



Millennial Dreams in Oil Economies

This book shifts the analysis of economic development in Oman from the traditional focus on oil to the perspective of labour. Focusing on the experiences of workers, jobseekers, and the governance of labour markets, Crystal A. Ennis offers a fresh perspective on regional development and rentier neoliberalism in the Gulf. Uniquely, the book treats Gulf labour markets as part of the story of global labour. Highlighting Oman's position within global capitalism, Ennis makes a compelling case for de-exceptionalising the Gulf, arguing that the region's labour markets are global and subject to similar pressures as other global economies. Moving beyond oil also allows Ennis to focus on the social conditions of Oman, where over 64 per cent of the population are under the age of thirty. Ennis offers a rich analysis of historical lineages of labour governance and class formation and how, following protests after 2011 as youth unemployment soared in the region, authoritarian states react to public pressure and social unrest around perceived economic decline.

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Millennial Dreams in Oil Economies

Job Seeking and the Global Political
Economy of Labour in Oman

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Preface

I walked into the first class of the semester. It was early 2007. I had already spent over a year teaching at Shinas College of Technology, watching it grow from a fledgling new addition to Oman's Ministry of Manpower's chain of technical colleges across the country. The college started with offering engineering and information technology diplomas along with an English foundation year when it opened in the fall of 2005. By 2007, I had been tasked with shepherding the new business studies program as the acting head of department. But this was not a business class. This was a research methods and communication class for engineering students. The room was full of young female students, most of whom were from the various corners of the Al-Batinah governorate in north Oman. Eager faces looked up from their chairs. It was the first Shinas cohort of engineering students in their last year of the diploma programme. There were two men seated awkwardly between them. Yes, in rural Oman, with students from the growing port city of Sohar, small towns along the coast, and further inland villages across Al-Batinah and Al-Buraimi governorates, the percentage of female engineering students was far higher than I had ever encountered in North American engineering programmes, which even today remain overwhelmingly male. I was inspired. I loved that even in the far corners of the Arabian Peninsula women were defying tired Western stereotypes of their oppression and role in the economy and society.

Their employment opportunities were not as promising. Jobs for engineers at the time were often concentrated in the oil industry, and many required field stays in the desert or offshore. Few women in rural communities, it was thought, would be willing, or have families willing to permit them, to be the only female living in work accommodations and spending nights away from the home. Companies reproduced these excuses without asking female graduates themselves. Moreover, the companies in the growing Sohar Industrial Estates rarely hired young Omanis of any gender, preferring trained expatriates from the

Indian subcontinent. I tried several times, unsuccessfully, to arrange internships and work placements for our students there. Companies simply did not want to commit to training local labour even when it was offered through educational schemes. Supervisors were uninterested in local knowledge transfer. The impression among Omanis who did work there, and those who wished to, was that mid-level and senior management, often from South Asia, wanted to hire their own compatriots rather than young Omanis. Omani employees were perceived as threats to expatriate job security. Knowledge transfer and local hiring were usually only discussed in the context of corporate social responsibility – a necessary expense of doing business.

Upon graduation, women were even less likely to find work here. One evening on my way to a later-than-usual meeting in the industrial area, I was stopped from driving through the control gate instead of being waved through. The sun was setting and darkness was beginning to extend across the stretches of concrete blocks and fences ahead. The security guard, looking bored, informed me *‘al-nisā’ mammū’ bi-al-layl’* (women are forbidden at night). I explained I had a meeting and was allowed to pass. It is true, however, that the state has rules (only intermittently implemented), supposedly in the interest of protecting women, that limits their employment during evening or nighttime hours with the exception of some industries like health care. Better job prospects could be found in Muscat, but this would usually mean taking up accommodation during the working week in the capital region. But very often, young women remained frustrated and unemployed for long periods or became busy with building homes and families. Educated young men and women felt alienated from the job market, frustrated by a lack of prospects, and uncomfortable with the few opportunities that were presented.

These anecdotes offer a simple introduction to the many labour market contradictions I was confronted with during the years I first worked in Oman between 2005 and 2008. It also hints at the broader empirical puzzle that shapes my work on the country. Why do economic development plans from the state appear to respond so clearly to labour market problems yet fail so dramatically to address them evenly across sectors? Why are labour market reforms so unevenly adopted and so rapidly changed, while the conditions that restrict young jobseekers’ productive engagement in the economy and alienate them from the private sector persist and continue intensifying? And

Preface

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finally, how can we understand the experiences and range of responses from Omani millennials?

This book addresses these puzzles. It is dedicated to my former students and to the youth of Oman.

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I am overwhelmed with gratitude to Raya Al-Maskari, the inspiring artist of the painting featured as the cover illustration on the book, for allowing me to use her beautiful work. It is truly an honour. Her painting is entitled *bāḥthūn ‘an āmal*, meaning ‘hope seekers’, which is a play on words in Arabic to *bāḥthūn ‘an ‘amal* – job seekers. The painting, to me, encapsulates both an awareness and a yearning for hope among a generation of citizens – a hope that is wrapped up in the dream of working.

I thank the Oman Studies Centre, and its director Joachim Düster, for awarding me the Omani Studies Fellowship that allowed me to spend the Fall of 2021 at the Leibniz Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin, German. I benefitted tremendously not only from the time to write but also for the vibrant intellectual community at ZMO. Special thanks to Ulrike Freitag, Kai Kresse, and Katrin Bromber for many thoughtful exchanges, as well as to Olly Akkerman, Zahir Bhalloo, and Taha, and to Kadara Swaleh, Jacob Nerenberg, Silke Nagel, and many others who made Berlin or ZMO feel like home.

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for the roundtable ‘Citizenship and Belonging in the Arabian Peninsula’ convened by Gwenn Okruhlik in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020) grew out of Chapter 5 of this book. Gwenn and the other roundtable participants offered me insightful reactions to my arguments. I first developed the analysis of intersecting logics at work in entrepreneurship promotion (in Chapter 6) in my *New Political Economy* article ‘The Gendered Complexities of Promoting Entrepreneurship in the Gulf’ (24, no. 3 [2019]). Reactions to this piece have allowed me to strengthen and clarify the approach. Establishing a good foundation in Arabic was also key, and I am grateful to the many Arabic teachers I have had over the years, including Kawthar AlHarthi, Kanan Al-Ali, Khadige Abboud, among others.

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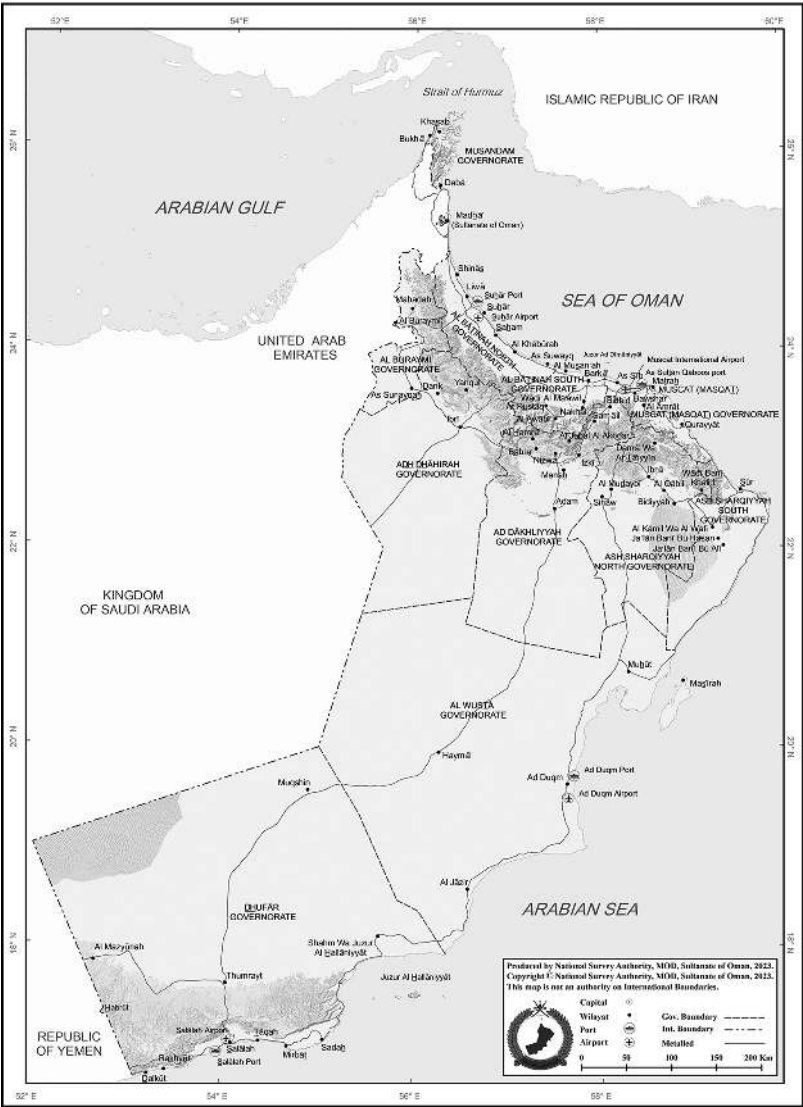
A Note on Transliteration

I mostly follow the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES) guide for Arabic transliteration except in cases where the name or word has a commonly used spelling within Oman, where local pronunciations differ, or where it is widely used in English otherwise. For example, I spell the city of Ṣuḥār as Sohar. Rial is used instead of *riyāl* for the unit of Omani currency based on its official spelling on banknotes. For personal names that are not pseudonyms, I have used the transliteration that appears favoured by them according to business cards, personal websites, or personal communication, etc.

Abbreviations

BOT	Build, Operate, and Transfer (BOT) agreements
CEO	chief executive officer
CSR	corporate social responsibility
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	gross domestic product
GFOW	General Federation of Oman Workers – sometimes General Federation of Oman Trade Unions (GFOTU)
GPE	Global Political Economy
FDI	foreign direct investment
FTA	free trade agreement
FYP	five-year plan
ICV	in-country value
IFIs	international financial institutions
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IOR	India Office Records
IPC	Iraq Petroleum Company
IPE	International Political Economy
IR	International Relations
ISCO	International Standard Classification of Occupations
LCC	local community contractors
MAN	Movement of Arab Nationalists
MENA	Middle East North Africa
MNC	multinational company
MoM	Ministry of Manpower (renamed Ministry of Labour in 2020)
NCSI	National Centre for Statistics and Information

NOC	no-objection certificate
NSA	National Survey Authority
OMR	Omani Rial
OU	Oman Union
PDO	Petroleum Development Oman (PD(O) until May 1980)
PFLOAG	Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf
PPP	public–private partnership
PRO	public relations officer
SDGs	sustainable development goals
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SEZAD	Special Economic Zone Authority of Duqm
SME	small- and medium-sized enterprise
SOE	state-owned enterprise
USD	US dollars
VAT	value-added tax
WTO	World Trade Organisation



Map 0.1 Map of Oman (Governorates and Wilayats).
National Survey Authority, MOD, Sultanate of Oman (2023)