**Ambivalent States: Paradoxes of Subjection in the Jordanian South**

**Abstract**

This paper explores the passionate attachments that underpin subjection to political authority. It does so through an examination of the ways residents of the Jordanian city of Ma‘an are formed by, respond to and live with stateness. Rather than unpacking the prosaic practices through which the state comes to appear as an external structure, it probes the forms of agency and affective connection that emerge from life amidst these practices, exploring some of their effects and conditions of possibility. Far from calling for the Jordanian state’s downfall or demise, Ma‘anis call for the state’s redemption, in a circuitous cycle that only intensifies their conviction in an object of desire that so dependably thwarts their aspirations. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Lauren Berlant, this paper argues that while the assurances and consolations the state offers can be entered into in any number of ways, subjectivities in its midst may very well be marked by a constitutive ambivalence that is difficult to escape.

Keywords: The state; Subjection; Ambivalence; State effect; Subjectivity; Jordan

*As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical*

Judith Butler (1997:1)

On a balmy Thursday morning in September 2015, I was called into Adel’s office. The proud and prominent owner of two bakeries in Ma‘an, I met him through a common acquaintance. He had agreed to an interview, and while perplexed by my request to spend some days observing his bakery, he had eventually acceded. I had avoided bringing up the looming cross-examination over the first few mornings, as Adel was endlessly answering phone calls or blaring instructions at one of his employees. But today, it seemed, he wanted to talk.

In Amman, the backrooms of bakeries were muggy and moist, but rarely stifling. More than two-hundred kilometers to the south, in the smaller city of Ma‘an, these hectic backrooms became an unremitting cauldron. All you did was sweat, and then sweat more. Adel had inured himself against the conditions by way of air conditioning. His fine suit, flawlessly gelled hair and penny loafers demanded nothing less. Alongside him today was Oraib, his flour supplier, and two of his workers, on their mid-morning break. “I thought you would learn more if you heard from a few of us,” Adel told me, as I settled soggily into an office chair. I started with my standard set of questions about bakeries and the subsidy of *khubz ‘arabī* (Arabic bread or pita). While their remarks on these topics offered plenty of food for thought, most of their replies circled back to Ma‘an. “We are a city forgotten,” Oraib stated. “Ma‘an is poor, dirty, depressed, the place everyone in Jordan avoids.” The bakers, Abbas and Amir, mentioned deteriorating schools and rising prices, irritably outlining their monthly budgets before asking how exactly anyone expected them to get by. Adel offered some provisos, describing failed government investments, recession in nearby Saudi Arabia and the collapse of trade with Iraq, but he concluded along similar lines: “The state ignores and neglects us, letting us stew in our own grime. And then when we protest, it punishes us.” Things could be different, they all seemed to agree. But only if the state did more, not less. As it once did. If it cared and provided rather than disciplined and admonished, as their parents and grandparents told them used to be the case—when Ma‘an was bustling and prosperous, lively and affluent. “We founded this country,” Adel concluded. “Now all we want is a future, not just a past.”

I had arrived in Ma‘an expecting rebellious gusto. In the capital, Amman, I was frequently told that lively dissent or vocal protest were simply not worth the paltry rewards. The cards were stacked against anything except the most token expressions of opposition to the Hashemite regime. A Prime Minister might fall, but never the King. Changes, if any, were cosmetic. Policies, be it privatization or discreet partnerships with Israel or the US, were the domain of the Palace. Ma‘anis were different, Ma‘an too, I was informed. Residents of the southern city were said to feel no compunction in airing their grievances. They would complain, condemn and criticize. Clashes with security forces were common, animated demonstrations chronic. Ma‘an was an unruly place, stubborn and defiant, all and sundry seemed to conclude.

Yet as many Ma‘ani interlocutors told me, often quite bluntly, they were staunchly loyal to the monarchical regime. They considered themselves to be the first citizens of the embryonic Hashemite state, its most faithful and long-standing backers. The overwhelming majority did not want to join tribal kin in Saudi Arabia or establish an Islamic caliphate, as sensationalist media accounts often claimed. Their goal was simply a more responsive state, one that earned their respect through sustenance and support, not force and repression. And in expressing this plea, in articulating this desire, they are far from alone.

Why does the state remain a site of such deep political-affective investments? To what can we ascribe its powerful hold? Anthropologists and geographers have shown that rather than being the solid thing we often mistake it for, the state is assembled through a host of practices, some spectacular, others prosaic (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Jeffrey, 2012; Painter, 2006). Yet we know too that deconstructing this staged unity does not result in its dismissal or dissolution, as if it were a fiction easily relegated to the dustbin alongside nations and races (Aretxaga, 2003; Laszczkowski and Reeves, 2015; Navaro, 2002). The state commands belief. It recurringly garners allegiance, or at least an agonized acceptance. And so, perhaps, there is something more fundamental involved in Adel’s appeal to the state, both the critique of its failings and the demand that it fulfil certain pledges and guarantees. Ambivalence might not denote uncertainty or confusion. It may very well convey a structurally located tension in processes of subject formation, one that undergirds subjection to something citizens feel, fear, disparage and discuss, but never really see.

In their magisterial work, *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler interrogates attachments to subjection—the hesitating embrace of the very forms of power that regulate and suppress ordinary citizens. Building on Foucault and Althusser, they posit that “A power *exerted on* a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power *assumed by* the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject’s becoming” (1997:11). Butler asks and compellingly conjectures, what might be gained by thinking through a subject’s agency as deriving precisely from those forces it opposes? That is to say, if power not merely subordinates but also forms us, producing our very conditions of existence, are we not always already given over to categories, norms and deeds not of our own choosing? Admittedly awkward and more than a little disconcerting, Butler’s theory of the subject halts any attempt to overcome connection when analyzing relations with forces of rule. What remains comparatively unexplored in this reckoning are the sites of political authority that are reified by such modes of subjection, and the structural dependencies these sites both depend on and generate. Put differently, if individuals across many parts of the world become intelligible by virtue of assuming their status as citizens, then perhaps Butler’s analysis might help explain how a subject formed through reiterated rituals of power can be ensnared by their own passionate attachments to the state.

Without delving too deeply into the psychic forms that political authority takes, this article considers why so many of my interlocutors in Ma‘an evinced a yearning for the Jordanian state to do more and do less, to lament its absences while deploring its shows of strength—sometimes in the same breath. In two parts, it considers how Ma‘anis are formed by, respond to and live with stateness—the “mundane *practices*” that work to engender the state effect (Painter, 2006: 753; Mitchell, 1991). Rather than unpacking the diverse geographies of such prosaic manifestations, I probe the forms of agency, sociability and affective connection that emerge from life amidst the practices that make the state appear to exist, exploring some of their effects and conditions of possibility. I do so to push spatially attentive accounts of the state beyond their overwhelming focus on material flows and linkages, convinced that uneven power geometries have additional vectors worthy of exploration. To be clear, the Jordanian state is hardly alone in exerting an enigmatic, ambivalent appeal amongst its subjects. In sites as diverse as rural Guatemalan villages, the peri-urban areas of Mozambique’s capital Maputo and the highlands of Central Asia, scholars have documented the incongruous and vacillating ways in which citizens both denounce the state and demand more of it (Nelson, 2004; Nielsen, 2007; Reeves, 2014). Closer to Jordan, the state remains a site of hopeful expectation for a broad swathe of Egyptian, Lebanese and Iraqi citizens (Ismail, 2006; Martínez and Sirri, 2020; Obeid, 2010). Despite tangible failures and perceived betrayals, notwithstanding the retraction of a broad swathe of public services over the past decades, “What remains,” in Amira Mittermaier’s words (2019:15), “is the lingering promise of a caring state, despite the increasingly uncaring reality.” How can we understand such conditioned modes of attachment? What possibilities do they afford and what others do they foreclose?

Building upon twenty months of fieldwork conducted in the Hashemite Kingdom, including several extended stays in Ma‘an, this article ponders these questions while avowing the inevitable incoherences of political subjectivity. Conversations and engagements took place not with those who rebel and revolt, of whom there are many, but with the far larger number of citizens who are caught up in circuits of adjustment so as to keep close to one object that is profoundly reassuring. The state is certainly made and remade through these engagements. But so too is the subject, and the stubborn attachments that form it. More provocatively then, I want to posit that while the assurances and consolations the state offers can be entered into in any number of ways, subjectivities in its midst may very well be marked by a constitutive ambivalence that might be impossible to escape.

*Seditious Outcasts?*

Inflation, job losses and cuts to welfare services have brought a wake of deprivation to Ma‘an. In Jordan’s most recent poverty assessment, 26.9% of the city’s households were classified as deprived while 28.4% were branded “vulnerable,” sitting immediately above the poverty line (GoJ, 2013). Unemployment, imprecisely measured, hovers around 20%. This surplus population has slowly filtered into an informal economy that promises little in the way of opportunity. Rather than attenuating such circumstances, public policies have more often done the opposite, accentuating Ma‘an’s peripheral position in Jordan’s centripetal political economy through misguided investments, failed industrial ventures and uninterrupted graft. Faced with under-funded municipal institutions and inattentive national ones, Ma‘anis draw on partial and prejudiced patronage systems in order to make due (Bouziane, 2010). Yet these and other governmental failures are rarely mentioned by politicians or media outlets when the city’s travails are discussed, often in the wake of a protest or an outbreak of violence. Stories of citizens demanding schools, hospitals and subsidies are supplanted with tales of lawlessness, laziness and radicalism. Government-controlled radio, print and television portray Ma‘an as a backwater filled with troublemakers (*mushkaljiyye),* where drug trafficking, gun running and salafist Islam are rife (al-Ajlouni, 2017). Ma‘anis suffer not only from substantive deprivation, surveillance and systematic neglect. They must also “bear the weight of public scorn” that comes with living in a locale widely characterized as a hub of crime, religious fanaticism and delinquency (Wacquant, 2008: 29). In this context of latent marginalization, and in the face of repressive incursions by the *Darak* (General Directorate of Gendarmerie) that seem to have little purpose beyond buttressing the existing socio-political order while exculpating the government’s own responsibility for it, many still held out hope.

Jawad was one of them. He was the unacknowledged but indisputable leader of a group of young men (*shabab*) I frequently joined to play football. While not as skilful on the field as some of his companions, his clout was the result of his unmatched skills as a jokester coupled with his unrivalled physique. Jawad was built—his every muscle bulged, the veins on his neck always looked liable to burst. Like all of his friends, he was informally employed. Jawad occasionally helped an uncle at a sandwich outlet, other days he might work a shift hauling goods for a cousin’s rapidly shrinking transport business. Numerous attempts to join the armed forces and police had come to not, for reasons he could not fully explain but was more than willing to contemplate. “Maybe they just don’t like picking people without families in the security services, especially if you are from Ma‘an,” he mentioned one day over coffee. “We are always under suspicion.” The son of a noted dissident family, Jawad’s father identified as a “retired communist.” Like many leftists of his generation, he has been unofficially barred from public employment, an exclusion he believes has filtered down to his four children (Larzillière, 2016). Now a part-time cashier at his neighbor’s butchershop, I could quickly tell where his son’s acerbic wit came from. Over numerous long walks around the downtown, Jawad’s father, a few years past sixty, would wax lyrical about the trials and tribulations that have troubled his city of birth. Again, I expected outrage, rather than melancholy and ambivalence, but the latter two is what I often got. “Things could be better here if the state cared, if we [Ma‘anis] weren’t treated as thugs and jihadis,” he conjectured one day, as the slant of the sun shone through a white-clouded sky. “Ma‘an used to be so different.”

Mentions of the past were common in Ma‘an. Along with other older residents, Jawad’s father had seen headier times, when Ma‘an functioned as a major transportation hub and many locals made a living moving goods between Iraq and the Jordanian port of Aqaba. “Subsidies meant food and fuel was cheap, everyone who wanted a job had one,” he reminisced, recalling the lack of poverty that now troubles his hometown. “The government spent a lot of money either employing local residents or giving them assistance so they could start businesses. Our infrastructure was also top-notch,” he relayed. “I went to that elementary school,” Jawad’s father mentioned as he pointed to a dilapidated building a half-block away. “We had books and after-school programs. Teachers were well-paid. Now some students don’t even have pencils. Neither they nor the school can afford them. It hasn’t received a lick of paint in over a decade.” Whether in allusions to fluctuating electricity, under-resourced schools or unemployment, residents were keen to remind me of how much more thriving Ma‘an, and its residents, used to be. Engagements with the past often compelled my interlocutors into reflections about the present; earlier times working as a shared measuring rod of sorts against which to contemplate current predicaments.

These collective representations consistently marked the city’s inhabitants as one-time recipients of a far more generous mode of governmental care. Jawad was born in 1989 amidst the implementation of the government’s package with the IMF and was raised during the numerous crises that followed. He had not experienced the booming years first-hand—yet he was no less attached to their legacy. “This marketplace used to be the pride of the city,” he remarked, as we strolled one day through Ma‘an’s dilapidated old market. “The state spent money here and ensured the streets were well-paved and clean. You could find anything in these stalls,” he said as he motioned towards a tired looking fruit stand. “Pilgrims from all over the world came to shop here on their way to the holy cities of Saudi Arabia. Now, no one comes. The new highway does not even pass through the city. They cut us off.” Such assessments are not quite what Charles Hirschkind (2020: 3) astutely terms “a kind of historical therapeutics, a reorientation of cultural and political subjectivity through an excavation of the buried past.” Instead, they acutely mark the outlines of a geography of chronic crisis, one inscribed in the slow degradation of a once thriving urban landscape. Yet similar to Hirschkind’s interlocutors in Andalusia, the Ma‘anis I spoke with drew on a shared historical legacy, one that did not offer straightforward political prescriptions but did function as the ground from which the present was most frequently encountered.

The failure of successive governments to improve life for the city’s inhabitants had opened up a rift between the ostensibly prosperous past and the distinctly inadequate present. Flourishing Ma‘an was both “vividly remembered and manifestly unreal (Ferguson, 1999:13),” a haunting barometer against which local residents’ relationship to the state, and the prosperity it was deemed to have brought, was painstakingly evaluated. “The state could do so much more, if it just tried, like it used to. Now it no longer sees us,” Jawad’s father sighed on one of our final walks together, his search for recognition operating as a conduit for his nostalgia (Cave, 1988). “Instead, our youth’s only dream is to leave. Not to live a great life, for they are not naïve. But just to escape this one,” he asserted with a forlorn grimace. Gauging my hesitant response, Jawad’s father savoured the quirk of the storyteller as I tried to unpack the uncertainty simmering behind his words. Against fading sunshine, he squinted and smiled: “Our city, our people, should not live this way. We deserve more than just to be repressed by the police.”

During the twelve months prior to my first visit to Ma‘an in September 2015, approximately ten young men had allegedly died at the hands of different branches of Jordan’s security forces. None of these deaths were acknowledged by Jordan’s Interior Ministry. In response to these and other governmental blunders, Ma‘anis would periodically organize protests outside the city’s main mosque following the Friday prayer. They would then march to the nearby courthouse, one of the foremost symbols of state power in the city. Frequently portrayed as “pro-Isis” rallies by the foreign press due to the occasional appearance of a black flag (Said et al, 2014), the most common chants focused on a litany of failures ascribed to different branches of government. “End the occupation in Ma‘an,” denounced the heavy hand of the security forces and their callous treatment of city residents. “Raising prices is playing with fire,” took aim at Parliament’s recent decision to cut subsidies and increase taxes. Other chants underlined the peaceful nature of the protests while denouncing wide-scale corruption. Yet one slogan in particular was repeated throughout, the final line in a number of run-on couplets: “The security of the state is between you and I (*amn ad-dawla baynī wa baynak*).” In spite of deep suspicions toward law-enforcement, this mantra locates security not in the state, nor amongst citizens, but in the relations between them. It expresses a conviction, some would say a fantasy (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2016: 37; Navaro, 2002: 4), that if only the state altered its *modus operandi*, antagonisms between local residents and the security apparatus could transform positively. Faced with the violence of officialdom and a raft of other perceived betrayals, Ma‘anis who gathered at these protests did not disavow their faith in the state—they reaffirmed it.

I attended two Friday protests with Jawad. Once things died down some hours later, I would discuss my field notes with him, asking for further impressions and seeking out possible oversights. The goal of these events, he stressed, was to pressure the state so as to ameliorate Ma‘an’s marginalization. “The protests express a common viewpoint, things we have all discussed many times. We criticize things Ma‘anis think hold the country and our city back,” he indicated. These citizens had developed a clear and concise view of governmental failings—public services were inadequate, the police far too heavy handed. And yet rather surprisingly, pronouncements of loyalty to the monarchy were ubiquitous, as was vocal consent to being ruled by the Jordanian state. Unlike the trivial minority who made declarations of allegiance to Saudi Arabia or ISIS, the overwhelming number of participants in these protests sought to remind those in power that things could be different, if only they listened to their demands. I asked why, Jawad explained:

Look, most people here don’t want to overthrow the regime or bring about the collapse of the state. We have seen what has happened in Iraq, Syria and Libya. Obviously, things here are far from perfect. Our demands are aimed at making the situation better. When we protest, we are usually vilified, so our declarations of loyalty seek to make clear our purpose. We don’t want to destroy the state. We are its kin.

Since the onset of the Arab uprisings, the Hashemite regime has regularly reminded its citizens of the perils of revolt. Sometimes subtly, other times less so, the implicit and explicit mention of turmoil in neighboring countries seeks to mitigate revolutionary desires. Monarchists stoke fears and code them into social life as possibilities easily triggered by the smallest of dissenting positions or events (Masco, 2014: 18), a strategy whose coordinates have shifted over the years but whose ultimate purpose is hardly new (see Massad, 2001: 273-275). Yet what struck me about Jawad’s remarks, as well as those of several others, was how often Ma‘anis would portray themselves as *abnā’ ad-dawla* (kin of the state) when voicing their claims and criticisms. Cognizant of their increasing remoteness from levers of influence, this phrase harkens back to the support Ma‘anis offered Emir Abdullah I upon his arrival in the city in November 1920, when the Hashemites were struggling to establish and extend their authority across formerly Ottoman lands.[[1]](#footnote-1) This phrase expresses much more than a privileged historic relationship to the state; it projects affinity, avows affective attachments and indexes collective ties to political authority.[[2]](#footnote-2) And its use is hardly coincidental as, in addition to being vilified in mainstream news outlets, Ma‘anis are celebrated by the monarchy as Jordan’s most dedicated and trustworthy citizens.

In one of his typically trite statements during a visit in April 2011, King Abdullah II remarked upon his happiness to be in Ma‘an—“which was, and still is, a symbol of authenticity and loyalty, and the beginning of the history of the Jordanian state.” After reminding the audience of the city’s important role as the launching point for the Hashemite Kingdom’s foundation and its continued role as a “beacon in the nation’s history,” the monarch acknowledged the extent of its needs and mentioned some of the initiatives in health and education that would soon be undertaken (Abdullah II, 2011). His praise for Ma‘an, as well as the litany of promises, were echoed by the Prime Minister and parliamentarians whose remarks followed. All acknowledged the socio-economic challenges facing the city. None failed to position Ma‘anis as steadfast supporters of the Jordanian state, its most devoted adherents.

The King’s remarks are, of course, not an accurate statement about Ma‘an’s past, nor do they seek to be. They are, like many others tenets of Hashemite historiography, an attempt to portray the state as a beneficent nationalist force, all while relegating citizens to the position of supportive children. The figure of the contemporary Ma‘ani draws much of its emotive force from the important place the city played during the Hashemite’s arrival in what became contemporary Jordan. But as the monarchy remolds these events in order to turn Ma‘anis into passive supporters, it sheds them of their combative history, not to mention the participatory agreements and calibrated pacts that cemented their support for Emir Abdullah I.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet more than dissimulating past and present disagreements, the monarchy’s rhetoric seeks to define the contours of Jordanian political subjectivity. That is, it works to construct the hegemonic truths to which citizens must ascribe. While Ma‘anis are occasionally allowed to proffer critique, this must occur within the framework of monarchist hagiography. Of course, this helps diffuse threats to an autocratic order that may, at any moment, come under attack. Yet its more noxious work is to foreclose alternative political imaginaries, ensuring that Ma‘anis seek recognition and solicit support not through categories of their own making, but through a discourse that subjectifies them as loyal citizens of the Jordanian state.

In this and many other respects, Ma‘anis are trapped in what Radhika Gupta (2019: 485) perceptively labels “a double bind.” Like her Kargili interlocutors, Ma‘anis are simultaneously viewed as the state’s most loyal collaborators and its most willing insurrectionaries. Allegiance and suspicion combine constantly in forms of affective management that are paradoxical but hardly incongruous. One result is that Ma‘anis must pull, jerk and twist official narratives, articulating their disagreements within the terms of an acceptable monarchical idiom that embraces a “mutuality of being” between a people and the sovereign, whose lives as kin “are joined and interdependent” (Sahlins, 2013: 21). Invoking ties of kinship to the state allows Ma‘anis to make particular demands on authorities accused of circumventing their historically-inflected obligations, even as it reifies the unequal ties that bind them together. And while I am hesitant to claim that their self-identification as *abnā’ ad-dawla* can be applied as some fully-fleshed out kinship network, what became clear is that the phrase subordinates Ma‘anis while making certain modes of agency possible. As one former MP put it, “The phrase is a way of saying we are not against the King but we have the utmost right to criticize current policies. We love the King and the state, but we are not happy” (Interview 1). That is, *abnā’ ad-dawla* furnishes Ma‘anis with a distinctive position through which to police the terms of their subjection to the Jordanian state, even if they only seek to reinstate them in what is perceived as proper form.

Herein lies the paradox, the indelible ambivalence: Notwithstanding their willingness to disparage and decry the ways they are governed, Jawad, his father and many of those I spoke with keep faith in the state that so often lets them down, calling for its renovation rather than its overthrow. Mixed feelings and equivocal attitudes abound not due to confusion or mystification, but because agency in this context derives precisely from the matrix of power from which these citizens are spawned. The enabling constraints of subject formation buttress ambivalence towards the state from the outset. Whether they are aggrandized as Jordan’s foundational citizens or spurned as the country’s jihadist conscripts, Ma‘anis continue to conjure relationships with a structure of rule to which they are optimistically affixed. Perhaps, like many others, they suffer from what Wendy Brown (1993) terms “wounded attachments,” seeking redress from, maintaining affections in and thereby reproducing precisely the forces that injure them.

*Unruly Mutineers?*

I returned to Ma‘an in August 2019, nearly four years after my first visit. The city had changed in slight but perceptible ways. Police were now traversing the downtown and could be seen occasionally driving through its principal arteries, actions that would have previously made them liable to getting pelted by stones. Friday protests had died down and violent incursions by the Gendarmerie were less frequent. Life for local residents was calmer, but not appreciably better. I met up with Jawad and his friends to try and get up to date with recent developments. Many of their past critiques persisted, not all that much was different, everyone seemed to say. Except for modes of appeal, Jawad told me, as we raced to meet a friend of his from high school. This acquaintance, one in a group of chronically unemployed Ma‘anis, had reckoned with previous efforts. And with some inspiration, they decided on a new way of expressing their frustrations and claiming their due.

On 9 February, 2019, Professor Falah al-Arini set out on foot from his home in the Tafilah governorate, around 100 kilometers north of Ma‘an. His destination? The Royal Hashemite Court, the foremost seat and symbol of monarchical power. After trying numerous avenues in order to secure stable employment in higher education, al-Arini had reached the end of his tether. Accompanied by his twelve children, the professor sought to traverse the 180 kilometers to the capital in order to obtain what he considered his primary right as a Jordanian citizen—dignified employment. And he would do so from the only body he deemed responsive to the people, al-Arini posited in a series of tweets. For one week, the professor and his family endured rain and frigid conditions. Some onlookers offered food and medicine, others joined the walk for a kilometer or two. Al-Arini’s quest quickly ignited commentary on social media. Certain observers condemned him for taking his children out of school and exposing them to arduous daily walks. Others expressed their solidarity, and shared corruption allegations that had similarly prevented them from obtaining respectable work. While his journey ended prematurely ten days later due to injuries, reactions across the country would soon echo in unanticipated ways.

Jawad introduced me to Saif on a sunny August day. He was surrounded by a group of acquaintances that seemed to find refuge in a jovial despondency. Two or three of them sat in a soothing silence, though the majority were more boisterous. All shared their desolation, their opinions and their tobacco. A few days after Professor al-Arini set out from Tafilah, more than sixty unemployed men from the southern-most Jordanian city of Aqaba decided to emulate his gambit. Expelled from their sites of assembly after more than two months of periodic sit-ins, they decided to march on the capital. After a week, more than a hundred others had consolidated their ranks, joining from a variety of towns and villages. Buoyed by public opinion, they refused to negotiate with a delegation from the Ministry of Labor sent to halt their momentum, eventually reaching the Royal Palace in Amman. On 21 February, they were met by the Chief of the Royal Hashemite Court, who promised to meet their primary demand—jobs—in a matter of weeks.

Only days after the marchers from Aqaba disbanded, Saif and forty-four unemployed men in Ma‘an gathered for Friday prayers. Encouraged by the unanticipated success of the marchers from Aqaba, they decided to follow suit. The group compiled a list of unemployed locals and set off for Amman. Upon their arrival, they initiated a sit-in under a bridge just across from the Royal Court. Several efforts at mediation came to nothing, as Saif and his friends, now joined by hundreds of others, vowed not to leave until they were offered stable employment. “We saw what happened to the marchers from Aqaba,” Saif told me, “They were promised jobs but then nothing came,” he stated when describing why the pleas of tribal leaders and parliamentarians for the marchers to return home had come to naught. Tired of a long litany of empty promises, the marchers decided they wanted any job offers in writing. Over the course of 18 days, Saif and the representative committee of Ma‘ani youth of which he was a part met with an array of government officials. All seemed to recognize the validity of their demands and promised to work towards meeting them. Yet no solution arrived, only requests that the unemployed return to their hometown and work through local employment offices to achieve their ends. On 14 March, and after weeks of sympathetic press coverage of the sit-in, a deal was finally reached. Three businessman from Ma‘an acted as negotiators. They pledged, with the ostensible backing of government figures, to provide 750 jobs that included health insurance and social security. Unemployed Ma‘anis would be hired by the civil service or private sector and, failing that, the military (Nakhle, 2020).

Over a month in Ma‘an and sporadically for the next year online, I spoke with Saif and several others involved in the march about their novel mode of claim-making, and the employment that ostensibly arrived as a result. The marchers, I quickly realized, were driven far more by desperation and destitution than a penchant for insurrection. Time and again, privatizations, public investments and vows to improve the economic situation in Ma‘an had come to not, they all told me. Most had rotated in and out of insecure employment. None had gained a foothold in what remains of the phosphate and cement industries in the province. A good number had university degrees, which had come with the promise of career opportunities that they had seen only those well-connected able to attain. On weekend trips to see relatives, they could witness unthinkable affluence in nearby Aqaba or certain neighborhoods of Amman. It was a prosperity they often heard about and sometimes saw, but could never inhabit (Ferguson, 1999: 237; Piot, 2010: 166). Amid these compromised conditions what struck me was the tenor and content of their demands. At a time when salaried public employment is no longer as prestigious or lucrative as it once was, these men’s primary request were secure government jobs. “All of us have worked in transient or part-time jobs that are not sufficient to meet our family’s needs,” Saif emphasized one day when I enquired as to why employment was the central pillar of their sit-in. “A big portion of us have been applying to work in the bureaucracy for nearly a decade, a large number have cycled in and out of temporary work and today not one of us can live without help from our families or friends.” Would the solution not be to open a business or move to the capital in search of work, I asked, before being reminded that I was parroting the government’s dismissive rhetoric. “We demand stable jobs in our city because it is what the state promised and what previous generations received,” Saif reminded me. “It is the only way we can survive. And it is our right.”

Jordan is not, nor was it ever, the epitome of a generous welfare state. But beginning in the 1950s, and increasingly throughout the 1970s and early 80s, interventionist measures drawing on the Keynesian paradigm prevalent at the time did underpin a broad set of public policies (Moore, 2017). Buttressed by aid from nearby oil-rich autocracies, these measures ranged from subsidies for food and fuel to public investments in infrastructure and industry. Of particular importance outside the Jordanian capital, these more interventionist techniques of social government strived to level living conditions across the country by managing the economy. A key pillar was public employment for all those who sought it, a way of cultivating bonds of obligation that was as much political technique as an economic one (Mbembe and Roitman, 1995).

Since the ascent of King Abdullah II to the throne in 1999, and increasingly since the global financial crisis of 2008, these policies have been slowly forsaken although not entirely eschewed (Baylouny, 2008; Martínez, 2017). At each and every turn, the monarchy has sought to transform how Jordanian citizenship and its entitlements are understood and rationalized. Welfare measures and public investments are no longer underpinned by what Antina von Schniztler (2016, 177) terms a “solidaristic notion of body-politic or universal civic entitlement,” but are instead grounded in the idiom of basic needs, individual responsibility and macro-economic growth. The country’s 1952 Constitution is troublesome in this respect, as it guarantees not only employment as the “right of every citizen,” but ensures that “the state shall provide opportunities for work to all citizens by directing the national economy and raising its standards.”[[4]](#footnote-4) And while then Prime Minister Omar Razzaz accepted during the sit-in that “ambitious young people have a right to a job in an office,” he was also careful to add that, unlike in the past, “the government cannot secure these jobs for everyone (AmmonNews, 2019). Employment was both a right and an impossibility, one that Ma‘anis were better off forgetting, government spokespeople repeatedly declared.

In an insightful exploration of the legacies of Nasserism in neighboring Egypt, Sara Salem (2019) seeks to account for the unquantifiable afterlives of political projects. Building on the work of Jacques Derrida and Avery Gordon, she asks how the Nasserist undertaking continues to bedevil government moves towards a free market economy, analyzing the ways in which its ideological underpinnings incessantly return to challenge market-friendly reforms. Although Nasserism never realized the Arab Socialist utopia it promised, workers, activists and social movements have continuously mobilized under its mantras, inspired by its depiction of what just economic relations should, and sometimes did, look like. As in Ma‘an, workers in the Egyptian city of Mahalla who went on strike throughout the 2000s demanded a return to an era where the doctrines of neoliberal capitalism were not the dominant logic driving policy. While the Hashemite monarchy never proffered anything as coherent or imaginative as Nasser’s Arab Socialist creed, it did manage to normalize certain visions and practices of government, ones that were ingrained across peoples “skins, tastes and perceptions” (Fennell, 2011: 60; Martínez, 2022). Besides boosting aggregate demand, stimulating growth and boosting quality of life, policy measures that provided Ma‘anis with secure jobs and public goods stoked ties to particular modes of government intervention. The demand for jobs, the routine ways in which Ma‘anis describe employment as their just due, is just one instance where such legacies come forcefully into view. The march on the Royal Palace was not a revolt or mutiny, Saif and his colleagues often reminded me. Rather, it expressed attachments to modalities of power that had once ensured Ma‘anis a secure place in the world, ties that were as much about a salary as the dignity and justice that came with it.

I entered the Ma‘an municipality building a few days after its power had been temporarily cut off by Jordan’s Electricity Authority due to non-payment. Mired in debts and financially dependent on the central government, it was rumored that the Mayor had simply decided to stop opening monthly invoices. The story was a bit more complicated, but the frustrations indexed by the rumors were clear. I arrived expecting those in the municipality to disown the marchers. The exasperation of the latter seemed to reflect poorly on those charged with local affairs. Yet none of those I spoke with at the municipality sought to distance themselves from the marchers or disavow their actions.

Unable to collect much in the way of taxes and subject to tedious oversight by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, local leaders had neither the funds nor the leeway to undertake the projects they deemed necessary. “Everything we try to do takes time, lots of time,” deputy mayor Raed Shuwaikh conceded (Interview 2). Like many others in the city, Shuwaikh bemoaned shortcomings in various public services. A new slaughterhouse for livestock was urgently needed, as was a public garage for what remained of the transport sector. Schools could definitely use more funding. Trying to get a pothole fixed was a thankless and interminable task. While the deputy mayor recognized how budget cuts had reduced municipal expenditures throughout the Hashemite Kingdom, he repeatedly pointed to the central government’s disregard for his city. “No one listens when we tell them our problems, only the King. It is easier to call us lazy or criminal,” he emphasized in a wide-ranging interview in the municipality’s conference room.

Seated at the head of a large oval-shaped wooden table, Shuwaikh was careful but candid in his words. He was keenly aware of how public investments entrenched regional inequalities, frequently accentuating the differences between Ma‘an and other cities. “Ma‘an is easy to ignore because we are far from the capital. The city also doesn’t get many tourists. It’s not like Aqaba or Petra who get resources from the state because foreigners and investors visit these places,” he stressed. I then asked about the marchers, inquiring as to why, in his view, some residents of the city had decided to walk to Amman, rather than express their grievances closer to home, as was the convention before. “These young men are all kin of the state (*abnā’ ad-dawla*). They were exercising their constitutional rights as Jordanians. No one listened to them so they did the only thing they could—march to the capital and petition the King.” I tried to push him on this, asking what would happen if all of Jordan’s unemployed showed up at the Palace’s doors. The deputy mayor toed a fine line. He expressed sympathy for the marchers and voiced the city’s grievances while asserting his allegiance to the Jordanian state. “You’ve talked to these men,” he stated after I mentioned some of my conversations. “Like the rest of us they are not trying to start a revolution against the monarchy or overthrow the state. They want what we all do, to live a dignified life. People here are willing to work, we just need the state to provide opportunities, to show that it cares.” Political differences abound in Ma‘an, the rest of Jordan too. But employment, and the dignity that ostensibly comes with it, had an appeal no one could afford to deny.

After a month of conversation in cafés, soccer fields and government offices, Saif invited me to his home for a meal. With every block we traversed away from the city center, Ma‘an’s infrastructural deprivation became increasingly clear. Abandoned buildings with bits of corroding steel bulging from concrete, narrow alleyways with uncovered electricity cables, an only occasionally well-paved street. Saif hurried home with a young man’s stride as I struggled to keep pace. He lived with his wife in a small attached room in his parents’ home, along with three of his brothers, their partners and a total of eight children. Dinner was raucous, as seventeen of us sat down to eat. My attendance had been announced earlier that day, but the children were no less amused, my peculiar accent became the butt of many jokes. Once the food finished, the adults eventually settled down for tea.

Only one of the younger couples had found stable employment, as a nurse and school teacher. Everyone else had stories of transient jobs and occasional successes outnumbered by many setbacks. When I expressed my interest in the march to Amman, and its focus on employment, the conversation quickly turned to budgeting and costs. Average salaries for most jobs in Ma‘an were almost never enough, I was told, especially when they did not cover healthcare. If one child got sick and needed certain pills or another had to visit the hospital in an emergency, then what would the adults have to do without? It was a united family’s math, one where meat, milk and diapers were infrequent indulgences rather than routine purchases. Meagre and inconsistent salaries meant heightened exposure to deprivation, that much was obvious. More unnerving was the inability to plan.

The aspiration of the marchers was not to become wealthy, Saif’s wife Zahra emphasized as the conversation wound down. It was to live a normal life, to not have to resort to patronage, illegal connections to public infrastructures or the sale of counterfeit goods in order to survive. “The march was inevitable once everyone here saw what Professor al-Arini did,” she surmised. “Protests rarely work here [in Ma‘an], they haven’t in a few years,” she made clear. “We draw on family and friends to make ends meet when things are bad, but these aren’t permanent solutions. Nor are the other technically illegal things lots of us [Ma‘anis] do to avoid paying taxes and fees,” Zahra explained, while motioning at the hastily marshalled electricity cables just outside the family’s home. “A stable job is the only way to raise a family and live a dignified life,” she stressed, “In Ma‘an we have tried to achieve this through elections and protests. And now again with the march to Amman.” Like other Jordanians, Ma‘anis search for recognition and resources through an array of avenues and openings. Their modes of mobilization are historically inflected and astutely honed, diverse forms of political practice permeate and circulate. Sometimes voting in an election is worthwhile; at other moments, blocking transit on the highway is called for. Resorting to informal terrains of negotiation need not come at the expense of more formalized avenues of petition. “In Ma‘an we are only guaranteed sun and mosquitoes,” Zahra concluded. “The point of the march was to demonstrate that this should not be so, that the state should do more.”

Video recordings make clear how the demands made at the sit-in aimed at holding the state to account, to beseech it to foster the conditions necessary for a reasonable standard of life. Throughout, marchers refused both the rhetoric of austerity and the practices of nepotism, calling for arrangements of people and jobs that both remoralize respectable work and reject the panaceas of private sector-led growth. “We saw what Professor al-Arini did and what those in Aqaba achieved and were inspired. We thought the march was worth a try,” Saif told me in one of our last conversations. “We wanted people to see us and understand our misery. We wanted the state to realize its mistakes, modify its actions and help us.” As of the last time we spoke (September 2020), not all of the promised jobs had materialized. Quite a few of them vanished after just months. But as I was often reminded, when lamb was a luxury, chocolate an extravagance and brandishing new clothes meant inheriting them, even a few stable posts in the civil service were an accomplishment. So while they did not achieve all they set out too, I am hesitant to portray the Ma‘anis march to Amman as a failure. It evidently worked to communicate grievances, re-articulate solidarities and produce heretofore unexpected results. The march also brought Ma‘an into embodied proximity with the capital, shifting momentarily the spatial coordinates that contribute to the periphery’s marginalization. But what I want to dwell on here is the shared horizon of expectation amongst those I spoke with.Living amidst the fragmentation of governmental practices that once worked to improve collective life, Ma‘anis constantly devise new repertories of contention to underscore their plight. Yet their investments and imaginaries remain fixed on a central object of optimism they deem to merit esteem, one that makes their petitions legible while also permitting “a kind of compromised endurance” (Berlant, 2011: 48).Ma‘anis may describe the state as soulless, deceptive or ineffective. They may signal their disapproval and be offered some haphazard remedy. But their conduct remains fully organized around a disposition that accepts it as given. It is precisely such attachments that I find to be rife with ambivalence. Not because their verbal iterations are in some way unclear or uncertain—for clearly they are not. Rather, I am arguing that Ma‘anis express concurrent and contradictory sentiments towards a structure of rule that originate at the site of their formation as Jordanian subjects.

The significance of these attachments resides, partly, in their enactment of the state as coherent figure, as something that inevitably is and must be. But equally important are the ways they ensnare Jordanians in a relationship with a fantastical form that exerts a powerful hold, even though it rarely delivers—the state effect is affective too. Ma‘anis repeatedly rejected government efforts to ‘culturize’ their poverty. They knew well that their marginalization was not a result of communal identity, religious belief or individual failing, as many in the central government wanted them to accept. These citizens could identify the vectors of punishment and abandonment that marginalize the urban poor throughout Jordan’s cities and towns. Yet their foremost demand was precisely to uphold a particular relationship to political authority as the most viable way of organizing, and improving, their lives. And while there were, of course, several important critics of the marchers, it was their means that were disparaged, never their site of address. The point, then, is not that the marchers were seen in an unabashedly positive light. Nor is it that in holding the state accountable for Ma‘an’s desolation, local residents gave it “on the ground traction despite its failures,” although this was most definitely the case (Stamatopoulou-Robbins, 2019: 123). Rather, I speculate that Ma‘anis are entangled in a relationship and propelled through attachments that many of us share. Despite the glaring incapacity of government institutions to care for Ma‘anis or provide them the necessary building blocks for their well-being, citizens seek novel ways to rectify the object that governs them. They are formed as subjects that not only submit to a state, but rely on it to sustain their own agency. The march to Amman is suggestive in this respect, and not only for what it reveals about how those at the geographical and political margins try to overcome their precarity. It also makes clear the boundless appetite for the state—a locus of affective investment and a seemingly endless site of possibility. Subjection has both a what and a where.

*Conclusion*

What, then, does it mean to embrace the very effect of power that disciplines, regulates and (mis)rules in order to overcome such conditions? In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant asks, and seeks to explore, how the placeholders for our desires become fetishized, allowing people to cling onto anchors in the world that rarely fulfil them. They posit that a new ordinary has emerged in the United States, one in which the state-citizen relationship has been displaced by something new. And while I find Berlant’s explorations of sex, democracy and misrecognition potent and convincing, I wonder whether the state, and desires for its reformation, are so easily dismissed in other contexts and milieus.[[5]](#footnote-5) At a time when so many struggles, campaigns, petitions and protests presume it as an object, can we be so sure that the state does not remain one of the central objects of identification onto which people displace their agency and aspirations?

Conversations in Jordan lead me to say no. They suggest that detachment from the constellation of promises and possibilities made in the state’s name is not as straightforward as it seems—attachment is far more sustaining. Despite chronic disappointments, most Ma‘anis call for the state’s recovery and recuperation, part of a cycle that only intensifies their conviction in an object of desire that so dependably thwarts their aspirations. And in doing so recurringly, Ma‘anis are hardly alone. Scholars have found analogous ambivalences across a variety of locales, places where the state is both loathed and coveted, entreated to act less hurtfully and implored to operate more benevolently. Maybe “hope for/ against the state” (Jansen, 2014), the search for its “ideal face” (Obeid, 2010), or what so many others describe under a different heading, is a mode of subjection to which many citizens are structurally attached, even if it can feel any number of ways. To appeal to the state is to offer it reciprocal recognition as sovereign, that much we seem to know. But if we understand power as producing the subject and not just dominating it, as providing the conditions for its agency and the trajectories for its yearnings and aspirations, then ambivalent states need not be particular to marginalized locales. Instead, ambivalence operates according to a structure of relationality, one that works to produce the subject at the moment of its citizenly emergence. We are made by the mechanisms of power in which we participate.

To be clear, I do not seek to offer an account easily reduced to the simple internalization of the state, and all that comes with it. The forms of claim-making examined herein are robust practices for handling the plodding challenges that shape everyday life. They are neither signs of complacency nor signals of surrender. Instead, they demonstrate how citizens remained conjoined with the ingrained, in an unbalanced and shifting entanglement that can unsettle such relations, even while entrenching them. If, as Lisa Wedeen argues (1999: 26), “actual experiences of both domination and resistance demonstrate not so much the functional coherence of power, but its ambiguities,” then this paper seeks to foreground the state as a foremost contemporary site of this morass. Gaps and tensions abound. But whatever strategy Ma‘anis pursue, their practices are overwhelmingly indexed to the state, tapping into its unquestionable existence, participating in (and extending) its performative powers as well as its ability to command belief. Room for subversion is possible, but only if we acknowledge that agency begins with power, and must always wrestle with attachments to subjection (see Berlant 2014). Diagnosing ambivalent states offers no easy release, but it does better disclose how we manage the binds and impasses of contemporary life, those that shape our capacity to imagine and enact politics otherwise.

“Things will get better here, you’ll see.” Saif told me, slightly more upbeat, as I departed Ma‘an for the last time. “There is no Jordan without us. We are the kin of the state (*ihna abnā’ ad-dawla*).”

**Interviews Cited**

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2. Mr. Raed Shuwaikh, Deputy Mayor of Ma‘an, in interview with Author, 6/8/2020.

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1. For an interesting examination of Ma‘an before the Hashemite Amir’s arrival, see Neveu, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These collective ties often (although need not) come at the expense of groups not presumed to be members of the *statsvolk*, such as Palestinian-Jordanians in the Jordanian context. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on the socio-political dynamics leading up to and including this period, see Rogan, 2002: 44-69; Tell, 2013: 55-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This citation is from Article 23. For more, see Salameh and Darawsheh, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a powerful theorization of how identification with the modern state works as the bearer of a displaced aspiration to sovereign agency, see Markell, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)