Tunnel-bypasses and minarets of capitalism: Amman as neoliberal assemblage

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream accounts of Arab political life highlight endogenous political legacies to explain the persistence of illiberal regime outcomes in the face of global pressures for transition and newness. Meanwhile, the government of people and places across the Middle East and North Africa is being transformed by powerful models of pedagogy and practice derived from the laws of the market. Consider Jordan. The landscape of government is being reconfigured via—inter alia—Special Economic Zones, Poverty Pocket schemes, Development Corridors, community empowerment initiatives, urban regeneration projects, gated communities, planned satellite cities, and new systems of movement and connection. The scope and political significance these arrangements may not be revealed through examination of the institutions and coalitions traditionally associated with Arab regimes. A different picture emerges, however, if one explores this changing landscape of government from the perspective of those governed within it. Focusing on efforts to advance neoliberal modalities of development and government within the Greater Amman Municipality, this paper charts global connections giving rise to powerful agencies that have been elided by regime-centric inquiry, and considers what they imply for currently dominant modalities of thinking about and acting upon Arab political life. Along the way, it also recovers a sense of the subaltern globalism of people and places elided by efforts to extract theory from dominant accounts of contemporary globalization.

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Transformations without transition

Political scientists are rarely attuned to the ways in which a changing cityscape might reflect emerging configurations of power. Yet, if one explores the new systems of movement and connection being etched into cityscapes across the Middle East, these concrete structures tell a story of transformation that has been lost in transition-oriented accounts of Arab political life.

Consider Amman. Driving through streets congested by the spill-over of the Iraq war, Jordan’s capital appears as a city of big holes. In between detours necessitated by work at strategic points along the city’s road network, one encounters numerous fenced off construction zones spruced up with billboards that provide a glimpse of the glittering future in store for the site. In passing, these unfinished projects look more like a series of planned accidents glittering future in store for the site. In passing, these unfinished projects look more like a series of planned accidents—wreckage at the intersection of channels carved by flows of oil wealth and war—than a consistent reflection of global commitments. But closer inspection reveals something more. Amman is being remade and presented to investors as a new city that conforms to globalised benchmarks of speed, efficiency, and connectivity. Places and populations are being distinguished according to market calculations (e.g., Ong, 2000), and repositioned in proximity to regulatory ensembles that reformat calculative space in ways that enable certain styles of socioeconomic and political performance at the expense of others (Callon, 1998: 2-22; Callon & Muniesa, 2005; Sidaway, 2007). In short, the changing cityscape reflects efforts to bring private agencies and market-oriented solutions to bear on traditional problems of government (e.g., economic and social development, distribution of public goods and services, maintenance of the commons, security, etc.). Via strategies of selective destruction—and through the deployment of new infrastructural and regulatory ensembles—the projects underpinning this change set out to “create a social reality that neoliberal discourse suggests already exists” (Lemke, 2000: 59).

Focusing on developments within the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM), the following remarks call attention to sites of political innovation—from community empowerment initiatives to development corridors and master plans—that have been largely elided by the statist-institutional perspective of mainstream comparative politics. Insofar as such arrangements have been noted at all in contemporary accounts of Arab political life, it is typically because their failure to aggregate in ways that reflect

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1 This essay is based on fieldwork conducted during regular extended visits to Amman over the past 9 years. Most of this fieldwork—which consisted in activities ranging from interviews to archival research to participant observation—was done in service of other, related projects. My concern here has been to bring this research together to advance a broad but grounded critique of political continuity and change in the Middle East, and to make a critical contribution to the debates on state-space relations and agency formation that have inspired me in this effort.

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globalist assumptions can be taken as evidence of their deformation by endogenous legacies of state building and regime consolidation (e.g., Heydeman, 2007; Ottoway & Dunne, 2007; and Schlumberger, 2008). Guided by the tropes of neo-institutional theory, observers turn inward to unearth the embedded norms, strategic dilemmas, and structured imbalances of power that might be held responsible for the non-occurrence of transition. And the resulting evidence—derived as much from a particular way of looking at and thinking about the political world as from any real insight into lived political experience—is in turn invoked to problematise Arab political life in ways that justify techno-political intervention.

Focusing on connections rather than institutions, I show how government in Jordan is being channelled into arrangements that articulate incumbent elite power to wider networks of finance and technocratic expertise. I also demonstrate how the resulting agencies leverage state power to defend ‘market requirements’ against the claims of deliberative citizenship. As such, my account is consistent with the wider literature on neoliberal state practice (e.g., Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2005; etc.). At the same time, however, I have sought to go beyond this critique to explore both (i) the globally distributed transactions, claims, and practices that intersect to give rise to governing configurations at any given moment in time and space, and (ii) the infrastructures and mediators (human and non-human) that connect any given site to distant others involved in its formation (Latour, 2005; Mitchell, 2002). The point is to de-essentialize the assumed interplay between ‘global’ and ‘local,’ and focus instead on the encounters, connections, exclusions and erasures – both contingent and structured – that underpin the production of political agency at given moments in space and time. By bringing non-humans into the focus of political investigation, it becomes easier to demystify the ‘inbetweeness’ (Jonas, 2006; see Marston, Jones, & Woodward, 2005) of scales while still taking into account their power as devices for structuring convincing narratives and claims about the political world (Collinge, 2006; Tsing, 2000).

I begin by sketching the re-emergence of Amman as a space of global engagement and entanglement over the 20th century, and tracing the globally distributed genealogy of dislocations, claims, interests and practices that gave rise to the ‘local’ contexts that (neo)liberals problematise and seek to reorder. I then explore the actual work of reassembling given artifacts, discourses and objects of government in ways congenial to neoliberal modalities of statecraft. This focus on assemblage makes it possible to show how neoliberal projects preserve and assimilate ‘authentic’ social configurations (e.g., the community) into hegemonic projects of accumulation. The two subsequent sections discuss how local agencies are formed out of global connections, and defended with reference to a neoliberal rhetoric of order. Case studies include the Abdali urban regeneration project (Amman’s ‘new global downtown’) and the recently published Amman Master Plan. I also look at spaces of neoliberal performance and pedagogy. Finally—returning to the longer history of global engagement that has been etched into the city—I explore the political potentialities contained in the gaps and transgressions that have been all too easily overlooked in scale-based accounts of neoliberal hegemony (e.g., Brenner, 2001), and to the violence involved in enforcing this elision.

City of migrants; kingdom of speed

“No more riots, no need for much repression; to empty the streets, it’s enough to promise everyone the highway.”—Paul Virilio (2006a: 49).

In a country that boasts Petra, Wadi Rum, crusader era castles, coral reefs, and significant remnants of biblical, Greco-Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic civilizations, Jordan’s Royal Automobile Museum hardly sits atop tourist itineraries. Yet, no other site so succinctly expounds the changes currently underway in the Kingdom. Together with the new Hashemite Royal Court compound, the new royal guesthouse, and the massive new King Hussein Mosque, the museum is part of a complex that crowns the hilltop overlooking the King Hussein Memorial Gardens in north-west Amman. Inside, one finds an exhibit of cars owned by the late King Hussein, and assorted vehicles used by the Hashemites at crucial moments in Jordan’s history. The impressive collection is of obvious appeal to car-lovers. But it is what the cars are arranged to say that is truly remarkable: they advance a revised narrative of Hashemite modernization, one that illustrates the taming of the Transjordanian frontier (and, by extension, the frontiers of contemporary globalism) with the resources of ever-increasing speed.

Near the entrance, a series of photographs show the dusty pedestrian streets of 1920s Amman transformed into wide, 21st century thoroughfares that channel continuous streaks of red and white light between modern, high-rise buildings. In less than a century, Amman has been transformed from a sparsely inhabited stop along the Hijaz railway into a landscape of constant, rapid circulation inhabited by 3 million people. The automobiles display the qualities and personas of statecraft: a Cadillac acquired by Abdullah I soon after he arrived in Amman in 1920 allowed him to move quickly between his British patrons and the local constituencies as he assembled a base for his rule. Other cars served in official parades. King Hussein waved from a stylish convertible on national holidays; while a military vehicle and rugged attire were chosen for public appearances in more trying times. Toward the end of the exhibit, one finds videos of Hussein piloting racecars. Indeed, the exhibit seems curated to redefine the official persona of the late king: he is no longer the prudent statesman, a traditional leader in touch with modern sensibilities, but a playboy who relishes the speed and risk of the racetrack, an image he worked to play down during his lifetime.

A film shown in the screening room at the front of the exhibit introduces Abdullah II as a leader who has inherited and developed these dromocratic skills—skills practiced through leisure activities that extend seamlessly from his day at the office. The film, entitled The Royal Tour, opens with a motorcycle racing toward the camera on a long, straight stretch of highway in the Rum desert. Upon reaching the camera, the black-clad rider stops and removes his helmet to reveal himself as Jordan’s current monarch. Abdullah follows up on this cinematic entry by taking viewers with him as he pilots his helicopter over green fields, flies ultra-light aircraft through the majestic desert landscape of Wadi Rum, and replays down sheer rock cliffs into the turbulent waters of Wadi Mujib canyon. The video crafts the image of a man in tune with today’s adventure-seeking global business elite; a leader who sets targets and wants deadlines met yesterday. “Is everyone in the royal family such a daredevil?” asks the impressed narrator as Abdullah’s brother Faisal jumps the waves on his jet-ski. “Well,” the king replies, “let’s just say that we like calculated risk.” At the same time, however, respect for tradition—family, community, history, etc.—are reassuringly woven into the narrative. Abdullah characterizes camel-riding Bedouin as “the soul of Jordan;” Crown Prince Hashim pours tea for Abdullah after their shared ‘extreme adventure’ in Camel-riding Bedouin as “the soul of Jordan;” Crown Prince Hashim pours tea for Abdullah after their shared ‘extreme adventure’ in

2 In the early 1920s, Amman spanned 6 km². The GAM now encompasses ca. 1700 km².
management, and as a reliable shepherd of the various communities that serve as a repository for obligations devolved from a state undergoing neoliberal reforms.

But how did we arrive in a political world where speed is king? If we are to take seriously the idea of a world being remade by global flow, then speed—as an intrinsic attribute of flow—provides a metric against which the varying capabilities of populations can be distinguished, problematised, and presented for techno-political intervention. Concurrently, the infrastructures that direct and regulate the speed of flow, together with the techniques for managing the risks arising from a world of constant and rapid circulation, become constituent agencies of political order; they reposition places and populations within the increasingly fragmented space-time of the nation, and open them to the incentives and discipline of market forces. The ability to fly high and drive fast—to move quickly between distinct regulatory spaces and maintain the effect of an elevated centre overseeing an integrated and coherent whole—becomes an essential attribute of managerial government. As The Royal Tour takes us between sites separated by wide-open spaces, this work of assemblage seems naturalistic enough. Places and populations lie in wait for the tourism and investment that will open them to a world renewed by global market forces. By contrast, the job of reassembling Amman—of unravelling dense pathways of connection accumulated within the crowded streets of a city that has (supposedly) yet to ‘go global,’ and rearticulating them in line with neoliberal assumptions—more clearly reveals the work that lies behind the exhibition’s remarkable polemic.

Amman’s topography does not encourage speed. A city of refugees and migrants, Amman’s inhabitants arrived in waves that resonate with the convulsions of the landscape upon which they settled. The steep hills of the city’s affluent western quarters poke sharply toward the densely populated slopes of East Amman, which roll in gently from the eastern steppe only to crest and fall precipitously into the downtown. This natural setting reinforced distinctions between groups. It provided shelter for the reconstitution of communities displaced by war,3 and facilitated efforts to delineate and manage the constituent communities of monarchic rule. But it also, by virtue of sheer gravitational force, generated flows that spiralled downward to meet in the narrow valley floor below. Never a convenient place for cars, Amman’s city centre was cut through the refugee camps and popular quarters of East Amman, which sharply toward the densely populated slopes of East Amman, accentuating the divide between east and west. Million-dollar villas sprang up in the Abdoun neighbourhood of Western Amman, while informal settlements proliferated in outlying areas of the East.

Whereas an earlier effort at master planning had been shelved as a result of the fiscal crisis of the late-1980s,4 officials eventually invoked planning methodologies to confront growing demographic and political pressures. In 1995, the GAM was removed from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs and placed under the tutelage of the Prime Minister’s office. Breaking with a robust tradition of open municipal elections, the new arrangement stipulated that the mayor—together with half of the municipal council—would be appointed by the PM. While widely interpreted as a move to counter the rising influence of Islamists on the municipal council, it also rendered Amman amenable to technocratic initiative. However, the resulting possibilities remained unexplored until Abdullah’s ascension in 1999. The new king moved quickly to integrate Jordan into arrangements regulating global trade and finance, joining the WTO in 2000, and entering into Free Trade Agreements with the USA and EU in 2001 and 2002, respectively. He also signalled that Amman would be a showcase for efforts at modernizing government in Jordan, and charged mayor Nidal Hadid with advancing this vision. With the elected half of the council effectively limited to negotiating modalities of implementation, a new generation of technocrats and entrepreneurs—armed with Anglo-Saxon MBAs and PhDs—began to make their mark. Drawn from Jordan’s existing elite families, this young guard realised that their fortunes were best served by leveraging state power to engage in wider networks of accumulation and influence. They provided the backbone of new, quasi-formalized economic decision-making bodies, and took part in the new agencies and governance networks being supported by USAID and other donors. They were also fascinated by the transformation of the small Gulf sheikhdoms into hypermodern centres of finance, business, commerce, and tourism. The post-war reconstruction of central Beirut provided another model (Summer, 2005). With donor support, efforts were made to mobilize these same planning and financial networks to refashion Amman as a global ‘destination city,’ generating development through foreign investment and tourism.

Reassembling Amman

“The speed with which the government has to act in order to attract investments can take society by surprise and cause a lot of talk...this is the way the world works. Countries that cater to speed will win and others that let cumbersome bureaucracy get in the way will lose”—King Abdullah II (Ruwashdeh, 2008).

Hadid—soon dubbed ‘the mayor of tunnels and bridges’—initiated this effort with projects designed to bypass obstacles along the arteries that link Amman’s new city hall, which stands on a vast traffic island at the western edge of the old city centre, to various centres of West Amman. One segment of this network facilitates rapid movement from City Hall to Shmesani and

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3 Circassians and Chechens arrived in the 19th century, Palestinians in the 20th, and now Iraqis in the 21st.

4 Jordan borrowed heavily throughout the 1980s in order to sustain the effects created by the boom of the 1970s, leaving the state with debt on the order of 200% of GDP by late-1988. Structural adjustment followed in April 1989.
Amman’s projected ‘new downtown’—the al-Abdali Urban Regeneration Project (discussed below). Another leads from City Hall up to Abdoun, an affluent suburb housing Amman’s political and economic elite and the US Embassy/USAID compound. With the recent completion of a stylish suspension bridge, a third artery links Jebel Abdoun to Shmesani and Abdali, articulating a triangular fusion of international finance, supranational authority, and local state.

Roughly bisecting this triangle, five of the eight traffic circles along Zahran Street—traditionally used to denote neighbourhoods in Jebel Amman—have also been transformed into tunnel-bypasses. From the Third Circle—now a tunnel-bypass situated on the axis between the city hall and Shmesani—one can drive unimpeded to the Jordan Gate complex at Sixth Circle, a project that will be crowned by two high-rise office towers visible from all parts of Amman. Third and Fifth Circles have been partially ringed-in by five-star hotels, representing the transformation of spaces that provided focal nodes for neighbourhoods into sites of transient global connection. Le Royal Hotel on the Third Circle is particularly noteworthy: designed to reflect the form of the 9th century spiral minaret of Samara in Iraq, “This massive building, accompanied by the [tunnel-bypass] construction on the Third Circle...has not only altered the pattern of [the Third Circle neighbourhood] but has also altered the historical linkages in its urban pattern” (Abu Ghazalah, 2006: 157) (Fig. 1).

Heading south from the Seventh Circle, Jordan’s main north–south highway straddles another area slated for high-end redevelopment and cuts through a new investment corridor that stretches some 50 km starting from just below the Jordan Gate to al-Jiza, a lumpenproletarian settlement just south of Amman’s international airport. From the airport, the highway traverses the desert toward the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, an administratively independent state-owned corporation that governs 400 km² and some 100,000 people in and around Jordan’s only seaport. Before reaching the Airport, the north–south highway intersects with the Amman Development Corridor Project. Co-financed by the Country Assistance Program of the World Bank and the European Investment Bank, the project promises to act as “a catalyst for economic development and expansion” by “enhancing conditions for growth led by the private sector” (World Bank, 2004). The axis of the initiative is a 40 km stretch of highway that will serve as the southern-most segment of the Greater Amman Ring Road, improving communications to existing Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ) facilities at Sahab, and opening a further Ring Road, improving communications to existing Qualifying for development and cuts through a new investment corridor that

new downtown, Abdali was the main hub for public transport to the north, and an important node in the popular life of the city. As Abdali has now been set aside for luxury consumption and prestige business investment, the public transportation hub has been moved to Tabarbur, thus cleansing Abdali of elements associated with the popular life of the ‘old downtown.’ Similarly, the bus-station at Raghadan (adjacent to the ancient Roman theatre) has been transformed into a tourist centre, and public transport redirected 3 km eastward to Mahatta. These changes have caused considerable disruption for commuters. Informal hubs have sprung up in defiance of planners. However, plans to fully privatize public transportation—turning it over to a single, private provider and thereby introducing logics of scale and efficiency that might prove very different from those of most users—will likely undermine grassroots appropriation of the new spatial network.

By precipitating the rise of an order in which speed, efficiency, flexibility, and global connectivity become essential criteria of political selection, this network of highways, tunnel-bypasses and bridges does more than simply provide technical solutions to the changing circumstances of modern life. It opens places and populations to “a democratic order of great invasions” (Virilio, 2006b: 113), giving rise to agencies engineered to advance one particular matrix of global connection at the expense of others. And in doing so, it reveals itself as a powerful tool for the regulation of human life. But while pavement, steel and concrete can be rolled out to enable and direct the flow, they do not set it in motion. Neoliberals must find ways of producing and representing difference in order to generate the very flows that appear to confirm their logic. If neoliberal globalism produced homogeneity across space and time, the logic underlying movement would dissipate. Neoliberal ‘invasions’ thus ultimately depend on sites of occupation. And occupations signal not victory, but the onset of new struggles that in turn carve their own channels and narratives of connection. They call attention to the points of collision where hierarchies (together with high-rises) are pushed up, and around which borders are drawn, monitored and defended. Neoliberal globalism is thus not about the liquid destiny of flow. After all, the flashy cars make their point well enough even when parked inside.

Spaces of exemption and privilege

“You only need to open your eyes and discover the world that is to become the new downtown... marvel at the physical features of a setting [arranged] in complete accordance with how its residents move and make their way in every space” — promotional material, www.abdali.com.

Neoliberal development discourse justifies itself through an appeal to ‘the global.’ Much like modernization in past decades, globalization is today presented as a force external to, and hence beyond the scope of, political agency articulated at any particular point on the globe. As such, it provides a backdrop against which the various projects involved in its making can be made to seem not only technical and political neutral, but also historically inevitable. More than any other contemporary ideological project, neoliberalism has absorbed the charisma of popular, post-Cold War accounts of globalization to make its claims appear authoritative and effective. Somewhat paradoxically, however, it is the local scale that has proven a particularly useful platform for global ambitions. By virtue of its proximate links with irreducible scales of social

5 Announcing plans for a Special Economic Zone in Mafraq, then-Prime Minister Marouf Bakhtit stressed that investors “will enjoy all the privileges and exemptions” accorded at other similar sites in the Kingdom (Al-Abed, 2006).
organization (e.g., individual bodies and households), the urban milieu is seen to provide a malleable spatial container within which to reformat the life-world in ways congenial to modalities of government that prioritize the market as an instrument for expressing, aggregating and informing public choices. Municipal administration poses as an arena of practical problem solving free of the inertia associated with agencies organized at the national scale. By effecting the juxtaposition of local and global scales, neoliberal policy initiatives seek to articulate pathways of connection that harmonize the link between the individual (irreducible unit) and the global (universal principle), thereby resolving tensions built into the organizing dichotomies of liberal political thought (e.g., individual-collective, state-market, private-public, etc) in ways that advance individual liberty, and—by virtue of market-derived mechanisms of aggregation and regulation—the liberty of society as a whole. At the same time, however, this reliance on scale as a strategy of organization and naturalization provides a clue that the supposedly boundless logic of neoliberal globalization depends for its realization on the deployment of boundaries and hierarchies.

Perhaps the most obvious sense in which this is so regards the ways in which neoliberalism puts places and spaces in competition with each other for infusions of private investment and financial capital. Almost per definition, this competition implies a comparison across similar socio-spatial units distributed across the globe. Scale-talk allows for the classification and ranking of spaces and populations with reference to categories and hierarchies that appear to be universally valid. By reconfiguring complex social realities into statistically comparable objects, it makes space legible within the wider matrix of competition that provokes the movement of capital.

Scale is, as such, a calculative device: a common operating principle that conditions the ability of actors to imagine and estimate the consequences of a particular course of action. It refers to a strategic matrix of infrastructures and technologies that detach people and places from the complexity of lived political experience, representing them as mathematical expressions within an ostensibly neutral regime of accounting. The distinctions thus produced are not inherent in the nature of the places or spaces being compared, but are at least in part produced by techniques and infrastructures that encourage some kinds of connections and comparisons at the expense of others.\(^6\) Worked into a diverse array of indexes that rank the performance of countries on the basis of indicators that claim to measure—inter alia—globalization (e.g., A.T. Kearney Inc.), democratization (e.g., Freedom House), transformation (e.g., Bertelsmann), corruption (Transparency International), investor friendliness (World Bank), and urban governance (UN Habitat), the criteria that underpin these accounting regimes become mechanisms of discipline. They act upon the objects and arrangements of government so as to encourage (at least the outward appearance of) conformity with ‘global norms,’ thereby determining patterns of investment and global engagement. As such, they enable the exercise of power at a distance.

Jordan has scored well on many such indexes,\(^7\) and new agencies (e.g., the Jordan Investment Board, the Amman Institute, etc) have been created with the aim of advancing these scores still further. The expansion of Amman’s municipal boundaries was itself a move designed to enable the redistribution of—for example—poverty, and dilute its potentially ranking-lowering effects across a wider field of measurement and regulation. In practice, these indexes measure not conformity with universal principles, but the production of business-friendly effects within arrangements that each market a particular regulatory advantage to attract the flows of transnational capital valorised by neoliberal development theory. State agencies become ‘entrepreneurial’ in these arrangements by joining forces with, rather than acting as an external source of regulation upon, the private sector. The private

\(^6\) This formulation is inspired by Callon and Muniesa (2005).

\(^7\) In 2007 Jordan ranked ninth on the A.T. Kearney Globalization Index, eighth onUNCTAD’s index of Foreign Direct Investment, and in the second of five tiers on theBertelsmann Transformation Index. Amman won the 2007 World Leadership City ofthe Year Award for Asia and the Near East.
and public sectors are no longer adversaries, but partners—often together with NGOs and donor agencies—in setting, implementing, and administering policy initiatives in areas that were traditionally seen as the preserve of state authorities. State agencies intervene to minimize transaction costs for investors who can choose between competing places across the globe (risk is removed from the private investor and redistributed across the public at large); and they become stakeholders whose return on investment is valorised as a public good. This in turn leads to a situation in which government becomes accountable to investors (naturalized as ‘market requirements’) over and above citizens. Meanwhile, the tendency to evaluate these arrangements against statistically-rendered global norms disguises both the “varied and often quite illiberal forms of social and political rule” (Sparke, 2006: 153; see also Swyngedouw, 2000) that go into their making, and the specific configurations of interest and practice that emerge within each particular complex. These illiberal forms do not reflect the persistence of endogenous institutions, but are entangled within wider, emergent webs of global engagement and agency.

Consider Mawared’s Abdali Urban Regeneration Project. Mawared (The National Resources Investment & Development Corporation) is a financially and administratively independent state-owned corporation set up to oversee the transfer of military sites to private developers. According to its website (www.mawared.jo), Mawared is committed to “generating considerable investment opportunities for the private sector, creating job opportunities, and stimulating economic growth.” It presents itself as “the ideal partner for the private sector,” offering “flexible partnership formulas,” and facilitating “the smooth processing of official dealings.” The corporation is technically owned by the Jordanian military. The king sits atop its board of directors, and proceeds from the projects, it oversees are invested in the military pension fund and other military-related projects.

Mawared started out with 80 ha in the Abdali district of Amman, 12 ha of land in Aqaba, and 2500 ha of land in Zarqa. The land in Aqaba was quickly sold for redevelopment as a luxury seaside residential community. The land in Zarqa has been slated for redevelopment as a mixed-income residential city, dubbed Madinat ash-Sharq (City of the Orient), with a projected 500,000 inhabitants. But it is the $1.5 billion Abdali project that is the jewel in Mawared’s crown. Promising “a new downtown [and a] lifestyle of global connectivity and cultural significance” (MAWARED newsletter, 14 October 2003), plans centre around investment in information technology, medical tourism, higher education, and high-end commercial and residential real estate. In order to attract global investors, the land was offered to private developers at well-below market price, and regulations regarding the buying and selling of finished properties within Abdali are more relaxed than those governing real estate investment in the country at large (Marroushi & Ford, 2006), thus minimizing risk and promising high returns.

![Fig. 2. Redistributing the poor.](© C. Parker and M. Ababsa (2008)](© C. Parker and M. Ababsa (2008))
The case also illustrates how state authority becomes entwined with private agency: Mawared has formed a 50/50 joint venture with Oger Jordan (a subsidiary of Saudi Oger) to form Abdali Investment and Development (AID), a private land development company. AID has in turn formed a partnership with the Kuwaiti investment group KIPCO, while DAMAC and EMAAR—both UAE-based firms—are spearheading the development of high-rise apartment complexes within the site. The international scope of the network has recently been extended with the establishment of Mawared International, capitalized at $1 billion in Luxemburg. As the Abdali site becomes entwined in webs of investment, planning, and donor funding, the king (and the state agency he represents) increasingly appears as but one of many elevated nodes in a power network that spans the globe. That state agencies prioritize investors over citizens is evidenced—intra alia—by the ways in which the GAM has intervened (under pressure from Mawared) to expropriate the land surrounding the site in order to build the necessary service infrastructure.

The GAM is itself involved in several similar initiatives, the largest being the $1.25bn Royal Metropolis, which consists of two interrelated projects: the Royal Village, a gated community abutting the Dead Sea highway; and the Jordan Gate, two high-rise business towers with a shopping mall located on the sixth Circle. The GAM contributed the land in exchange for a 10% stake. The Royal Metropolis was conceived as the flagship development of the airport investment corridor. This initiative includes plans for, inter alia, a ‘media city,’ a ‘sport city,’ a ‘health city,’ a ‘UniverCity,’ and even a privately-developed ‘Government city’ that will be rented to state agencies out along the highway. Meanwhile, gated communities with names like Greenland and al-Andalusia are springing up on the western side of the highway, while industrial estates and low-income housing projects (discussed below) have been planned south and east of the corridor. In short, planners are creating enclaves—artificial ‘cities’ made safe for capitalism—that bypass Amman itself.

On 12 September 2006, 2 Egyptian construction workers were killed and 16 others injured when 3 stories of the Jordan Gate’s north tower collapsed during construction. The event galvanized local residents who—backed by protests from within the Engineers Association—began to raise concerns about the project. Critics noted that the GAM had appropriated the land for the Jordan Gate from its original owner with the intent of creating a public park (Ababsa, 2007). Furthermore, little consideration had been given to the extreme traffic congestion that would result; nor had the impact of the towers on local water and sewage infrastructures been considered. Finally, there was concern about the GAM’s financial stake in the project: how, asked residents, could the GAM be both a financial stakeholder in the project and represent the concerns of citizens? Concerns had been raised during early stages of the project. The GAM contributed the land in exchange for a 10% stake. The Royal Metropolis was conceived as the flagship development of the airport investment corridor. This initiative includes plans for, inter alia, a ‘media city,’ a ‘sport city,’ a ‘health city,’ a ‘UniverCity,’ and even a privately-developed ‘Government city’ that will be rented to state agencies out along the highway. Meanwhile, gated communities with names like Greenland and al-Andalusia are springing up on the western side of the highway, while industrial estates and low-income housing projects (discussed below) have been planned south and east of the corridor. In short, planners are creating enclaves—artificial ‘cities’ made safe for capitalism—that bypass Amman itself.

In May 2006, King Abdullah called on the GAM to put forward a ‘master plan’ for Jordan’s capital. “It is crucial,” he announced, “that we all do our utmost to ensure that our beloved city will continue to be a magnet for pioneering development projects, and a fertile ground in which innovative ideas can take root and blossom” (Abdullah bin al-Hussein, 2006). On the surface, this call for master planning seemed intended to introduce some order and accountability into a growing frenzy of speculation. Around the time of the Jordan Gate incident, nearly 350 plans for high-rise buildings had been submitted to the GAM for approval. The GAM’s reputation for favouritism was fuelled public cynicism. The Master Plan promised a depoliticized schema that would be “followed whatever the particular agendas of future mayors,” and thus break the pattern of nepotism that, according to critics, “marred the aesthetics of the capital and led to an overload on [the city’s] infrastructure and resources” (Farawati, 2007). But this emphasis on transparency should not be confused with accountability to public deliberation. On the contrary, the Master Plan transfers decisions about the shared urban future away from traditional institutions of collective deliberation and into arena of negotiation between capital and community stakeholders. As Gerry Post, chief planning consultant for the Bearing Point Group in Amman, puts it: “In essence, our aim is to marry investment with communal aspirations.”

The GAM has adopted this idea of a social compact between businesses and communities, and has actively engaged in producing the fictional spaces of common interest within which such compacts might be forged. City Hall has played host to an array of community consultations, expert roundtables, corporate social responsibility forums, etc where stakeholders negotiate the implementation of measures dictated by ‘good governance’ and ‘best practice.’ These new forms of participation are carefully circumscribed to protect the imperatives of technocratic governance in general, and market requirements in particular (they are typically more pedagogical than participatory). They appear inclusive, but fragment the larger political collectivity in practice, bringing small groups around the table one-by-one to face the coalition of business-representatives, consultants, and administrators in city hall.

The Master Plan also uses other techniques to represent regulatory diversity within a scheme of unity. Most notably, it scales-up the various spaces of exemption and privilege by creating a ‘one-stop-shop,’ (a.k.a., ‘single window approval process’) that allows investors to browse and compare between investment opportunities in spaces under GAM jurisdiction. It does not so much homogenize regulatory arrangements as make difference across spatially distributed sites calculable and legible. It groups diverse investment ‘products’ and market opportunities within a single calculative frame in ways that make them appear as part of a larger, coherent whole.

The notion of ‘one-stop-shop’—as much a command as an institution—also reveals much about the ways in which neoliberalism regulates, incentivises, and disciplines the political subject. Neoliberalism premises development on the capacity to consume;

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8 Interview with Khalid Neimat, Amman, April 2007.

One-stop-shop (a master plan)

“Let the Shopping Begin!”—Slogan on a billboard at the Abdali site

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Meanwhile, order is premised on the individual responsibilisation that supposedly comes with participation in global consumer culture (i.e., regimes of accounting, credit, property ownership, savings, personal insurance, etc). Full participation thus requires that the assets of the poor, and their position in the cycle of production and consumption more generally, be brought into formal circuits of market regulation and exchange (e.g., De Soto, 2000).

The Master Plan invokes several spatial strategies that effectively dilute the impact of variables (e.g., poverty) that might undermine Amman’s position on the above-mentioned benchmarking tables. First, it incorporates six new districts into the GAM’s jurisdiction. Overnight, Amman’s area increased from 668 to 1700 km². According to the GAM press office, this expansion is “designed to make the new destinations attractive for investors and lead to the overall development of the country and its people” (Neimat, 2007). Supplemented by negative subsidies, initiatives to encourage and enable home ownership, and new infrastructure, this manoeuvre opens up a frontier for colonization by the market. It introduces a regime of biopolitical investment that is intended to break the dependency of peripheral communities on state resources, and integrate lumpenproletarian populations into a virtuous cycle of capitalist responsibilisation by—inter alia—creating pressures and opportunities for home ownership. It thereby mobilizes the sanctions and incentives of the market to secure the borderlands (Duffield, 2001).

Via the new systems of movement discussed above, people are also directed to sites where individualized consumer preferences can be registered, aggregated, and articulated to global networks of production and exchange. This is reflected in the shopping malls and hypermarkets that are mushrooming at various points along the new spatial network. The shopping mall provides a model of neoliberal spatiality. It generates the illusion of access to ‘the world under one roof’,¹⁰ presenting global brands and identities within a climate-controlled and securitized container removed from the city itself. The mall also gives rise to a politics of fascination, the pedagogical implications of which should not be overlooked. The desire to shop—to participate in the heavily promoted consumer culture—itself serves as an incentive to responsibilisation.

“Families that live on a tight budget come to the bigger super-markets to experience a different atmosphere,” notes a newspaper article that reports on the opening of a new Carrefour hypermarket in Amman, “but prices are not what is bringing them in. I think that … all the big hypermarkets are the same and expensive. If you are a bargain shopper you are better off shopping at the grocers and vegetable markets in downtown Amman. I came to Carrefour today because my kids like the modern atmosphere,” Asmahan, a mother of four, told The Jordan Times” (Hindi, 2007). The shopping malls are even being integrated into public health campaigns. The USAID-supported Community Project for Family Health has organized several well-publicized mall-walking events. Arguments have been made to suggest that such flânerie might give rise to new public spheres (e.g., Abaza, 2001), but the argument is difficult to sustain. These venues segregate publics according to patterns of, and capacities for, consumption (a point emphasized by the private security guards that regularly deny working-class young men entry); they echo with political emptiness.

But “Not all real estate development is about catering for luxury living,” announces an article in JDi Magazine (5 October 2006): “The Beitna City project [will offer] budget accommodation to low-income families. [It] aims to raise the standards of an area that has been long abandoned, and thus lacks the basic needs for social and economic development. … Towers, residential buildings, commercial centres, a hospital and university will be complete in 2012.” The website of Beit al-Mal, the Islamic investment bank developing the $350-million initiative, adds that: “The Company has re-organized ‘Beitna Location’ on Yarmouk Street to be a complete city… containing different commercial health, educational, residential and recreational services required by cities… forming a new modern centre of the capital. The Mega Mall will be connected with the surrounding mountains by bridges containing commercial shops and shopping centres” (www.beitna.com).¹¹

These bridges—also referred to as the hanging rivers—will connect the shopping mall at the heart of this ‘complete city’ to quarters of East Amman that together account for two-thirds of the city’s population. And, as business is drawn away from exiting centres, this will enable larger investors to move into Eastern parts of the city with projects designed to cater to higher income groups. Beyond integrating East Amman into dominant circuits of global consumption, the project will effectively function as panopticon for the poorer neighbourhoods of East Amman. People are pulled out from the dense and narrow alleyways of the refugee camp and downtown marketplaces and into a well-lit and privately policed site of global consumption. Ultimately, the mall and shopping centre must be seen within a wider infrastructure of circulation that links supermarket aisles and shopping mall promenades to the parking lots from which cars are loaded and re-launched back onto the highway. Cars and customers are channelled into patterns of circulation that keep people moving along pathways open to surveillance. And insofar as it becomes necessary for full participation, the automobile becomes “a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order” (de Certeau, 1988: 111).

Who is governing? The question is frequently raised in the political salons and teahouses of Amman these days. Policy decisions that have an enormous impact on the city seem to appear from the ether. The very phrase Master Plan suggests the authority of a higher order. But who or what is the master? By granting market-derived methodologies for aggregating and regulating public choices priority over the critical (but, according to neoliberalists, easily compromised) deliberative space of citizenship, neoliberalism holds out the promise of governing through freedom (e.g., Rose, 1999). In practice, however, this requires the actualization of a carefully circumscribed and attenuated model of freedom. It depends on the ability of experts to isolate and reassemble bits of the social world in spatialised containers (one-stop-shops) where the choices that underpin the exercise of freedom are delimited and laid out in ways prefigure its performance in line with the assumptions of the theory. In other words, neoliberals first mobilize the pedagogy of the market to fashion the political subjects they claim to liberate. Meanwhile, the contours of political life are no longer negotiated at points where society meets the state, but at points where the highway meets the street: communities and populations (not citizens as such) find themselves negotiating the implementation of neoliberal policy initiatives with consultants, donor agencies, NGOs, private firms, and the technocratic administrators of public–private partnerships—people who ride in from out of town—and not with state authorities. And as neoliberal development discourse celebrates the involvement of private agencies in the ‘governance’ of places and populations, it remains silent on the potentially authoritarian implications of this shift. The contingent character of agencies and interests assembled at any given site are hidden behind the global imperative of meeting market requirements. Ultimately, the effectiveness of such a project depends—at least in part—on ignorance of its arbitrariness.

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¹⁰ This being the slogan of Dubai’s Ibn Battuta Mall.
¹¹ Consulted January 2007, text in italics has since been altered.
Cracks on the neoliberal horizon

“Beyond the horizon lies a brighter future”—billboard slogan at “al-Andalusia” (a gated community currently under construction)

“Build to the East?! We cannot do that, because then people would have to pass through East Amman and Wihdat” declared a GAM official, referring to the capital’s densely populated working-class quarters, and the Palestinian refugee camp at its heart (Ali bin al-Hussein, 2007).

For the neoliberal planner, East Amman and Wihdat are problems—places that slow the flow. The ca. 2 million people who actually live in the densely populated quarters of East Amman seem to exist only as a mass that gets in the way of investors who pass through. Viewed against the global ‘destination city’ envisioned by businessmen and officials, Amman’s popular quarters appear as places of entropy and decay; they raise the proverbial spectre of the ‘Arab street’ with its supposed propensity toward rejection and violence. The obstacle to flow thus becomes a security issue for which rational solutions are invoked to justify a wide range of policy measures designed to responsibilise individual behaviours and govern the conduct of populations prone to dependency and conflict (see, e.g., MPIC, 2005). Social capital replaces the rights of citizenship and community, social capital, and empowerment to present its project theoretically promiscuous (and culturally resonant) terms like ‘neoliberal management of assets’ (MPIC, 2005). In short, they are initiatives designed to encourage the productive and entrepreneurial management of assets (MPIC, 2005). In short, they are charged with the groundwork of reassembling the life-world of the poor in ways that make it amenable to business-led development.

Neoliberal discourse naturalizes this project by appropriating theoretically promiscuous (and culturally resonant) terms like community, social capital, and empowerment to present its project as authentic and emancipatory. Community, and not the state, must be mobilized to mitigate negative market externalities (e.g., Herbert, 2005). Social capital replaces the rights of citizenship and collective action as a source of mediation between the individual and market forces (e.g., Somers, 2005). And empowerment is defined in terms of skills and resources required for autonomy in the marketplace, and not in terms of the ability of citizens to make claims upon, and influence the content of, collective political institutions. Just as power is distanced from state agency and diffused through a variety of agencies engineered to mimic the sanctions and incentives of the market, so neo-liberals also seek to deflect eventual claims about legitimacy and accountability away from the state and into the arena of corporate social responsibility (CSR), an innovation that embodies the notion of a neoliberal social compact.

Jebel al-Nadhib, a neighbourhood in east-central Amman typified by poverty, crime, drug use, and informal housing, provides a prime example. Its location—overlooking the city hall compound and sites set aside for business development—has made it a focus of CSR efforts. Aramex, a multinational logistics company headquartered in Amman, took the initiative to renovate the local primary school and build a police station. It has also set up an NGO—Ruwwad—to initiate and guide efforts at community empowerment and self-reliance. Ruwwad’s director emphasizes a commitment to bypassing municipal authorities in the pursuit of community development. Instead, members of Ruwwad’s ‘youth corps’ attend training sessions to learn how they might effectively seek corporate sponsorship for community projects. Jebel al-Nadhib is also a focus of the GAM’s Repainting Eastern Amman campaign. The municipality has partnered with several private firms to “revive and beautify the older districts of East Amman” (Jordan Times, 2007a), thus putting “Amman on the global tourism map by ensuring that the area is renovated without losing its authentic feel” (Hazaimeh, 2007). According to the project’s chief consultant, the initiative aims “to enhance the view of the old suburbs that overlook downtown Amman … promoting partnership between the GAM and citizens by empowering [the latter] to preserve the environment” (Hazaimeh, 2007). Mayor Omar Ma’ani thanked participating businesses for “showing a true commitment to corporate social responsibility, a concept close to the GAM’s heart” (Jordan Times (2007b)).

Jebel al-Nadhib’s location leaves it well positioned to attract such schemes. It provides a visible showcase—and a bankable return—for the CSR portfolios of participating firms. But what about other, less visible poor areas? Given the obvious limits of bringing CSR to less central poor areas, the government has been teaming up with private firms to develop satellite cities in the vicinity of existing and planned industrial zones on the newly annexed areas of the GAM. In short, where CSR won’t go to the people, people are being brought to CSR. The flagship project of this kind is a $900 million residential city project scheduled for al-Jiza, a lumpenproletarian settlement located on the highway just beyond Amman’s international airport. Previously an independent municipality, al-Jiza has also been designated as a priority Poverty Pocket in the kingdom. Sponsored by USAID and the World Bank, the Poverty Pockets program seeks to mobilize NGOs, Community Based Organizations, and private investors to provide sustainable, market-oriented solutions to endemic poverty (Fig. 2).

In the case of al-Jiza, the land for the project—some 7.5 million square meters—has been transferred from the state-owned Housing and Urban Development Company (HUDC) to a private firm—Taameer Jordan—in exchange for shares in the project. As the luxury housing market has become saturated, Taameer—a company that has been at the forefront of introducing the gated community concept to Jordan—is now partnering with the GAM to designate sites for low and low-middle-income housing development. The al-Jiza complex will include 15,000 residential units designed to accommodate a population of 84,371 (press release, Taameer Jordan, 26 June 2007). Plans also include 2010 commercial units.

Housing units will start at around JD 21,500 (ca. $30,000), a price beyond the reach of the 50% of Jordanians who live below the housing poverty line (set by the HUDC at JD392 per month for 2005). Nevertheless, Taameer promotional materials highlight studies showing that over 50% of Jordanians currently live in rented accommodation, and note that recent legislation removing rent controls as of 2010 will increase the desire to own houses (Taameer Jordan, 2007). They further note that Taameer will be launching a mortgage loan company offering “very competitive financing options.” Meanwhile, planners hope that airport expansion and the rise of new industrial estates near al-Jiza and along the development corridor will provide the jobs and income to enable repayment. Commenting on his business philosophy, Taameer Jordan Chief Executive Khalid Dahleh noted that “demand follows supply” (Taher and al-Ahmed, 2006). It certainly does, if you give it a push.

By moving poor people from downtown neighbourhoods to sites on the other side of the development corridor, planners also open

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urban space for investors. Residents of neighbourhoods like Jebel an-Nadhif—most of whom are registered Palestinian refugees—have resisted neoliberal entitlement schemes (ostensibly for fear that formalization of property rights would be taken as evidence of resettlement, thus undermining their right of eventual return to Palestine). Another goal of the project is to break the state/welfare dependency embedded in the tribal networks of the al-Jiza’s existing community. Because of the GAM’s unique status within the Jordanian polity, the newly absorbed municipalities no longer have the right to elect their own municipal councils and cultivate systems of patronage through statist administrative hierarchies. Nevertheless, consistent with the neoliberal tendency to position the community as a site for the authentication of market-oriented modalities of rule, GAM documents stress the preservation of tribal life and customs. In any case, property developers will likely prove the major beneficiaries of these schemes for redistributing the poor: they profit from the scheme to create a low-income housing market, and—as people are drawn from the downtown—they gain access to spaces opened for gentrifcation.

Neoliberalism holds out the promise of rehabilitating East Amman and its periphery by integrating it into global circuits of capitalist exchange. But a closer look reveals East Amman as a quintessentially global space—an assemblage of people, places, and practices that have been pushed and pulled into movement by displacements and dialectical movements spread over a longer trajectory of global entanglements and engagements. The image of East Amman as an isolated slum suggests a degree of passivity and essentialism that would seem odd to anyone familiar with the vibrant economy of its marketplaces and the subaltern cosmopolitanism of its inhabitants. The Palestinian refugee camp of Wihdat, for example, is home to one of Jordan’s most vibrant produce markets and a dizzying array of low-end consumer outlets (over 2000 shops in total; Hamarneh, 2002). Wihdat is tied into commercial networks that span the region. Furthermore, via the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees, some one and a half million East Ammanis can make claims upon a non-market, but nevertheless global, regime of rights, obligation, and practice.

Jordan’s capital is also home to hundreds of thousands of Egyptian and South Asian migrant workers; and provides shelter to some 750,000 Iraqis displaced by nearly two decades of repression, international sanctions, and military invasion. In short, East Amman and its inhabitants have been profoundly shaped by engagement with global forces, from the upheaval of late-imperialism and nation-state building (resulting in the Palestinian camps), to the displacements induced by contemporary projects that seek to advance neoliberal modalities of government; and these earlier movements have in turn given rise to networks and institutions of global purchase that cannot be reduced to laws of the market. Nevertheless, the image of East Amman as a space beyond the global allows neoliberalism to present itself as a solution to problems that it has itself (at least in part) created; it legitimizes the violence that is essential to the maintenance of interests woven into the fabric of liberal modernity.

Agamben suggests that “not the tracing of boundaries, but their cancellation or negation is the constitutive act of the city” (cited in Minca, 2007: 80). If this is so, then it is not so much the neoliberal project with all its reliance on the spatial strategies of exemption and scale that is the measure of Amman’s status as a global city, but the reserves of urbanity that reside in the networks, institutions, and imaginaries of neoliberalism’s global other. These networks embrace the vast majority of the world’s human inhabitants. By contrast, the networks being encouraged by USAID and the World Bank empower only the privileged few; they give capital access to the resources of the poor, not vice-versa. But these ostensibly conflicting paths to the global cannot be entirely separated: they have met before in the cotton fields of Egypt (Mitchell, 2002), the QIZs of Jordan, and the killing fields of Iraq. The neoliberal horizon is thus no more solid or deep than the layer of paint splashed on to the slopes of East Amman. By following the pathways of connection between neoliberalism and its global other, the cracks on this painted horizon can be identified, peeled back, and broken through.

Conclusion: neoliberalism as a destination

“Only when travelling along the road, can you learn something about its force.”—Walter Benjamin

Contemporary theories of transition can accommodate the idea of multiple pathways to the global, but have more trouble with the possibility that the global might refer to a variety of heterogeneous and even contradictory destinations. Similarly, accounts concerned with the non-occurrence of regime transitions in Arab political life typically follow the map of globalist assumptions, but ignore scope and significance of boundaries and connections being etched into the terrain itself. Positioning the global as something hierarchical, isomorphic, and encompassing, they problematise the political world at the level of subordinate (and taken for granted) units and scales, and turn inward to unearth the endogenous path dependencies, structured imbalances of power, collective action dilemmas and regime survival strategies that might explain the non-occurrence of outcomes suggested by theory. This has led not only to a profound misdiagnosis of the dilemmas of contemporary Arab political life, but also to a catastrophic misdirection of intellectual and political resources.

The evidence presented here suggests that modalities of technopolitical intervention advanced by market- and transition-oriented modalities of inquiry are unlikely to provide an antidote to the enduring power of incumbent political and economic elites in the Arab world. This is not simply because neoliberal reforms enable the reconstitution of class power by articulating it to networks of finance, government and expertise that span the planet (e.g., Harvey, 2005); but also because such global engagements have been there all along. They are reflected not only in the new arrangements sketched above, but also in the very entanglements that gave rise to the nation-state, the society, and the economy (not to mention the theory) to begin with. They thus hint at the arbitrariness of projects historically associated with the advance of liberal modernity. As such, the non-occurrence of outcomes projected by (neo)liberal theory should not be taken as confirmation of the deformation of a global logic by endogenous institutional imperatives, but rather explored as evidence of the (often violent) contradictions that lie beneath capitalist ideology and practice.

That the ‘local’ contexts neoliberal globalism problematises and seeks to transform are themselves reflections of earlier trajectories of global engagement becomes clear if we start from the destinations as opposed to the destinations of neoliberal restructuring. If we look outward from the perspective of the governed—if we start from Jebel al-Nadhif, al-Jiza or Abdali rather than from assumptions of planners and theorists—the global appears not hierarchical, isomorphic and encompassing, but heterarchical, emergent, and fragmentary. And while some fragments are clearly more powerful than others (Tsing, 2005: 271), it is only by travelling the paths that lead to the sometimes-distant sites of their formation that we might identify the cracks through which the assumptions and agencies of neoliberal globalism might be most effectively contested and transformed. The road can take us over a border, but it cannot deliver us to the global.

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