Introduction

In a shopping center in an affluent part of Dubai, a group of old, retired Emirati men congregate daily in Starbucks. When I asked these men about places in Dubai where they felt a sense of community, they argued there was no real community anymore: it only existed in the old days, when everyone knew one another and everyone was Emirati—and these days were long gone. Likewise, popular and scholarly accounts depict similar narratives about the sense of alienation inhabitants of Gulf cities endure in cities dominated by neoliberal spectacles.[1] Yet, a more complex picture emerges when one follows the everyday lives of these very individuals and learns the ways that they adapt and make meanings *within* (and *not* just behind or against) the glitzy and rapidly changing urban landscape they inhabit, which has created Dubai's reputation as "the spectacular city." It also highlights the need to understand people's everyday lives holistically, beyond just interview data, as people's experiences of the city do not always mirror how they speak about them.

These men, for instance, had appropriated the chain coffee shop (located in what would normally be considered a sanitized shopping center) in a "traditional" manner, almost like they would a *majlis*.[2] They consumed little from it, as evidenced by the lone bottle of water sitting at

the table, and brought their own food from home, such as a stainless-steel bowl of dates. One of them—who was the most vocal about his dislike of the city's "superficiality" and its catering to tourists—often frequented the city's fancy restaurants and five-star hotel lobbies, potent symbols of top-down and commerce-oriented spectacular development for which Dubai has become known.[3] While this does not negate the sense of loss he and others experience, it draws attention to the reality that many inhabitants' everyday lives—and the social meanings they make—do not only take place beyond the spectacular city but also *within* it. Even as these men considered the new Dubai to be less "authentic" than the city of their childhood, they were still making it their home. The example of their coffee shop outing ritual draws attention to ongoing processes of *inhabiting spectacle* pursued by *adaptive agents* to create meaningful everyday lives amid rapid development in the new Dubai, and not only beyond it.

Everyday Life in the Spectacular City is an urban ethnography that reveals how middle-class citizens and long-time residents of Dubai adaptively interact with the city's spectacular spaces—such as its big shopping centers, gleaming new developments, and upscale coffee shops—to create meaningful social lives. I use the phrase "spectacular places" to refer not only to big developments but also to more mundane spaces, such as small coffee shops and malls. I do this because the latter still represent the spectacular and rapid scale of development in the city, which is often considered to be inauthentic, alienating, sanitized, too modern, and too foreign in popular and mainstream accounts. This book argues that these citizens and residents inhabit spectacle as adaptive agents: they adapt themselves to imposed structures while at times also making these same structures serve their own social needs, which evolve in tandem with the changing urban landscape of a now iconic metropolis defined by neoliberal patterns of modernization and globalization. Belying popular and scholarly portrayals of Dubai as inherently "inauthentic," and therefore objectively alienating and disempowering, it presents *adaptivity* as a new framework for understanding how agency operates beyond the conceptual binary of resistance and capitulation within the increasingly twinned developments of illiberal society and neoliberal spectacle.

In response to Dubai's dramatic development trajectory, it has become a common scholarly and popular pursuit to seek, implicitly or explicitly, to

uncover the "real" city that lies beneath the veneer of the high-profile architecture and newly renovated, often privatized indoor and outdoor spaces of Dubai. This pursuit contrasts supposedly "authentic," "local" spaces with "inauthentic," "tourist" ones, which are often depicted as objectively alienating to local populations. While this vein of critique can voice sincere concerns about neoliberalism, exclusionary urbanism, and the losses that can accompany rapid changes, it is often mired in unexamined Orientalist attitudes and has little regard for the everyday realities of the many inhabitants of these layered landscapes. Indeed, while the new Dubai of today has been built by the state and globalized finance capital largely outside the oversight or control of Dubai's citizens and residents, the significance of the city's transformations is never fully determined by the intentions of its developers. This book, therefore, centers the ongoing adaptive work inhabitants do to transform Dubai's spectacular places into personally important cultural sites, sites that house memories; provide places to gather, connect with one another, and "see and be seen"; and serve as public spaces where residents observe and negotiate social norms and various regimes of inclusion and exclusion. For adaptive agents, the spectacular city becomes a site of not only loss and marginalization but also belonging and community.

Inhabitants' activity in forming meaningful connections with and within spectacular spaces grounds the book's conceptual contribution to understanding how contemporary subjects living in illiberal societies actively respond to their societies' neoliberal developments. Dominant discourses conceptualize a limiting triptych of ways residents might relate to spectacular developments such as those in Dubai by (at least subtly) resisting the neoliberal agenda the developments represent; helplessly watching as the spectacle unfolds; or maybe enthusiastically accepting the new status quo.[4] In this schema, agentic engagement with urban spaces is conflated with acts of defiance toward the spectacular city, which is not depicted as a "real" place. For instance, Yasser Elsheshtawy, considered one of the foremost urbanism scholars writing on the Gulf, asserts that "in the midst of the spectacular city, *between its cracks*, another city emerges."[5] "The city's 'placelessness' and temporariness is defied in many ways through small acts of resistance."[6] Such narratives privilege overt or subtle resistance to spectacle as meaningful, while positioning other experiences within the

spectacular city as superficial, lacking in a deep engagement with urban space, or even the manifestation of false consciousness. This resistance-centered discourse prioritizes liberal conceptions of agency, overlooking the experiences of individuals deemed politically passive while simultaneously investing spectacular urban space with a level of power that can seem completely totalizing.[7] Alternatively, my ethnography shows that middle-class citizens' and residents' attitudes toward the top-down developmental model do not fit into a triptych of supporters, oppressed, resistors. Instead, many are adaptive agents who inhabit and make meanings in a spectacular and illiberal city that shapes, but can also be shaped by, their desire to live a meaningful life and the practices they enact to achieve this goal.[8]

Through its focus on contemporary Dubai and those who inhabit its spectacular spaces, this book offers a deeper look at an understudied middle- and upper-class population of people living everyday lives within an urban landscape that has recently undergone dramatic transformations. Because of the scale and rapidity of its developmental trajectory, and the spectular spaces that have resulted, Dubai has frequently been portrayed as an exceptional place by both critics of the city and its boosters. Yet while some aspects of Dubai are unique to the city, its trajectory of spectacular development has echoes in other times and places within the Gulf region and across other parts of the world. Therefore, this research offers broader insights into how people create everyday life within top-down and commerce-oriented development through negotiating ongoing processes of loss and marginalization while also forging dynamic forms of belonging and community. Ultimately, adaptive agency offers a tool for understanding not only the actions of middle-class inhabitants in Dubai but also a more globalized phenomenon, for some of Dubai's spectacles, this book argues, can be seen as *un*exceptional in today's changing world.

HOW DUBAI BECAME THE SPECTACULAR CITY

A brief history of Dubai's development trajectory can help us contextualize the city's spectacular development, which is a function not only of its modern urban aesthetic but also of the quick pace and large scale of the changes that have unfolded across the city over the last few decades.

Pre-oil Dubai was a business hub, due in part to its rulers' efforts to encourage merchants and traders to settle there. In 1900, Arab and Persian merchants and traders who had been living in Persian port cities moved to Dubai after the Persian government began levying taxes on its ports and the ruler of Dubai instituted a variety of business-friendly economic and political incentives designed to attract them.[9] The city remained small, however; for the next several decades, urban Dubai was less than 320 hectares (3.2 km^2), and the entire population lived in three enclaves at the mouth of Dubai Creek.[10]

In 1960, Dubai began to develop under the direction of Sheikh Rashed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, who hired British architect John Harris to develop the city's first master plan. An electrical grid and a road system were built; the area of the creek near the port was dredged; a new town center was constructed; and land was zoned for industrial, commercial, and residential uses.[11] In 1966, oil was discovered in commercial quantities, and by 1968, migrant laborers constituted 50 percent of Dubai's population. These developments spurred significant expansion and development of infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, roads, and telecommunications networks.[12] A new port and terminal building were constructed at Dubai International Airport, and the largest manmade harbor in the world was built at Jebel Ali, where a free-trade zone was created.

The making of Dubai as a spectacular city has often been associated with the city's recent developments, beginning particularly with the building of the iconic luxury hotel Burj Al Arab at the end of the 1990s. However, similar endeavors began as early as 1959 with the construction of Dubai's hospitals and its first national bank, which may be considered mundane today but were once themselves spectacles.[13] Dubai's airport, now considered an essential service, was often described while it was being built as "a vanity project 'to enhance Dubai's name.'"[14] Developments like these were used to fashion Dubai's image as a modern, safe, and regulated place—and to ensure citizens' loyalty. For example, Sheikh Rashid found hospitals in neighboring emirates to be a political threat, as he was concerned that other ruling families offered better health care for Dubai's citizens.[15] The building of Al Maktoum Hospital in the 1960s "signaled Dubai as a legitimate place of welfare and safety"[16] and presented the city "as a place where one could live comfortably. Medical care—with its dual needs

of refrigeration and heating . . . antiseptic surfaces, and its aura of serenity delivered by assured technology—also exhibited Dubai's capacity for technological advancement."[17] Vaccination campaigns demonstrated to people coming to Dubai through the ports that Dubai was regulated and safe.[18] During this time as well, Dubai's confined passageways were exchanged for wider roadways. Construction standards, and the enforcement of those standards, were associated with health, so various new inspectors emerged. In 1961, there was a "Sanitary Inspector." By this time, Spinney's supermarket had already opened in Deira and offered the optical assurance of hygienic packaging, though the store still could not offer fresh milk."[19] All these developments advanced Dubai's desire to present itself as a modern, safe, and orderly place, an effort that continues today.

In discussing Sheikh Rashid's visits to London, Reisz says that while London was not a template for Dubai, "it was presented to the ruler as a sales catalogue of discrete parts and experiences," ranging from escalators, theme parks, high streets, metros, and hotel suites.[20] A hospital, airport, and bank were built not only for the services they provided but also for their aesthetics: they presented Dubai as a modern place, a safe place, a regulated place. Dubai's desire to present itself as a modern, safe, and orderly place continues today through various initiatives.

In 1971, Dubai became one of the emirates that constitute the United Arab Emirates (UAE). After the union, a new master plan replaced the older one (with the same architect). A tunnel beneath the creek, now called the Shindagha Tunnel, was constructed to connect Bur Dubai and Deira. The Maktoum and Garhoud bridges were constructed and Port Rashid was opened in 1972.[21] After Sheikh Rashid's death in 1990, his son, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, became the de facto ruler of Dubai (his brother, Sheikh Maktoum, was the official ruler until 2006, when he passed away). Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid is credited for creating the Dubai that is known today. He envisioned a Dubai that could sustain itself without oil as an international tourist hub where big multinational corporations would establish their Middle Eastern headquarters and investors would want to spend money. He wanted Dubai to be a well-functioning, modern city that offered services such as a metro and efficient electronic information and communication technologies in both the government and the private sectors.

The city grew, particularly along Sheikh Zayed Road toward Jebel Ali, an area that has come to be known as the "new Dubai."[22] Sheikh Zayed Road, and "new Dubai" in general, house the city's skyscrapers and new commercial and financial centers. New Dubai instantiates the "glitzy" and "sanitized" side of the city, where the most spectacular developments take place.[23] To forward Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid's goal of transforming Dubai into a major tourist destination, in the 1990s the city began constructing megaprojects such as the artificial islands known as Palm Islands; Burj Al-Arab Hotel; Dubai Marina, which features luxury hotels, high-rise apartment buildings, and cafés; Jumeirah Beach Residence, a beachfront apartment and hotel community featuring restaurants, a boardwalk, a park, and chair and cabana rentals; Internet City, an IT business park that houses 1,400 companies; Media City, a regional hub that houses 1,300 media companies; and many others. By 2005, Dubai's urban area was 190 times bigger than it had been in 1900.[24]

Although many new developments have been erected on empty land, some megaprojects are now being built on the old sides of the city and are gentrifying these areas. While the new Dubai may be seen as the sanitized and wealthy side and the old Dubai as the "gritty" side, one can find working-class neighborhoods and lower-income residents sharing big villas in parts of new Dubai. Nevertheless, many parts of the city are clearly segregated by class. This segregation facilitates a common distinction observers make between "new Dubai" and "real Dubai": realness is associated with the older neighborhoods where Emiratis used to live and that now house the foreign working class, and realness is dissociated from the new developments and their emphasis on capitalist development and attracting foreign capital.

But everyday life is not as clear cut as this common dichotomy suggests. Middle-class inhabitants engage with new Dubai as a "real" space in ways that they find meaningful. While some of them describe experiences of loss and alienation in relation to new Dubai, many also describe social gains made through enacting rituals of belonging there. By illuminating the complexities of their relationships to new Dubai, and the agential work they do to inhabit the city, this book fills in some of the shades of gray that are missing from prevailing black-and-white images of life in old and new Dubai.

LOOKING BEYOND BINARY PARADIGMS
TO THEORIZE ADAPTIVE AGENCY

In my first weeks as a PhD student at the University of Oxford, I attended an Arab student group dinner. As we were socializing in a Syrian restaurant in town, an Arab student sitting next to me informed me that she had been to Dubai but didn't like it—she found it superficial. I had heard these comments before. A few weeks ago, on a plane ride from Dubai to London, a British woman told me she preferred Abu Dhabi to Dubai because the former was slower paced, and you could see more Emiratis there—she described Abu Dhabi as more authentic. I constantly hear comments about Dubai's perceived superficiality from various people: Arabs, South Asians, Westerners, and others; people from different backgrounds and occupations; and people with different relationships to the city, including tourists, new residents, and, occasionally, the city's inhabitants, both Emiratis and long-term resident non-Emiratis. While this narrative persists in academia and mainstream accounts—and there has been very insightful research highlighting the Orientalist nature of such stereotypes—there is still a need for a large-scale intervention to thoroughly investigate this omnipresent authenticity discourse and the consequences its narratives play in our understanding of certain geographies and the people who inhabit them.

Therefore, a central contribution of this book is its critique of binary paradigms that have dominated popular and scholarly portrayals of Dubai and how the city is inhabited by its long-term residents. Foremost among these is the pervasive discourse that the city is inauthentic, and therefore totally alienating, to its residents. This "discourse of inauthenticity" shapes, and is shaped by, portrayals that characterize the city as an exceptionally illiberal and neoliberal urban landscape, in which the authoritarian state and global capital work together to exert overwhelming power. While attentive to the dramatic scale of Dubai's development and the political economy in which such changes have taken shape, my ethnography foregrounds alternative conceptualizations of Dubai's urban environs and the ways they achieve meaning through ongoing practices of interaction between middle-class residents and the city they inhabit. This book eschews binary notions of authenticity/inauthenticity and liberalism/illiberalism to focus on the meaning-making practices of adaptive agents

who negotiate complex and layered political, economic, social, and cultural geographies to create everyday lives within the spectacular city.

Binary conceptualizations of fake versus authentic environments lead people to fetishize so-called authentic places, while at the same time dismissing so-called fake places (whether whole cities like Dubai or specific spaces such as shopping malls) as nonplaces unworthy of studying and learning about—except to critique. When we use binaries of fake/authentic to understand certain spaces and geographies, we fail to recognize the multiplicity of roles spectacular places assume. They are home for some people, places of memories, places where people negotiate social norms, and important cultural sites in various ways—not just inherently alienating spaces of neoliberal spectacle. Overlooking these realities results in narratives that depict inhabitants of Gulf cities as constantly isolated, helpless as they are forced to live in soulless cities changing beyond their consent. It also reproduces ideas about these cities being exceptionally exclusionary and unsustainable, without linking the exclusionary and unsustainable nature of neoliberal urban development in Dubai to global processes happening simultaneously elsewhere. For instance, in *The Independent*, the public intellectual Ziauddin Sardar writes:

> The place looks and feels unreal. That's the conclusion I reach every time I visit a Gulf state. It is not just the Disney World architecture, the obscene display of wealth, the ubiquitous presence of poor migrant laborers, the insidious racism of the natives, and the segregation and seclusion of the women. What really strikes you is the fact that the region is totally out of sync: the contradictions between imported hypermodernity and the reactionary and anachronistic local traditions are just too stark. I always leave thinking: this isn't going to last long.[25]

Valuations of modernity are political, as are judgments of modernity: "when observers accept or reject an individual's or a group's effort to be seen as modern, their evaluations are political pronouncements."[26] Sardar's depiction of the supposed clash between "imported hypermodernity" and "anachronistic local traditions" categorizes the Gulf's modernity as a facade covering up a lack of modernity underneath.[27] Sardar's assessment exemplifies the Orientalist lens that often implicitly or explicitly pits Gulf states against the rest of the (typically Western) world. In this quote,

for example, the exploitation of workers and exclusion of women are depicted as primary characteristics of Gulf states, not as social ills that plague many states. Koch demonstrates that there is an abundance of these narratives in Western newspapers and academic work.[28] Yet, these narratives do not only emerge from the West. For instance, Centner shows that people from Istanbul and Beirut contrast Dubai to their own cities, portraying Dubai as a cultureless place in comparison to their cities of "civilization" and "history."[29]

One of the aspects often associated with Dubai's "inauthenticity" is its illiberalism, wherein inhabitants do not play a role in how their cities develop, which coexists with *neo*liberalism to create the spectacular city. Authoritarianism and neoliberalism are linked: Debord says that the modern spectacle is "the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign."[30] A society of spectacle therefore appears to uphold neoliberalism's basic principles, where state and capital come together and further empower one another, which can magnify authoritarian political arrangements. However, it is important to foreground that state spectacles exist both in liberal and illiberal settings, even if they are more dominant in the latter because creating spectacles requires resources (financial or political) that are easier to arrange in settings with minimal organized opposition.[31] While illiberal settings may produce more overt forms of spectacle, spectacular cities share the same characteristics and problems of other neoliberal cities, and neoliberal forms of governance exist both in liberal and illiberal states.

States build spectacular cities—signified by megaprojects and "starchitecture"—for a variety of reasons, such as to facilitate capital accumulation, project themselves as tourist destinations, and portray themselves as modern to both the world and their own residents.[32] Spectacles promote a city's modernity and a state's global visibility, showing it as a "vital and dynamic place" while legitimizing development projects without a high level of scrutiny.[33] When spectacular developments or events are tied to national pride and patriotism, they are less prone to being criticized, as doing so might risk someone being seen as unpatriotic.[34]

Because they aim to attract foreign capital, tourists, and wealth, spectacular cities are often neoliberal cities (although cities not deemed spec-

tacular also share similar characteristics). Neoliberal development privileges elites with economic capital while disadvantaging those without it, as it allows for the redistribution of wealth in a manner that benefits the economic elite—for example, by lower taxation of economic elites, by giving the private sector control over the public sector, or by lower welfare distributions.[35] The general lack of regulation safeguarding rights of low-wage laborers or the lack of social benefits for noncitizens corroborates the idea of Dubai as a neoliberal city. However, it is not sufficient by itself to explain the extensive social benefits offered to citizens, such as free land or housing, free higher education and health care, high job security, and the availability of public sector jobs with short hours and relatively high pay. Nevertheless, we do see forms of neoliberal governance dominating the landscape in many ways, even for citizens. For instance, the fact that most Emiratis in Dubai attend private rather than public schools reinforces the reality that private services are fulfilling the roles that the public sector otherwise could, as these public services are seen as deficient compared with private ones.

The depiction of cities such as Dubai as *exceptionally* illiberal and neoliberal, however, may lead us to miss out on mundane realities of people's everyday lives and critique their political subjectivities (or supposed lack thereof) to higher degrees than when similar research is conducted elsewhere. While there are states with a higher saturation of illiberal practices than others, pockets of liberalism and illiberalism exist everywhere, and authoritarian and democratic states use many of the same tools to engage with their subjects.[36] More importantly, there are people and places in so-called liberal states, such as Indigenous communities or Black Americans in the US, who experience illiberalism more than others in the same state.[37] Rather than locating liberalism/illiberalism geographically or spatially, liberalism/illiberalism should be located by practice.[38] This allows us to begin de-exceptionalizing Dubai's forms of illiberalism and neoliberalism to gain a better understanding of the forms of subjectivity and agency that take place there.

In this book, critiquing the pervasive "discourse of authenticity" built on binaries of authentic/fake and liberal/illiberal allows a more nuanced portrait of Dubai's middle-class residents to emerge, one that highlights their adaptive practices of inhabiting spectacle. This is important because

it allows us to theorize a mode of agency operating beyond the binary of passivity/resistance that has often framed popular and scholarly portrayals of Dubai's residents despite the well-known limitations of this framing.

Take, for instance, this scholarly account:

> Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha and others. Their soaring towers, spotless shopping malls, immaculate transport systems and ultramodern airports are suggestive of an urbanity that does not tolerate any kind of informal intervention. A *detached populace* moves through these sites, consuming a visual landscape that is predicated on the spectacular. It must remain clean, sanitized, free from any traces of human interaction. *People are behaving as if they are on a stage set, playing a predetermined role and following a carefully written script*.[39]

Here, inhabitants of spectacular cities are described as entranced subjects who are incapable of feeling "real" belonging or having meaningful lived experiences; their actions have been predetermined for them. Some scholars of the Gulf at times engage in similar narratives: the Bahraini scholar Omar AlShehabi depicts inhabitants of Gulf cities as without agency in relation to their cities' development: "They are generally marginalized and without any active role in defining its physical and social features. Here they see buildings and towers rising around them, and they cannot do anything except watch."[40]

It is perhaps not unexpected, then, that a lot of the academic discourse on the Gulf is focused on locating resistance, whether explicitly or implicitly. Abu-Lughod says that scholars who find "something admirable about resistance have tended to look to it for hopeful confirmations of the failure—or partial failure—of systems of oppression."[41] Elsheshtawy, for example, highlights the "toiling populace" who are "bravely defying prevailing norms" as the exception to an otherwise detached population.[42] Yet if we allow resistance to spectacle to appear to be the only legitimate (or even possible) form of agency, we simplify some of the more complex dynamics of subjectivity through which people in Dubai relate to their city, to themselves, and to one another.

Everyday Life in the Spectacular City charts an alternative path to the common academic quest to locate a certain type of (resistive) agency

among inhabitants in Gulf states. In this way, it advances a perspective informed by critical scholarship that decenters resistance in conceptualizing agential human subjectivities. Mahmood, for example, argues that academics still emphasize women's acts of "resistance," even "when an explicit *feminist* agency is difficult to locate."[43] The trend among feminists of different leanings to assume that Muslim women's participation in socially conservative (Islamic) movements is either based on some sort of false consciousness (which has been abandoned since the 1970s) or indicative of subversive resistance—a trend scholars like Mahmood and others have critiqued. Yet a similar pattern in scholarship emerges in the context of the Gulf, with the discourse of "false consciousness" still being used at times, not only in Western narratives but sometimes also among Gulf intellectuals, to describe urban denizens. Indeed, most people living in Gulf cities cannot participate in the official making of their cities, which is also true for residents of many non-Gulf cities. As a result, many of them experience alienation and loss, something that I explore later, as have many other scholars writing about the Gulf.[44] Yet many also feel belonging and create community in the city's spectacular spaces through adapting to the city's spectacular developments; and in some cases, they also adapt aspects of the city to their own needs.

In conceptualizing middle-class Dubai inhabitants as adaptive agents, I build on Alexei Yurchak's work on "normal subjects."[45] While Yurchak's normal subjects lived in a very different context than my interlocutors— the late communist-era USSR—the similarity between his ethnographic context and mine lies in the centrality given to groups of people who have been dismissed as indifferent and passive in the face of illiberal state spectacle. Yurchak argues that academic and media representations of Soviet life are built on the idea that most people living under (late) socialism in the USSR experienced it as simply "bad" or viewed it as "imposed" on them (although it is important to emphasize here that his reference is to people living in the USSR and not in Eastern Europe). He notes the presence of various dichotomies in the academic literature on Soviet life, such as repression/freedom, oppression/resistance, and official culture/counterculture, as well as hidden/official selves. He criticizes works that attempt to uncover a "hidden resistance," arguing that common narratives ignore that there were many people living under late socialism in the

Soviet Union who genuinely supported the values associated with it, even though their actions sometimes transgressed many of the system's norms. In his analysis, transgressing some of these norms was not typically resistance (hidden or not) but rather part of the articulation of normal subjectivity.[46]

Yurchak's useful definition of a normal subject is one who knew they could live a "normal" life—defined as safe, self-manageable, and enjoyable—"away from the official sphere, provided he/she took no active interest in it."[47] These normal subjects varied from those who attended Komsomol meetings but mostly napped during them; to those who refused to attend any of these meetings, not because they were anti-Soviet but because they differentiated themselves from both anti- and pro-Soviet groups; to those who fully believed in the goals of communism but enjoyed playing banned rock music, not seeing it as a transgressive act. Many of Yurchak's interlocutors self-consciously labeled themselves as normal subjects, particularly as their everyday lives included interactions with political contexts that they then navigated in "apolitical" ways.

The central figures in my study do not self-consciously refer to themselves in this way nor are they in similar political contexts, living as they do in a neoliberal and globalized city. My questions to them about their everyday socializing practices and the urban spaces of the city are also markedly different from what Yurchak may have asked his own interlocutors, as I attempted to understand their attitudes toward Dubai's late-twentieth and twenty-first-century developments. Many of my interlocutors, though not all, are generally supportive of Dubai's top-down developmental model while also possessing some reservations about certain issues, which vary from one person to another and take forms from ambivalence to forthright critique. Still, what is common among most of them is that they are generally adaptive, rather than resistant, to the city's changes, even if they do not feel favorably toward all of them. This is what makes them normal subjects—their strategies of adaptation fashioned away from the official sphere and geared toward the construction of safe, self-manageable, enjoyable lives, ones amenable to pursuits of belonging and community formation. Framing these residents of Dubai as normal subjects throws into relief their actions and identities as adaptive agents.

Adaptive agents, as I conceptualize them, often negotiate an ambivalent sense of belonging to Dubai, adapting to its spectacles in some ways—and not in others. Like Yurchak's use of "normal subjects," my point here is to contest binaries of antagonists/supporters as well as to challenge the depiction of certain criticism as a form of resistance. It is also to call attention to the myriad quotidian negotiations of everyday desires through which residents—including not only citizens but also noncitizens—respond to the norm of spectacular development as an iterative and ongoing process.

Like Mahmood, I also criticize "normative liberal assumptions about human nature" that assume that "all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them, and so on."[48] By saying that freedom is not everyone's priority I do not mean to draw essentialist arguments that imply freedom is only sought or able to be experienced in the West. Many in the Gulf seek for their voices to be heard or advocate with varying degrees of directness for specific changes. But not everyone seeks freedom for the same purposes, nor do they seek it all the time, my research shows. An overemphasis on freedom can elide other desires, including desires for social ties, material objects, new experiences, comfort and safety, and so on.

Seeing Dubai's residents as adaptive agents opens space to explore modes of inhabitation that might otherwise be hard to understand as agential, including states like acceptance and indifference. Discussing the illiberal and spectacular city of Astana in Kazakhstan, Koch says that Western media and academic discourse about Kazakhstan erases the agency of Kazakhstanis, many of whom support the nondemocratic regime.[49] Their support does not imply unawareness of structural inequalities and violence, nor that there are no critics and forms of discontent.[50] Rather, there are many more ambivalent and complex attitudes toward their state that cannot be easily understood through narratives about supporters/antagonists. Furthermore, Koch argues that common depictions of Astana as "false" and "strange" exclude "from sight the realities of the ordinary people, including their complex attitudes towards their state—whether it is their admiration and support for it; their fear of persecution; or more commonly, their mere political indifference."[51]