

Pernilla Ouis, *Power, Person and Place: Tradition, Modernity and Environment in the United Arab Emirates*, Lund University, Sweden, 2002. (418 pages).

This is an absorbing academic investigation into the processes involved in the evolution of the United Arab Emirates into a modern state and the impact of these processes on its people and environment. As the title suggests this work is divided into three major themes: power, person and place. The first of these is discussed under the heading *Pearls and Petroleum: The Power of Nature*. Both pearls and petroleum are extracted commodities and Ms. Ouis attempts to show that reliance on the latter could be as vulnerable as reliance on the former in the past. Pearl trading collapsed in the 1930s due to the vicissitudes of world trade. She asserts that viewed politically “the power of oil” is illusory (p.163).

Someone has finally provided an answer to the riddle of why camels now ride in pickup trucks rather than people riding them as used to be the tradition. The objectification of camels is treated in a fascinating discussion in the second theme of this book entitled *From Camels to Cadillacs: Nature as person*. This chapter discusses how the relationship between man and camel has changed with the advent of modernity. In traditional Bedouin culture camels were treated as almost human. The life of the desert is now virtually extinct and with the sedentarisation of the nomad the camels are used for racing: from being a companion of the desert it has become an object of sport. The author sees this as an aspect of the modernisation of the human-animal relationship (p.251).

The title of the third theme is *The Nature of Nature: Practice, Politics and Place*. Ouis discusses nature and its modern constructs and attempts to discover local ideas about nature itself. What is it? Is there natural nature? Is nature a social construct? Nature is an abstraction but how do we get to grips with defining our natural surroundings and finding our place in it? Are we not part of the natural world? This last question is answered by the idea of embeddedness. The visible Emirati response to modernity is greening the country; rolling back the desert. This is an example of disembeddedness. Once part of the desert its people have now objectified it.

Can there be more than one definition of environmentalism? Is it about conserving a bio space or changing it for the ‘better’ according to one’s own social construct, idea of aesthetics, political disposition or cosmology. This section provides answers to the puzzle why the Emiratis insist on greening their country, a hostile desert environment, at such enormous cost to themselves and it must be said the environment itself.

Ouis goes to great lengths to formulate her theoretical approach and in fact devotes the whole of the first chapter to it. An interesting aspect of this is her struggle to dispense with Cartesian dualism in her analysis and she returns to this theme in various sections of the book. This is a brave try indeed given that western scholarship is almost wholly based on Cartesian methodology. In order to make her point she says, “Western intellectual history has a tradition of so called Cartesian dualism, expressed in terms of an opposition between culture and nature, mind and matter, and subject and object”, and adds, “The separation of society from nature is a complicated and often debated dichotomy, and the separation itself has been accused of being one of the roots of our ecological crisis ...” (pp.18, 19). Ouis points out that humans are not separate from nature but if they believe they are “then they will view nature as an

external, dead object to be exploited for exclusively selfish purposes”. This indeed is almost universally the case today and the capitalist economic model assisted in no small measure by a consumeristic education system could be described as being at the bottom of the problem. As an alternative she proposes a three dimensional constructionist approach which she describes as a “tripartite construction of reality based on the three realms of human ecological investigation: the mental, the social and the material”(p.19). It is almost as if we needed the environmental crisis to draw our attention to the serious fault lines in the Cartesian religion. A timely warning perhaps.

This is a particular story about the modernisation of nature but this would also appear to be the story of the human species across the length and breadth of the planet if one accepts that modernisation goes hand in hand with the exploitation of the natural world. But, two factors make this one particularly unique. Firstly, the UAE falls into the rare category known as a “rich developing” nation assisted by a surfeit of oil and a small population. Secondly, this development has been compressed into a short time span of about thirty years. In this sense the Emirates could be said to have provided ideal laboratory conditions for the researcher. The processes that have taken the industrial west over three centuries, the people of the Emirates have managed to compress into just three decades. There is a nostalgia for the abandoned past and some confusion towards the unfamiliar present laced with a confidence towards a future which is in many ways unpredictable. However, the over riding sentiment of the Emiratis would appear to be a deep sense of gratitude that the battle for survival in a harsh, unforgiving climate has now been replaced with ease.

This last comment would perhaps explain the huge investment in “greening the Emirates” sanctioned by Sheikh Zayed the ruler of UAE but this leads us to a paradox. The accepted approach to environmental issues world wide is conservationist. In the Emirates it has been one of enhancement – making a garden out of an entire country in a climate inimical to this sort of enterprise. And there is a paradox within a paradox: this enhancement is only made possible through the wealth derived from the exploitation of oil reserves that cannot be said to be a benign process. Thus viewed through the lens of mainstream conservation practice it could be said that the country is being subjected to a double jeopardy.

This research study is comprehensive. It has an interesting historical account including inevitably the imperial machinations of the British. Allegations of piracy in the region would appear to be an invention - a strategy of the “Big Lie” (An eerie echo here of the war on Iraq and allegations concerning weapons of mass destruction) as a guise to implementing hegemonistic policies: imposed treaties, gun boat diplomacy, humiliations, changed lives. It deals with tribal economics, the leap into global trade and the world of market forces. It also has an excellent summary of the geography of the region. In my view there is a case here for the production of an abridged version of this research study aimed at the general reader. It may prove to be a big success.

Ouis is Swedish. She is also a Muslim which fact she declares at the onset of her presentation. However, she has diligently confined herself to the rigours of the academic discourse and states in her concluding section, “My main goal was not to point a finger at the Emiratis’ effort to change the environment, but rather to use their

case as an example illustrating the illusiveness of Cartesian dualism". In this she has succeeded admirably.

The paradox however still remains. What will happen when the oil runs out and the affordability of investing such vast resources in this green enterprise becomes in itself a problem? Will nature be allowed to be herself once again?

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