important issues such as natural resource wealth, rentierism, and the social, political, and economic implications that follow; prospects for democracy and authoritarian resilience; foreign policy; and questions of gender, identity, and citizenship. However, research on liberal-flavored social engineering—while a favorite topic of breathless Western reporters and Gulf government spokesmen—is less well-developed. Strangely, despite its popular image as a rare island of progress in the Middle East, the UAE also remains among the least studied countries in the Gulf, particularly compared to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Yet it is also clearly among the most energetic of Gulf countries in terms of the kind of liberal social engineering many outsiders admire, as the following sections will illustrate.

A Liberal Education

Liberal education reforms are sweeping the UAE. Consider Education Vision 2020 from 1999, when these reforms began in earnest. Here, autocratic officials speak zealously, and with apparently no irony, of their own education system as being “autocratic,” rendering UAE citizens “passive in that they take and do not give, memorize and don’t think.” As they mournfully conclude, “Their creative potentials are stifled.” In true revolutionary spirit, “radical change” was said to be needed. And as the progressive educationists also argued decades ago for the revitalization of liberal democracy, they called for a shift from “memorization to creativity, reflection, imagination and innovation,” with teachers transformed out of the “traditional roles they play into more effective roles to promote, develop, and instill the culture of innovation, which is a societal ambition.” As Mary Ann Tétreault notes in the case of Kuwait, such liberal educational initiatives “promote curiosity, questioning, engagement, and activism—a nearly perfect antithesis of what authoritarian governments and social groups would like to see in their universities.”

Far from mere rhetoric, these ideas have led to very real and increasingly radical reforms in education at all levels. In the UAE, teachers have been retrained, a plethora of Western university branch campuses established, schools and classroom environments wholly reimagined, and new standardized tests, notably the CEPA, an SAT-lookalike, rolled out to reward creativity and problem-solving over memorization. An example of the transformation of physical space in kindergartens and primary schools is especially illuminating. Where young children used to sit for hours on end in strict, disciplined rows, as if attending a military function, they now study in wholly reinvented classroom spaces, rebuilt to facilitate interaction, story-telling, imagination, and play as learning. Previously empty walls are now populated with drawings, word puzzles, and other media-rich material to stimulate individualism and the development of the “whole child.”

As in the Soviet Union, where “bourgeois” textbooks were replaced with ones embracing the new ideology, intense curricular reform has occurred in line with the now-ubiquitous liberal educational philosophy, novel in the UAE context. To reduce rote learning, for example, reformers have switched from textbook-based to standards-based curricula. Teachers have been retrained across the board in the new “student-centered” methods, incongruously instructed by an authoritarian state to ask more open-ended questions in the classroom, arrange debates and discussion, and assign independent research projects to help boost critical thinking in the young. In Abu Dhabi, for instance, state-mandated independent research projects (called “ECART”) ask middle- and high-school students to investigate a topic in the community, debate and discuss it in class, and present findings and recommendations. Even civic education has been reconceived. As the Ministry of Education’s director of curriculum development, herself a member of the Sharjah ruling family, enthusiastically explained, “problem-solving” and “critical thinking” are now at the center of the citizenship curriculum, together with “tolerance.”

Perhaps the most radical aspect of these reforms has been their outward-looking character and embrace of Western-led globalization. Authoritarian social engineering has often had a more inward-looking character. In the
Gulf, in particular, as Ayalon points out, monarchs were originally less inclined than those in Jordan and Morocco to “open themselves up to the outside world,” and “looked inward rather than outward.” Yet today, in UAE public schools, it is open-mindedness and participation in the outer world, rather than isolation from it, that are emphasized. Most controversially, state authorities are rapidly shifting the language of instruction in public schools in math, science, and English from students’ native Arabic to English.

Conspicuous by its limited role in the educational reform agenda is not just Arabic but also Islam. This is consistent with the secular character of liberal social engineering, but also part of a broader strategic effort to reduce the influence of Muslim Brotherhood-type forces, which previously played a much greater role in education. The shutting out of Islamic Studies is dramatically visible in schools themselves. In one hallway, one observes foreign experts buzzing around helping with the teaching of math, science, English, and civics, promoting student-centered pedagogy, and publicizing students’ work on bulletin boards. In the very next hallway, where Arabic and Islamic Studies are taught, the experts are nowhere to be found, resources are limited, and the atmosphere is resentful.

Indeed, since many teachers lack the requisite English skills, and some are seen as too wedded to the old teaching methods to fully accept reform, rulers have enlisted a whole “new guard” of Western teachers and consultants. Over the past ten years, thousands have come to live and work in the UAE, recruited out of liberal democratic cultures such as Britain, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand to help UAE rulers implant the liberal ideology of education associated with those same cultures. And they are ubiquitous, ranging from their presence as advisors, teachers, and administrators in schools to their leading roles in institutions of higher education such as New York University – Abu Dhabi and UAE University. In addition, the new civics classes are themselves often taught by British and American expatriates, hired to make creativity, individual empowerment, and critical thinking an integral part of being an Emirati citizen.

A Spirit of Entrepreneurship

Changes in the symbolic arsenal of the state are also underway, with meanings being managed and reconfigured once again in ways that are curiously liberal in character given the authoritarian nature of the state. Symbolic politics, as Edelman put it, focuses not on “how people get the things they want through government”; rather, it examines the “mechanisms through which politics influences what they want, what they fear, what they regard as possible, and even who they are.” Social engineers often use visual symbolism like icons, art, posters, and other forms of propaganda to promote the official ideology. In this, the UAE is no different, except that the new ideology being promoted has more in common with Western liberal democratic countries than with their erstwhile authoritarian opponents.

In addition to the tenets of liberal educational philosophy, the economic liberalism associated with those countries holds a special appeal. Work, for example, is being imbued with new liberal meanings harking back to Weber’s spirit of capitalism and even the American dream. The idea that work is an end in itself, that it is intrinsically fulfilling and ultimately empowering for the individual, is now widely celebrated and promoted. Like Marx to Soviet planners, it is almost as if UAE social engineers have taken Weber as their ideological guiding light, particularly attending to his observation that “an attitude like this is not . . . something which occurs naturally.” Rather, a spirit of capitalism “has to be the product of a long, slow ‘process of education.’”

Such a process of education is widely in evidence throughout the UAE. As the much-publicized recent government strategy, Vision 2021, helpfully notes, “joining the world of work is a first step towards personal fulfillment and economic empowerment.” Everywhere can be found posters and banners showing young Emiratis, smiling and hard at work, yet with an individually empowering rather than a collectivist orientation. Consider, for example, the regime’s palpable excitement surrounding the idea of entrepreneurship as a means of self-discovery and source of personal fulfillment. The Young Entrepreneur Competition (YEC) was established in 2005 under the patronage of Sheikh Hamdan—a son of the Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed—aiming to “inject the spirit of entrepreneurship into young UAE Nationals,” according to the event’s state-employed Lebanese coordinator. As the coordinator gushed, these youth “discover themselves” through entrepreneurship. “They come out of YEC not only as businessmen,” she said, “but they create their own personality out of it.”

Many other examples of the new symbolism imbuing the idea of work with liberal notions like self-actualization and personal fulfillment can be found. At Careers UAE, a huge state-sponsored job fair, established in 2000, the slogan is “Empowering Nationals.” The liberal-sounding refrain is a popular one in ruling circles. Tawteen, a key government entity to guide young Emiratis into the workforce, has also adopted it. Not unlike the Stakhanovite movement in the Soviet Union, it operates a road show bringing motivational speakers from the private sector into classrooms to serve as role models of self-fulfillment through work.

A Festival of Thinking

A final aspect of UAE social engineering is its lavish use of state-sponsored spectacles. Spectacles may serve multiple
purposes and cater to different audiences, both as systems of signification and community,” as Lisa Wedeen puts it, and as “functional strategies to enforce dominance and construct community.” Royal iconography, the crowning of Queen Victoria as Empress of India, and the French Revolution’s “cult of reason,” for instance, may “dramatize the aspirations of the regime,” but are also “designed to convey certain ideas to spectators” in an effort to shape hearts and minds. Spectacles, therefore, may serve both expressive and instrumental ends. State-sponsored festivals, ceremonies, monuments, and media have all been analyzed as spectacles, dramatizing politics by emphasizing spectacular images and symbols over substance, idealistic slogans over reality, and myth over complex historical truth.

As with earlier incarnations of authoritarian social engineering, the idea of monumentalism plays a prominent role in the UAE campaign, reflected through imposing architecture, striking visual design, and “built cities.” When examining these developments as political spectacles, it becomes clear that they embody the regime’s liberal, enlightened self-image, aiming to impress it upon not only Emiratis, but also the international community. Consider, for example, the manmade Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, where the emirate has invested $27 billion to establish a flashy new cultural and educational district. New York University–Abu Dhabi, described as the “first world-class liberal arts university in the Middle East,” is located here, as will be branches of the Louvre and Guggenheim. The Guggenheim will be housed in a 450,000 square foot building designed by the architect Frank Gehry, with an acquisition budget vastly exceeding that of the New York original.

The regime’s liberal self-image is especially evident in the rhetoric surrounding these new monuments. For example, the Louvre Abu Dhabi is described and justified in the following extravagant terms: “Transferring to an Arab country a cultural form born in Enlightenment Europe, [the Louvre Abu Dhabi]’s deep sense of identity is rooted in the notions of discovery, exchange and thus education . . . [It] will express the universalism of its time, that of a globalized and interdependent world. Its duty will also be to translate exactly and instructively the spirit of openness and dialogue demonstrated by a young Arab nation.”

Public festivals, lavishly supported and highly publicized, have also been central to this campaign, and likewise liberal in character. Consider the Festival of Thinkers, a sumptuous “celebration of thought” established in 2005 and held every two years by the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), one of the country’s three public institutions of higher education. It aims to “energize promising youth of the region to inspire, innovate and invent,” providing opportunities for them to network with leading global thinkers and Nobel Laureates. “If only one young person in our land yearns and learns to use this wonderful gift of thought better,” mused the HCT chancellor at the opening ceremony for the 2011 Festival of Thinking, “maybe greatness will be the outcome.”

Intriguingly, when examining the Festival of Thinking more closely, one finds a certain quasi-religious quality to it consistent with earlier incarnations of authoritarian social engineering. On its website, it is described as a “unique thinking event,” designed “in collaboration with lateral thinking expert Dr. Edward de Bono.” On his own website, de Bono is described as a cult-like figure, the “Father of Creative Thinking” who has helped millions to become more creative through the “direct teaching of thinking.” Indeed, like a traveling preacher translating God’s will to the masses, his “special contribution has been to take the mystical subject of creativity and, for the first time in history, to put the subject on a solid basis.”

How Rulers Think: Explaining Liberal Social Engineering

What explains the liberal character of this campaign? Why would autocrats encourage their own citizens to be critical thinkers, particularly when they have such enormous reserves of oil and natural gas that obviate the need for a neoliberal developmental agenda? And why would they celebrate creativity, individual empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and “thinking” with such incredible gusto? Do they not worry about inciting critical thought about themselves, triggering an Arab Spring of their own? In this section, I probe reasons for action using evidence from palace-based ethnography and interviews with ruling elites, and then consider how such evidence may enrich theory on the puzzle of autocratic liberalization.

Of course, it is not possible to know with certainty how others think, and thus answer these questions fully. There are also hundreds of ruling elites in the UAE—members of the country’s seven ruling families—who do not always think the same way. But an ethnographic approach carried out over fifteen months of fieldwork combining observation and interviews with ruling elites can help us “see” phenomena the way the actors themselves do. Over time, with repeated interactions and the development of trust, ruling elites “let their guard down,” often providing deeper insights into their ways of thinking than can be gleaned from one-shot interviews, scripted speeches, and carefully crafted websites. Indeed, as Wedeen observes in the context of her ethnographic work in Yemen, the stories and jokes that actors tell amongst palace settings ranged from conversation about shared challenges and poetic dueling characteristic of the local culture to elaborate jokes and storytelling. My strategy, as an obvious outsider, was to embrace the role, as Venkatesh suggests, posing questions for discussion and observing.
the resulting dialogue. In the interest of ethnographic reflexivity, I also sought to maintain a low profile after posing initial discussion questions, not taking sides to allow conversations to proceed organically. Still, as the only non-Emirati, my presence was noted, though it was noted less over time.

Overall, my sense was that my outsider status helped to relax ruling elites, who worried less about what they might say in front of me than if I were tied more closely into the local community, where gossip spreads like wildfire. Likewise, although some have supposed that gender is a barrier for female researchers in the Middle East, I found that it helped to open doors, perhaps because I was viewed as less threatening. In comparing notes with male colleagues, I believe my gender may have encouraged ruling elites to feel themselves in a kind of safe domestic space, where they could speak their minds without being judged. In reflecting on my role, I am reminded of Abbas Milani’s observation, in his biography of the Shah, that the elder Reza Khan, the Shah’s father, was “more comfortable, less starchy, and less pompous,” more “himself” with Europeans and Americans than with other Iranians—itself a telling pattern. That I was not Emirati, an academic not a journalist, and able to speak Arabic seemed valuable factors encouraging access and a willingness to talk.

In Search of Lost Time: Young Autocrats Abroad

What is immediately apparent from the ethnographic evidence on ruling elites is a very real “love affair” with the West—or, more precisely, their idea of the West. In this way, the most powerful ruling elites in the UAE, who came to power in the 1990s and early 2000s and have spearheaded liberal social engineering, are different from their predecessors—less well-traveled rulers such as Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Rashid of Dubai, and Sheikh Saq of Ras al Khaimah, who never studied for a significant period of time in the West. When asked about their liberal social engineering initiatives, we find today’s ruling elites shifting the conversation nostalgically to their own impressions of the West, suggesting an active courting of its cultural models rather than the unconscious emulation implied by world culture theorists. Moreover, they do not talk of the West in abstract, impersonal terms, as if they were detached pragmatists simply adopting “whatever works” elsewhere as a rational learning perspective might suggest. On the contrary, they talk of it in very concrete, personal ways, telling stories from their own lived experiences there, typically as college or graduate students in America, Britain, Canada, or Australia, to explain their present-day motivations. I have titled this section after Marcel Proust’s In Search of Lost Time to frame my central findings, pointing to memory, longing, and nostalgia as emotional influences over autocrats’ reasoning that are underappreciated in existing theory.

Consider, for example, the story that the ruling monarch of Ras al Khaimah, the UAE’s northernmost emirate, chose to tell when asked about the country’s liberal campaign. It was a typical dinner in early February 2011 at the Ruler’s Palace, unfolding in the airy outdoor tent that served a majlis function in cooler months. His Highness Sheikh Saud bin Saqal al Qasimi sat on a cushioned seat lining the inside perimeter of the tent. Sitting to his left and right were various local men of note, including tribal elders like Ahmed al Khatri and well-known businessmen like Abdulla Yousef and his son Khaled Abdullah. On some nights, one or more of the Ruler’s teenage sons might join the group. Ruling elites from the other emirates were also frequent guests. It was said that the tent had an open-door policy, so to speak, and that anyone was welcome. Throughout the meal and conversation, some men would come and go with little ceremony, while everyone would stand for the arrival and departure of certain high-ranking men, such as the Ruler.

First, Sheikh Saud set the scene, describing a bustling university culture and the heady chaos of the “shopping period” where he could choose any courses he wanted from what seemed to be an infinite list. He paused to dwell on the many choices, frowning as he noted the absence of such a range of possibilities for UAE youth, whom ruling elites sometimes refer to as a “lost generation.” It was his first year as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan—Ann Arbor, where he would go on to study political science and economics. He recalled the lively events that were common, the book fairs, movie screenings, academic conferences, activist rallies, and student-run plays. There were also career fairs, internship support offices, and entrepreneurial meet-ups. He had never seen anything like this in the UAE. At first, he admitted, he was very nervous, even intimidated. “They were in the library all night,” he told the group. “I never saw anyone work so hard.”

But one day, with the extreme cold sharpening his clarity, he decided not to be intimidated any more. It was a simple act of willpower. He decided that he would be the first person in the library every morning, proving to himself and to the others that he could do it. Winning some laughs from the crowd in the tent, he explained in meticulous detail the complicated array of winter outerwear he needed to research and then purchase to bring this plan to fruition, given the bracing early-morning temperatures and his being more accustomed to a desert climate. But, despite these obstacles, he said with a grin, he succeeded. The story ended there on a note of personal triumph—but not before a short, humorous tangent about how several female undergraduates screamed when they saw him enter the library the first time, as he was wearing a black ski mask to keep warm that made him look like a burglar. He confessed that he would have liked to continue his studies in America, had he not received...
“the call” to come and rule as the next in line for the throne in Ras al Khaimah after starting a master’s program.

Although Sheikh Saud’s story may seem a bit round-about, this kind of elliptical storytelling, a staple of the local and especially Bedouin culture, is a common way in which ruling elites react when asked for their reasons for courting liberalism. The stories often function like fables, where the “moral” of the story points to something in the West that ruling elites see as lacking in UAE society, suggesting that personal experiences abroad helped shape their sense of a “problem” at home. That problem, as they describe it, is a rentier-style sense of entitlement and listlessness among UAE youth—what theorists call the “rentier mentality”—marked by a lack of personal drive, individual sense of purpose, and motivation to achieve, which contrasts sharply with their idealized image of how people are in the West.” For example, when pressed on whether the UAE needs Western-style social engineering, Sheikh Fatima, a niece of Sheikh Saud and high-end jewelry designer, pointed to one of her brothers as a classic example of the problem such social engineering can help solve.

You would not believe how lazy he was—just sitting around all the time. I would call my father every day and say “Please, please make him go to America or Britain, so that he will get better!” So after a while my father made him go Britain, he went to some schools—some time at Cambridge, then in London. And when he came back, he was 100% different. He was motivated, focused, more engaged, more positive. It was amazing.

Likewise, at the federal Ministry of Education in Dubai, responsible for public education across the country, I asked Abdulla al Amiri, the Special Advisor to the Minister, why the rulers were putting so much faith in Western-style liberal education, given its uneven performance. Ignoring the critical remark, he said wistfully, “When you look at people in the West, they rely on themselves to develop a career and to develop themselves. If you can’t do these things, it is difficult for you to develop your character and to mature… You will never be independent if you rely on others to do the job for you.” This, he said, is what he learned from his own experiences in the US, where he earned a master’s degree and Ph.D. in mechanical engineering.

For autocratic elites, these common socialization experiences in the West seem not only to have brought their recognition of a “problem” into sharp relief, giving them concrete ways to describe it, but also pointed a way forward. The ethnographic evidence suggests a roadmap of causal and normative ideas about what “enlightened” progress looks like and how to get there. Back at the tent at the Ruler’s Palace in Ras al Khaimah, for example, a young businessman with the ear of Sheikh Saud was applauding the idea of Western-style liberal social engineering as a solution to the rentier mentality. He reminisced nostalgically about his own time as an undergraduate at the University of Arkansas, where he said he finally felt like a “complete” person with choices and responsibilities. “In the UAE,” he said, “the locals never have to worry about what they will eat for dinner, someone always makes it for you, and your father pays your utility bills, and everything is taken care of.” Although many would presumably find such a life quite pleasant, he meant the comparison negatively. “At college in the US,” he continued, “it was the first time I had to cook for myself and figure out how to plan my day, pay bills, and take responsibility for things.” This, he said, is what the UAE needs.

It is clear that the sorts of things that stood out to these young autocrats abroad were liberal in the broad sense of character formation, rather than politically liberal (let alone democratic). Being immersed in a culture of individual self-actualization, autonomy, and entrepreneurialism, even a strong work ethic in the service of well-defined personal goals, is what struck their fancy, not the presence of political rights. In Abu Dhabi, when I asked Khalid al Amiri, for example, a younger member of the same prominent family as the Special Advisor quoted earlier, about the reasons for liberal social engineering, he focused on the absence of personal drive in the UAE, an “internal compass” as he later clarified, compared to his image of Westerners:

When you look at kids in the US and the Western world, they know; they have a hero, they have someone they want to be like. If a little Emirati boy comes to me and says, “I want to be Mark Zuckerberg.” You know, good for you, if somebody wants to laugh, fine laugh, but the kid knows. He has something. Has some focus. Even if he never goes into tech, at least he thought about it at that age.

Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, when ruling elites gather amongst themselves, there is very limited acknowledgement of responsibility for these rentier-style problems of listlessness and low achievement motivation. They speak about it with an air of distance and detachment. Yet, as Gulf and rentier state scholars will be quick to point out, these ruling elites may complain about the rentier culture, but they also benefit from it, and it is their distribution policies that help cultivate it. In fact, the rentier social contract is a cornerstone of their legitimacy, contributing to the authoritarian status quo, as citizens trade political rights for economic security. This, however, only makes ruling elites’ characterization of the rentier culture as a “problem” all the more strange: if it helps them so much, why should they complain about it?

The fact that they see it as a problem at all is by itself telling. What their stories tell us is that living and studying in the West at an impressionable age encouraged them to “see” the politically expedient rentier culture as a problem, even if they implicitly recognized its role in regime survival. There is an air of embarrassment in the
way these ruling elites talk about the rentier culture, as if it is a source of anxiety over national status and they find it awkward to live off of oil and related industries.77 As the Special Advisor explained, he came to the conclusion after own his time abroad that you cannot “develop your character” and “mature without a career. This is hardly a universal view, and not one that a certain “old guard” of ruling elites share, who are quite at ease with UAE society as it is. For instance, back in the outdoor tent, during a different palace event in Ras al Khaimah, Sheikh Saud was explaining the need for liberal education reform to a skeptical older guest. Sighing, he said, “Imagine an oil field that is not tapped,” referring to the pool of human talent that might go to waste if not “tapped” through the correct liberal social engineering tools. Later on, after the man had left, Sheikh Saud complained to the group that this—the language of oil—is the only language that “they” understand. “They” see nothing wrong with resource wealth and a society resting contentedly upon it. Yet those like Sheikh Saud, who spend significant time abroad, come to realize that much of the world does not truly respect this kind of development.

Instead, they absorb the idea that it is development that is “earned” with advanced technology, ideas, and human capital—the “knowledge economy”—that is not only the “real” key to progress, but is also respected as such. And liberal social engineering, of the kind many of them experienced personally at universities in the West, is seen as a solution, a way to cultivate that kind of appropriate, productive culture in their own societies. This shared realization, and the resulting understanding of themselves as enlightened elites seeking to modernize a backward society, may help assuage feelings of embarrassment and resolve the sense of cognitive dissonance that must emerge from living uncomfortably as an autocrat in a liberal democratic country. But what about the political risks of liberal social engineering in an illiberal state? Strangely, given the emphasis of theory on the “king’s dilemma” and other such tradeoffs, rarely could I find evidence that ruling elites felt such a conflict of interest. Their attitude can best be summarized with a joke. At the suggestion that liberal social engineering might trigger demands for political change in this hot desert state, Sheikh Saud quipped, “For that, the people would have to get out of their [air-conditioned] cars.” Whether ruling elites are right to joke, or if their lack of concern simply illustrates how sheltered they are from reality, remains to be seen.

As a whole, then, the ethnographic evidence suggests that ruling elites’ experiences in the West supplied a bundle of causal and normative ideas about the ways in which modern, productive members of a community ought to act.76 Moreover, these experiences were deeply personal ones, furnishing a means of comparison with the homeland that was not always favorable. With sufficient resources and political will, ruling elites came to believe that the liberal culture they saw and admired abroad could be recreated to good effect in their own societies, without its political dimensions and some of its more radical social ones—in other words, liberalism with a “democracy-shaped” hole, echoing Sartre’s critique of secular European culture as having a “God-shaped hole.”

Theoretical Implications
How does this evidence fit with existing theoretical perspectives on autocratic liberalization? First, it is clear that the popular rationalist account receives only limited support. There is little evidence that autocrats are intently focused on their own political survival and the perpetuation of authoritarianism. In fact, they appear to take these for granted, dismissing the notion of popular revolt with a joke and a wave of the hand. Have they carefully calculated the costs and benefits of liberal social engineering? The evidence does not suggest it. Rather, they fixate on their own romanticized memories of liberal social engineering in the West, in which liberal political institutions have been conveniently repressed, while ignoring the notion that it might not produce the same positive outcomes transplanted elsewhere.

Still, are there obvious political benefits that liberal social engineering brings to ruling elites, subtly reinforcing authoritarianism and thus vindicating at least functionalist variations on the rationalist perspective? Ruling elites clearly see liberal social engineering as part of a broader modernizing plan for a post-petroleum future. In this sense, it is viewed as beneficial from a long-term perspective, both for them and for the country. But apart from this, it would seem to offer autocrats few short-term benefits and quite a few risks. Certainly, it does not produce the sorts of benefits commonly identified in the literature on autocratic liberalization. For example, it cannot be viewed as an effort at co-optation, since there is no groundswell of popular demand for liberal social engineering. As shown above, the most vocal reaction has been criticism of the regime.

Does liberal social engineering provide autocrats with other benefits, perhaps in the international realm? Davidson, for example, argues that Gulf monarchies’ efforts to establish relationships with Western universities, either by inviting them to establish branch campuses or sponsoring their research centers, are an effort to build “soft power,” improving their reputation in the Western countries that protect them.77 That may be. It is true that the Gulf monarchies have historically relied on Western support for their defenses. However, that support has never been conditional on progress toward liberal democracy or the achievement of a positive image in the West, so a straightforward logic of consequentialism is not particularly convincing here. Moreover, the desire to curry favor abroad cannot explain the sheer breadth of the liberal social engineering underway domestically, which extends
far beyond New York University–Abu Dhabi and the other Western branch campuses.

How do ideational and normative approaches fare? One general factor consistent with the “world culture” approach of Meyer et al. is the timing of the liberal campaign in the UAE, coinciding with the rise in the late nineties of global discourses surrounding the need for modern states to build “knowledge economies” in the twenty-first century. For knowledge economies to thrive, the discourses suggested, societies must nurture creativity, critical thinking, and individual achievement—key goals of the UAE social engineering campaign. Perhaps UAE ruling elites are simply emulating these liberal and neoliberal models drawn from world culture. Yet the ethnographic evidence, while pointing to the importance of Western norms, does not entirely support this perspective. As critics of the approach have argued, and as the ethnographic evidence confirms, ruling elites are not passive vehicles for the transmission of world culture: they pick and choose among the different models circulating “out there.” Clearly, UAE ruling elites have not imported liberal culture, and not even “neoliberal” culture, wholesale; they have consciously selected some elements and not others.

Similar limitations are apparent in related normative and ideational arguments. For example, liberal social engineering might be explained as the natural product of the ideas embraced by the enlightened leaders of “globalizing monarchies.” Yet this presumes that top-down initiatives are, in fact, “enlightened” in an obvious, straightforward way, and begs the question of why authoritarian elites should come to think of their very un-authoritarian campaign as so enlightened in the first place. Likewise, liberal social engineering might be viewed as the result of competition and “branding” efforts among the admittedly very competitive Gulf monarchies for prestige and status.

With similar top-down spectacles and liberal educational initiatives emerging in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, in particular, this dynamic is clearly at play. However, it leaves unanswered the question of why autocrats would be competing in terms of liberal social engineering at all. How did liberal culture become such a “prestige object” for autocrats in the first place?

 Might Western consultants have made this so, serving as “norm entrepreneurs”? Indeed, Western experts play a central role at all levels of policymaking in the UAE and broader Gulf region. But, in this case, interview evidence suggests their role is more of an enabling one that fuels overconfidence at the top, rather than the driving force. It is UAE ruling elites, dead set on results, who have aggressively sought out Western consultants for assistance with liberal social engineering. In fact, many consultants are doubtful that Western-style liberal social engineering can flourish when divorced from its liberal institutional base, and subtly try to temper rulers’ high expectations for it.

Overall, then, the ethnographic evidence does not sit well with a narrow rationalist perspective on autocratic liberalization. Although ruling elites have a “rational” plan, one reflecting a broad logic of consequentialism aimed at building a less resource-dependent, less rentier society that they view as more modern, the reasoning behind this plan rests more on Western norms of appropriateness than narrow calculations of self-interest. In this sense, ideational and normative perspectives are a closer fit. But they too leave something missing because they do not explain why ruling elites should be so fanatical about liberal social engineering, given its risks and the obvious uncertainties over whether it can be politically defanged and transplanted into an authoritarian context.

Here, the ethnographic evidence helps fill gaps by showing how memory and emotion can turn abstract norms into especially powerful influences over reasoning, hijacking the learning process. The findings thus confirm and vividly demonstrate the importance of linkage to the West when it comes to liberalization, yet not through the material mechanisms that Levitsky and Way and others have stressed, nor through the calculated, less emotional pathways emphasized by theorists of technocracy in the literature on Latin American liberalization. Instead, the stories ruling elites tell suggest that it is emotions like longing, nostalgia, and embarrassment connected to personal experience, which have led them to latch on to liberal social engineering, and in ways that magnify potential benefits and downplay risks and uncertainties—not unlike the “emboldening” effect of emotions described by Pearlman, albeit in a very different context. In these ways, the findings resonate with recent work on the role of emotion in political decision making, with ruling elites believing emotionally in the correctness of liberal social engineering, “Emotional beliefs,” Mercer has explained, “are generalizations about internal, enduring properties of an object that involve certainty beyond evidence.” Deng Xiaoping, for instance, is said to have been deeply emotionally affected by his study trips to the West, which fostered “an almost magical faith in the role that science would play in China’s renewal.” For UAE authoritarian elites, it was not the science of the West but its culture that proved so enthralling.

The View from Below

Although my primary concern is autocratic reasoning, I now turn to how those outside of ruling circles are interpreting liberal social engineering. Do ordinary citizens support them? Are they taken seriously? Obviously, audiences don’t always share the same meanings of policies as their original planners have intended. As the campaign remains in its early stages, these attitudes are still in flux, and this section is necessarily brief.
First, there is a strong segment of Emiratis who see these initiatives as a threat to UAE national identity. This should not be surprising. In fact, given the radical nature of some of these changes, it is surprising that more nationalist resentment has not arisen. A 2010 speech given by Maryam Lootah, a political science professor at UAE University, makes this clear.\textsuperscript{90} The shift to English as the language of instruction, she said, is “denying the right to learn in one’s mother tongue,” and causing an erosion of Arab and Emirati identity. Moreover, far too much of the education budget has been earmarked for Western-style liberal social engineering, “hindering the self-confidence” of UAE nationals who should be more involved in their own reforms. These critics see liberal social engineering as a combination of Western cultural imperialism and rulers’ insulting lack of faith in their own culture.

A second response focuses less on the Western character of reforms than on a perception of exclusion from their implementation and the benefits they bring. This group is mostly found in the poorer northern emirates or the outlying regions of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, far from those respective capital cities. As a school principal in Hatta, a small town several hours west of Dubai, put it, “They don’t care about us. We get nothing from them.”\textsuperscript{91} A well-known professor at UAE University, Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, put this sense of exclusion very well. Asked about the new New York University–Abu Dhabi, he said: “It’s an illusion. It’s a bubble there, an isolated entity that has absolutely nothing to do with the society. A few people are sitting in that nice beautiful place. Is that a knowledge economy? If so, then there is a misunderstanding of what a knowledge economy is about.”\textsuperscript{92} He also emphasized the fact that very few Emirati students are actually enrolled at New York University–Abu Dhabi.

The liberal campaign has therefore met with criticism. There is, however, a third type of response that may give rulers some hope. I visited over twenty-five public schools aiming to understand how youth, arguably the most important “objects” of the liberal social engineering campaign, actually view it. From Abu Dhabi to Fujairah, Emirati youth were surprisingly excited about the changes underway. They described how classes had become more interesting. They pointed to their own work posted on the walls of the now “media-rich” classrooms. They mentioned field trips to the new museums, role-playing games, independent research projects letting them investigate something of their choosing. What do they think about learning in English, rather than Arabic? “It’s good!” Arabic is good too, they said, but they already speak it at home, and English will help them more in the long run. One of the country’s young public intellectuals, Mishaal al Gergawi, puts this perspective well, if a bit provocatively. Asked about education and language, he said, “It should be in English. You know why? Look, I think we as Arabs should get over the fact that we’ve been in the dark ages for hundreds of years.”\textsuperscript{93}

\section*{Conclusion}

Such single-minded social engineering—with a liberal education system on the horizon, cities awash in Weberian individualist symbolism, and lavish spectacles celebrating creativity and critical thinking—is an odd phenomenon to see unfold in an authoritarian state. Compared with liberal institutions, liberal social engineering is a lesser-studied variant on the puzzle of autocratic liberalization, though it is arguably as important for long-term political development. To gain insights into this puzzle, I have used an ethnographic approach, unusual in the authoritarianism literature because of data access challenges. In so doing, I make two contributions. First, I offer relatively rare, in-depth evidence on how some autocrats think, and second, I show how such evidence can help test and fill gaps in existing theoretical perspectives on the puzzle of autocratic liberalization.

In the UAE, the stories and jokes that ruling elites tell amongst themselves, away from the public eye, reveal a great deal about their ways of thinking. As shown, the ethnographic evidence does not support the popular scholarly image of the autocrat as über-rational being, a scheming Moriarty with every liberal move a rational strategy to prolong authoritarianism. When asked about their liberal initiatives, we find them turning nostalgically to their own personal experiences in the West, using these to justify their current actions. Like fables, the stories they tell contain lessons, illustrating something they came to see as problematic in their own society in comparing it with the West, as they recall it. I have argued that these transnational socialization experiences encouraged them to see the politically expedient rentier culture as a problem, and Western-style liberal social engineering as a solution.\textsuperscript{94}

The evidence therefore fits normative and ideational perspectives on autocratic liberalization more closely. But it also adds something important to them by showing how memory and emotion rooted in personal experience can transform abstract norms into especially powerful influences over reasoning, obscuring risk and uncertainty. Here, ideas motivating change arose not from a free-floating world culture, the lobbying efforts of norm entrepreneurs, or the dictates of formal international institutions. Rather, they emerged from young autocrats’ deeply personal experiences abroad, crystallizing into a certain stylized, plug-and-play idea of the West that might, like an app, be used to install a depoliticized liberal culture. Ruling elites’ emotional investment in this idea seems to have contributed in significant ways to their decision to pursue change that was never demanded by the people, will not win tangible international benefits, and is not immediately needed in an oil-rich society.
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Where else might we expect these dynamics to unfold? Other rentier states are a good bet, where emotion and memory tied to the West, assuming some degree of pre-existing linkage, may enter into autocratic reasoning more readily simply because there are fewer material and institutional constraints on choice. Rentier theorists emphasize how rents afford autonomy to authoritarian leaders, widening the space for elite agency and policy experiments that may invite non-material factors into the reasoning process. Jordan, not a resource-rich state but one displaying rentier characteristics because of aid reliance, hints at such a link; there, the current king established the King’s Academy as a near-exact replica of Deerfield Academy, a New England prep school where he studied and reportedly spent the happiest years of his life. In the Gulf, the push by monarchs for liberal social engineering is also consistent with this hypothesis. Because of shared colonial histories, all Gulf monarchies display significant linkage to the West, especially the English-speaking countries. All have also shown interest at the top in Western-style liberal social engineering. Yet it is generally the richer and less constrained of these rentier states, like the UAE and Qatar that lack powerful parliaments and strong religious counterforces, which have successfully implemented large-scale initiatives, illustrating the limits of these dynamics.

A valuable future line of research might explore the interplay between rentierism and liberal social engineering. On the one hand, rentierism can create space for liberal social engineering via enhanced elite agency at the top, which empowers leaders to innovate. On the other hand, rentierism can also make liberal social engineering more difficult to implement due to the constraints imposed by the rentier social contract, which empowers citizens who don’t want such change to resist. As scholars have shown, rentier norms can render even very rich states weak in their ability to implement reform. Indeed, when it comes to liberal social change, rentier states may be simultaneously innovative and weak.

Another important area for further research is autocratic learning, and particularly the question of what Western-led globalization “really” teaches authoritarian elites. Clearly, the popular notion that such exposure would have an inevitably democratizing effect has not panned out; as Leheny argues, in his critique of theories of democratization, “choices are more complex than a resist-or-submit dichotomy.” So what, then, do autocrats learn? For many, the lesson has been to adopt the technology and institutional models of the West, but not its culture. The original Meiji reformers, for example, sought to “use Western methods for anti-Western ends.” Yet, with the liberal social engineering under autocracy described here, it is culture that has been embraced and repurposed. As a result, the UAE effort and others like it may constitute a novel attempt at authoritarian modernization, mixing and matching elements of liberalism, neoliberalism, and authoritarianism. Future research should continue to explore autocratic learning and the new variations on modernism—and high modernism—that can emerge in the minds of young, impressionable, and globally mobile ruling elites.

Notes

2 Art 2012, 365.
3 Scott 1998, 4.
4 See, for example, Mahdavy 1970, Beblawi and Luciani 1987, and Crystal 1990.
5 My account is therefore more aligned with theories of diffusion and linkage to the West (e.g., Levitsky and Way 2010). However, these theories rarely emphasize the effects of memory and emotion on autocrats’ reasoning.
6 The phrase “seeing like a sheikh” is a play on James Scott’s Seeing Like a State, which also focused on top-down social engineering and its origins.
7 Wedeen 2010; Schatz 2009a.
8 Schatz 2009a, 305.
9 Schatz 2009b, 5.
10 United Nations Development Programme 2003, IV.
11 Levitsky and Way 2010.
12 Blaydes 2010, 3. See also the discussion in Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009.
13 For an overview, see Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009.
15 Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009.
18 Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.
19 For an overview, see Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2006, who outline four mechanisms of diffusion, some of which (e.g., coercion) involve more instrumental reasoning than others (e.g., emulation).
21 Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.
22 Centeno and Silva 1998.
23 March and Olsen 1998.
24 For example, Stephen Macedo (1990, 251–252) describes the liberal “ideal of character” as “actively reflective, self-critical, tolerant, reason-giving and reason-demanding, open to change, and respectful of the autonomy of others.” See also MacMullen 2013.
26 For vivid examples, see Wedeen 1999, Kenez 1985, and Mosse 1975.
37 Callan and White 2002; Darling and Nordenbo 2002.
39 Zhao 2012; Gillespie 2001; Cambanis 2007.
40 ‘Donnell and Schmitter 2013.
41 Thus, the “king’s dilemma” (Huntington 1968) can apply to liberal institutions as well as liberal social engineering.
42 Herf 1984; Gray 2005.
43 Heater 2004, 163.
45 Herb 1999; Tétreault 2000; Davidson 2012.
48 Vali Nasr, for instance, described the UAE as a rare example of “good news” in the Middle East during the Pew Forum’s biannual Faith Angle Conference (December 8, 2008, transcript accessed February 13, 2013 at http://www.pewforum.org/2008/12/08/america-and-islam-after-bush/).
49 Davidson 2005 remains the most thorough, political-science oriented treatment of the UAE in recent years, though Dubai has attracted growing attention from scholars in other disciplines; Kanna 2011, Ali 2010. Valuable histories and more specialized studies are also available; Heard-Bey 1982, Van Der Meulen 1997, Almezaini 2012.
51 Tétreault 2010, 145.
53 Conversation with former Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) curriculum developer, Abu Dhabi, June 2012.
54 Interview with Sheikh Khulood Al Qassimi, Director of Curriculum Department, Ministry of Education, Dubai, November 2011.
55 Ayalon 2000, 33.
56 Interview with UAE public intellectual, Mishaal al Gergawi, Dubai, May 2012.
57 Author’s field notes, 2010–2014.
60 UAE Cabinet 2010, 20.
61 For an excellent overview of neoliberal symbolism in Dubai, see Kanna 2011.
62 Interview with Nisrin Sasar, YEC Coordinator, Dubai, November 2011.
64 Wedeen 1999, 13.
65 Mosse 1975; Scott 1998.
66 Bundhun 2010.
68 See the Festival of Thinkers website, http://fot.hct.ac.ac/about/chancellor-message/, accessed September 22, 2014, where his speech is reproduced.
69 Mosse 1975.
71 Wedeen 2010; Schatz 2009c.
72 Wedeen 2008.
73 Between 2010 and 2014, I conducted extensive fieldwork in the UAE, partially funded by a fellowship from one of the northern emirates. As a result of the connections and status afforded by the fellowship, I was a frequent guest at meetings, dinners, ceremonies, and other events held at the Ruler’s Palace in Ras al Khaimah, the northernmost emirate, and able to conduct palace-based ethnography. Over the course of my fieldwork, I visited the palace regularly, often in an outdoor traditional-style tent serving a majlis function where ruling elites from all over the country would congregate, and interviewed dozens of additional ruling elites outside the palace context in both Arabic and English. I was also able to meet many times with the reigning monarch of Ras al Khaimah, Sheikh Saud bin Saqr al Qasimi, to ask follow-up questions, and to obtain introductions to ruling elites in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Fujairah.
74 Venkatesh 2002.
75 Shehata 2006; Pachirat 2009.
76 For more on these issues, see Schwedler 2006. The fact that I was also associated with a well-known Western university—of the kind the sheikhs themselves admire—probably also facilitated access in ways that an affiliation with a non-Western university, unfortunately, might not have.
77 Milani 2011, 36.
78 In a palace context, the majlis is an official room where meetings take place.
80 Not all people, however; Sheikh Saud was quick to criticize, for example, “your hippies.”
81 Conversation with Sheikha Fatima al Qasimi, Ras al Khaimah, April 2014.
82 Interview with Abdulla al Amiri, Special Advisor to the Minister, Ministry of Education, Dubai, November 2011.
In these ways, my argument mirrors that of David Leheny (2003), who found that Japanese leisure policies reflect governing officials’ ideas about how “normal” people spend their recreational time, based on examples from abroad and especially the West.

Indeed, they are adamant about maintaining their very “un-neoliberal” welfare system.

Eickelman 2001, for example, compares Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, the ruling monarch of Qatar from 1995 through 2013, to Frederick the Great. On “globalizing monarchies,” see Henry and Springborg 2010.

Peterson 2006.

Marcy 2000.

Jones 2014.

Mercer 2005, 95.

Markey 2000.

Peterson 2006.

Yanow 1996.

Interview with school principal, Hatta, Dubai, September 2011.

Interview with Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, university professor and well-known public intellectual, Abu Dhabi, June 2012.

Interview with Mishaal al Gergawi, Dubai, May 2012.

Thus, like Levitsky and Way 2010 (44–45), I emphasize “linkage” to the West as an important contributor to liberalization, but where they view the mechanisms of its influence as material, I see them here as far more normative or ideological.

Paumgarten 2006. Indeed, when King Abdullah first saw the models for the dining hall, which had rectangular tables, he was not pleased. He said, “This will not do. These tables should be round. The tables at Deerfield are round.”

In Kuwait, for example, the parliament often blocks top-down development projects; Herb 2009.

Chaudhry 1997; Hertog 2010.

Leheny 2003, 178.

99. Jeffrey Herf (1984), for example, famously coined the term “reactionary modernism” to signify an embrace of the West’s technology combined with a rejection of its liberal values, best embodied by Nazi Germany.

100. Beasley 1972, 212.

References


