In Search of Utopia in Post-Political Beirut:
The Pragmatic Turn and the Decline of Radical Imaginaries in Activist Lebanon

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Abstract

Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Beirut, Lebanon, this dissertation examines the turn towards a pragmatic and technocratic approach to politics in Lebanese civil society, in the aftermath of the 'garbage protests' that gripped the country in 2015. It situates this development within a global political conjuncture characterized by what other scholars have designated an anti-political, or post-political turn amongst activists in disparate contexts. Such activists are seen as focusing increasingly on uncontroversial questions of livability and wellbeing imagined to have the capacity to transcend binaries of Left and Right and, in so doing, instigate change.

This dissertation tells the story of a middle class urban social movement concentrated largely in Beirut, which drew on the technocratic expertise of its adherents to market an alternative vision for the city and wider country. The activists that made up this movement rejected the divisiveness of 'ideology' and the messiness of 'politics' proper in favor of what they put forward as a neutral discourse of the 'right to the city' – a non-contentious approach to socio-political agitation. In addition to making sense of the appeal of this approach to activism, I highlight its limitations.

My research unfolded in the aftermath of a political event that activists saw as charged with potential, yet quickly fizzled out, stranding them in a post-evental moment of 'dead time' heavy with the debilitating sense of having yet again failed to facilitate transformative change. I examined the ways in which activists in Lebanon attempted to work their way out of this impasse and towards new moments of rupture in an endeavor to create new processes of political subjectivation.

This dissertation charts ways in which activists in Lebanon attempted to challenge the hopelessness that was assumed to have enabled mass complicity with the status quo. It employs ethnographic methods to discern the ways in which activists in contemporary Lebanon made sense of and worked against what was designated as a prolonged period of 'stuckedness'. It asks how the experience of routine failure within Lebanon's post-civil war activist scene transformed contentious politics in the country, examining the decline of once popular radical political imaginaries, and the emergence, in their stead, of a pragmatic approach to politics. In exploring the limitations of this form of activism, I explore the effects that neoliberalism as a governing rationality has had on the political imagination, and on the ability of dissenters to think a more radical socio-political otherwise.

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Note on Arabic Transliteration

In transliterating Modern Standard Arabic into English in this dissertation, I follow the recommendations of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. In transliterating colloquial Lebanese, I used the spelling most common in Lebanon, and which best communicated the local pronunciation of a given term.

My interlocutors and I usually communicated in a mixture of Arabic and English. I have rendered all quotes in English, including the Arabic versions of particular words or phrases that were not easily translatable with their English equivalent in brackets, where necessary.

All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

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Introduction

The Stench of Possibility

I. The Garbage Protests

In the summer of 2015, rivers, mountains and valleys of trash gradually overran the Lebanese landscape. Monstrous heaps and flows of waste interrupted car and pedestrian traffic, overwhelmed the senses, sickened bodies, kept tourists away, and inspired thousands of protestors to take to the streets and demonstrate against what was framed as only the latest consequence of decades of chronic governmental corruption and negligence.

With the advent of what became known as the 'garbage crisis', Lebanon's post-civil war (1975-1990) political order took on unavoidable olfactory and visual dimensions, literally stinking up and defacing the streets.[1] Face masks, sunglasses, rolled up car windows and even staying indoors couldn't keep the trash at bay. The sensorial invasion positioned the Lebanese political system as a threat that could no longer be ignored, put up with or even creatively circumvented. Its policies – or lack thereof – had begun to take a toll not only on the civil wellbeing of its

[1] The crisis was sparked by the closure of the Naameh garbage landfill in southeast Beirut, to which the waste of Beirut and Mount Lebanon had been sent since 1998. The landfill was forcefully closed by protestors who lived in the village, and who had become fed up with the existence of the toxic dumpsite, which was originally meant to be a temporary solution to the management of the capital's waste (Kerbage, 2017). The closure of the landfill coincided with the expiration of the contract between the state and Sukleen, the private waste-management company tasked with trash collection in Beirut and Mount Lebanon since 1996. In July 2015, the government decided not to renew Sukleen's contract as usual, choosing instead to invite bids from alternative waste management companies, causing garbage to pile up in the streets, pour out of bins, and fester in the summer heat (Civil Society Knowledge Centre, 2016, para. 1-2).

citizens and denizens (the subpar character of which many had grown accustomed to), but on their physical health as well, endangered as they all were, regardless of class background and socio-cultural capital, by the toxic material left to occupy their streets.

What began as a hashtag introduced by civil society activists – #youstink or #tol3etre7etkom – evolved into a Facebook page and later a campaign calling for public sit-ins, before metamorphosing into a full-blown popular mobilization in August of 2015 that drew tens of thousands from a variety of confessional, regional, economic, educational and political backgrounds to downtown Beirut's Martyrs' Square (Kerbage, 2017). While the activists who initiated the You Stink campaign focused their energies on demanding a solution to the garbage crisis, the protests organically developed into a platform for the airing of a diversity of complaints including, but not limited to, "unemployment, precarity of livelihoods, and the commodification of public services" (Kerbage, 2017, p. 5).

When not violently interrupted by the Internal Security Forces, the protests were often joyous affairs that appeared to eclipse, however briefly, the conventional sectarian politics characteristic of Lebanon. As Kerbage (2017) writes, "since the civil war ended in 1990, Lebanon had not witnessed mass mobilizations against cross-sectarian livelihood issues as massive as the August 29 demonstrations" (p. 5). Organizers claimed the August 29th mobilization drew between 80,000 and 100,000 protestors, while the press more conservatively estimated that tens of thousands flooded Martyrs' Square on that day.

I recall a smaller yet not insubstantial gathering I attended on September 9th, around a month before starting my DPhil at the University of Oxford, where I had originally planned to engage with Lebanese cinema in order to make sense of how residents of Lebanon critical of the country's scarred past, stagnant present and nonexistent future perceived the conditions under which they lived, and critiqued them. But, on that late summer day, walking through the streets of a Downtown Beirut I otherwise loathed and avoided, watching all that was subversive and underground claw its way to the surface to do more than diagnose and dismiss, I felt I had to shift gears away from cultural production towards the kind of grassroots activism that, while also invested in cultivating and disseminating alternative readings of the status quo, was committed to facilitating new processes of political subjectivation through a being-together-in-public; through the power of assembly (Butler, 2015) – whether as part of protest or political meeting, reading group or neighborhood committee, an environmental or electoral campaign, as I will outline in this dissertation.

On that day in September of 2015, resistance-themed songs bellowed from speakers, electrifying the notoriously silent downtown; feet pounded dances into the manicured pavement; vendors stuffed *kaak* with cheese and toasted them on makeshift grills; ice cream trucks abandoned their usual stations along the Corniche to help cool perspiring protestors; collective chants were interrupted by piercing announcements signaling the availability of cold sodas for sale; humorous signs competed for laughs; and thousands celebrated their shared presence in a part of Beirut that had since the end of the civil war served as a metonym for the Lebanese political system – a space that claimed to reflect the spirit and cater to the needs and

desires of all Lebanese but, in reality, was built for and welcoming to none but a small national elite, as well as wealthy tourists.

The protestors who filled Martyrs' Square and marched through Beirut's streets that summer boasted a diversity of confessional, political and economic backgrounds. Many, Kerbage (2017) writes, were participating in "cross-sectarian demonstrations, raising civil and livelihood issues for the first time" (p. 6). These first-timers had attended demonstrations organized by sectarian political parties in the past, but in 2015 found themselves drawn to a mobilization "beyond traditional sectarian politics" (Kerbage, 2017, p. 6). While middle-class, youth-led collectives like You Stink and We Want Accountability positioned themselves as the organizers of these mobilizations, with the former claiming to have launched the movement through its hashtag, these activists were not alone, and they were certainly not the majority composing these extra-sectarian events.

Of course, the *Hirak* (movement), as it became locally known, did not occur in a vacuum. A diversity of Lebanese citizens, residents and precarious denizens (refugees, migrant workers, asylum-seekers, displaced peoples) had been periodically provoked into temporary mobilizations of various sizes and forms by explosive catalysts that punctuated the post-civil war period prior to the garbage crisis – the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005; the Israeli onslaught on Lebanon in 2006; the Lebanese Army's offensive against Islamist militants in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr El Bared in 2007; the almost civil war of May 2008; the start of the Arab uprisings in 2011; the multiple extensions of parliamentary terms and postponements of national elections. Post-civil war Lebanese civil

society also had a history of organizing around a variety of issues prior to 2015, including but not limited to demanding answers about and justice for the disappeared of the civil war era and their families; campaigning against domestic violence and advocating for civil marriage (Kerbage, 2017). But, as Kerbage (2017) writes, although the *Hirak:*

> was a continuation of previous labor and civil struggles, it went further, specifically when it comes to the mass August 2015 demonstrations. It expanded the demands, recruited new social groups, and raised the stakes of the political discourse against the predominant March 8 and March 14 political poles (p. 6).[2]

The *Hirak*, despite the heated disagreements that characterized it, and despite the clashes that eventually resulted in stronger fault lines within civil society and between civil society and the wider population, was, for a moment, a resounding 'enough'. It was a declaration of the intolerability of humiliating, widespread precariousness and neglect; a refusal to continue to accept a disposability that served to enable the luxurious lifestyles and wealth accumulation of a privileged few, allowing them to profit endlessly at the expense of others (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). The *Hirak* was, in short, an 'event', in Alain Badiou's sense of the term, which constituted a "real break;" a moment of rupture, destabilizing the "pre-existing order," that framed the status quo as a condition that not only could be but *had* to be tolerated, the alternative being descent, yet again, into civil war (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 122). The *Hirak* was, for a diversity of anti-status quo actors, an event charged with potential, with the transformative possibilities that could emerge from a standing together in public – until its momentum fizzled out and it 'failed'.

[2] The split within the Lebanese ruling class into what became known as the March 8th and March 14th coalitions occurred in the aftermath of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination. I will elaborate on this development in the next chapter.

Nayel and Moghnieh (2015) argue that "the organizers who led the protests failed to embrace and organize those outraged on the streets who had just abandoned their sectarian social bubbles" (para. 15). At the organizational level, they write, the *Hirak* was crippled by "an NGO mentality," and groups like You Stink insisted on restricting the scope of their demands to a solution to the garbage crisis, forcing them to "de-escalate" their "measures of direct action" when they felt they were losing control of 'the street' (para. 16). Kerbage (2017) argues that what groups like You Stink tried to do was draw on the "tools and terminology of NGOs to build a populist discourse that transcends contradictions by identifying a common adversary" (p. 7). Theirs was a rights-based approach, underpinned by a vague discourse about an ineffective and corrupt government, and a generalized opposition to "the rule of 'Crooks' and Zu'ama" (Kerbage, 2017, p. 18). Controversial issues that could prove divisive were avoided, and:

> specific demands were articulated in a purely scientific and technical language and were confined to providing various environmental solutions to the trash crisis…Knowledge production advocacy was always dominated by a discourse of technicality and scientific expertise, distancing itself from social and economic demands emerging from the protestors (Kerbage, 2017, p. 18).

This tactic, Kerbage, Nayel and Moghnieh argue, produced a momentary, broad emotional appeal, drawing many to the protests, but it "could not frame and retain a narrative" for the *Hirak* (Kerbage, 2017, p. 19). Organizers demanded a "clean environment, water, electricity, housing" (Kerbage, 2017, p. 21) without articulating the politico-economic underpinnings behind their lack, and without offering a structural reading of the problems plaguing Lebanon that could pave the way towards alternatives worth vying for.

II. The Aftermath of Political Failure

This dissertation takes the fizzling out of the *Hirak* as its starting point, examining what became of Lebanese anti-status quo activism and its attempts to provoke the country's population into agitating against the order of things in the wake of yet another supposed failure at prolonged mobilization. I am interested in how the desire to work towards transformative change is nurtured in the *aftermath* of a political event such as the *Hirak*, when activists find themselves in a conjuncture characterized by what many of my interlocutors called *iḥbāṭ* – 'frustration', but in this context with complex overtones of stasis, exasperation with the status quo and hopelessness. I ask what became of the ideas, the political philosophies, introduced during the *Hirak*, after the "return to the 'normality' of everyday life" (Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 179). How were activist energies organized and deployed in the service of propagating and popularizing the ways of thinking and doing politics; of delineating, prioritizing and advocating for demands, introduced during the event? And, what dispositions and rationalities did these discourses aim to challenge? What "new sensibility" or "new common sense" were they trying to cultivate (Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 179)?

Drawing a parallel with Harding's (2001) work on televangelist Jerry Falwell and born-again Christians in the United States, one can frame such activist discourses as *secular* narratives of conversion, or profane acts of witnessing, meant to "convict and convert the unsaved listener" (p. 34) – in this case the complicit, hopeless or fearful citizen or denizen. "Witnessing," writes Harding,

> like evangelical preaching, 'is intended to create a spiritual crisis by calling to the fore one's desperate and lost conditions, which one may have been totally unaware of.' This crisis is the onset of the conversion process, what fundamentalists call 'coming under conviction' (p. 38).

I think of the attempts by the activists with whom I worked to introduce a politically generative anxiety amongst Lebanon's wider population, in these terms. The cultivation of this nervous disposition can be framed as the condition for political change, a means of productively embodying the unsustainability of the status quo, and of sensing that one has been duped into accepting its irreversibility by a discourse of transcendental corruption and innate instability. To come under conviction would mean not only to realize that something *should* be done, but that something *can* be done. "In the words of Benetta Jules-Rosette, who studied among, and joined, the Apostles of John Maranke in Africa, conversion is 'a powerful clash resulting from the shift from one realm of thought and action to another, a moment of specific *shock*" (Harding, 2001, p. 38). What were the means through which activists in post-*Hirak* Lebanon were attempting to facilitate processes of conversion among the wider population, and conversion to what type of political subject and agent of change? And, from where did they derive the faith to keep persisting in their activism, despite routine failure?

There were two competing anti-status quo discourses vying for hegemony during the *Hirak*. One survived, evolved, and came to dominate the doxa and praxis of Lebanese civil society, while the other retreated to the peripheries of that milieu. I am interested in the respective popularity and marginality of these divergent understandings of the status quo within Lebanese civil society, and the differing definitions of desirable change and tools for introducing

conditions of possibility for socio-political transformation these understandings directed activists towards.

In the year that followed the events of the summer of 2015, a diffuse urban social movement that had been developing in Beirut for over a decade, composed of collectives, NGOs, coalitions and independent activists, subsuming a variety of campaigns and protests, all aimed at Lebanon's "centralized, fragmented and inefficient urban governance structure" (Harb, 2016, p. 4), sedimented into what looked like a more cohesive and organized force with the introduction of an independent electoral campaign in the run-up to the country's 2016 municipal elections, known as Beirut Madinati (Beirut, My City).[3] With the rise of Beirut Madinati, the pragmatic and technocratic politics promoted by groups like You Stink during *Hirak*, imagined to have the potential to transcend divisions grounded in class, sect and more if it could offer a chance at 'real victories' (Kerbage, 2017, p. 21), developed into an electoral platform that saw activists ask the sitting authorities to step aside and let the qualified take the wheel, rather than merely making demands of corrupt politicians. The diagnosis of Lebanon's ills still focused on the 'rule of the crooks', but rather than asking that they stop being crooked, Beirut Madinati and the volunteers and supporters it drew from the city's urban social movement demanded that they be replaced by the objective, the qualified, and the impartial to sectarian or class interests.

[3] When Harb (2016) refers to urban governance in Lebanon as simultaneously centralized and fragmented, she is pointing to the fact that, on the one hand, urban policies are issued top-down by a select group within a handful of public institutions who fail to consult the general population and, on the other, to the absence of a central institution "effectively conceiving and implementing spatial planning policies across the Lebanese territory" (p. 4). The Council for Development and Reconstruction, for example, formed in 1977 as a replacement for the Ministry of Planning, answers to the council of ministers, and despite releasing a National Physical Master Plan in 2005, meant to provide direction for spatial planning and regional development, this plan lacked "clear implementation and mechanisms at regional and local scales." Additionally, local and regional governments "have large margins of maneuver when it comes to spatial planning, but weak resources" (p. 4).

How can we understand the politicization, since 2015, of a self-proclaimed secular, educated class of society that previously funneled its energy and skills into the NGO sector? This dissertation explores the growing popularity, in the aftermath of the *Hirak*, of an urban social movement concentrated largely in the capital, which drew on the technocratic expertise and professional backgrounds of its adherents to market an alternative vision for the city and country. The organizations, collectives and independent activists that made up and supported this urban social movement rejected the divisiveness of 'ideology' and messiness of 'politics' proper in favor of what they put forward as a neutral, universalist, unifying discourse of the 'right to the city' – a non-contentious, issue-focused approach to socio-political agitation focused on liveability and wellbeing. In addition to making sense of the appeal of this pragmatic and technocratic approach to contentious politics amongst disenchanted middle class residents of Beirut in the aftermath of the *Hirak*, I am committed to highlighting its limitations – the ways in which this approach to challenging Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal order actually risked reproducing it or aiding in its mutation.

The pragmatic and technocratic politics of You Stink and similar groupings was not the only discourse being propagated by independent activists during the *Hirak*. *Al-Shaʿb Yurid* (The People Want), a grouping of independent activists, collectives and organizations that broadly identified with leftist principles, from revolutionary socialism to radical feminism and queer Marxism, was formed not only to participate in the *Hirak* in an organized manner, but to actively challenge what its founders considered the limited and problematic discourses of groups like You Stink and We Want Accountability. Members of *al-Shaʿb Yurid* with whom I spoke prided themselves on having played a role in puncturing and re-shaping anti-status quo discourse

during the *Hirak*. They pushed for an approach that went beyond garbage – that addressed the political system and Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal order in its entirety. When security forces intervened and began firing live bullets in the air and rubber bullets at protestors, enraging both participants and many of those still at home and hesitant to participate, *al-Shaʿb Yurid* saw an opportunity to make its perspective go viral. Social media was abuzz with debate, as activists churned out one public status or tweet after the other, to be supported or challenged by peers and fellow protestors, but either way engaged with.

Al-Shaʿb Yurid criticized the demand for a private sector solution to the garbage crisis, what one participant I spoke with called a "techno-populist approach." It countered the popular narrative that working class protestors – who challenged middle class organizers' dedication to non-violence and its equation with civilized protest – were infiltrators (*mundasseen*), thugs sent by sectarian bosses to disrupt the protests. "We shaped a lot of the narratives," another participant told me. "We tapped into a lot of discussions, and we were invited to a lot of them and for a long time it felt like we were the beating heat of this thing." To calls for reforming the system, *al-Shaʿb Yurid* responded with the need to persist until its dismantlement.

Beating heart or not, *al-Shaʿb Yurid* was eventually trumped by the groups that positioned themselves as the *brains* of the movement, and exerted significant control over the narratives and statements presented to the media, speaking on behalf of the many, simplifying and generalizing demands and interests in a way that proved incapable of maintaining the momentum of a street that eventually lost sight of what it was mobilizing for, as the government debated various solutions to the garbage crisis, ignoring the input of civil society and eventually

imposing a solution that a country desperate to be rid of the flood of toxic waste overtaking it was forced to accept.[4] The organizers of the *Hirak*, Kerbage (2017) writes, "did not frame, politically translate, or clarify their meanings. Thus, new participants took to the streets and protested; some vented to the media, and then everybody went back home" (p. 17).

Unlike the technocratic and pragmatic politics associated with groups like You Stink, the left-wing radicalism of *al-Shaʿb Yurid* crumbled after the protests. As one participant told me:

> It was a response to something urgent – what You Stink was doing and the need to criticize them – but it was dysfunctional. All these people with shared, complicated pasts coming together just because they didn't like You Stink, but otherwise didn't agree on much else and actually hated each other. What people took away from the experience was that leftist organizing doesn't work.

In this dissertation, I juxtapose the popularity of the issue-focused, expertise-driven, pragmatic politics of Lebanon's urban social movement with the marginality of the country's radical and revolutionary left amongst activists in the wake of the garbage protests. When I refer to the radical and revolutionary left, I mean to point to a millennial generation of Lebanese leftists

[4] "On September 9, 2015, the government approved a waste management plan proposed by the Minister of Agriculture, Akram Chehayeb. It consisted of the following measures: decentralizing waste management duties by allocating them to local municipalities; reopening the Naameh landfill for seven days; renewing Sukleen's contract for eighteen additional months; rehabilitating a garbage dump in Burj Hammoud and transforming it into a landfill; upgrading a landfill in Akkar to a sanitary landfill, and opening a new landfill in Masnaa along Lebanon's eastern mountain range. The plan was criticized by activists for failing to take into account the environmental consequences of re-opening or upgrading the landfills, although the plan did concede to one of civil society's key demands – setting a long-term plan for the decentralization of waste management, while taking into consideration the funding needed to carry out such duties, as well as the environmental experts and consultants needed to help municipalities shape their procedures" (Civil Society Knowledge Centre, 2016, para. 5). At the time of writing, environmental activists were still actively criticizing the lack of a sustainable waste management strategy in Lebanon and lobbying the authorities for the development of one. The Waste Management Coalition, composed of activists and experts, was formed in the years after the *Hirak*, and criticized the continued reliance on landfills to which waste was being sent without adequate sorting and treatment. The coalition also lobbied against the proposed introduction of incineration as a national strategy for waste management, insisting on its detrimental health and environmental effects.

who had distanced themselves from the 'dogmatic Marxism,' 'Stalinism' and Arab nationalism of the Lebanese Communist Party and currents associated or allied with it (Haugbolle, 2016, p. 68). With the growing popularity of the issue-focused and expertise-driven activism that solidified into a more cohesive political movement with the emergence of Beirut Madinati, the radical and revolutionary left increasingly came to be seen by independent activists in Lebanon as an elitist and out-of-touch club. The critiques that emanated from *al-Shaʿb Yurid*, capturing a not insubstantial number of imaginations within Lebanese civil society in 2015, were subsequently framed as sterile, even by some of those who had been part of the collective.

My ethnographic fieldwork over the course of two years (summer of 2016 until the summer of 2018) involved participant observation with the preparatory reading group for prospective members of the revolutionary socialist political organization The Socialist Forum – a key force within *al-Shaʿb Yurid*. I worked with two public space-focused advocacy groups whose members were influential forces within Beirut's urban social movement: The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche (also known as the Dalieh Campaign), and Nahnoo. Additionally, I collaborated with the neighborhood initiative of Beirut Madinati, which, despite losing the municipal election in the capital, was at the time of my fieldwork engaged in grassroots community organizing in preparation for the next round of municipal elections in 2022. The politics of Beirut Madinati, I argue, cannot be understood without analyzing the trajectory of the urban social movement that preceded, enabled and continued to exist and grow alongside it, and from which the electoral campaign turned political movement drew many of its volunteers and most devoted members.

My fieldwork was limited to activism originating from or unfolding in the Greater Beirut area, admittedly neglecting smaller social movements taking place in other parts of the country. I did examine how Beirut-based groups attempted to expand their reach through coalitions, and fashion a more holistic and inclusive vision for the country as a whole. What I observed, however, was that there tended to be an awareness of and engagement with the kinds of agitations unfolding in the capital, which when large enough in scale, like the garbage protests, often drew activists from other parts of the country. Beirut was the primary target of post-civil war reconstruction and neoliberal development, allowing activists elsewhere to anticipate what was in store for their locales based on the struggles the city had witnessed since the early 1990s. I therefore treat Beirut's activist scene as a kind of synecdoche – a part that does not mean the whole, but anticipates it.

How can we understand the increasingly hegemonic desire within Lebanese civil society to work towards mass consensus, and avoid divisive or difficult issues, in the wake of the garbage protests? How can we make sense of the refusal to hear criticism of such strategies that was not accompanied by a 'realistic' alternative? I will argue that, in the aftermath of the *Hirak*, activists associated with Lebanon's urban social movement were committed to 'acting', to forms of advocacy and lobbying based on their potential for 'getting something done', however minute or ephemeral that something might be, in order to counteract the hopelessness gripping the country. By contrast, the revolutionary leftists I worked with attempted to fight this hopelessness through collective study, which appeared to many as a paralysis brought on by a hysterical commitment to utopian ideas that only the privileged could afford, but can conversely be understood as a form of political praxis considered well-suited to counter-revolutionary

times. What, I ask, drew a minority from within Lebanon's already circumscribed civil society milieu away from the pragmatic and technocratic politics popular amongst their peers and towards the supposedly immobilizing utopianism of the revolutionary left?

In both cases, I engage forms of political praxis framed as potential technologies of self and collective – on the one hand, that of the ideal citizen and, on the other, that of the revolutionary subject. And, in both cases, I trace the work of activists who, despite their many differences, were all in one way or another attempting to respond to the historical failures of the Lebanese left during the civil war and its immediate aftermath, as well as to the durability of the country's post-civil war sectarian-neoliberal order.

Situating Contemporary Lebanese Activism

I. The Regional Context

My dissertation takes place within a post-uprising Middle Eastern context where emboldened authoritarian regimes had suffocated activist energies. At the time of writing, activists all over the region found themselves in a moment of retreat from the street. Given this regional context, characterized by the dissipation of revolutionary energy and its replacement with "more localized and smaller protests," scholars like Schwedler and Harris (2016) have encouraged the adoption of a "longer-term analytic framework" that can not only assist scholars in making sense of the reverberations and consequences of the uprisings, but also expand our conception of what constitutes "contentious politics in the region," accounting for the "wider range of

outlets" into which "political activist energies have been channelled…in large part due to necessity" (p. 3). In a regional conjuncture characterized as counter-revolutionary, it is important to ask: what "new alliances and new strategies of resistance and dissent"(Schwedler & Harris, 2016, p. 3) are activists resorting to? This scholarly call serves as an important challenge to the "idea that re-entrenched authoritarian regimes have effectively quashed activism" (2016, p. 5).

There is a dearth of scholarly literature on the processes that precede and follow bold political events in the region – the 'in between', during which the foundations for these pivotal moments, as well as their shortcomings, are cultivated. Activism during moments of political stagnation and hopelessness, which lack opportunities for mass mobilization, have not only received inadequate attention within the scholarship on political change in the Middle East, but within the discipline of anthropology more broadly, within which I locate myself.

In terms of the content of this dissertation, it is important to contextualize the development of new forms of contentious politics in Lebanon within the expansion, over the last decade or so, of middle class, youth-led socio-political networks and organizations throughout the Middle East, and the "new repertoires of social and political action" they have been introducing (Cole, 2014, p. 124). What Cole (2014) calls 'left-liberal youth' played a key role in the Arab uprisings and were distinguished by their dedication to "a horizonal model of organization instead of a hierarchy," and their embrace of a more "pragmatic" approach to politics (p. x). I situate Lebanon's urban social movement within what Cole calls the Arab New Left, by which he means something closer to what would be called left-liberals or left-of-center activists in a

context like the United States. Cole distinguishes this new left from the old, Leninist left, once a formidable presence in the Middle East, arguing that the former "could not be less interested in Leninism and instead believed in the possibility of democratically mobilizing workers and the people" (p. 85).

By chronicling the politicization of middle class professionals in Lebanon, this dissertation aims to contribute to studies of the Arab uprisings and their aftereffects – particularly, attempts to make sense of the increased visibility of politicized, middle class, liberal-left activists in the region who, disenchanted with the organizational frameworks of 'the failed' parties of the traditional left and reeling from smothered revolutions, have been joining or founding NGOs or networks rather than political parties, and introducing "new forms of political action and more open, dynamic ideologies, as well as simply preferring pragmatic action to strict ideology" (Cole, 2014, p. 241).

II. The Global Context

Of course, shifts in the contentious politics of the Middle East since 2011 cannot be de-linked from developments on the international scale, especially given the reverberations of the events in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and other regional locales, which inspired activists around the globe to agitate against their own status quos. In 2011, Dean (2014) argues, "Europe and the USA experienced the most significant political movement on the Left since 1968" (p. 261). One important, distinguishing factor of these mobilizations, she writes, is that many of the participants insisted that they were *not* political events.

The participants in these mobilizations, Dean continues (2014), abandoned attempts at forging a 'we', an identity rooted in a specific, coherent political project and worldview, emphasizing, instead, "issue politics, identity politics and their own fragmentation into a multitude of singularities" (p. 264). Within this context, neglectful, broken or corrupt states, rather than capitalism as a high-functioning global system structuring social, economic and political life, were framed as the primary culprits behind local, context-specific problems that remained un-universalized, prevented from being framed as symptoms of something "beyond themselves" (p. 267).

In Spain and Greece, Dean (2014) explains,

> multiple voices, participants as well as commentators, emphasized that no common line, platform, or orientation united the protestors; they were not political…The movement of the squares risked becoming an end in itself rather than an element of a larger political strategy aiming towards ending capitalism and developing equitable and common relations of production (p. 268-9).

Occupy Wall Street followed a similar pattern. Its inclusivity drew a diversity of disenchanted individuals to its sit-ins but, Dean (2014) argues,

> when combined with the consensus-based process characteristic of the General Assemblies (adopted from the Spanish and Greek occupations) this inclusivity had detrimental effects, hindering the movement's ability to take a strong stand against capitalism and for collective control over common resources" (p. 269).

Emancipatory discourses and lexicons of resistance travel. They traveled from Tahrir Square in Cairo to Zuccotti Park in New York in 2011. And, the anti-political approach to agitating against

the order of things described by Dean above, made its way to the Middle East as well, as activists coping with political failure debated what strategies and tactics were most suitable to the counter-revolutionary conjuncture they found themselves in. In terms of this ethnography, I argue that is important to situate the growing popularity of pragmatic and technocratic politics in Lebanon within the global context outlined briefly above, especially given my interlocutors' regular referencing of movements like Spain's Podemos as models to aspire to.

If for Hobsbawm, "as for later British 'cultural Marxists,' the socialist movement, with its labor unions, parties, and secular aspirations, is the emblematic social movement of industrial capitalist society" (Salman & Assies, 2007, p. 218), this dissertation aims to contribute to the theorization of what the paradigmatic social movement of today is by drawing out the links between contemporary Lebanese activism and parallel movements from the region and beyond.

Time & Habitus

I. The Politics of Patience

As mentioned earlier, this dissertation takes the aftermath of the *Hirak* as its starting point, primarily because the activists I worked with spoke in terms of what felt possible before, during and after the event. My ethnography unfolds in a period experienced by my interlocutors as 'dead time' (Jeffrey, 2018). It concerns itself with the varied ways in which different activists experienced, made sense of, and worked within and against what was felt to be a conjuncture of 'stuckedness' (Hage, 2015), and the ways in which they occupied themselves preparing and

attempting to lay the conditions for a future political event. This is then very much an ethnography of waiting – for elections, in some cases, revolution in others.

The context in which this dissertation unfolds was one characterized by routine failure – a failure my interlocuters had come to embody, and which had imposed on them debilitating, depressive dispositions against which they had to constantly fight to persist as activists. If the *Hirak* temporarily "served to connect people," in its aftermath independent activists were faced with the more difficult task of keeping "the spirit of insurgent subjectivity alive through its 'reactivation, expansion and translation into a subsequent and sustained phase of subterranean organizing'" (Kurik, 2016, p. 68). Kurik (2016) lists the documentation of such practices as an important emergent task for the anthropology of subjectivities in protest. This ethnography is set in the moments of everyday life *after* an explosive, collective articulation of dissent, heavy with "a sense of exhaustion, desperation, and more importantly, self-interrogation" (Theodossopoulos as cited in Kurik, 2016, p. 69).

Building on the work of Ghassan Hage (2015) and David Scott (2014), and contributing to an emerging body of work that ethnographically documents the phenomenon of 'waiting' in its various social guises (Bandak & Janeja, 2018), I pay close attention to the temporality of Lebanese activism in the aftermath of the *Hirak* – to the acute sense of the present as characterized by stagnation and paralysis; of the past of Lebanese activism, recent and distant, as characterized by numerous failures; and of the future as a realm of increasingly limited possibilities. I examine the role that this sense of past, present and future played in the lives and work of my interlocutors, who had become accustomed to cyclically working towards political

climaxes that seemed always doomed to dissipate. How did their experience of time alter and inform their activism?

I situate contemporary Lebanese activism within a wider temporal conjuncture haunted by the ghosts of bygone "postsocialist and postcolonial futures past," where time is increasingly experienced as "out of joint" (Scott, 2014, p. 2). The teleological conception of time that fed a "longing for total revolution" is no longer as convincing. As Scott (2014) puts it, "it is hard to continue imagining the present as though it were merely waiting for its own dialectical overcoming in a Hegelian-Marxist story of futurity understood as the ready horizon of Universal History" (p. 6).

Time appears much less bountiful than it used to. Today, we find ourselves contending with what Scott (2014) calls 'aftermaths' – of political catastrophe, of failed revolution – "in which the present seems stricken with immobility and pain and ruin" (p. 6). What becomes of activism in a conjuncture anxiously experienced as potentially endless, in which once promising visions of the future have increasingly come to be felt as the flourishes of idealistic imaginations – the utopian longings of ignorant generations past whose worldviews and desires are no longer relevant?

In the Lebanese case, what kind of a subjectivity did living amongst what were constructed and experienced as the ossified ruins of a civil war, stuck in a stagnant present, enable? Scholars, novelists, filmmakers, journalists and others have regularly portrayed the average Lebanese subject as haunted by memories or postmemories of a future past, of a pre-war era narrated as

cosmopolitan and prosperous in the somber voice of a petrified present. A sectarian reality, it is popularly believed, led to a sectarian war from which only sectarianism itself emerged as victor – the nation and its people its vanquished prisoners of war. The Lebanese of the post-civil war period, it can be argued, find themselves living a "temporal crisis" (Scott, 2014, p. 70) – a strandedness in the present.

If what came after a period retrospectively read as one of cosmopolitanism and prosperity was a civil war hegemonically understood as the product of primordial hatreds, then all paths must lead back to communal conflict. The best those residing in or, in many cases, stuck in Lebanon can hope for is a permanent impasse defined by the precarious management of immortal tensions; the perpetual delaying of all-out war. Any rocking of the proverbial boat, even if for the sake of individual and collective liberties and dignities, of inalienable civil and human rights, could be perceived as a prodding towards catastrophe. Lebanese politics is a "politics of people continuously staring at the abyss…In such circumstances there is not much room for 'thinking big' politically. One just hopes the country survives from one day to another" (Hage, 2015, Chapter 2).

But there have been and continue to be those who refuse to be complicit in this paralysis; who refuse to accept disorder as the way things just are, choosing instead to work towards undermining the narratives that sustain its continuous erasure of alternative futures. But this working towards is interrupted by moments of exhaustion and frustration, of immobility. This, then, in the vein of other ethnographies of waiting, is also a story about how "people shift from a sense of purposeful waiting to a purposeless inertia and back again" (Jeffrey, 2018, p. xiv). It

is about the ebb and flow of activism in Lebanon when there was an absence of invigorating events, as activists attempted to lay the groundwork for a successful lassoing of the moment of potentiality they were living in anticipation of. Waiting, as Jeffrey (2018) writes, "is not an absence; it is the grounds for having fascinating conversations about suffering, modernity, agency and difference" (p. xv).

The Middle East is not only 'awake' when the bodies of its citizens and denizens are assembled in its streets, bruised and bleeding in the name of freedom. There are befores and afters to the events that erupt and seem to make the political suddenly manifest as though out of thin air, only to melt away shortly thereafter – an inbetweenness, a period of waiting, during which the foundations for these pivotal moments, as well as their limitations, are being constructed. This dissertation explores "modalities of waiting" (Bandak & Janeja, 2018, p. 1) amongst activists in Lebanon who found themselves stuck in a post-evental moment of paralysis and frustration, in the aftermath of an eruption of the political that was full of hope but whose full potential was never actualized.

What ways of acting and thinking did the post-*Hirak* temporal configuration authorize and popularize, on the one hand, and make unpalatable, on the other? And, what happens when a given temporal configuration comes to be perceived as a permanent state of affairs, as a reality that can only ever be slightly adjusted? How do political waiting rooms both enliven those productively occupying them but also break them down? Critically contending with waiting as an ethnographer allows one to think through the coexistence of "doubts and uncertainties" with "potentials of hope" (Bandak & Janeja, 2018, p. 5) within social movements and activist circles,

and the way in which the oscillation between hope and doubt affects the work of anti-status quo actors.

The Lebanese state has been asking its citizens to "accept life as it is" (Cory, 2015, p. 125) since the end of the civil war – to dwell in "epistemic murk" (Taussig as cited in Cory, 2015, p. 119). A general amnesty for all political crimes committed during the civil war was codified in 1991. Suspected mass grave sites were not excavated:

> These laws and reports effectively asked Lebanese people not only to disavow their knowledge about what had, or might have, happened, but also to *not to go looking* for their loved ones, to simply accept life as it is, even when, for many families, life seems to have stopped the day their brother, father, sister, mother disappeared (Cory, 2015, p. 125).

This practice of accepting life as it is, of an "active not-knowing" (Taussig as cited in Cory, 2015, p. 119), lest one wake the sleeping bear and help spark communal strife, has continued deep into the present. It makes sense then that the kind of opposition that would emerge in response to this condition would be one that attempts to "fashion a gap in the order of things – a gap in which there is 'room for manoeuvre'" (Stewart, 1996, p. 3).

My interlocutors argued against deterministic, apocalyptic thinking; against the naturalization of the permanency of crisis; against the inevitability of communal strife; against essentialist understandings of Lebanon; and against the idea that the citizens and denizens of Lebanon did not deserve or could not handle a system other than the one they had long been burdened with. In this dissertation, I examine attempts at nurturing a generative anxiety in Lebanon, one aimed at provoking people out of complacency with a stagnant present.

In all of my field sites, I found myself working with actors who were not attempting to facilitate *immediate*, transformative change in a Lebanon where the protracted mobilization of a public frequently described as cynical had proven difficult. Rather, I found myself among individuals investing their energy in creating the conditions of possibility for a future subject capable of bringing about larger socio-political transformations. This was a form of activism characterized by patience: "waiting while working to make something happen" (Procupez as cited in Bandak & Janeja, 2018, p. 8).

I joined my interlocutors as they attempted to create or liberate physical, intellectual and affective spaces – a park or rocky shore, a neighborhood or municipality, a reading group – where *political encounters*, to draw on Louis Althusser and Henri Lefebvre, could take place; encounters that could allow for "expressing political ambitions before the means to realize them are created, are yet invented" (Merrifield, 2012, p. 279).

II. The Intimate Life of Social Movements

In delineating what he considers the emergent tasks of the anthropology of resistance, Kurik (2016) calls for an embrace of the affective turn adopted by many other anthropological sub-disciplines, encouraging an attentiveness to the visceral dimensions of activism; to the emotional pull and impact of protest, the study of which, he argues, "has eluded the anthropology of resistance from its beginning" (p. 58). Della Porta and Diani (2006) emphasize the importance of examining the roles that "identities and symbols, emotions, organizations, and networks" (p. 6) play in enabling activists to routinely mobilize and maintain spaces of

collective thinking and strategizing. And, Nash (2005) points out the inadequacy of attempting to make sense of collective action merely by examining 'grievances', adopting a formulaic approach that assumes a build-up of rage will eventually lead to some kind of political eruption.

As Della Porta and Diani (2006) argue, it is important to pay attention to the identities, memories, symbols, life histories, abilities and inabilities, values, biases, knowledge backgrounds, histories of mobility or immobility and much more that contribute to drawing people to and keeping them active within particular types of social movements, on the one hand, and that encourage others to ignore them, or social action altogether, on the other.

In my approach to making sense of the respective intelligibility and unintelligibility of competing forms of contentious politics amongst activists in contemporary Beirut, I follow recent calls by anthropologists of protest and dissent to remedy the lack of engagement in the anthropology of resistance with "the intimate relations within which an act of dissent is embedded, or works against" (Kelly, 2019, para. 5). Drawing on Michael Walzer, Kelly (2019) explains that "commitments are rarely just commitments to ideas, but also…obligations to people who we might know, love, and respect" (para. 3). They can also be obligations to ourselves, as we strive for a sense of purpose, for a less precarious future, for a more fruitful career. To account, for example, for the common discrepancy between the ideals that dissidents express and the work they do in the world without recourse to intentionality, one must approach such individuals as not merely possessors of grand morals, visions and ethics, but also "contradictory intimate aspirations and relationships" (Kelly, 2019, para. 1). We must,

furthermore, approach the sphere of activism as one characterized not only by "abstract principles," but also "intense sociality" (Kelly, 2019, para. 1).

To put it differently, I think it is essential to pay attention to and contextualize both the habitus of the activists I worked with and those of their target audiences, meaning "the patterns of judgment underlying people's evaluations of situations, and their subsequent actions" (Salman & Assies, 2007, p. 234) – patterns of judgment with distinct conditions of possibility. In so doing, I'm better able to make sense of the *how*, rather than simply the *why*, of the popularity of pragmatic politics amongst activists in Lebanon despite its very apparent and acknowledged limitations, as well as the marginalization of those committed to more radical, utopian alternatives within this counter-culture, and the reluctance to agitate against the status quo in society more generally.

Furthermore, paying attention to habitus allows one to note and make sense of "the *barriers* for change even among those seeking change or criticizing the status quo," by tracing the ways in which people "are subconsciously attached to their habitual 'reality' even in their efforts to change it" (Salman & Assies, 2007, p. 234). In looking to habitus, I can better evaluate the obsessive need I observed among the activists of Beirut's urban social movement to 'get something done' in the short-term and log accomplishments, even while acknowledging that these 'somethings' were not leading them any closer to their visions for socio-political transformation, and in some cases even pulling them further away from them – in other words, the tension between a politics of patient commitment to a long-term vision and the anxious need to feel as though one where inching towards that vision in the present. Attentiveness to habitus

also allows me to interrogate the revolutionary left's inability to maintain its alter-political practice of nurturing comradeship and solidarity through collective study. Finally, a focus on habitus allows for an embrace of both a "structuralist and more agency-emphasizing" approach to the study of social movements, which in turn enables an understanding of "peoples' resistance to prevailing situations of domination, and at the same time…their troubles to rise above the 'heavy reality' of such relations" (2007, p. 234).

Of course, when analysing the relationship between habitus and activism in Lebanon, attention to class is imperative. Building on research on middle class-led grassroots activism and urban social movements in Lebanon and elsewhere (Baud & Nainan, 2008; Hickel, 2012; Mayer, 2013a; Mayer, 2013b; Khattab, 2015; Moghnieh & Nayel, 2015; Kerbage, 2017), and the auto-critiques expressed by many of my interlocutors, I examine the role that class – cosmopolitan middle class subjectivity and the anxieties it is generative of in particular – has played in inspiring and shaping the approaches to activism on which I am focused.[5]

[5] When I refer to the middle class in this dissertation, I am referring to a sub-section of the broader economic category – an upper-tier with enhanced financial capabilities distinguished by a cosmopolitan lifestyle enabled by physical, epistemological and cultural mobility. Lebanon's middle class, as is the case elsewhere, is heterogeneous not only culturally and politically, but also financially. In the context of the Global South, however, scholars have noted the "rise of a segment of the middle class whose members are noticeably more affluent and more globally oriented than other members of the middle class. These people enjoy the western style of life, speak English, feel comfortable in foreign culture, and exhibit a global orientation in their work and leisure" (Koo, 2016, p. 442). Koo (2016) calls this a 'global middle class', defined by its "consumption patterns and social identity more than by mere income status" (p. 443). Scholars have increasingly come to distinguish between a "transnational middle class" and a more "locally oriented middle class" in the Global South. Paraphrasing Derne's work on the Indian context, Koo (2016) writes that "while the former is more globally oriented in their lifestyle, identity, and gender orientation (more modern) …the latter remains attached to 'Indianness' and to traditional gender norms" (p. 443). It is with this cosmopolitan sub-section of the middle class in the Lebanese context that I concern myself in this dissertation, a significant contingent of which is comprised of white-collar professionals and managers, who spearheaded this class's foray into the political sphere as my fieldwork unfolded.

In thinking about activist oscillations between hope and despair, doubt and conviction, the short-term and the long-term, the commitment to thinking and planning and the nervous need to act, I follow Schielke's (2015) call not to take "narratives of perfection for granted and to view deviations from them as exceptions," betrayals or failures (p. 48). Rather, by paying attention to the ambiguities and contradictions that pepper the work and lives of activists in Lebanon, I am better able to situate them within a particular political conjuncture; to think about the ways in which this conjuncture has shaped and constrained activism, and to challenge the truth claims through which it imposed a particular vision of reality, and with it, a field of possible action and intervention, on my interlocutors. It is important to examine "the intended outcomes of a particular ideal of personhood" and how "it builds on a particular discursive tradition" – an examination that is very much a part of this dissertation. But, I am also interested in how "people live these codes" (p. 47). As Schielke writes, "the ways in which people try to live a good life under conditions of conflicting demands are ambiguous and often tragic in their outcomes" (p. 48).

This ethnography is very much a story of multiple tragedies, but it is also a story about the durability of grand schemes; about how even if one's attempt to structure one's life and work around them "is frustrated by failures and tragedies," the "grand scheme remains valuable and credible" (Schielke, 2015, p. 37). What is it that activists in Lebanon are trying to "accomplish by taking a discourse seriously, pursuing an idea, embodying a rationality, and with what consequences?" And, can we think of these attempts as generative of "both satisfaction and suffering?" (Schielke, 2015, p. 37).

I. Neoliberalism and the Anthropology of Social Movements

In delineating what he considers the areas to which the anthropology of resistance should dedicate increased attention, in addition to calling for an embrace of the broader affective turn in anthropology, Kurik (2016) adds the need to think through what neoliberalism, not only as a force structuring economic and political life, but as a governing rationality affecting *all* aspects of life, plays in shaping subjectivities in protest. Kurik encourages an attentiveness to the ways in which "the logic of capitalism and the neoliberal state's art of governance" (p. 64) – which embrace notions of democracy and responsible citizenship, as well as the entrepreneurial, self-propelling subject – have infiltrated many of the activist networks anthropologists of resistance are attempting to study. Anthropologists of resistance and subjectivities in protest, he argues, must look to the ways in which "civil society, activist engagement, and non-profit organizations have thus become technologies of the neoliberal government" (p. 64). Mining social movements for traces of neoliberal rationality can help us make better sense of how neoliberalism has evolved, what it means to lead a life structured by it today and how we risk aiding in its reproduction even when we position ourselves in overt opposition to it.

This dissertation asks what the changing tactics and targets of activists in Lebanon can tell us about how Lebanon's socio-political and economic system has evolved alongside the mutation of neoliberalism and its various instantiations globally. I build on what Nash (2005) and others argue is anthropology's particular contribution to the study of social movements: its focus on

'holistic analysis'; on paying attention to the wider, multi-scalar political, social and economic contexts informing even the most seemingly parochial of contentious practices and events.

There exists a rich literature on post-civil war Lebanese counter-cultural production, which has documented attempts to remember, memorialize or analyze the 15-year conflict (Barak, 2007; Haugbolle, 2010; Larkin, 2010; Lang 2014), as well as efforts to criticize the process of post-war reconstruction and neoliberal development that followed the 'events' [*al-aḥdāth*], as they are referred to locally. Scholars have pointed out the role that counter-culture has played in addressing the traumas of the war and its causes, as well as the consequences of the Taʾif Accord of 1989's reinstatement of political sectarianism, and the 1991 Amnesty Law that absolved war-time perpetrators of their crimes and sanctioned an amnesiac national attitude towards the conflict. And, they've also highlighted attempts at linking the "precarious conditions" of the Lebanese post-war present to the persistence of a "political and corporate elite" that preceded, survived and thrived in the aftermath of the civil war (Naeff, 2018, p. 241). This literature has highlighted the substantial amount of time and effort that critical Lebanese voices in the post-war period have dedicated to understanding the *how* of their past – the outbreak of prolonged violence that defined the worldviews of everyone who experienced it and, in some ways, those who came after – as well as the *what* of their present – a post-war sectarian-neoliberal order that was enabled by, but had superseded, the civil war. Counter-cultural production in the post-civil war period, we've learned, has contributed to framing the civil war not as a "historical abomination," but rather, as "part of more durable structures that have continued to reproduce injustice and violence until today" (Naeff, 2018, p. 38).

With Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 and the easing of restrictions on public socio-political critique that accompanied it, many activists increasingly shifted their attention away from memory work around the civil war, towards an evaluation and critique of the post-war sectarian-neoliberal order as a condition that, while partially enabled by the conflict, could not be reduced to it. This is not to say that these activists disassociated themselves from the civil war. On the contrary, their work repeatedly acknowledged that the damaging aspects of the post-war present would not have been possible without the chaos of the war and the discrete structural and legal alterations it enabled – to property laws, for example. Rather than dismissing the importance of engaging with the civil war of the past in order to imagine alternative futures, these activists attempted to shift the conversation away from the origins and ongoing echoes of inter-communal violence. The intended result was to move analytically away from a *culture* of sectarianism that divided and destabilized Lebanon, towards the persistence of a ruling class that took advantage of the civil war to lay the groundwork for a post-war order that it would continue to dominate and debilitate, and which its disparate, squabbling and warring parts would come together time and time again to secure.

The post-war 'reconstruction and development' period that began in the 1990s and was still ongoing when my research unfolded enabled new forms of damage to the socio-economic fabric of the country. This damage had come to be increasingly addressed by independent, non-sectarian activists in an attempt to frame the present as intolerable due to the post-war introduction of unbridled neoliberalism, and the persistence of corruption within the institutions of the state, rather than the unaddressed causes and scars of the civil war. Such actors questioned the choice that many Lebanese had supposedly made to content themselves with creatively

navigating a disorder to which, it was widely assumed, there could be no alternative besides the apocalyptic. Their aim was not so much to get others to question – they did not believe their audience to be passive. It was, rather, to get them to see the *utility* of questioning. By highlighting political corruption and unrestrained neoliberalism as the sources of stunted development and precarity in the post-war period, these activists worked to undermine the argument that Lebanon was simply suffering from primordial hatreds always threatening to flare up and tear open still tender wounds.

But, it is important to understand the post-war sectarian-neoliberal order in Lebanon not only as something to which the activists I studied were opposed, but as a system in which they were also embedded, and which shaped and constrained their activism. Paying attention to and defining the political conjuncture that the activists I worked with found themselves in, and linking the local to the global, is paramount for making sense of the pull of certain forms of activism over others for middle-class activists, and the more general reluctance to participate in social movements amongst the wider population.

II. The Post-Political as Global Condition

Recently, a growing body of literature in the social sciences has attempted to make sense of "processes of depoliticization" by analyzing them through the lens of "the post-political" (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 6). While the term has been used in multiple ways and deployed to explain a diversity of situations, it generally refers to an increasingly ubiquitous condition in which:

> political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance. 'The people' – as a potentially disruptive political collective – is replaced by the population – the aggregated object of opinion polls, surveillance, and bio-political optimization. Citizens become consumers, and elections are framed as just another 'choice', in which individuals privately select their preferred managers of the conditions of economic necessity (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 6).

Within this literature, attention has been paid to the shifts in practices of governance that define the post-political conjuncture, but what interests me in particular is the ways in which the rationality associated with it has affected the shape that social movements take as well. Post-politics is a framework or lens for making sense of "the ideological implications of neoliberal development" (Kamat, 2014, p. 69). What happens when a single issue (the environment, housing, etc.) is politicized, but not universalized or structurally contextualized? What happens when consensus is equated with properly functioning democracy? What happens when institutional failure is blamed on the bad governance practices of individuals? What desires, identities and interests are prioritized within this approach, and which are erased and made illegitimate?

Decades ago, Herbert Marcuse argued "that the antagonisms of capitalist society had been superseded by forms of rationality that turned problems into individual issues instead of clarifying their collective character" (Salman & Assies, 2007, p. 220). Increasingly, when activists attempt to articulate their problems and think up potential solutions to them, they reference less and less, "the structures, the organization and transparency of the state, and the representational institutions," illustrating how normalized it has become "to reduce experiences of injustice and humiliation to the immoral behavior of *persons*, and not so much to the

underlying causes" (Salman & Assies, 2007, p. 256). This has given rise to an approach to political change that seeks to achieve compromises between all 'stakeholders' involved in a given issue – what has been called 'good governance' – and which, rather than aiming to interrupt and fundamentally rework the "existing state of the neoliberal political-economic configuration," aims merely to adjust it and make it more bearable. This is what is referred to as "post-politicization, institutionally configured through modes of post-democratic governance" (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 5).

Scholars like Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014) argue that the post-political conjuncture began with Francis Fukuyama's infamous assertion of 'the end of history', by which he meant the end of the long battle between incompatible ideologies. "Utopia, in short, was a thing of the past" (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 7). To paraphrase Frederic Jameson, in our current political conjuncture it has become more realistic to picture the destruction of the entire world than the annihilation of capitalism. "The defeat of actually existing communism signified a crisis of the political imaginary of the left, from which it has yet to recover" (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 8).

Much of the literature on post-politics has focused on developments in advanced capitalist democracies. Following Kamat (2014), however, I want to examine the ways in which "the imperatives of global capitalism produce similar tendencies in the 'Global South'" (p. 69). In postcolonial 'democratic' contexts like India and Lebanon, "neoliberal rationality not only promotes market values of competitive individualism, but fuses these with democratic norms of participation, community empowerment and inclusion" (p. 68). Within the post-political

conjuncture, the ideological differences between liberals and conservatives are overshadowed by a 'neutral' discourse of "public-private partnership, civic participation and the promotion of democracy as the path to economic growth and sustainable development" (p. 68).

In studying social movements' complicity in processes of depoliticization in the post-political era, scholars of post-politics don't aim to argue intentional collusion or insidiousness, but rather, to show how even where "radical democratic" strategies focused on "participation and empowerment" aim to challenge "the development industry," they have actually enabled it and the post-politicization it works to cement (Kamat, 2014, p. 72). What studying social movements through the lens of post-politics allows us to do, is expand our critical engagement with and understanding of neoliberalism, looking at the ways in which the language of democracy and democratic engagement plays a role in the perpetuation of "capitalist hegemony" (Kamat, 2014, p. 81). When we are "attentive to the ways in which democratic aspirations are being mobilized towards capitalist ends," we come to see that "political democracy cannot be the litmus test of anti-capitalist politics and struggles" (Kamat, 2014, p. 82).

To put it succinctly, through my study of Lebanon, I hope to contribute to a much broader literature on the ways in which neoliberalism has restructured not only "policy arrangements and governing practices" (Larner, 2014, p. 191) since the mid-1980s, but also political projects, resistance practices, and imaginings of the agent of change and the subject of politics. I also hope to contribute to an increasingly urgent scholarly search for those forms of politics, of fostering and demonstrating being-in-common, not grounded in collaboration and participation

with the neoliberal state, whose practices do not unfold in "the parliament, meeting room or council chamber, but the square, the housing estate, the people's assembly, the university campus, the street, the park, the factory or office floor" (Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 174). What sustains these minoritarian practices that actively challenge neoliberal rationality and the vision of reality and political possibility it has imposed? This latter focus situates me as an engaged anthropologist or anthropologist-activist, a positionality to which I turn in the final section of this introduction.

Many social movements are inadvertently contributing to the perpetuation of a post-political conjuncture that hinders radical, transformative change. If one wishes to "reveal the contingency, fragility, and incompleteness of post-politics" (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 16), one needs to pay attention to the movements resisting the status quo in ways that unintentionally reinforce it, since they also harbor the potential to break us out of this stifling political conjuncture. In order to do that, we must excavate "the imaginaries" (Larner, 2014, p. 190) underpinning the post-political, which have seeped into and informed those of its opponents as well, in addition to seeking out "the spectres of radical politics that continue to haunt the post-political world, exploring their emancipatory potentialities, and confronting their political limitations" (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 16).

Chapter Breakdown

To summarize, this dissertation is set in the aftermath of the 2015 garbage protests – a political event that participating independent activists saw as charged with potentiality, but that quickly

fizzled out, stranding them in a post-evental moment of 'dead time' heavy with the debilitating sense of having yet again failed to facilitate transformative change. I examine how activists attempted to work their way out of this impasse and towards new moments of rupture by focusing on creating the conditions of possibility for new processes of political subjectivation. I look at how anti-status quo actors tried both to challenge the hopelessness that allowed much of Lebanon's population to be complicit in the reproduction of the status quo, and the divisive sources of meaning-making that allowed this status quo to remain bearable.

In trying to make sense of the popularity of pragmatic-technocratic politics and the marginality of leftist principles – once the primary ideological underpinning of resistance movements in Lebanon – amongst activists during the conjuncture outlined in the preceding pages, I take several factors into account. Firstly, I look at their experience of time, of their own past failures and those of their predecessors. Secondly, I look at their class position and their relationship to it, in the context of a Lebanese civil society dominated by a stratum of middle class, cosmopolitan professionals, thinking through the particularities of their habitus. Thirdly, I look to a global context where pragmatic and technocratic politics have increased in popularity, examining it through the lens of 'post-politics'.

I dedicate three chapters to in-depth discussions of each of the activist groups I worked with – the first, focused on public space activists, is intimately connected to the chapter that follows it, which centres on Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative. My two-chapter discussion of Lebanon's urban social movement is followed by a discussion of the revolutionary socialist

political organization the Socialist Forum, and the alternative to pragmatic politics it represented.

Each of my ethnographic chapters play host to themes and engage with bodies of literature specific to them, but also share umbrella themes that highlight their relevance to the overall project I've outlined in this introduction. In each case, I will explore how the activists I worked with understood the ills of the Lebanese status quo and what they diagnosed as their source; what vision for Lebanon they tried to work towards; what kind of a political subject they tried to cultivate and empower in order to fulfill this vision; and, lastly, what drove them towards their activism and what enabled them to persist in the face of failure.

Chapter 1, *Lebanon in the Aftermath of Reconstruction*, provides a brief historical overview of key political and economic developments that followed the end of the civil war, focusing in particular on their transformative impact on activism in the country. Chapter 2, *Spatial Activism and the Right to the Lebanese City*, focuses on the work of the Dalieh Campaign, a public space focused advocacy group whose members were influential forces within the city's urban social movement. I explore what these activists meant by the right to the city – the discourse within which they grounded their activism – and how they came to see this discourse and the strategies they associated with it as the most appropriate means for challenging both the negative impact on the quality of life in Lebanon produced by the country's sectarian-neoliberal order, and the practices of othering it enabled and fed off of.[6] Chapter 3, *Take Back the City: Community*

[6] My interlocutors regularly referenced the concept of 'the right to the city' in English when describing their activism. When I refer to it as central to their discourse and work, I am drawing on their own articulations rather than imposing the term onto them.

Organizing in Beirut, remains with the theme of Beirut's urban social movement and the popularity of right to the city-based discourses, focusing on attempts at community building and organizing spearheaded by a group of activists associated with Beirut Madinati. Chapter 4, *Imagining Utopia: Reading Marx in Beirut*, focuses on the preparatory reading group for prospective members of the revolutionary socialist political organization The Socialist Forum. In a post-Marxist conjuncture where, in the Lebanese context, leftist thought and critique was being dismissed by many anti-status quo actors as sterile and idealist, I examine the reasons behind and the effects of an alienated few's insistence on engaging in Marxist theoretical practice.

Chapter 5, *The Political is Personal*, builds on discussions of class, habitus and affect in the previous chapters, to engage in more depth with the factors that both allowed my interlocutors to persevere in the face of failure, *and* that stunted the development of their social movements as well. In this chapter, I also explore the relationship between the activists I worked with and Lebanon's wider population, often framed by those with whom I worked as trapped between acquiescence to sectarian-clientelism or a succumbing to hopelessness. I examine the limitations of an approach to making sense of the durability of both sectarian and cynical subjectivities that fails to examine the affective infrastructures propping both up.

In addition to summarizing the main points of my dissertation, my conclusion will reflect on the direction in which Lebanese independent activism appeared to be heading in the aftermath of the 2018 parliamentary elections, as I was wrapping up my fieldwork.

I turn now to some brief reflections on the difficulty of carrying out ethnographic work 'at home', as someone from Beirut, and the challenges that came with having a political stake in the activism I was studying.

The Ethnographer as Activist

I had never considered myself an activist before starting fieldwork in Lebanon. As an adult, I hadn't lived in any one country long enough to physically participate in grassroots activism. I was switched on, to what was happening in the Middle East and elsewhere and had identified as a leftist since my freshman year of high school. But, my engagement was limited to sharing articles on social media and writing articles about Arab cultural productions that touched on the socio-political. I didn't, however, have any on-the-ground experience – just plenty of opinions and a background as an analyst.

My interlocutors would not allow me to be *just* an ethnographer, and for that I am grateful. I was too familiar, albeit while bearing the markings of someone who wasn't quite as local as they were – an obvious child of the diaspora, but of one that was close by, in the Arabian Gulf. My Arabic wasn't as sophisticated as theirs, but I was fluent, and I had only a Lebanese passport and so shared in the limited mobility that afflicted many of them. I wasn't Arab- American or British or European. I was just Lebanese, but with less experience of the everyday anxieties and frustrations of Beirut, although I knew them well enough from my routine visits. I also, importantly, shared a class background with most of my interlocutors, and a Western education. When I spoke of the theories I'd studied, many were already familiar with them. Similar

trajectories had directed us towards the embrace of many of the same core values and ideals. I was *too* familiar, and so I had a duty to participate in their activism – it was my burden to share in. I felt ethically compelled to promise labor and commitment in exchange for being folded into their spaces. It was expected of me to invest, to care, to want a better Lebanon. They wouldn't let me be impartial.

I was, of course, invested. It was exhilarating to be present for the garbage protests and to see my generation, long characterized as apathetic and disconnected, expressing anger and participating fully in the unfolding events. In its aftermath, as I sat in Oxford outlining my research proposal, I was excited to see many activists abandoning the judgmental dismissiveness and righteousness that had long bothered me about secular activism in Lebanon. When I wrote my MA thesis in 2011, I focused on the collective investment the Islamic-Shiʿi political party and social movement Hezbollah's constituency had in the forging of a 'resistance community', and the groundedness of this community in an Islamic-Shiʿi discursive tradition. Trained by students of Talal Asad, I was committed to challenging portrayals of pious, non-secular subjects as brainwashed and lacking agency, which were common assumptions in the circles within which I traveled when in Beirut. The epilogue to my thesis focused on problematizing the desire amongst secular activists to impose their worldviews on the pious, who were often framed as in need of enlightenment. I questioned their unwillingness to collaborate with those who did not share their way of seeing and inhabiting the world and wondered what pluralism could look like in the Lebanese context. It was refreshing to see many activists, after the summer of 2015, abandoning this approach, embracing the 'other' within, and attempting to cultivate narratives of shared suffering and collective practices aimed at

alleviating them, which harbored the potential to chip away at divisive dispositions without undermining ways of being that were central to people's lives. When I wrote my DPhil proposal, I was excited to investigate and broadcast the potential of this new form of contentious politics.

But, after two years in Beirut, I began to see the limitations of the pragmatic bent this desire for generosity increasingly took, of the abandonment of ideology, however noble the intentions underlying it. I began to wonder if there was a way of doing politics that could respect and work through difference while also pushing forward a more inclusive, just worldview. And, I began to feel it was my duty not only to participate fully in the actions of my interlocutors, but to also join them in reflecting on the limits and shortcomings of the practices they had embraced; in thinking comparatively about what had worked or failed elsewhere. I couldn't, with good conscience, sit quietly, observe and take notes, go along with the activist flow and do what was asked of me, only to return to Oxford and write a scathing critique that might be perceived as a betrayal by the people I had worked and developed friendships with over the course of two intense years.

When I felt I'd earned the right to offer my opinion, I began to do so, abandoning the fear of losing access to my field sites if I said something bothersome or uncomfortable. My interventions weren't always heard. I was sometimes dismissed, albeit kindly, as a detached academic or an idealistic leftist. But sometimes I managed to break through and have an enriching conversation. Had I not intervened, I don't think I would have developed as deep an understanding of my interlocutors' worldviews. Intervening gave them the chance to defend their positions, to explain them, to push back against me, and in the process we influenced each

other – my understanding of them deepened, I questioned assumptions I had otherwise long been uncritically committed to, but I also managed to make modest contributions, bringing, for example, the left into liberal spaces and contextualizing liberalism for the left, bridging a gap that had otherwise been aggressively maintained. As Juris (2007) writes when making the case for what he calls 'militant ethnography', "in order to grasp the concrete logic generating specific practices, researchers have to become active practitioners" (p. 165).

In what follows, my aim is not to offer "sweeping strategic and/or political directives" (Juris, 2007, p. 165). As I said in many a meeting, I do not know what the alternative to pragmatic politics is, and I do not know if the opportunity for socialist revolution will present itself in our lifetimes. What I hope to do through what is, in many ways, a project of contextualization, is to contribute to "ongoing activist (self-)reflection regarding movement goals, tactics, strategies, and organizational forms" (Juris, 2007, p. 165). Having been with these activists in the thick of things, in the aftermath of 2015, the fervor leading up to the 2018 parliamentary elections, the emotional and psychological descent that followed it, I hope I've earned the right to do so.

In thinking and writing this ethnography, I am indebted to scholars, from Wendy Brown to Erik Swyngedouw, Jodi Dean and others, who have dared to write their politics explicitly into their work, and who have called for an engaged scholarship dedicated to making the case for progressive political thought and practice. Within anthropology in specific, Geros (2010) has criticized what he calls the "political nihilism that most of the post-Geertzian interpretive ethnography seems to entail" (p. 112), with its prioritizing of "the politics of representation," the "poetics," rather than the "politics of ethnography," which overlooks "the wider forces,

mechanisms and unequal power relations that structure the lives of those we study and benefit some people at the expense of others" (p. 111). Similarly, Navaro (2002) has pointed out the tendency towards the romantic within resistance studies, which has often led to the ways in which "power is regenerated in the very domain of so-called resistance" (p. 159) to be overlooked.

I am invested in using my work to challenge the ubiquitous forces of depoliticization hindering those committed to radical change in Lebanon and elsewhere, which limit imaginations of what alternative futures are possible. The literature on post-politics has been called theoretically and politically pessimistic. However, what appears as pessimism can also be understood as an attempt to critically engage, in a productive way, with hegemonic ways of thinking and acting that hinder transformative political change. I hope this dissertation manages to be of use to activists in Beirut and elsewhere.

Chapter 1: Lebanon in the Aftermath of Reconstruction

This chapter is grounded in the work of Lebanon-focused social scientists like Bassel Salloukh, Hannes Baumann, Fabrice Balanche, Kristen Monroe, Aseel Salwalha and Joanne Nucho, who have chronicled the post-civil war development of contemporary Lebanon's "corporate sectarian power-sharing political system" (Salloukh, Barakat & al-Habbal 2015a, p. 13), the mass precaritization that economic liberalization enabled, and the role that sectarian-clientelist networks have played in providing "important channels and pathways to security, to services, and to a sense of stability and belonging," within this environment (Nucho, 2016, p. 135). This historical overview will unfold thematically, rather than in a strictly chronological manner.

From Physical to Economic Violence

What Salloukh, Barakat and al-Habbal (2015) call modern Lebanon's "corporate sectarian power-sharing system" (p. 13) is the descendant of a political order introduced by Ottoman and European powers in 1842, when what was then the mutasarrifate of Mount Lebanon was first divided along confessional lines. Prior to this, Mount Lebanon was stratified on the basis of a more traditional distinction between the peasantry and the feudal elite. After 1840, one's sect came to determine "one's involvement in the public sphere and one's ability to be appointed to office, to govern, to collect taxes, and to punish" (Leenders as cited in Salloukh et al, 2015a, p. 14), facilitating the naturalization and sedimentation of what was an otherwise "imagined and constructed identity" (Salloukh et al, 2015a, p. 13).

More recently, the verbal agreement known as the National Pact of 1943 (the year of Greater Lebanon's independence), between Maronite President Bishara al-Khouri and Sunni Prime Minister Riyad al-Solh organised executive, legislative, and judicial powers on the basis of a "corporate confessional power-sharing arrangement…based on the 1932 census – the last official one to be conducted in Lebanon – and accordingly affixed a 5:6 ratio of Muslims to Christians in state bureaucracy" (Salloukh et al, 2015a, p. 17).

In 1975, a fifteen-year civil war broke out that highlighted the National Pact's inability to introduce a stable and durable confessional power-sharing system among Lebanon's 18 officially recognized sects (Salloukh et al, 2015a, p. 20), and to resolve the ideological rifts between those who wanted to position Lebanon within a wider Arab nationalist framework, and those who wanted the country to be politically and culturally independent from the region. During the war, militias established their own parastates in various neighborhoods, exerting control over "customs duties, ports, indirect taxes, and various modes of mass communication – television channels, AM and FM radio stations, and newspapers" (Salloukh et al, 2015a, p. 20). They expelled ethnic, sectarian and political rivals, and through this process of cleansing and homogenizing the areas under their control, facilitating the hardening of sectarian identities and affinities. Militias worked to frame the interests of their communities and political factions as inherently at odds with those of opponents, smothering imaginings or memories of a Lebanon of coexistence and shared interests.

The Taʾif Accord of October 1989 (implemented in 1990), conceived and signed in the presence of invested regional and international mediators (including the United States, Syria and Saudi

Arabia), put an end to the war by constitutionally *redesigning*, rather than eradicating, the sectarian political system. Muslims and Christians were now to be equally represented in parliament, in a move away from the pre-war power-sharing agreement that had established a "hierarchical confessional" arrangement, towards a "consociational inter-sectarian partnership" (Salloukh et al, 2015a, p. 23). This led to the emergence of what is today known as the 'troika' – the post-war order by which public policy making is dependent on consensus among the Maronite president, the Sunni prime minister, and the Shiʿi speaker of parliament.

Importantly, the Taʾif Accord awarded Syria de facto rule over Lebanon, which it enforced through its intelligence apparatus and with the assistance of its Lebanese allies from 1990 until 2005. What became known as *Pax Syriana*, while oppressive, allowed Syria to serve as an arbitrator between Lebanese sects and to manage sectarian discord, obscuring the dysfunctional aspects of the post-war power-sharing system (Salloukh et al, 2015a, p. 25).

In the aftermath of the civil war, a 'neoliberal reconstruction model' was introduced by Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in order to respond not only to the physical destruction but also to an economy crippled by more than a decade of strife. Hariri served as Prime Minister from 1992 until 1998 and again from 2000 until 2004. His neoliberal reconstruction program shaped – to the chagrin of many a Lebanese architect and urban planner – the renovation of Beirut's city center. "It was a massacre," Marwa, an architect, activist and member of the Dalieh Campaign told me. "It was against the spirit of the city, had no social dimension, was an erasure of

memory, falling into amnesia, materialism, real estate speculation. It erased the collective memory of the city completely without any regard for it."

Hariri announced his plan for downtown Beirut's development in 1991, to be spearheaded by his construction conglomerate, Oger International. The plan required the almost complete destruction of remaining structures in Beirut's central district, among other damaging interventions that threatened the area's historic socio-economic fabric. In 1992, laws were passed to create Solidere, a joint-stock company with Hariri as its main shareholder. On its website, the company defines itself as, simultaneously, a "land developer, real estate developer, property owner, property and services manager and operator" (Solidere, n.d.). Following the establishment of Solidere, owners and tenants in downtown Beirut had their land or property expropriated, and historic buildings were widely torn down, marking the permanence of the effects of Hariri's reconstruction scheme on the ways of life, work and leisure previously characteristic of this important site of gathering (Monroe, 2016, p. 49).[7] Solidere answered only to the CDR (Council for Development and Reconstruction) – "headed since 1991 by Hariri's trusted adviser Fadl Shallaq" (Arsan, 2018, p. 214) – and was not accountable to the municipality or governor of Beirut. This equipped it with "extensive powers of exception which underwrote its claims to economic sovereignty over the centre of Beirut." Notable amongst these privileges was the "compulsory purchase powers" that facilitated its acquisition of more than a hundred thousand properties in the area (Arsan, 2018, p. 215).[8]

[7] Solidere acquired the property of "around 100,000 to 150,000 residential and commercial landlords and tenants, ranging from notable families like the Salam, Beyhum and Daouk to charitable organizations like the Maqasid and small shopkeepers and artisans who held stalls in the souks for generations" (Arsan, 2018, p. 215).

[8] "Around 90 percent of those involved acquiesced, accepting shares in Solidere in return for giving up their claims to properties in downtown Beirut. Only a small number resisted, challenging the company's authority in the courts" (Arsan, 2018, p. 215).

Beyond reconstruction, Hariri is credited with facilitating the development of a post-war economy with "monopolistic and lopsided features" exceeding those of the pre-war one (Salloukh, 2015a, p. 6). "Capital inflows, remittances, foreign development assistance funds and deposits, and money market securities" facilitated a post-war economy committed to bolstering real estate and the service sector, and neglectful of agriculture, manufacturing and other productive industries (Salloukh, 2015b, p. 176). Hariri's goal was to turn Lebanon into a regional focal point for "transport, tourism, and banking;" as well as an attractive holiday destination aimed primarily at affluent Arabs from the Gulf with an excess of disposable income (Arsan, 2018, p. 5).

The blending of business and politics was not new to Lebanon, with the pre-war commercial-financial bourgeoisie playing an essential role in the forging of the country's state and its laissez-faire economy, and pre-war political chieftains (*zuʿamāʾ*) hailing from a handful of bourgeois families (Baumann, 2012a, p. 127-128). During and in the immediate aftermath of the civil war, however, a variety of factors led this class to gradually lose power to what Baumann (2012a) calls the 'new contractor bourgeoisie' – a group to which Hariri belonged.[9]

Peopled by technocratic experts, Hariri's cabinets focused on creating opportunities for foreign investors and the class of bourgeois contractors to which he belonged, neglecting the welfare needs of the majority of the population. Economic liberalization, explains Balanche (2012), led

[9] "A small but not insignificant number of Lebanese émigrés managed to accumulate great wealth as contractors in the Gulf. Their success was due to a mixture of personal entrepreneurial flair and connections to key individuals with access to royal contracts. In the late 1970s and early 1980s this new contractor bourgeoisie returned to Lebanon to invest and to seek political influence. As the heads of transnational enterprises, the new contractors belong to a faction of the 'transnational capitalist class' that promote neoliberal globalization" (Baumann, 2012a, p. 128-129).

to the gradual pauperization of the middle classes, while sectarian-clientelism came to play an increasingly important role in the day-to-day survival of much of the country's population, "undermining the fragile return to democracy" (p. 148). Focused on his grand vision for a reconstructed downtown Beirut, which "necessitated a vast campaign of corruption and bribery…that targeted all the main decision-makers of the country" (Balanche, 2012, p. 148), the prime minister neglected the degenerating living conditions of the majority of the country's population.

Interestingly, the civil war had shielded Beirut's population from real estate speculation and structural adjustment. Its end, conversely, brought economic catastrophe for many of the city's residents as a result of the form that reconstruction took on (Balanche, 2012, p. 154-155). "For me, it was the destruction, not the reconstruction, at all levels," Marwa told me:

> During the war we didn't have as bad, horrible living conditions. Congestion, pollution, waste management, no electricity, no water. It was acceptable during the war and after the war, but it's not acceptable 25 years after the war. It has accumulated so much corruption – that corruption is now a kind of fact. Where do you start? It has been 25 years of post-war corruption and it has been building up, and people are empowered by it. So, it's not just finding solutions to implement. People now have interests in not solving problems or solving them the wrong way. So now we're fighting against [garbage] incinerators, but the incinerators have people who already have financial stakes in them. Getting electricity 24/7 means that everyone who owns a generator and is supplying fuel to these generators is not going to make a penny from now on. These are people in power. It's not just about solving these problems but fighting the corruption that's behind the problem being persistent.

The success of Lebanon's post-war political economy has depended on an alliance of "sectarian/political and economic elite" (Salloukh, 2015b, p. 174) with an exclusive grip on state institutions and resources, capable of drafting socioeconomic policies that benefit their

interests, and equipped with "the material and clientelist wherewithal to reproduce sectarian identities and modes of political mobilisation" (Salloukh, 2015a, p. 2). It has also depended on the entanglement of the private and public sectors. State funding for public institutions was and continues to be routinely subcontracted to private companies, the majority of which are run by members of the sectarian/political elite or people close to them. In addition, the Lebanese state finances many sectarian NGOs and private foundations that cater to people's welfare needs by running, for example, free private schools, orphanages and clinics (al-Habbal, 2015, p. 46).

Furthermore, Lebanon's personal status system ensures that the Lebanese citizen remains a sectarian subject "from the cradle to the grave" (al-Habbal, 2015, p. 35). Anything pertaining to family law falls under the domain of sectarian courts, which regulate marriage, inheritance and similar matters. Lebanese sectarianism is, then, more than just a governmental power-sharing structure. It is a pervasive aggregate of multi-sited disciplinary mechanisms reproduced by institutions and individuals, political as well as civil society organisations.

While Lebanese political patronage or sectarian-clientelism is often defined in socio-cultural terms as a practice unique to the country, dependence on private channels to meet welfare needs is a globally pervasive, distinctive feature of late capitalism. The ubiquity of reliance on *wasta* [connections] to meet anything from the smallest to the most dire of needs – getting out of a minor fine, landing a civil service job, paying hospital bills – continues to be framed by many Lebanese as a feature of daily life particular to Lebanon and what is seen as its exceptional infestation by a culture of corruption. But, as Arsan (2018) points out, in reality what is distinctive about Lebanon is the "complex arithmetic of confessional and partisan

considerations that determines who receives welfare, how much they will receive, and through what channels," rather than the pervasiveness of political patronage itself (p. 161). Additionally, contrary to the ways in which many Lebanese have come to describe life in post-war Lebanon, the shape that the country's economy has taken over the last three decades was not the result of a frail or missing state, "fatally wounded by fifteen years of civil strife and content to remain a tired and old night watchman" (Arsan, 2018, p. 237). Rather, as explained above, the country's economic trajectory was facilitated by calculated, purposeful and substantial intervention on the part of the ruling class.[10]

The Lebanese's impression of the country's political economy, however, did not emerge from nowhere. As is the case in many other late modern states, the Lebanese ruling class is invested in cultivating and maintaining an image of itself as "pervasively hamstrung, quasi-impotent, unable to come through on many of its commitments," insisting that it is "no longer the solution to social problems," that it is "but one player on a global chessboard" (Brown, 1995, p. 194). In Lebanon's case, it is not only the global (and regional) chessboard, in the form of foreign meddling, that is repeatedly invoked, but also the local one – a fragmented, tensely held together mosaic of warring communities with competing interests always threatening to break permanently into irreconcilable pieces. Drawing a parallel with late modern masculinity, Brown (1995) argues that the primary paradox of the late modern state is that "its power and privilege

[10] In terms of real estate alone, for example, the revision of building regulations in 2004 substantially eased restrictions on the construction of high-rise residential buildings. Additionally, in 2001 and 2006 laws were passed that made it easier for foreigners to gain real estate and establish companies in Lebanon, enabling "a highly favorable regulatory framework for property developers" (Arsan, 2018, p. 237). The creation and passing of these laws was the product of sustained lobbying by developers.

operates increasingly through disavowal of potency, repudiation of responsibility, and diffusion of sites and operations of control" (p. 194).

Like in most other contexts, neoliberal development in Lebanon has relied both on state involvement "in particular sectors of the economy through manipulation of interest rates and monetary tinkering" and, simultaneously, on the abdication of responsibility in other spheres of governance, "such as the administration of urban space or the provision of welfare and utilities" (Arsan, 2018, p. 214). The latter bolstered the power of sectarian political parties in the country, as they used a variety of private establishments and initiatives to fill the gap left by the very state whose renunciation of culpability for the welfare of its general population they had a hand in enabling, as extensions of the ruling elite. Sectarianism, then, has been essential to the thriving of actually existing neoliberalism in Lebanon, and vice versa. After all, "the state, the private corporations that control so much of the economy, and the partisan organizations and communitarian support networks that provide welfare to the country's inhabitants are controlled to a large extent by the same actors" (Arsan, 2018, p. 258).

Stifling Dissent in Post-War Lebanon

The Lebanese economy's dependence on industrial and agricultural wage labor in the 1950s and 1960s enabled the development of a counter-political culture rooted in trade unionism and oppositional political parties with a strong working class base. The shift, in the post-war period, to a neoliberal economic model dependent on what David Harvey calls 'accumulation by dispossession', which unfolds in a more splintered way – "a privatization here, an

environmental degradation there, a financial crisis of indebtedness somewhere else" (Harvey as cited in Khneisser, 2019, p. 7) – had the effect of fragmenting opposition to the status quo as well, into "single battles divorced from structural or macro-realities," as people contended "with the many frontiers of crises fomented by the system of accumulation" (Khneisser, 2019, p. 7).

Additionally, the ability of Lebanon's post-war sectarian-neoliberal political system to reproduce itself depended significantly on an alliance amongst sectarian/political and economic elites and their efficiency at coming together and setting aside differences to successfully hinder the development of cross-sectarian, cross-class, cross-racial and ethnic, multi-issue movements and mobilizations (Salloukh, 2015c, p. 70). In the pre-civil war years, for example, the General Confederation of Labor in Lebanon (GCL) was considered one of a handful of Lebanese institutions that transcended sectarian cleavages. It focused on advocating for cross-sectarian, socio-economic demands, "negotiating annual wage increases that protected workers' wages from rising inflationary effects, and demonstrated against corruption and damage caused by currency speculation" (Salloukh, 2015c, p. 73). During the war, it organized cross-sectarian rallies that called for the cessation of violence. As the war came to an end, the GCL had come to be seen as "a symbol of Lebanese unity and opposition to the war" (2015c, p. 73).

In the aftermath of the civil war, a concerted effort was made on the part of the ruling class to weaken the country's labor movement. As Hariri began to reveal his neoliberal reconstruction plan for Lebanon, the GCL positioned itself as an outspoken opponent of his approach, frequently organizing protests and demonstrations. The GCL was also a vocal opponent of the Syrian presence in Lebanon, opposing the restrictions on political rights and freedoms that came

with it. By 1997, a vast array of post-war political and economic elites were hellbent on instigating a change in the GCL's leadership (Salloukh, 2015c).

These elites managed to co-opt the GCL by taking advantage of an element of its internal structure. Regardless of size, each union federation was allowed two representatives in the GCL's executive committee. In response, successive ministers of labor authorized the creation of new union federations tied to members of the sectarian/political/economic elite, allowing the latter to find their way into the GCL's executive council via loyal proxies. This infiltration process would eventually push many leftists and independents to boycott the GCL, and the organization would subsequently come to fracture along sectarian and political lines, "as each wing of the labor movement accused the other of politicizing labor demands at the service of their sectarian patrons" (Salloukh, 2015c, p. 77). By subduing the GCL in the post-war period, the ruling class "denied the labour movement collective bargaining on behalf of a long list of social and economic demands" (Salloukh, 2015c, p. 78).

The GCL became yet another cog in the machine reproducing the sectarian-neoliberal system, foreclosing the possibility of powerful provocations emerging to challenge this system's "political economy and ideological hegemony" (Salloukh, 2015c, p. 78). One particularly poignant indication of the GCL's transformation into a complicit institution is the federation's opposition to the social wage package proposed by former Minister of Labour Charbel Nahhas

(2011-2012), which positioned the body as an ally of the ruling class rather than the disenfranchised (Salloukh 2015c, p. 78).[11]

With the GCL no longer leading the battle for upping the minimum wage and public salaries, the Syndical Coordination Committee, which brought together 250,000 public sector teachers and employees formerly part of the GCL, took up the mantle in the 2010s. Despite its popularity, its success in staging debilitating strikes, demonstrations and sit-ins, and the support it received from some members of parliament and the cabinet as it lobbied for the demands of public sector teachers and workers, the SCC found itself short-circuited by a "new class-based alliance of sectarian/political and economic forces" (Salloukh, 2015c, p. 83), and would eventually come to face a fate similar to that of the GCL.

Post-war attempts at electoral reform have also been derailed. In 1996, the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) was formed by a collective of intellectuals and activists, to advocate for "fairer and more democratic electoral laws" (Salloukh et al, 2015b, p. 101).[12] LADE was successful in cultivating and propagating a public discourse around the importance of establishing an independent, non-partisan mechanism for monitoring post-war

[11] "Public wages and the minimum wage had been frozen since 1997…Cognizant that any prospective wage increase was bound to be diluted by parallel price increases, Nahhas proposed a way out of this cyclical saga through a package labelled 'the social wage' (*al-ajer al-ijtimaʿi*). On this view, wage increases – which Nahhas proposed should be equal to the 16.3 percent increase in prices estimated by the Central Administration of Statistics (CAS) – would be part of a wider package of social services and legislations that includes universal health care, incorporating transportation costs into the employee's basic salary with its attendant pension plan supplements, the provision of an efficient public transportation system, market regulations to end monopolies, and guaranteed employment for first-time job seekers in return for the state picking up the bill for their pension plan fees" (Salloukh, 2015c, p. 79).

[12] "Some of the proposed reforms included a women's quota, media and finance monitoring of election campaigns, lowering the voting and candidacy age, and establishing a national commission for elections in a bid to free parliamentary elections from the MOIM's [Ministry of Interior and Municipalities] grip. The proposed reforms also covered details pertaining to the voting booth, preprinted electoral ballots, and how to monitor the voting process" (Salloukh et al, 2015b, p. 102).

elections, and the need for initiating substantial electoral reforms. It even took it upon itself to monitor elections, despite not receiving official authorization from the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities.[13] In August 2005, as part of its attempt to demonstrate "a break with the Syria era of electoral laws" (Salloukh et al, 2015b, p. 103), Fouad Siniora's government issued Decree No. 58, which authorized the formation of an independent commission tasked with drafting a "new and more politically representative electoral law" (Salloukh et al, 2015b, p. 103), to be applied ahead of the scheduled 2009 parliamentary elections. The commission brought together twelve specialists in electoral reform from various political, professional and social backgrounds, three of whom were civil society activists. The draft law the commission proposed to parliament in May of 2006, tried to bridge the gap between the desires of the sectarian/political elite, who favoured the existing winner-takes-all system, and civil society organizations, who advocated for proportional representation. The commission also proposed "new technical procedures to ensure the fairness and transparency of the elections" (Salloukh et al, 2015b, p. 103).

The draft law was meant to make its way to cabinet and then to parliament for ratification. But, it was set aside by Siniora, and then overshadowed by the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, and then by what many referred to locally as the miniature or almost civil war that erupted on May 7th 2008.[14] The latter political conflict was resolved in Qatar, through what became known as the

[13] It was eventually granted permission to do so by the MOIM in April of 2009.

[14] In May of 2008, the government of Fouad Siniora, associated with Saad al-Hariri's Future Movement, issued a decision to dismantle its political rival Hezbollah's private telecommunication network and fired the Hezbollah-linked head of airport security. Hezbollah declared these developments a direct attack, and soon after fighting erupted between supporters of what was, at the time, the Hezbollah-led political opposition, and Hariri's governing coalition. At the conflict's peak, Hezbollah militants took control of West Beirut. This incident took place over the course of several days and was diffused first when the Lebanese Army intervened and, later, more officially, at a meeting brokered by the Qatari government in Doha.

Doha Accords, which derailed the electoral reforms put forward by the Boutros Commission. In Doha, what Lebanese politicians decided on was barely distinguishable from the 1960 winner-takes-all electoral law (Salloukh et al, 2015b, p. 104) – a law designed to reentrench, rather than reduce, political sectarianism and clientelism.[15]

This is a potent example of the Lebanese state's routine recourse to crisis as a pretext for delaying reforms, legitimizing its decisions by insisting on the need to maintain stability in a precarious present, setting the future aside for another, more stable, time. In reality, the Doha Accords offered elites the opportunity to "block any electoral reforms that may undermine their ability to predetermine elections results and use elections to reproduce sectarian modes of subjectification and mobilization" (Salloukh et al, 2015b, p. 104).

Social justice and civil rights movements have faced similar challenges to those with which labor and electoral reform activists have had to grapple. Because marriage is governed by personal status law in Lebanon, civil unions can only be entered into abroad. After a lengthy civil society campaign, in 2013 the Higher Committee for Consultations, a department within the Ministry of Justice, "declared civil marriages to be legal and valid in Lebanon" (al-Habbal, 2015, p. 38).[16] The ruling was submitting to the MOIM, and then minister Marwan Charbel

[15] "The electoral system agreed upon in the Doha Accord is based on the 1960 electoral law which stipulates that the caza (small administrative district) is the electoral district. Each caza has several seats which can range from just 2 seats and as much as 10 seats. The electoral system is majoritarian, i.e. the list or alliance with the highest percentage of votes wins the entire district…By concentrating electoral battles in single districts, and applying the majoritarian system, the 1960 caza-based law…succeeded in setting up buffer zones for the various sects. The elections in many districts were in reality calm referendums, reaffirming a leader or a party's control over the district" (Khoury, 2014, para. 30-32).

[16] "The committee ruled that a public notary can marry Lebanese who do not embrace any sect, or who have opted to remove their sectarian affiliation from the state records; the committee also ruled that, in the absence of a civil personal status law, the couple is free to select any foreign civil law approved by the Lebanese state" (al-Habbal, 2015, p. 38).

signed “the registration of the first civil marriage in the General Directorate of Personal Status records on 25 April 2013” (al-Habbal, 2015, p. 38). However, when the Future Movement MP Nohad Machnouk became Minister of Interior in February 2014, he promptly “refused to recognize civil marriages performed in Lebanon in the absence of a civil law regulating these marriages” (al-Habbal, 2015, p. 38). Unsigned marital contracts accumulated in the offices of the MOIM, and the campaign for civil marriage in Lebanon was forced to reignite its struggle as it witnessed its achievements become nullified.

Machnouk, finding it was within his power to refuse to authorize these marriages, did not so much overturn the MOJ’s decision as decline to participate in it, using the law or lack thereof as a source of legitimacy. The sectarian-political elite, this narrative shows us, are able to allow civil society certain symbolic wins, which they can then cut short or limit through bureaucratic red tape. Civil marriages, after all, pose a threat to Lebanon’s demographic balance, but perhaps more importantly, religious marriages provide influential sectarian courts with a substantial part of their income.

There is, of course, much more to be said about the state’s success at hindering cross-sectarian mobilizations and movements. My purpose in presenting these three brief examples has been to illustrate that, contra the popular narrative about post-civil war Lebanon as crippled by a weak or failed state, post-war governments, despite the deadlocks and violence that their never-ending internal squabbles for power have enabled, have all shared a desire to maintain this system of sectarian-neoliberal governance, and have successfully managed to set aside their differences

to come together and efficiently and successfully squash any challenges to the sectarian-neoliberal status quo.

Those wanting to agitate against the order of things in Lebanon at the time of writing face co-opted or decimated unions and syndicates, a network of patronage that many depend on for survival, and a hegemonic discourse of crisis used to delay conversations about necessary reforms and to even brutally suppress calls for change, drawing on an embodied fear of the return of violence. They also face a system of sectarian-power sharing that allows governmental institutions and bodies to rotate amongst political parties in a way that subjects not just their personnel but their modus operandi to constant change, meaning that the law is not stable or given and that its implementation relies constantly on a particular set of partisan interests as embodied by whichever party happens to be in control of a given ministry at a particular point in time.

Even NGOs have, as Khattab (2015) argues, "emerged as strategic partners of both the sectarian/political elite and international organizations determined to involve the third sector in a governance model based on neoliberal structural adjustment and state retrenchment" (p. 53). Religious and communitarian non-profit organizations proliferated in the post-war period, offering their adherents socio-economic services, strengthening the clientelistic underpinnings of sectarian loyalties. These organizations became the primary source of healthcare and education for the communities they catered to. "This helped the sectarian elite extend their clientelistic reach, renew their social patronage base, and consequently deepen the political economy of neoliberalism upholding the sectarian system" (p. 54).

Meanwhile, non-sectarian rights-based NGOs, Khattab (2015) argues, mostly sought "reform and accommodation within the existing sectarian system" (p. 53). In the aftermath of the introduction of Hariri's neoliberal reconstruction and development plan for postwar Lebanon, NGOs entered the playing field to address the welfare gap left by the state, growing at a rate of approximately 250 organizations per annum (Khneisser, 2018). These organizations benefited from the influx of millions of dollars in foreign donor money aimed at strengthening civil society. But, instead of challenging governmental policies, and "championing an alternative holistic agenda that mounts a meaningful challenge against the sectarian system" (Khattab, 2015, p. 54), these NGOs worked to alleviate their most serious socio-economic consequences, engaging in a symbiotic relationship with the post-war sectarian-neoliberal state. NGO-ization allowed the postwar sectarian/political elite not only to abdicate its responsibilities, but also to dilute political opposition.

Rights-based NGOs, writes Khattab (2015), focused primarily on service provision, acting as caretakers by, for example, providing free HIV testing, in the case of LGBTQI+ organizations, or shelters for victims of domestic violence, in the case of women's rights organizations, allowing the state to absolve itself from providing for communities already 'represented' and 'protected' by well-funded NGOs. Instead of empowering marginalizing communities, she argues, this resulted in the "de-mobilization and de-politicization of grassroots organizing" (p. 54).

The Cedar Revolution, its Aftermaths, and the Emergence of New Moments and Modes of Contentious Politics

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005 sparked mass protests against the Syrian presence in Lebanon, with Syria accused of carrying out the attack by a substantial number of citizens and politicians.[17] In April 2005, Syria succumbed to international and Lebanese pressure and withdrew from Lebanon, ushering in "an intense overlapping domestic and external struggle over the post-Syria Lebanese state" (Salloukh et al, 2015a, p. 28).

Without Syria to serve as an arbitrator, a "sectarian contest" erupted "at all levels of state institutions and the decision-making process," which "led to the paralysis and atrophy of state institutions, as politics degenerated into a cycle of perpetual crises" (Salloukh et al, 2015a, p. 29). Over the last 14 years, Lebanon's ruling class has demonstrated a growing incapacity to manage the country's confessional power-sharing system, and to facilitate agreement around key issues. This led, for example, to a two-year presidential vacuum that was finally resolved in October of 2016, 12 years without a public budget, resolved in October 2017, and a nine-year parliamentary extension that came to an end in May 2018 (Khneisser, 2018).

[17] "Hariri's assassination was prefaced by growing tensions between Hariri and al-Assad's regime over Syria's increasing meddling in Lebanese political affairs and, in particular, over Syrian efforts beginning in the spring of 2004 to force through Parliament a constitutional amendment that would allow the then president, Emile Lahoud, another term in office. In response, the international community denounced both the amendment and Syrian interference; United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 called for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon and the disarming of all militias – the latter included Hezbollah. As parliamentary blocs were increasingly gaining strength among the Christian and Druze political figures in opposition to Syria, Hariri was assassinated by a car bomb on 14 February 2005" (Clark & Zahar, 2014, p. 5).

But, to return to 2005, one can argue that the Cedar Revolution constituted a promising moment of rupture for activists in the country. For many youths who came of age during the post-civil war period, the Cedar Revolution, or Independence Intifada, catalyzed by Hariri's assassination, would constitute their first engagement with politics. Clark and Zahar (2014) argue that the event also facilitated the entry of a new actor onto the NGO scene – what they call 'alternative' NGOs focused on "changing the communal or sectarian nature of the political system" (p. 2).

The around one million Lebanese who gathered in downtown Beirut in 2005 not only denounced Hariri's assassination and insisted on Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, but also protested Lebanon's sectarian political system. Clark and Zahar (2014) claim that this constituted "the first cross-confessional mass mobilization of Lebanese citizens ever held with the prospect of weakening the hold of sectarian politics" (p. 5). Following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, the ANGOs that sprung up amidst the uproar turned their attention fully to the sectarian system. "ANGOs," Clark and Zahar explain, purported to work towards a "sectarian-free" Lebanon, constituting "an important break from other interest-based NGOs both past and present as they do not seek policy but systemic change" (p. 7-8). Their activities centred largely around raising awareness and facilitating cross-sectarian dialogue.[18]

The Cedar Revolution, however, not only created opportunities for new civil society organizations to enter the political playing field, but also birthed new political coalitions that

[18] "They range from discussion groups or 'democratic spaces' where youths can discuss politically sensitive issues and 'practice democracy', to cross-sectarian sport events, to politically grass-roots campaigns and sit-ins…Some ANGOs offer workshops (often in villages where civil war massacres occurred) on negotiating skills and still others focus on fostering a new conception of citizenship based on rights and duties. A limited number concentrate on lobbying and/or monitoring MPs" (Clark & Zahar, 2014, p. 8).

continue to dominate Lebanese politics at the time of writing, although their configurations have begun to change. In the aftermath of the protests, the country's political scene fractured into what became known as the March 8th, pro-Syria camp, dominated by Hezbollah and its allies, and the anti-Syria, 'pro-West' March 14th camp, dominated by Hariri's son Saad and his allies. The two camps took their names from anti and pro-Syria demonstrations organized in the aftermath of Hariri's assassination. The rise of the two camps sharpened communal and political tensions and produced new instabilities. "As protagonists jockeyed for dominance on the Lebanese political scene, their foreign allies lent political or military support. This ultimately exacerbated political sectarianism and increased sectarian expressions in society" (Clark & Zahar, 2014, p. 9).

This reinvigorated form of sectarian politics, which fractured Lebanon's political sphere into two sharply opposed sides, had a debilitating effect on the ANGOs that Clark and Zahar (2014) describe, with many aligning themselves with one of the two dominant camps. Those that did try to create alternative political spaces found their efforts obstructed by sectarian parties.[19] Additionally, because of their reliance on foreign funding, these ANGOs were hindered by the protocols of international donors, which made them unattractive candidates for financial support.[20] Western aid to Lebanon was substantially bolstered in the aftermath of 2005. And,

[19] "Their media outlets attacked ANGOs; they contacted ANGOs' partners and/or donors to dry up their funding; and they blocked access to sectarian strongholds, such as villages under their control" (Clark & Zahar, 2014, p. 10).

[20] "In the months following Syria's withdrawal international donors consistently prioritized interest-based and communally-based NGOs over ANGOs. This resulted partly from the Law of Associations, which allows the Ministry of Interior to set requirements and restrictions on internationally funded bilateral projects…Equally significant were the primary concerns that underpinned donor selection of NGO partners. Most Western donor representatives prioritize efficiency, ability to deliver and report, and sustainability and representation" (Clark & Zahar, 2014, p. 11-12). Additionally, many international donors expressed a desire to prioritize developing working relationships with Lebanese authorities and institutions.

Western donors were particularly invested in supporting the March 14th political coalition, which had an effect on their funding decisions and put into question the autonomy of ANGOs who sought out or accepted it. ANGOs' inability to access sufficient external funding "deepened the power asymmetry between the actors who sought to maintain the status quo and the actors of change" (Clark & Zahar, 2014, p. 12).

Clark and Zahar (2014) conclude that ANGOs were unable to take advantage of the mass politicization that followed Hariri's assassination and, the year that followed it, the Israel-Lebanon war, obstructed as they were by the polarization that accompanied the power struggle between the March 8th and March 14th camps, to which foreign donors contributed. For a while after the Cedar Revolution, many Lebanese activists played the lesser-of-two evils game, voicing support for Hezbollah as a supposedly anti-imperialist movement, or leaning towards the supposed liberalism of the March 14th camp and away from the Islamism associated with Hezbollah, and others forsook politics altogether. And, in a context where ANGOs desirous of significant influence "needed either foreign support or, if that was not forthcoming, the support or the quiescence of the very sectarian leaders they were criticizing" (Clark & Zahar, 2014, p. 13), there developed a significant degree of disenchantment amongst independents with the non-profit scene, which came to be seen as either complicit or impotent.

With the eruption of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, however, Lebanon's independent activist scene was reinvigorated. What became known as the anti-sectarian movement, or *isqāṭ an-niẓām at-ṭā'ifī* (downfall of the sectarian regime) organized its first mobilization on the 27th of February 2011, drawing more than 1500 demonstrators (Hermez, 2011a). At its height, the movement

mobilized more than 20,000 people. "The strategy," writes Hermez (2011a), "building from revolutionary movements elsewhere, was to mobilise people with the help of social network websites such as Facebook, and to ensure that nodes of activity spread beyond Beirut, the capital city" (p. 527). This anti-sectarian movement drew organizers and ideologies from past independent, anti-status quo movements, including "successive waves of prewar student or labour movements and postwar civic, ecological, human rights, or alternative globalisation movements" (AbiYaghi, Catusse & Younes, 2017, p. 74) – a loud, public reminder that the country's counter-political scene had never been limited merely to political parties, or NGOs.[21] Despite how marginal these movements might have been, they managed to sustain spaces for imagining a subversive alter-politics for those who felt they didn't belong either among the country's sectarian political parties or its NGOs, and who refused to succumb to helplessness or disenchantment.

In an article about activists engaged in political activism during the Israel-Lebanon War of 2006 and its immediate aftermath, many of whom would go on to participate in the 2011 movement and the *Hirak* of 2015, Hermez (2011b) explains that there was "a wider continuity between the activists and an older generation beginning their activism in the 1960s" (p. 43). He argues that the temporal conjuncture inhabited by the activists he observed – many of whom are the same activists with whom I would come to work a decade later – was shaped by "a crisis in meaning,

[21] As AbiYaghi, Catusse and Younes (2017) note, "*the isqāṭ an-niẓām at-ṭā'ifi* movement was not born of an 'immaculate contestation' but was rather a moment that contributed to reviving previous causes for a wide array of activists in Lebanon. On the one hand, the country's left had been mobilizing for secularism for years, and on the other hand, the antisectarian movements that incubated mainly in the civil organizations of the 1990s and the 'antiglobalization nebula' in the 2000s mobilized around secularism as the smallest 'common denominator'" (p. 76-77).

direction, and identity of the left, in part inherited from the failures of the older generation" (p. 43).

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which aligned with the end of the Lebanese civil war, leftist and secular movements withdrew to the peripheries of a political scene in which they had previously occupied a significant presence. NGOs with foreign funding, a focus on socio-economic issues and a desire to sidestep politics, began to mushroom, and in the post-war period the idea that "political and social change would come from NGO-driven reforms" came to predominate amongst independents (Hermez, 2011b, p. 44).

The activists Hermez (2011b) observed, like those with whom I would come to work, occupied a temporal moment devoid of revolutionary energy, "replaced by what felt like a deep feeling of cynicism" (p. 44). The region's history was dominated by narratives of anti-imperial and leftist defeats as well as the growing popularity of Islamist movements, and its present was being stifled by neoliberal policies, all of which pushed these activists further towards the political periphery. "Their role, however," writes Hermez (2011b), "was important in their attempts (and often ability) to carve out an alternative left, and their efforts to act through spaces outside the sphere of political parties, universities, and NGOs" (p. 44). These activists' ability to sustain alternative spaces not only for thinking alternative forms of social, economic and political life but for embodying them, provided a base of people and ideas, precarious as it might have been, through which to mobilize when the opportunity presented itself, as uprisings swept the Arab world in 2011.

"The anti-sectarian people's movement in Lebanon," Hermez (2011a) writes, "was aspiring to greater dignity from the state in much the same way as in Egypt and elsewhere" (p. 530). Somewhat of an umbrella term, the desire for 'dignity' connoted a demand for "self-determination, equal rights, and the ability to successfully fend off oppression by different groups, including the state" (Hermez, 2011a, p. 531). Activists drew parallels between the ruling class in Lebanon and other Arab countries, arguing that whereas in contexts like Egypt and Syria the population was oppressed by a single dictatorial figure, Lebanon was burdened with a collective of oppressive leaders (Hermez, 2011a, p. 533).[22]

The movement called on people to challenge the structures of the Lebanese state but, as Hermez (2011a) explains:

> Leaders who commanded loyalty from the people occupied high positions in these state structures, and one could not easily detach the state from the communal leaders and political parties that used the state for their purposes. Such unresolved complications were factors that seemed to threaten the movement (p. 535).

Additionally, the movement suffered from internal tensions, much like the garbage protests of 2015, which brought back to the streets of Beirut many of the activists who had participated in 2011's anti-sectarian movement. I will discuss the internal fragmentation that inhibited these and similar movements in more detail in chapter six. In the end, *isqāṭ an-niẓām* constituted an

[22] "Similar to Egypt, some argued, corruption was not simply the result of political sectarianism, but rather, a result of the political elite being involved in a failed neoliberal system, whereby political leaders had free rein over public resources since economic dealings (trade, construction, and new business ventures) succeeded through political influence. They argued that political figures, state leaders, and businesspeople are deeply connected, not only in terms of being trading partners but also in drafting and conceiving laws, thus legalizing business dealings at the whims of businesspeople – often themselves politicians. Such politico-economic manoeuvring transcended sectarian allegiances, especially at the level of the political elite" (Hermez, 2011a, p. 533).

exciting yet ephemeral political event experienced by those who participated in it as another instance of failure.

As mentioned in the introduction, my fieldwork unfolded within yet another moment of 'dead' time, during the aftermath of a political event, when many activists felt paralyzed by what they called *'iḥbāṭ* – frustration and disillusionment. In what follows, I am interested in making sense of the relationship between this disposition, the experience both of routine activist failure and of the durability of Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal political system, and the growing appeal and dominance of a pragmatic and technocratic approach to activism within Lebanese civil society, as compared to the rapid depletion of the kind of alter-political spaces described by Hermez above, which nurtured many of the dissidents who flooded Beirut's streets in 2011.

In the following two chapters, I excavate the substance of the pragmatic and technocratic politics I watched grow increasingly popular amongst activists in Lebanon, focusing on Beirut's urban social movement, whose output best encapsulates this trend.

Chapter 2: Spatial Activism and the Right to the Lebanese City

In wildness is the liberation of the world – Andreas Malm

Figure 1: The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche. (2017). The Dalieh [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2K9LdQu

In this chapter, I will discuss the work of the Dalieh Campaign, a public space-focused advocacy group in Beirut whose members were influential players within Beirut's urban social movement during the period of my fieldwork, and who were also important, heavily-involved figures within Beirut Madinati.

The Dalieh Campaign had been active since 2013 on behalf of its namesake – a stretch of rocky coastline that includes Beirut's symbolic Pigeon Rocks. By reflecting on two years of fieldwork with the campaign, I aim to contextualize the appeal of the pragmatic and technocratic politics characteristic of Beirut's urban social movement, which I watched grow in popularity during my time in Beirut, explaining what forms it took, as well as examining its potential for facilitating the kinds of transformative changes my interlocutors aspired to.

In what follows, I describe the "narratives of perfection" (Schielke, 2015, p. 48) or visions of "the utopian city" (Gunder, 2005, p. 173) that my interlocutors within the Dalieh Campaign were committed to, and the circumstances that appeared to be forcing them to deviate from these imaginings in practice. I will argue that while the Dalieh Campaign was committed to cultivating the *political potential* of a public space like the Dalieh, to activating it as a space of assembly, the ways in which it went about trying to preserve the site's existence in the short-term threatened the very potential campaign members sought to harness and enhance. I will attempt to make sense of this discrepancy by, among other things, returning to the literature on post-politics.

The Rise of the Urbanists

In this section, I will contextualize the emergence of what scholars like Harb (2016) have designated an urban social movement in Beirut. I will highlight the characteristics that distinguished this movement from other activist trends, and explain the appeal it had amongst a disenchanted, cosmopolitan middle class frustrated with prolonged social, political and economic stagnation, as well as with a history of activist failure at laying the groundwork for meaningful change.

I. From the Environmental to the Urban

In the aftermath of the civil war, a substantial number of civil society groups and NGOs working in various sectors were established in Lebanon, focused particularly on "education, health and the environment" (Harb, 2016, p. 11). According to Kingston (2013), the 1990s was considered "a 'golden age' for the association and the environmental advocacy sector as a whole" (p. 143).

Kingston (2013) explains that, at the end of the war, the country was seen to be fragmented by sectarianism, lacking in potentially unifying political discourses. Independent activists saw in the environment an opportunity to "start something new," to construct a "unifying platform" on the basis of which "people could revive their political interests and challenge the political elites of the country *without having an explicit political affiliation* [emphasis added], especially given the abuse to which the country's environment had been subjected to 'by the warlords'" (p. 143). Adopting an issue-focused, expertise-driven approach, allowed activists to target policy-making

without becoming mired in Lebanese politics more generally. The environment, it was argued, could serve "as both a tool for collaboration, with, and opposition to, public authorities" (p. 143).

This insistence on distinguishing between policy-making and politics, embracing the former and avoiding the latter, was a characteristic that persisted among activists working on the environment, urban issues and the right to the city more broadly, and which I noted regularly during my time in Beirut. The same can be said of the decision to rely on 'science' as the basis for one's demands and a means through which to collaborate with public authorities without compromising one's principles (Kingston, 2013). 'Politics', a dirty word since the civil war if not before, needed to be cleansed and baptized anew as something divorced from ideology and identity, and rooted only in a universal, non-contentious understanding of livability and wellbeing.

Writing in 2016, Harb explains that "until recently, urban issues were completely absent from the agenda of NGOs and activists" (p. 11). Issues related to housing, public space, public transportation, utilities and more were not frequently discussed in public, through the media for example. But, gradually, urban issues made their way onto the agendas of youth groups and activists disillusioned with the management of Beirut.

Harb (2016) identifies four factors that she argues contributed to the development of an urban social movement in post-civil war Lebanon:

> the legacy of a first generation of urban activists and scholars, which laid the foundation of a critical urban discourse; the establishment of new urban studies programs in universities, which led to the formation of a second generation of urban activists; the growth of a diverse set of coalitions and campaigns placing urban issues at the centre of their claims; and the progressive domination of the logic of sectarian political allotment, and the associated breakdown of public action (p. 8).

In the 1990s, urban planners and scholars played a leading role in actively and publicly opposing Solidere, the joint-stock company established by former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in the early 1990s to implement and oversee a neoliberal approach to the post-war development and reconstruction of downtown Beirut. Though unsuccessful at stopping or even hindering Solidere, through their activism these urban planners and scholars did manage to produce a substantial repertoire of "knowledge on critical urban practice," which would come to "inspire many students of urban planning and design" (Harb, 2016, p. 9). It is among this second generation of urban activists that I carried out a large part of my fieldwork.[23] Exposed to this critical urban discourse, Harb (2016) writes that these young urbanists became:

> increasingly conscious of their roles as reflective practitioners, able to intervene on cities, improve modes of spatial production, in ways that would make urban spaces operate better, in resonance with ordinary people's daily needs, thus making such spaces more actively used, experienced and owned (p. 10).

Harb's genealogy helps us make sense of the formidable presence of urban planners, architects, civil engineers and graphic designers in contemporary Lebanese civil society, as well as how discourses focused on the 'right to the city', livability and wellbeing gained influence within

[23] The critical urban discourse associated by Harb (2016) with the "first generation" of urban activists found a home in the urban planning and design programs established at various Lebanese universities, public and private, in the 1990s and early 2000s, which focused on putting praxis in conversation with theory, weaving the social sciences into their curricula and contributing to the formation of a new generation of socially-engaged young urbanists (p. 9).

activist circles. This focus on liveability and wellbeing was often framed as a way of speaking about and advocating for change in a post-ideological, non-contentious, apolitical language – a language believed capable of *transcending* the kinds of divisive worldviews produced by the wars and crises Lebanon had become accustomed to, and *getting things done*.

II. The Appeal of Urban Activism

In addition to the factors that Harb (2016) lays out to explain the rise of this urban social movement, I would also add that temporal distance from the civil war, a scarcity of employment opportunities, and the desire for self-fulfilment and purpose in a stifling context, entangled with a sense of duty towards those broadly defined as less fortunate, played an important role.

Reflecting on a series of events organized by the Dalieh Campaign in May and June of 2017 in a draft of a report shared with campaign members, Jana, an established Iraqi architect based in Beirut and founding member of the campaign, points out that political turbulence and economic precarity in the Middle East had, ironically, provided urbanists with "abundant time to fight for natural and cultural heritage protection in Lebanon" (2017).[24] Many, she writes,

> myself included, are in design-related professions with a strong environmental sensibility and a penchant for social justice. With opportunities for professional work in

[24] Despite being public figures and providing me with permission to identify them in my dissertation, I have chosen to anonymize the members of the collectives and organizations I worked with. While I identify the groups they were associated with by their actual names because I reference work they did and advertised publicly, and because I was given permission to do so, I chose to anonymize their individual members after discussions with them in order to avoid causing them any kind of personal or professional harm through my references to conversations I witnessed or participated in. The only exception to this is when I reference published work by interlocutors.

> architecture, landscape architecture, urban and graphic design dwindling, many channelled their energy and creativity by volunteering as campaigners for causes that have been undermined by the neoliberal economy taking over the country and the blatant suppression of the public right to the city. Caring for our heritage, both natural and cultural, is one such cause. True volunteering doesn't pay the phone bill or put food on the table, *but the rewards of upholding the right of those citizens whose voices have been silenced, accrues dividends that can't be measured in monitory* [sic] *terms* [emphasis added] (personal communication, June 25, 2017).

In addition, activists both young and old had gained enough distance from the civil war to be able to focus more on critiquing the developments that followed it, rather than centring their activism primarily around memory work aimed at making sense of the conflict. In one of our earliest conversations, Alia, an architect, urban planner and founding member of the Dalieh Campaign, explained that:

> a lot happened in the 90s that nobody spoke about, but in the 90s the war hadn't been over for long, and things hadn't yet accumulated. It's not just accumulation of disasters that led people to be disgusted, but accumulation of knowledge, of awareness…I think now people are mobilized because they are well informed. It's got something to do with the fact that over the last ten years, people – whether through social media or journalism or whatever – are seeing and saying a lot of things, and these things are resonating, even if slowly.

Furthermore, the desire for a sense of purpose, the desire to exert a measure of control over the conditions shaping and constraining one's life, as well as the desire for self-fulfilment and gratification in a country widely considered as stifling as Lebanon, played an important, motivational role. Amongst the mostly middle class urban activists I worked with, there was an awareness of how their knowledge capital could be instrumentalized; how it could be deployed productively to serve as a source of power or, at least, influence. My interlocutors appeared driven by a sense of duty rooted in the privilege of having the resources to cultivate this capital, and by the gratification that could be derived from acting on this sense of duty when one had

few other opportunities to inject meaning and purpose into one's life. Importantly, issue-focused, expertise-driven activism rooted in liveability and wellbeing, carried the promise of results, of *achievements*, however miniscule, temporary or symbolic.

Sally, a practicing urban planner and member of the Dalieh Campaign, learned about the Dalieh through her interest in landscape architecture. She bemoaned the free labour that campaign members put into the Dalieh, taking on duties that should have been carried out by governmental institutions like the ministries of environment and culture. But she also acknowledged the personal gains the campaign members accrued – broadening their professional networks, receiving job opportunities, meeting romantic partners and cultivating new friendships.

Nour, who I worked with in both the Dalieh Campaign and Beirut Madinati, entered the field of urban activism in 2006, when she was in her late twenties, provoked by the mass destruction caused by the 33-day Israel-Lebanon War (also known as the July War), which took place in the summer of that year. In addition to volunteering with the relief organization *Samidoun*, she spent a year working on the reconstruction of the village of ʿAita al-Chaʿb in Southern Lebanon. Thinking back on how she ended up heavily involved in more than a decade of urban activism, Nour, who studied graphic design at the American University of Beirut, told me she was particularly influenced by one professor who taught her students the relationship between design and social responsibility:

> The designer has a lot of power, and she should be careful how she uses it, because she can create discourse and change discourse, and set the culture of a place. We have a strong tool in our hands, and we should be aware of it.

Like most students in her domain, Nour joined a design firm after graduating. She found the work uninspiring – she wasn't interested in simply implementing the ideas of others. The fact that graphic design and architecture were housed in the same department at AUB meant that, as a student, she had access to the strong discourse on urbanism being developed and taught in the latter. She applied for a master's in urban studies abroad and was accepted. She was meant to begin her postgraduate studies in the fall of 2006, but in the aftermath of the July War, she chose to defer so that she could spend the year in ʿAita al-Chaʿb with around thirty other former members of *Samidoun*, working on the village's reconstruction. "I couldn't sit and do nothing during the war," she told me.

I didn't know Nour could speak Portuguese until more than a year into working alongside her as part of the Dalieh Campaign and Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative. One evening, I joined a small group of collaborators and friends gathered at her home to offer Alia – her childhood friend and co-volunteer in Beirut Madinati and the Dalieh Campaign, and partner in a research and design studio focused on urban issues in Lebanon – well wishes after the sudden passing of a close relative.

Nour spent much of the evening on her feet, prodding people to eat the snacks she had prepared, checking on the baking Pao de Queijo she'd made with ingredients hand-delivered from Sao Paolo, and translating from English and Arabic to Portuguese for the Brazilian friend who was visiting her. After a year of witnessing and experiencing the frustration and cyclical sense of defeat that had come to define, for me, independent anti-status quo activism in Beirut, I couldn't understand how and why Nour persisted when she had a viable elsewhere to escape to – one

where she was already a naturalized citizen; where she had plenty of relatives; where language wouldn't serve as a barrier; where her skills as a graphic designer, teacher and urbanist would surely be desirable; and where, she told me, there existed a robust grassroots urban activist scene that she could become involved with.

"If I wasn't an activist working on things in the country, I wouldn't stay here," Nour told me.

> The country doesn't offer me anything. It's a catastrophe. Daily life is exhausting. *It wastes your time*. I'm here because I have hope that I can change things. Because the country is small, you can create a network between different issues and people, and you feel like you can change things. In bigger countries, activism tends to be very grassroots and strong, but it's very difficult for these movements to think of running for elections, for example. Here, imagine, we [Beirut Madinati] were about to win municipal elections! *There's room here*.

Lebanon's urban social movement, however, was not only made up of those with a professional or educational background in urban studies, architecture, engineering or design. The appeal of discourses grounded in or inspired by the 'right to the city', or variations on the concept, had been much more far reaching. More and more activists had come to acknowledge these discourses' potential to become contagious – believing in their ability to facilitate the kind of mass coming and working together that was seen as a condition of possibility for a wider social transformation.

Mansour, a founding member of Nahnoo ('we' in Arabic), was not an urbanist per se. He had worked in advertising and the restaurant business. He studied psychology, history and public policy. Nahnoo started out as a club at the Lebanese University in 2003, where Mansour was a student. At the time, he told me, there were no social or cultural clubs at the public university,

and student representatives of mainstream political parties held a monopoly over extra-curricular activities. Nahnoo's goal was to offer a platform for activities that were "not political or religious in the traditional sense."[25]

Mansour graduated in 2006, just as the 33-day war with Israel was breaking out, and a little over a year after former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination. "At the time, everyone was traumatized. A lot of people were feeling depressed; feeling like something was happening but we couldn't control it and we didn't have a voice in it." 2007 and 2008 came and went, and Mansour continued to feel lost and aimless:

> I felt like I couldn't be an employee and I didn't want to be an employee. *I wanted to do something I loved*. I felt there was a lot in the country that was broken, and I wanted to focus on that. The segregation of neighbourhoods, for example. I felt like the country was so divided. The people who live in this country are choking. There are so many social problems, rooted in the political climate. There was something inside me that pushed me to want to contribute to this, and to focus my life on this.

In our conversations, Mansour would speculate about the source of the belief, which he felt had long accompanied him, that he could *do something* about the situation in Lebanon. He remembered reading the works of great thinkers as a child, discovered in his school library:

> They used to have all these books about people like Einstein and what they accomplished. When I read about these people, I don't know, it made me feel like I could do something. Because these people always arrived at a point in history where others responded by saying, 'what are you doing? This isn't going to work.' There's always this 'things aren't going to work out' hopelessness. I don't know if it has to do with that, but I always felt like, no, we can do something. Things can work out.

[25] They invited psychologists to give talks on the emotional challenges that youths face growing up. They organized hikes, concerts, photo exhibitions, film screenings and more.

Nahnoo was registered as an NGO – an official platform for 'doing something'– in 2009. It didn't start off working on public space, with its original umbrella goal broadly and vaguely defined as 'social cohesion'. When Mansour learned about Horsh Beirut, however, the city's largest green space, which had been closed to the public since 1992, he saw it not only as a potential cross-class and cross-sect gathering point, but as a means of demonstrating what could become of the city if the authorities responsible for it were lobbied into doing their jobs properly. As one Nahnoo employee put it:

> *You find the issue where no one can argue with you*. Is Horsh Beirut a public space? It should open – you can't argue against that. It's about justice, human rights, etc. We won the Horsh Beirut case when we changed the discourse from being about trees and green to being about a social right and a human right and a symbol of how the government is not providing services.[26]

This notion of getting things done, of logging measurable wins and results in order to counter the ubiquitous sense that change was impossible in Lebanon, was a defining feature of the urban social movement, contrasted with what many of its members considered the impotence-inducing idealism [or purism, as it was often called] of the left, said to oppose sectarianism or capitalism or patriarchy by merely explaining why they were ethically and morally destitute systems of governance and/or meaning making, and shaming those who subscribed to them.

III. Conclusion

In this introductory section, I have outlined what I consider to be the defining features of Beirut's urban social movement at the time of my fieldwork, when it was positioned as one of

[26] In 2015, Horsh Beirut was partially reopened after a lengthy, successful campaign led by Nahnoo.

the most popular activist trends in Lebanon. It was distinguished by a commitment to an anti-partisan form of lowest-common-denominator politics – what scholars working on other contexts have called the sphere of 'post-politics', where categories like Left and Right are abandoned and the supposed needs of the majority are taken up in their stead (Fernandes & Paulson, 2015).

Beirut's urban activists challenged the widely held belief that there is no Lebanese state, and attempted to answer the popular question, 'who is in charge', insisting that "there *is* a state, but it does not provide adequate services" (Nucho, 2016, p. 134). By insisting that the state exists but is wilfully absent, and by documenting the formal responsibilities of governmental institutions and their failure to honour them, these activists asserted that there were, in fact, identifiable 'someones' to be held "accountable for providing infrastructures" (2016, p. 134). Urban governance and infrastructure were approached as goods in themselves, but also, as one interlocutor put it, a "concrete, measurable and pragmatic start," for demonstrating how the population could push the government to do its job.

Urban activism was aimed as much at the citizens of Lebanon as it was at the government, attempting to provoke the former out of complacency and bad consumption habits and the latter out of absence, as I will show in the remainder of this chapter. This was a response, to borrow from Berlant (2011), to "conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject," which turns suffering ordinary and enables "technologies of patience" that "suspend questions of the cruelty of the *now*" (p. 28). In their stead, urban activists attempted to introduce technologies of

both anxiety and hope, emphasizing the *intolerability* of the status quo and the *feasibility* of altering it.

Getting *something* done, facilitating some kind of change, was framed as more important than the scale of that change. "There are things, like capitalism or neoliberalism, you can't convey or change. They're too far – just empty words. When it comes to issues related to the city and city life, we are more likely to have an impact," Nour told me. For the expertise-driven and issue-focused activists with whom I worked, what mattered was not so much the theoretical impact of a tactic, but the possibility of success in actuality, adamant as they were that to create the conditions of possibility for a new political subject capable of bringing about more radical social transformations, they first had to convince the general public of the utility of collective grassroots lobbying, the hope being that this fruitful coming together would serve as a technology of subject transformation. I would come to see this positive spin on the possibility of change through micro and meso-agitations, and the personal gratification that could be derived from symbolic or short-term achievements, as both defining and debilitating features of issue-focused and expert-led activism within the country's urban social movement, as I will demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter.

In the sections that follow, I examine the limitations of this commitment to non-contentious, small-scale issues and strategies, and to negotiation and collaboration with governmental bodies. What rights, I ask, were being neglected through urban activists' understanding of and approach to 'the right to the city'? And, what role did the fetishization of corruption, and the

framing of Lebanese neoliberalism as salvageable, play in shaping and constraining their activism?

A Wild Space in the City

The *grand* aim of initiatives like the Dalieh Campaign, Nahnoo and Beirut Madinati, was to use the space of the city to enable a certain type of politics, with the former two focused on public space in particular. Instead of allowing the civil war to dominate Lebanese imaginings of public space, the Dalieh Campaign and Nahnoo drew attention to spaces of collective sitting together that preceded and survived the war. Checkpoints and demarcation lines, snipers on rooftops and a city segregated – anything that undermined the argument that Lebanon's communities could not non-violently co-occupy public space; that different sects and different classes should not mingle; that no good had ever or would ever come of such things, had to be left behind.

In a context where, as Sally put it, "the street was the war," where a long history of communal tension and sectarian conflict was used to justify a dearth of public spaces, these initiatives pointed to sites that challenged the claim that the residents of Lebanon could not and should not gather. A stretch of rocky shore, or a dense pocket of greenery in the middle of a concrete city, with rich histories of use, could flip the argument against public space on its head and frame this myth as a means of distracting from governmental neglect, and of keeping people apart so that they would not threaten the system of socio-economic and political corruption oppressing them. The Dalieh and Horsh Beirut were seen as causes in themselves – landscapes that urban

activists were invested in saving.[27] But they were also "realm(s) of nature" that were, each in their own way, a "locale of memory, a lieu de memoire;" monuments as "social fact imbued with moral-political significance" (Scott, 2014, p. 118).

In the following sections, I will focus on the Dalieh Campaign in particular, and the particularities of its attempt at politicizing public space. I will argue that there was a discrepancy between the political potential the campaign believed the Dalieh embodied and that it wanted to enhance, and the ways in which it went about trying to protect the site from privatization. How, I ask, did the campaign come to adopt an advocacy approach that seemed to diminish, rather than inflate, the political potential of the Dalieh – its ability to contribute to nurturing the democratic and collaborative ethos believed necessary to cure Lebanon of its identitarian woes and the corruption that feeds off of them?

Figure 2: Dictaphone Group. (2012). This Sea is Mine [Digital Image]. Retrieved from https://dictaphonegroup.com/work/this-sea-is-mine/

[27] Both Nahnoo and the Dalieh Campaign regularly referenced the World Health Organization's recommendation of 40 squared meters of open green space per person. At the time of writing, Beirut offered approximately one meter squared per person.

I. Introducing the Dalieh

Figure 3: Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche. (2014). Weekend gathering on the Dalieh [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/30Va2GC

When I began my fieldwork, the Dalieh Campaign had been active since 2013 on behalf of preserving the character of and public access to a stretch of rocky coastline that includes Beirut's symbolic Sakhret el-Raouche (Pigeon Rocks), and which, despite being privately owned, had long functioned as a public space.[28] The Dalieh had long provided families and friends a

[28] "The land had originally been owned by several Beirut families who had been custodians since Ottoman times. No building was allowed, and the land was available to the public for farming and fishing. In the 1990s, the Hariri political dynasty came together to buy it" (Battah, 2015a, para. 7).

picturesque spot for weekend meanderings; served as a tranquil and cosy setting for romantic liaisons; welcomed swimmers and fishermen to spend hours in and near its waters; and offered a multiplicity of other leisurely opportunities for a diversity of individuals and communities. The boisterous informal economy this shared space had long sustained supported fishermen, restaurants, tour boats, peddlers, photographers and a host of other creative entrepreneurs and their modest but popular enterprises (The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche, n.d.). The Dalieh was known as a haven for those who could not afford access to private beaches, from Syrian refugees, to lower class Sunni Beirutis and Shiʿite migrants to Beirut, the city's Kurdish community and more.

In a feature for the Guardian's Cities section published in March 2015, investigative journalist and urban activist Habib Battah calls the Dalieh "the city's last natural outcrop" (2015a, para. 3). The Lebanese capital's coast, he explains, has been devoured by a "development frenzy that has changed the face of the city, wiping out much of the craggy natural shore and replacing it with concreted yacht marinas and upscale resorts" (2015a, para. 3). Writing on his blog, The Beirut Report, in September 2015, Battah argues that,

> like dysfunctional public services, the unlawful seizure of public seafront properties has gone on for decades with no accountability as politicians and their cronies create luxury marinas and resorts restricting access to well-heeled customers and leaving very few public swimming areas for the majority of people in the country who can't afford entrance fees (Over 1,000 illegal resorts occupy the coast) (2015b, para. 2).

On its website, the Dalieh Campaign described its commitment to lobbying for the preservation and development of the Dalieh as an "open-access shared space for all city dwellers and visitors." It defined itself as a coalition of activists "who share a strong commitment to the

preservation of Beirut's shared spaces, ecological and cultural diversity as the pillars of the city's liveability" (The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche, n.d.). Responding to the much critiqued NGO-ization of Lebanese civil society, the Dalieh Campaign was anti-structural and non-hierarchical, relying on crowdfunding and personal donations to finance its initiatives.

The activists who would come to form the Dalieh Campaign were originally drawn to the cause when fishermen who had long worked and, in some cases, lived with their families on the Dalieh, were presented with eviction notices in September of 2013, signaling an impending real estate takeover of the site.[29] These activists rallied around the site users and residents, but in March of 2014, most of the fishermen's homes were torn down after financial settlements were negotiated with a majority of them. The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche began to emerge more formally in the aftermath of this defeat.

In the summer of 2014, the Dalieh was cordoned off with barbed wire soon after it was announced that famed Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas had been commissioned by a Hariri-owned investment company to design a major new development to sit on approximately 100,000 square meters of the site, violating what many thought was its status as an officially protected natural reserve.[30] Stalls and restaurants were shut and/or torn down, and the Municipality of Beirut stationed municipal police on the Dalieh to monitor and limit attempts at tearing down

[29] On its website, the campaign explained that the Dalieh had played host to two fishermen's ports since the 1950s. According to the campaign, "in 1995, Maritime Authorities officially recognized one of these ports and 75 fishermen and their boats registered in the fishermen cooperative" (The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche, n.d.)

[30] The 1954 zoning regulation authorized by the Beirut Master Plan bars construction of any kind along the city's coast (The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche, n.d.)

the fence and reclaiming the sea. In response, the Dalieh Campaign began organizing, among other activities, regular protests, musical performances, artistic interventions and public parties on the Dalieh, in addition to filing a lawsuit against the government and creating an online platform where people could share photos and memories of the site. The lawsuit challenged the legality of:

> decree 169, from 1989, which removed previous restrictions on development in Dalieh and the surrounding coastal areas, including the famous pigeon rocks and Beirut's only public beach. Their attorneys say the law was not made public or ratified by other government bodies, many of which were not even in session during the [civil] war [when the decree was passed]. And they say the developers held close ties to the politicians who passed it (Battah, 2015a, para 9).[31]

Additionally, the campaign engaged in heavy advocacy work directed at the Ministry of Environment, which eventually announced "that a draft law had been submitted to label Dalieh as a protected natural site, banning major construction" in 2015 (Battah, 2016, p. 41). It was primarily a symbolic gesture, unlikely as it was for the draft law to be passed by parliament, where MPs and allies associated with Saad al-Hariri – head of the Future Movement and son of slain former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, with whom the three real estate companies that came together to buy the majority of Dalieh plots are associated – wielded great influence, but it was seen as a "major public opinion win." Despite the campaign's success, when my fieldwork unfolded and at the time of writing, the Dalieh's status remained precarious, with the

[31] "The activists also demanded in an open letter to Koolhaas that he explain and defend his proposed project. They cited studies commissioned by the Lebanese government that call for protection of Dalieh's cliffs and caves as a natural habitat and archaeological site" (Battah, 2015a, para 10).

possibility of a new project being initiated on what was, after all, privatized land, continuously looming over the campaign and its supporters.

Figure 4: The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche. (2015). Historic image of families gathering on the Dalieh [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2GCte47

II. Democracy, Social Justice and Public Space

The campaign spent its first year engaged in what its members called 'reactive' work, in the form of protests and interventions on site to oppose the large-scale Koolhaas project. After that came a long phase of research, with the small group of around 15 multi-generational activists, most of whom were architects, meeting on a weekly basis, feeding off of one another's skills and dividing tasks based on experience and expertise.

I began volunteering with the Dalieh Campaign as part of my fieldwork in the summer of 2016. The first meeting I attended was erratic. I was one of the first to arrive at Jana's architecture office. I rushed to get there on time – panicking when I couldn't find the building. An old friend of mine, who also happened to be one of the few male members of the campaign, had invited me along, helping smooth the introduction process and making it easier for the campaign members to accept my request for participant-observation.

They hadn't met in months, because they had all been busy with different aspects of Beirut Madinati's municipal campaign. After a mere few minutes of fieldwork the overlaps within Beirut's urban social movement were already evident. Whispering to me, my friend pointed out the middle-aged women who made up around half of the nearly all-female Dalieh Campaign. They had been active on urban issues since the early days of Solidere, if not before that. He scoffed at what he termed the common misconception that Lebanon's urban social movement was 'youth' led. After almost an hour devoted to hugs and kisses, catch ups and jokes, the latest gossip and rumours, the group got down to business. They feared that they had neglected the Dalieh while working on Beirut Madinati's campaign; that they had allowed people to forget about it, or to mistake their having won the battle against a planned development in the area for a victory in the war for Beirut's coast. The Dalieh had to be put back into the public consciousness, and the residents of Beirut had to be reminded that it was still in danger, and still *worth saving*.

Alia partially attributed the successful mobilization in support of the Dalieh in 2015 to the campaign's cultivation of a compelling story for the site. "We were constantly building a narrative," she told me,

> not only cursing politicians…our goal was not just to *expose* and *shame*. Our goal was to build a narrative that someone could understand and start talking about on his or her own. When the protests of 2015 happened, and there was the day when the activists went and tore down the Dalieh fence, nobody went and wrote that this was a violent act or an encroachment on private property, etc. I think because the action happened at a moment when something had been built that people were convinced of.

"I think," Sally told me,

> there was a general sense of 'that's enough'. In our campaign discourse we always used the term 'the last remaining', and I think people were sensitive to this idea. Everyone we would speak to would say, 'so, even the Dalieh they're going to close off?' A lot of people who work for Solidere were even interested in being involved in the campaign. When I asked them why, they said the Dalieh was a red flag. Maybe because it's a symbol for the city. Showing photos of the eviction of the fishermen on Facebook also helped. They were forced out early in the morning by General Security. So, I think this feeling of injustice worked with the idea that the Dalieh is a symbol for the city. It's enough. Not this too.

Figure 5: The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche. (2015). The fence [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2yjRF1K

The Dalieh Campaign's discourse emphasized and celebrated the 'unscripted' character of the Dalieh – its long existing role as a 'wild common', "allowing for multiple, overlapping – yet never conflicting – activities to occur" (personal communication, October 9, 2017).[32] In a 2015 article featured in the *Arab Studies Journal*, an urban planner and campaign member used the example of the Dalieh to "propose a new concept of public space in Beirut" (Saksouk-Sasso, 2015, p. 299). She framed the appropriation of the Dalieh – a privately-owned property – by diverse publics as an expression of "popular or vernacular communal sovereignty" (Saksouk-

[32] This quote was taken from an internal narrative report written by the campaign about an event organized on site.

Sasso, 2015, p. 299). She bemoaned whitewashed publicity images of "an empty and sanitized Rock of Raouche," which erased the "vibrant and diverse activities on Beirut's seashore…. everyday life, and the possibility of a public" (Saksouk-Sasso, 2015, p. 305). Drawing on Asef Bayat, she framed the public's insistence on scavenging for and appropriating what she called "leftover" spaces, enabling their de facto becoming-public regardless of legal status, as "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary," which forms "the informal or communal sovereign" (Saksouk-Sasso, 2015, p. 308).

This emphasis on building narratives that spoke of the potential of endangered sites, can be linked to the conviction, which I observed frequently amongst urban activists in Beirut, that Lebanon's population was tired of negativity. Most, the argument went, were tired of witnessing people and structures, ideologies and worldviews, being torn down discursively or materially, without alternatives being proposed in their place. Consequently, the Dalieh Campaign, Beirut Madinati, Nahnoo and other similar initiatives expressed an aversion towards what they called 'naming and shaming'. Negativity, they argued, breeds cynicism and impotence. What people needed was a positivity nurtured by narratives about the untapped socio-cultural and natural wealth of Lebanon. These were framed as worth fighting for and investing in for the material, spiritual and physical riches they could offer the populace in its entirety. This positivity, it was believed, could be made convincing and contagious through the promotion of practical strategies rooted in scientific studies, an understanding of Lebanese law, and a willingness to negotiate with the powers that be.

In 2015, the Dalieh Campaign organized ‘Revisiting Dalieh’, an ideas competition to open up the debate around the site, attract more people and create more awareness, inviting proposals for holistic rehabilitation plans for the Dalieh. The point of the competition was to facilitate discussion, with no one believing the plans would actually be implemented in the near future. Importantly for the campaign, the competition unfolded under the patronage of the Lebanese Ministry of Environment, and so constituted an opportunity to collaborate with the government in a productive way. Nabila, one of the older but most energetic members of the campaign, nicknamed ‘adrenaline’ by her peers, asked me excitedly during one of our conversations if I comprehended what this meant:

> We convinced the Ministry of Environment to launch the competition in their space – imagine! You’re organizing a competition about land that is privately owned, and the Ministry of Environment is involved. What does this mean? It’s a message or indirect declaration that this site is public. I consider this intelligence. You can’t change things while sitting back and watching. People are depressed. They don’t trust anyone. There is no hope, there is no trust, and things are getting worse. You have to be both smart and distant. You have to observe and work. You don’t compromise your principles, but you have to be diplomatic in the positive sense, not in the sense where you lie to people.

Despite the Dalieh Campaign’s successes, the fizzling out of the 2015 garbage protests left civil society depleted of energy, physically and emotionally bruised and under surveillance, forced to retreat and leave causes like the Dalieh with less populist backing, limiting them once again to the attention of a few dedicated activists. Additionally, many of those who were active members in the urban social movement turned their attention to Beirut Madinati for much of 2015 and early 2016. This is how the campaign found itself, in the summer of 2016, needing to focus once more on its original mission: injecting the Dalieh with value.

Early on in my fieldwork, I joined some members of the campaign for meetings with other activist groups who, it was hoped, would together form a coalition aimed at fighting for the protection of Lebanon's coast in its entirety. During these meetings, despite many disagreements, a consensus developed around the need to make the sites these groups were advocating on behalf of, from the Dalieh to Ramlet el Baida and others in and outside of Beirut, socially valuable; to convince people not only that they had a right to the sea, but that they should want to hold on to this right as well – that there was something in it for them.

"At some point I was reading a lot about what makes a public space," Alia told me:

> Is it just a space of gathering, recreation, etc.? But in that sense a mall is a public space. What makes a public space is that *politics is able to happen there*. This is why public space is important and this is why I always feel that the Dalieh is important. It's a space where a lot of social groups can exist and be visible. I didn't know there were this many Kurdish people in Beirut before attending Nowruz [the Persian New Year] on the Dalieh.[33] *It's a place where people make themselves visible and represented and show that they are part of the city*. And, at the same time, it's a place where politics can happen – a protest, etc. Dalieh has very particular types of cultural practices that have to do with the topography of the place and its nature. I think the relationship between these is what makes the site valuable. What the campaign is trying to do is to give value to all of these things above the monetary value of the site. I think this is what people should comprehend.

It is important, Sally told me, to think of public space, social justice and democracy as intertwined. She called the Dalieh:

> a wild space in the city…it's the wild space where you can do things you can't do at home or in the street…*where you can transgress and be free*. Heritage can be inclusive,

[33] "On 21 March of every year, Dalieh transforms into a space in which the Kurdish community gathers by the thousands, setting up food kiosks and a music stage, and dancing all day carrying national flags" (Saksouk-Sasso, 2015, p. 304).

> and heritage is not just a building. It's also a landscape. Heritage is a building, a space, a view, a landscape, a memory, and it's also tangible and intangible.

Draw people into a space like the Dalieh, encourage them to see its value, enlist them in its preservation, and you can enhance its political potential. Echoing, in a way, some of Judith Butler's (2015) work on the politically generative potential of assembly, the campaign members seemed committed to the idea that a routine being together *in* and *for* a public space could nurture a shared understanding of the city and a collective desire to politically mobilize on its behalf. But, given that a space like the Dalieh was already in heavy use by the working classes – *already valued by them* – then who was the target of the Dalieh's value-making campaign?

In 2018, Nora B., a graduate student in anthropology at the American University of Beirut, carried out, along with some classmates, what she refers to as a 'mini-ethnography' of the Dalieh, aimed primarily at understanding how the site "is being used today and what population it serves" (n.d., para. 3). In an essay published on the blog *Hummus for Thought*, Nora explains that after repeat visits to the site, she was struck by a noticeable lack of Lebanese patrons. "Most of the people we interacted with, heard, or observed were Syrians, Palestinians, Kurds, South Asian or Southeast Asian" (n.d., para. 4).

While campaign members recognized the ethnic, racial and national diversity of the site users, and gestured to the difficulty involved in mobilizing them on behalf of the site, they rarely linked this difficulty to these users' exclusion from the majority of the rights awarded to Lebanese citizens, focusing instead on a generalized notion of economic disenfranchisement. Using class as the primary framework through which to talk about the site and why it had been

neglected, however, obscured the difficulties inherent in advocating for and politicizing a space used primarily by those ostracized by the Lebanese state and citizenry and unable to make claims on either.

In her article, Nora frames the Dalieh as a "space of refuge" for vulnerable and ostracized communities in Lebanon, a space where they could be temporarily spared the many visual and aural markers that signaled their 'otherness' and undesirability in the country – posters advertising elections they were excluded from, for instance, or security guards screening customers and patrons, as one often saw at the entrances to private beaches. An absence of municipal attention and management did mean a lack of bathrooms, garbage cans and seating, but it also allowed otherwise heavily surveilled populations to spend some leisure time away from the ominous gaze of an increasingly aggressive security apparatus. For these marginalized communities, we can think of the Dalieh, borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin, as carnivalesque or, borrowing from Michel Foucault, as a heterotopic space where the various forms of discrimination and alienation they daily experienced were temporarily suspended, and they could inhabit, however briefly, a different way of being – one not marked by the racial, religious or class-based hierarchies and prejudices they were otherwise bombarded with.

We could argue that the ways in which marginalized communities traditionally utilized the Dalieh as a space of refuge, the ways in which they carved out this zone of escape for themselves, already constituted a political act, as did their reluctance to lobby the government for a routine practice of care that would likely involve, if not their removal from the site, that their access to it be restricted. Beyond such heterodox forms of subterranean political praxis,

however, the initiative that these communities could take on behalf of the site was limited. These were not people who could risk being seen at multiple protests, for example, who could sue the government, or who could elect a more just municipal council. They were not citizens. As one of Nora's interviewees told her, "I don't feel like I can really make any demands. I'm not a Lebanese citizen. I don't feel that it's my fight" (n.d., para. 12).

But the Dalieh Campaign's understanding of political engagement appeared to hinge on a framing of it as not so much the prerogative of the citizen, but as something she should take the lead on given the norms of and constraints on public life in Lebanon. In her essay, Nora interviewed Mona El Hallak, Director of the American University of Beirut's Neighbourhood Initiative, who explained that to liberate and protect the Dalieh, "we need the people with us: People should stand up for their right to free access to the sea" (n.d., para. 8). And, the campaign regularly made the case for the socio-politically transformative impact that such a collective demanding of rights could facilitate. But, the bulk of the Dalieh's users were not considered 'people' of Lebanon. They were not rights-bearing citizens and, therefore, had no claim to the Lebanese sea in the eyes of the government and municipality. Could the Dalieh, then, be politicized or democratized without a wider discourse critical of the link between citizenship and human and civil rights in Lebanon? Could the campaign mobilize 'the people' without folding the fight for the Dalieh into a larger battle aimed at challenging normative ways of imagining who was deserving of being grouped within this category in the Lebanese context? And, without this contestation, what kind of a politics could the campaign facilitate on and through the site?

Even in the case of the Lebanese fishermen who mobilized against their eviction, while celebrating their resistance the campaign members acknowledged the fact that many, in the end, accepted financial compensation and vacated their posts. These fishermen certainly valued the Dalieh and worked to protect it, but when it came down to it and their livelihood was at stake, they did what they had to do in order to survive and protect their families. The Dalieh was not more valuable than their ability to provide for their kin. So, if users like the fishermen and their families did not need to be convinced of the value of the site, what was it that could compel them to fight for its preservation as a commons?

I do not mean to imply that site users never publicly asserted their opposition to the threats facing the Dalieh or were disinterested in mobilizing on its behalf. The campaign had a strong history of not only collaborating with but following the lead of site users as they publicly registered and asserted their refusal of the privatization of the Dalieh. Groups of swimmers and divers who made regular use of the site every day at sunrise, had at various points voiced their intention to honor their routine even if the site was closed off. Within this context, they argued, continuing to swim constituted a form of activism, and they "encouraged the public to keep exercising their right to swim for free in the sea" (El Khoury, 2016, p. 139). That day in 2015, when the Dalieh fence was torn down by participants in the garbage protests, many dove from the rocks of the Dalieh and partook in this established Ras Beiruti tradition for the first time, in solidarity with dedicated swimmers and other site users.

Figure 6: The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche. (2014). Diving competition on the Dalieh circa 2000 [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2OnqZbh

There is, then, a history of grassroots activism on the part of Dalieh users, as well as a history of allies, like those in the Dalieh Campaign, sharing in their practices as a means of voicing their support for the site as a wild commons and for the right to leisure of the popular classes. My focus in this chapter, however, is on making sense of the trajectory of urban activists away from this form of bottom-up collaboration and rallying, towards a more technocratic and managerial approach to saving the Dalieh that hinged on appeals to the state and to elements of the citizenry with the social and economic capital necessary to exert pressure on state institutions. This latter approach, however, risked stifling the site's political potential, which the campaign was so committed to cultivating.

In 2016, the Dalieh Campaign submitted an application for the Dalieh's inclusion on the World Monument Watch List, along with Honeine Palace in the Beirut residential neighbourhood of Zoqaq el Blatt.[34] The campaign and its co-organizer, Save Beirut Heritage, sought to organize a festival on both sites in the summer of 2017 that aimed to draw attention to both the value of the sites and the threats posed to them, drawing legitimacy from the international designation. In order to facilitate access for myself as a researcher, and as part of my desire to give while I took, I agreed to take on the organization of the Dalieh portion of what would become known as Heritage Watch Day, into which a year's worth of collective planning, energy and frustration was poured.[35]

III. Conclusion

In this section, I introduced the landscape of the Dalieh as one of the means through which urban activists in Lebanon were attempting to enable a certain type of politics through the space of the city. In the case of the Dalieh Campaign, it was trying to do so by focusing on a physical space of gathering with both historical and contemporary significance.

The campaign saw the Dalieh as a good in itself, but it also saw it as a tool for cultivating a new kind of political subjectivity by encouraging a diversity of people, regardless of class, political affiliation, racial, ethnic or religious background, to engage in a routine being together in public.

[34] The list is curated by the New York-based NGO World Monuments Fund.

[35] The World Monuments Fund awarded the campaign 1500 USD to carry out its Watch Day events. Watch Day is an initiative of the WMF and takes place annually in all of the sites selected for inclusion in the World Monument Watch List.

There was, however, a difference between the potential the campaign identified for the Dalieh and the ways in which it tried to strategically protect the site and draw a diversity of people towards it.

In the next section, I will argue that the Dalieh Campaign's desire to make the Dalieh valuable *to all* – the lower, middle and upper classes, governmental authorities, profit-seekers, etc. – in order to save it from privatization, contradicted or threatened its desire to honour and preserve the unscripted nature of the site, which it identified as the source of its political potential.

Making the Dalieh a Cause Worth Fighting For

In this section, I will present the Dalieh Campaign's original vision for Watch Day, which very much corresponded to its members' desire to celebrate the site as a wild commons, before attempting to make sense of why the event ended up deviating significantly from this vision.

I will ask why a desire to celebrate the site based on what it already had to offer was abandoned in favour of an event that catered more to middle and upper class residents of Beirut who had previously shown little interest in the Dalieh. I will argue that the anxiety to act in the short-term in order both to prevent the real estate sector's encroachment on the Dalieh, and to counteract widespread hopelessness and complicity with the status quo more generally by logging an activist achievement, directed these urbanists towards strategies they were not necessarily convinced would serve their own long-term, grander vision.

I. Watch Day

The campaign spent, as mentioned, nearly a year planning for the weekend of on-site events. Its members wanted to celebrate the site based on what it already had to offer; to engage and energize those who already made use of it regularly – fishermen, divers, yogis, the Kurdish community, the working classes who could not afford to swim or picnic on private beaches. We partnered with a local arts platform focused on public interventions to commission original, site-specific works that would, as per the original proposal, "contribute to place-making and facilitating the site's accessibility;" that would be participatory and interactive; and that would enhance the public features of the Dalieh through "lighting, seating, garbage collection, pedestrian paths, sounds" (personal communication, January 10, 2017). Some campaign members approached fishermen with whom they had long been connected, inviting them to run their usual boat tours, which introduced visitors to the seascape and provided the fishermen with much needed additional income. The campaign members decided to organize their own expert-led walking tours, to introduce visitors to the many riches of the site, from the historical, to the ecological and geomorphological. We discussed contacting members of the Kurdish community, who yearly organized a Nowruz festival on the Dalieh, inviting them to join us for Watch Day and to bring their distinctive energy back to the site for this special occasion. We talked about inviting fishermen to fry and sell freshly caught fish.

We managed to arrange the boat and walking tours, but much of what else we discussed did not unfold. We launched the weekend of joint events from Antwork – a sleek, contemporary collective workspace in the Sanayeh neighbourhood, close to Zoqaq El Blatt. We partnered with

hip, local food market Souk El Tayeb to bring vendors from all over Lebanon to the Dalieh, where they sold their dishes and products at prices unaffordable to the communities that ordinarily visited the site. We set up a speakers' corner to encourage dialogue, inviting specific activists from civil society to come speak about predetermined issues during scheduled time slots, instead of keeping the corner open and free to all for the entire duration of the Sunday reserved for Dalieh activities. We invited contemporary indie musicians and alternative dancers to create a lively, celebratory ambience. And, we commissioned artist interventions that, far from enhancing the usability of the space, were out-of-place conceptual works that meant little to the campaigners, let alone the users of the site – a washing machine sitting in a floating boat; a kiddie pool filled with seawater at the edge of a cliff. The former, titled *On the Same Wave Length*, was described in the Watch Day communication material as follows: "washing machines are collected from recycling, deprived from their counterweight, and placed on stranded fisherman's boats creating an eerie and absurd situation."[36]

[36] Descriptions of some of the other artists' interventions as they appeared in Watch Day communication material:
1.*Thin White Line* (Lime (Calcium Oxide) - 400 meters x 10-15cm): *Thin White Line* is a 400 meter line drawn in lime, dividing the Dalieh of Raouche into two parts. The land north of the line is protected from construction and the land to the south is land that can be built upon. Lime is derived from limestone, which forms the rocky landscape of Dalieh, and it is often used in the construction industry to produce mortar and plaster, among others. The line will be at the mercy of the natural elements, and will eventually disappear.
2. *Dalieh's Infinity Pool* (Inflatable swimming pool, metal sign, base plate, sea water): "An infinity pool is a reflecting or swimming pool where the water flows over one or more edges, producing a visual effect of water with no boundary. Such pools are often designed such that the edge appears to merge with a larger body of water such as the ocean, or with the sky. They are often seen at resorts, estates, and in other luxurious places." (source: Wikipedia)
3. *The Flag* (Concrete steel fabric, flag [that read *Bahr* or 'Sea' in Arabic]): I heard that I've almost become invisible, therefore, paid a visit to your land to reiterate that I exist. Oh and I also planted aflag.

Figure 7: Temporary Art Platform. (2017). On the same wave length [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/330oAqk

We ran a number of clean-up campaigns on site before the event and set up camp in one of the less picturesque spots on the Dalieh – a sandy lot, far from where those who normally used the site were congregated, creating a pathway with signs and ropes we deemed safer than the one users usually took down to the site. The day of the event, squeezed into one of the few empty spots I found under the shade of a vendor's umbrella, hiding from the scorching sun, I wondered: had we unintentionally created a class divide?

The logic was, perhaps, not to interrupt the routines of regular users, invading their space and imposing ourselves. But couldn't we just have simply joined them in *unscripted* form? Couldn't

we have used our socio-cultural capital to draw in those who refuse the space, designating it a haven for the dangerous classes, to its stunning rocks, covered in a moss so translucently green it looked almost alien against the backdrop of concrete Beirut? Couldn't we have encouraged the comfortable classes to appreciate this open, free space and the people who regularly occupied it? After all, scholars and planners who argue for the political potential of public spaces, including members of the Dalieh Campaign, regularly referenced those which, in particular, "celebrate spontaneity, contradictions, messiness and disorder…The less a public space is planned and designed into an abstract space generating specific types of socio-spatial practices, the more it has the potential to be politically subversive" (Harb, 2013, para. 3).

Figure 8: The Dalieh, June 4, 2017

How is it that an initial desire to celebrate the site as a wild commons resulted in an event that catered more to those middle to upper class residents of Beirut who neglected it? Needing to work through my confusion about what we had discussed and envisioned, and what we ended up with for Watch Day, I sat down with Alia – with whom I worked most closely during my two years of fieldwork – months later to discuss my observations.

"I'm a bit lost after everything that happened with Watch Day," she told me. "I was hoping it would be an occasion to build a coalition that could take care of the site itself, and that didn't happen." I told her I felt we had created a class divide that Sunday, which I found curious given the campaign's routinely expressed desire to engage the working class users of the site. In the past, she clarified, site users had always played a central role in events organized by the campaign. This time around, the event took place during Ramadan, which, she thought, is probably why we saw a dearth of regular users at our event. The Ramadan explanation, however, would have made more sense had regular users been absent from the site as a whole. But they were a few feet away, swimming, picnicking and smoking shisha despite the holy month. Additionally, we had made sure our event would stretch long enough to accommodate *iftar*, inviting visitors to break their fast on site.

Figure 9: Patrons enjoying the Dalieh, June 4, 2017

There was also the pressure of the World Monument Fund looming in the background, and its desire for an event that would fit nicely within a repertoire of activities happening on endangered sites in other parts of the world. And, there was the campaign's lack of resources, which Alia mentioned. The team was made up of only a handful of committed activists, after all, all of whom had full-time careers in addition to being immersed in a number of other civil society initiatives. Perhaps that's why, I told her, we ended up with an event that catered more to the

upper and middle classes. It was easier, after all, to partner with hip initiatives like Souk El Tayeb, whose tastes aligned with those of the campaign and could therefore be left to organize themselves, than to partner with site users with whom regular communication and multiple meetings would be required. This is a factor to which I can personally attest, having served as the liaison between Souk El Tayeb and the campaign.

Prior to arriving on site for Watch Day, I thought inviting Souk El Tayeb to participate was a wonderful way to draw its devoted clientele to the Dalieh. It wasn't until I arrived on site, purchased an overpriced cheese wrap, and noticed how segregated we were from the site users, that I began to question this decision. I say this to stress that as an ethnographer who participated in, and not only observed, all meetings and email exchanges related to Watch Day; who voiced approval or argued against various suggestions; and who played an essential role in the implementation of all decisions, I am very much complicit in the kind of event the campaign ended up organizing. What I am attempting to do in this chapter is assess a contradictory process of which I was very much a part, for I shared the campaign's devotion to the Dalieh as a wild commons, and yet found myself helping draft and implement a vision for the site that threatened this wildness.

What separates me from my interlocutors is simply the luxury of time and resources to engage in deep retrospective reflection on what occurred, and to place it in conversation with theory. I did not write this chapter as a critical outsider looking in, but as a member of this campaign who, by being able to step away both from activism and from Lebanon in its entirety, and dedicate months to critical reflection on the work we carried out together, hopes to contribute

something constructive to a group of activists who are juggling multiple responsibilities at once, and struggling to make something of life in Lebanon.

II. Who is Our Audience?

There was what seemed to me like an ideological divide within the campaign. These differences first became evident when we discussed the possibility of launching the Watch Day events at the lavish Sursock Museum, of which, for example, some members strongly disapproved. Others defended the suggestion as a means of ensuring visibility and reaching a wide audience, and of highlighting that the Minister of Culture, who heads the state institution responsible for public cultural institutions like Sursock, *cares* about the Dalieh. Those opposed to the suggestion didn't want the art scene to think the campaign's activities belonged in its world. They worried that a launch at Sursock would imply that the site wasn't in a precarious and dangerous position, urgently in need of mobilization and support.

Reservations were also voiced in response to an alternative suggestion to launch the event from the Ministry of Culture or the Ministry of Environment. One member said the idea made him feel nauseous. "I don't know how people would react to this." Defensively, those in favour dismissed what they called a fear of institutions in Lebanese civil society, responding, for example, as one member did, by arguing that "it is institutions that are supposed to take care of the coast. I don't care who they are as long as they do it." Chiming in, others insisted that it was the campaign's "intellectual audience" that would protect the site now.

There was then, a divide between members of the campaign who favoured a bottom up approach of reclaiming rights and standing together in public, and those who believed the Dalieh could only be saved through pressure from influencers aimed at the powers that be. The latter won out during Watch Day, not because they convinced the remaining members of the campaign of their position, but because, as the campaign members themselves had admitted, hard as they did try they had yet to figure out a way to protect the site from privatization *and* preserve it as a commons.

What was the alternative to the Watch Day that ended up manifesting? In the 2015 *Arab Studies Journal* written by a member of the campaign, mentioned earlier, the author quotes Simon Springer, who writes that "to remove passion from public space, the state attempts to create spaces based on a desire for security more than interaction and for entertainment, more than democratic politics – the end of public space" (as cited in Saksouk-Sasso, 2015, p. 307). But Watch Day, it seems to me, amounted to a staging of what the Dalieh could look like and function as if better managed and invested in by the state – a staging that contradicted the celebration of the Dalieh in its 'unscripted' form that we saw in the campaign's discursive material. It felt like, on the one hand, a demonstration for the benefit of the municipality, as well as the ministries of environment and culture, showing them the potential of the site and how they could and should manage it, and, on the other, a call to influencers to recognize the possibilities of the Dalieh, and to push the authorities to do their jobs and care for the site.

But, to invite the neoliberal Lebanese state into this wild space in the city would be to undermine its wildness – it is, I think, an impossible partnership. The conditions for the cultivation of a

democratic ethos could not, I felt, be born on that dusty stretch of rock and sand we occupied on a hot summer day.

Some members of the campaign seemed to want to avoid undermining the logic of the state – its commitment to private property, and its desire to generate profit from the city itself. They wanted to find a happy middle. Nabila, for example, in personal conversations with me and in meetings, spoke over and over again about the case studies she had carried out about the *potential* of the site. "So much can be done," she would say, "that would generate a lot of money. There are similar projects elsewhere – they don't touch the sites, but they manage them and their potentials well, and they can generate money, even for their owners." But, through this approach, the campaign risked lobbying not for the right to the city as Henri Lefebvre (who they often cited) understood it – as a means of producing political subjects – but merely for a right to [sustainable] enjoyment – a means of producing, if prioritized as *telos*, more content subjects for the existing system.

The Dalieh the campaign presented on that Sunday in June, seemed like one designed to appeal to a conception of public space not only acceptable to, but profitable for, the neoliberal state and the small sliver of society it is willing to pander to. In so doing, the campaign reminded me of groups like the Mumbai-based urban NGO SPARC (the Society for the Promotion of Area Resources), critiqued by Roy (2009) for producing "an entrepreneurial subjectivity…steeped in the morality of collaboration, participation and mediation. To protest, to confront, is to stand outside the parameters of citizenship" (p. 173). It is difficult to see what distinguishes this approach from that of many European and American organizations intervening in Lebanon,

which "tend to favour 'good governance' programs alongside traditional infrastructure-building or relief work" (Nucho, 2016, p. 3), and which, in their attempt to "combat the so-called weak state and increase good governance integrate into a fragmented order of service and infrastructure provision that is sectarian in nature" (2016, p. 7).

As part of the Watch Day festivities, the campaign organized a screening of the film *Children of Beirut* by Sarah Srage, which is set in the Dalieh. Members invited the fishermen of the Dalieh to the screening, which took place in an exhibition venue managed by the Ministry of Tourism. During the Q&A, one of the fishermen launched into a diatribe about the Hariri family and all of the damage it had done to the fishermen of the Dalieh through its seizure and sale of land. A number of campaign members were furious. They had promised the ministry there would be no mention of *politics* within this space. They whispered to one another and looked around nervously for the Tourist Police, which they expected would pop in for a surprise visit at any moment. But wasn't, I thought, one of the central goals of the campaign to empower these fishermen? Wasn't the campaign members' strategy of not naming and shaming rooted in society's supposed aversion to it? If a key segment of their audience chose to adopt this strategy, to name the person or persons who bought and sold their land, making their lives further precarious, shouldn't they as activists support them, disregarding the impact on their relationship with friendly ministries, especially given the miniscule number of fishermen who were still fighting for their right to work and/or live on the Dalieh, having either refused financial compensation or never been offered it in the first place?

In a draft of a write up about Watch Day that circulated amongst campaign members, Sally highlighted the following quote from one of the 300 visitors to the Dalieh, as one that particularly resonated with the campaign: "I am 40-years-old, and I never knew there was something like the Dalieh in Beirut" (personal communication, July 4, 2017). She chose, in other words, to highlight the impact the event had on a visitor, rather than a regular user. She mentioned the fishermen's visit to the Glass Pavilion at the Ministry of Tourism for the viewing of Sara Srage's film, pointing out the opportunity it gave them to "raise their plea," but failing to mention the campaign's opposition to and anxiety over the impromptu political intervention, and failing to mention the substance of the plea. Antwork was said to have been chosen as a launch venue because it is "a successful example of repurposing a 1930s mansion and its garden and preserving them" – not because it was the only venue left considered worthy of welcoming the press to after the Sursock Museum, and the ministries of environment, culture and tourism fell through or were vetoed. The Ministry of Tourism was chosen for the exhibition and the film screening, Sally wrote, because "it is supposed to be the legal authority whose mandate is to promote natural and urban tourism."

III. What Comes After the Encroachment of the Ordinary?

During Watch Day, simply joining the site users in unscripted form never seemed like an option, perhaps because of the risk of alienating them, but also because, I think, it wouldn't have accorded with some of these urban activists' desire to demonstrate their conception of what an ordered city could look like. The activists of Beirut's urban social movement, after all, were not merely invested in governmental reform, but in introducing, to borrow from Roy (2009), a new

practice of civic governmentality. The goal was also to enable and encourage a more responsible 'ethics of consumption' (Abou-Hodeib, 2017).

Writing about the Indian context, Nair explains that in Bangalore, "the more muscular middle-class resident's associations which have risen in the 1990s…elevate the rituals and comforts of a middle class domesticity to city-wide priority" (Nair as cited in Anjaria, 2009, p. 393). Similarly, while the Dalieh Campaign celebrated the transgressive practices – as Sally liked to refer to them – that had long characterized the site, it also paradoxically treated them like 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 2002) in the context of the well-ordered city, presenting in their stead a more acceptable way to consume public space – one that did not damage the landscape but that also highlighted its economic potential. But, to deem something 'matter out of place', is also to mark it for reform or even removal. An investment in the welfare of a population, after all, is also an investment in its proper disciplining, in inspiring the cultivation of particular ways to engage with society and authority, potentially by advocating for a certain mode of governmental intervention (Abu-Hodeib, 2017).

Perhaps one of the reasons for the discrepancy between the campaign's celebration of the Dalieh's 'unscripted' nature, and the kind of event Watch Day turned out to be, is the inadequacy or insufficiency of Bayat's notion of encroachment by the marginalized, which these activists celebrated in the abstract. What comes after encroachment? Is it a permanent solution in a context like Lebanon, where the Dalieh continues to be a threatened site sweating under the spotlight of developers, and where those doing the encroaching are, if not denied citizenship rights entirely, considered neglectable and disposable because of their class

position? In her writing on the Dalieh and the campaign, Saksouk-Sasso (2015) cites Lefebvre's distinction between:

> public space that the government controls and regulates and public spaces that social groups use. The distinction draws attention to the power to deem particular spaces official. This power runs 'concomitant to the power to exclude certain groups from such sites on the basis of this very ascription' (p. 307).

And, she points to a criticism levelled against some public space activists that accuses them of "freezing activism in the struggle for 'state building'" (2015, p. 300). But, if we examine the demands of the Dalieh Campaign, they are *all* provocations for governmental intervention – for the state to perform its responsibilities.[37]

"We shouldn't replace the state," Alia told me:

> There are authorities that have jurisdiction over this site. We are resisting and initiating but we shouldn't be replacing decision makers. For me, we are lobbying for demands and visions so the state will come in and adopt these demands and visions. There are authorities that have responsibility and accountability. *They are the ones who are going to decide what happens to the site.*

Earlier, we learned that some members of the campaign insisted that it was institutions who were meant to care and capable of caring for the Lebanese coast. But, to frame governmental intervention as *care* is to belie the adverse effects that are likely to accompany a municipal

[37] In the section of its website entitled "Roles of Institutions in Preserving Dalieh", the campaign lists the relevant responsibilities of various governmental institutions, from the governor and municipality, to the ministries of environment, public works and transport, and culture, the Directorate General of Urban Planning and the Council of Development and Reconstruction, framed as having the collective power to protect and develop the Dalieh if they only performed their roles properly.

attentiveness to the Dalieh, which is likely to identify and frame the policing of users and practices as part of its responsibility to the public. This effect was already demonstrated in the management of Horsh Beirut, whose partial opening to the public was accompanied not only by strict behavioral restrictions, but an army presence that made it difficult for the park to be enjoyed in a leisurely way.

Here, it is worth pointing, again, to the tension between wanting the site to be engaged with in both a 'civil' *and* an 'unscripted' manner. In her article, Saksouk-Sasso (2015) criticized the former head of Beirut's municipality Bilal Hamad for "admonishing citizens to be 'well behaved'," demonstrating an "undeniably classed, sexed, and racialized understanding of what an acceptable public might be" (p. 308). But the campaign also had a conception of what a well-behaved public was – one, for example, that cleaned up after itself. The campaign didn't see bad behaviour as some kind of cultural essence specific to a certain class or sect, but rather, the result of a lack of education or awareness that could be remedied – but it did uncritically classify certain ways of engaging with the Dalieh as 'bad', harmful or unsustainable, and it did identify the site as dirty and undesirable, despite its continued heavy-use. "Users," Alia told me,

> are not neutral. They can affect the site negatively. The fishermen, for example, at some point were having a negative impact. They were doing things that resemble a disregard for nature, disregarding ecosystems and the public domain. The Dalieh posed a really important question – how do you mediate between all of these interests – local economy, ecology and nature, the general public, the fishermen? *The site needs to be able to encompass all of these things*.

This is not to say that it was wrong to want the site to be clean, but rather to point out how this framing of user neglect for the site, linking it to a dearth of awareness or education, failed to

factor in the role that the lack of a sense of belonging to the Dalieh, the wider city, and the country as a whole, played in the way users behaved on and treated the site – the ways in which neglect from below could also be read as a political gesture. Care is not a neutral practice devoid of power dynamics, and caring for the Dalieh and its users did sometimes involve campaign members positioning themselves as experts who knew what was best for all those invested in the site – in some cases, uncritically inviting the state's attention and intervention, which risked facilitating processes of *de-politicization*, rather than engaging with and harnessing the politics *already* unfolding on site.

IV. Conclusion

When Lefebvre spoke of the right to the city, he didn't mean a right merely to physical space, but to:

> 'a political space as well, constituting the city as space of politics.' Reflective of his stress on the city as a space of politics, Lefebvre envisions a city where its inhabitants could properly participate in urban political life (Kuymulu, 2013, p. 925).

What the campaign created that Sunday in June felt more akin to what Richard Sennett calls 'dead public spaces', where "the essence of conviviality, spontaneity, encounter and yes, that little sprinkle of chaos, have been stripped out" (Garrett, 2017, p. 38).

My impression was that the campaign wanted to win over everyone: the middle classes and upper classes, the working classes and site users, the ministries and the municipality, and to work as the expert, neutral mediator between them all. It is difficult to imagine, however, how

an approach committed to winning over the state, to convincing it of the *profitability* of the reforms one is lobbying for, could result in the kinds of transformative changes my interlocutors were committed to; how, in short, it could politicize public space.

In this section, I have attempted to describe "narratives of perfection" (Schielke, 2015, p. 48) or visions of "the utopian city" (Gunder, 2005, p. 173), particular to the Dalieh Campaign, and to think critically about the factors that enabled, or forced, deviations from these narratives or fantasies without implying a lack of commitment to or investment in these imaginings on the part of my interlocutors. In the next section, I will discuss the understanding of Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal order that, I argue, kept my interlocutors from seeing how their desire to engage and empower the Lebanese state was incompatible with their vision for the city and the good life it was meant to enable.

Corruption as Fetish

To make sense of the commitment to activating the state as the primary vehicle for change, we have to deconstruct urban activists' understanding of the Lebanese political system.

In this section, I will discuss the reliance on corruption as the primary analytic for making sense of the problems plaguing Lebanon, and the forms of activism this analytic authorized. I argue that a diagnosis of vaguely-defined corruption as the primary source of Lebanon's ailments directed urban activists like those with whom I worked towards a collaborationist and

accommodationist approach to the Lebanese state, which hindered their ability to work towards their goal of politicizing public space in the service of social justice and democratization.

Despite a wariness about inviting the Lebanese state into a space like the Dalieh, which we see expressed in the writings of some campaign members, the campaign saw no other place to turn. Imploring the state to do its job eclipsed all other horizons of possibility. We can call this cruel optimism, following from Berlant (2011), or cynicism following from Navaro (2002).[38] But, I think there is also a particular understanding of the Lebanese political system, as well as what constitutes worthwhile activism, that fuels this commitment to activating the state and putting it in service of the public good – that makes lobbying the source of one's pain for redress appear as the most worthwhile strategy for facilitating change.

I. What is Corruption?

While planning for Watch Day, the Dalieh Campaign began hosting preliminary meetings for what would become the Alliance for the Lebanese Coast in 2017 – a rebooting and reorganizing of the coalition meetings that had taken place and then subsequently fizzled out during the summer of 2016.

The coastal alliance was the joint initiative of the Dalieh Campaign and two other environmental/urbanist groups from the South and North of Lebanon respectively. They

[38] Optimism turns cruel, Berlant (2011)explains, when one becomes attached to "compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to either be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic…whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world (2011, p. 24).

brought together campaigns from across the country in a series of meetings meant not only to deal with existing problems by creating a strategy for collectively responding to them and supporting one another, but also to imagine a holistic future for the coast. Despite their disagreements, the members of the coastal alliance were all positioned against one primary enemy – corruption.

There was a kind of fetishism of corruption amongst such groups, identified as the root cause of all Lebanese ailments. But corruption is a symptom, rather than the source of the problem. Furthermore, it tended to be broached by activists within Beirut's urban social movement in the abstract, discursively divorced from the structural conditions that enabled it. In his book *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-Building in Postwar Lebanon*, Leenders (2012) argues that most analyses of corruption in Lebanon focus merely on *condemning*, rather than also *analysing*, such practices. Within this framework the ruling regime is positioned as not doing its job, rather than uninterested in doing what opponents see as its job or structured to do a particular job and do it well. Leenders argues that Lebanese corruption cannot be understood without analytical recourse to the post-civil war political settlement that, he asserts, *inhibits* institutional reform in Lebanon.

Many who oppose political corruption in the country, including my interlocutors, call for political elites to respect and implement the Taʾif Accord and the constitution, failing to consider the role they played in facilitating a political settlement that "is incapable of generating the desired institutional changes" (Leenders, 2012, p. 236). The Taʾif Accord of 1990 officially ended Lebanon's 15-year-civil war. Its purpose was to promote political inclusivity amongst all

sects, and to prevent any one of them from "gaining lasting supremacy." But in so doing, it enabled and encouraged political elites' "reliance on confessionalism to muster political support and legitimacy" (Leenders, 2012, p. 123).

We cannot understand Lebanese corruption without, on the one hand, understanding the "built-in deadlock of the political arrangement prescribed by the Tai'f Accord" (Leenders, 2012, p. 139) and, on the other hand, the neoliberal order introduced by Rafiq Al-Hariri and the form that 'actually existing neoliberalism' took in Lebanon, where, "Hariri and his technocrats colonized and strengthened the 'right hand' of the state," and "rival elites – especially the former militia leaders – used 'service ministries' as patronage instruments" (Baumann, 2012b, p. 151).

Reliance on patronage was encouraged by a vulnerability imposed on elites by the post-war political settlement. Leenders (2012) explains that the manipulation of elections by expanding the number of parliamentary seats, adopting a winner-takes-all formula, gerrymandering or engaging in clientelistic practices, all made elites vulnerable, distancing them from their electorates, with whom they often shared few political or familial links, leaving parliament unrepresentative and open to delegitimization. Sectarianism also proved useful to the neoliberal order, by mitigating its damages (Salloukh, 2015a). As Baumann (2012b) writes, "Lebanon's post-war economy provided the material basis for sectarian clientelism" (p. 153). Consequently, "the structure of Lebanon's economic field means that access to jobs, healthcare and education can be used as patronage instruments" (Baumann, 2012b, p. 162). Far from a broken system, this created a symbiosis amongst otherwise rival political elites, who nurtured an understanding of the state as precarious and dysfunctional in order to wash their hands of responsibility.

A parochialized narrative of corruption, of a political system built on *wasta*, or political backing, on a scratch your back and I'll scratch yours approach to securing mutual financial interests, also belies the transnational linkages, to borrow from Gupta (1995), that play an influential role in policy-making in Lebanon, in addition to the role that patronage plays in maintaining the country's neoliberal economy. A failure to think in terms of the macropolitics and macroeconomics shaping urban governance in Lebanon, focusing instead on a local culture of corruption, assumes the universality of "expectations of 'right' behaviour, standards of accountability, and norms of conducts for state officials" (Gupta, 1995, p. 388), ignoring the fact that the contemporary state is accountable, today, to other forces besides its citizens – foreign capital, for instance, which also imposes norms of behaviour on political officials.

In his work, Kingston (2013) examines previous attempts by environmental NGOs to "wield policy influence" by choosing to "strategically engage with political and policy-making elites" (p. 135). Like the Dalieh Campaign, Green Line, the NGO analysed by Kingston, was looking to avoid the typical NGO strategy of picking up the slack of the state, wanting to strengthen it instead; "to encourage and assist the state in assuming its national public responsibilities" (p. 144).

Kingston (2013) describes the relationship that environmental groups had with the Ministry of Environment when it was run by Akram Chehayeb, a Druze politician with environmental concerns who was appointed in 1996 and eager to collaborate with them. But a particular *political* context undergirded this collaboration. In the aftermath of the civil war, head of the Progressive Socialist Party (associated with the Druze sect) Walid Jumblatt had hoped to gain

control of the Ministry of Health but found himself with the nominal Ministry of Environment instead. Angered at being marginalized within the new government, Jumblatt decided to use the ministry, managed by his associate Akram Chehayeb, to strike back at his political opponents by, for example, challenging the quarrying industry within which much of the political class had a stake. These elites, however, backed by the Syrian presence in Lebanon, ultimately turned out to be more powerful than Jumblatt. In the end,

> with the one exception of its success with respect to preventing the formal privatization of the coastal area, Chehayeb's ministry accomplished very little in terms of results on the ground and never had any of its draft legislations passed into law by the parliament (Kingston, 2013, p. 156).

While Jumblatt, to whom Chehayeb had to answer, had a genuine interest in the environment, he was "first and foremost a political leader of a minority confession fighting for its share of the country's resources" (Kingston, 2013, p. 156).

Similarly, the urban activists with whom I worked attempted to pressure, collaborate or share knowledge with existing ministries and other governmental institutions, called for individual resignations, demanded that the law be implemented or reformed, and that the constitution be honoured, ignoring the built-in limitations of the post-war Lebanese system – what appears, following from Leenders (2012), as its *unreformability*. They searched, to borrow from Navaro (2002), for the ideal face of the state, for the governmental figure who was loyal to his proper role. But the law, as Comarroff and Comarroff (2006) write, "often comes down on the side of bandit capital, especially when the latter dons the mask of respectable business" (p. 29).

II. Urban Activists and Neoliberalism

There are nods to Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal system in some of the writings of the Dalieh Campaign and Nahnoo, but their language overwhelmingly focused on a vague notion of corruption. When they did reference neoliberalism, for example, they seemed to imply particular neoliberal policies as well as corrupt practices, rather than the very structural foundations of the Lebanese economy. On its website, the Dalieh Campaign called for "a city where private capital *cannot trump* [emphasis added] the desires of the urban majorities in enlarging and improving the city's shared commons." It wrote of the 'greed' that "has motivated building processes in the city," of a "*dubious* [emphasis added] process of privatization" (The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche, n.d.). 'Keep your construction site off my Rouache', read one famous campaign banner, pointing to a desire to mitigate the *unwanted* effects of neoliberalism on *certain* aspects of urban life.

"We're not fighting capitalism," Nabila told me.

> If you bring someone into power, they're not going to be able to practice capitalism if the system is working. We have corruption. It has nothing to do with capitalism. They're not capitalists anyway. If you look at parliament, they're not capitalists. Hezbollah are capitalists? The feudalists were capitalists. Capitalism is not my issue. We don't have institutions. Intentionally they don't want a state.

But Lebanon's parliamentarians, including those associated with Hezbollah, supported and benefitted from the neoliberal economy, and the country's ruling class had cultivated and inflated a popular understanding of the Lebanese state as a *failed project*, allowing its efficiency in imposing a crippling socio-economic order to be nearly wiped from the public imagination.

The privatization of the Lebanese coast cannot be made sense of outside the framework of the neoliberalisation of the Lebanese economy, a key feature of which is, as elsewhere, the *redistribution* of wealth and income – what Harvey (2005) calls accumulation by dispossession, and one of the hallmarks of which is the "conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights," as well as the "suppression of rights to the commons" (p. 159). Contra the myth of the weak, absent or neglectful state, the Lebanese ruling class, as in most other neoliberal contexts, "plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting these processes" through recourse to violence *and* legality (p. 159).

To label privatization a product of the 'greed' of corrupt individuals, be they bureaucrats, members of parliament, or powerful lobbyists, is to obscure the fundamental role that "the corporatization, commodification, and privatization of hitherto public assets" has played in the neoliberal project, as a means of providing access to "new fields for capital accumulation in domains hitherto regarded off-limits to the calculus of profitability" (Harvey, 2005, p. 160). Without an attentiveness to the mechanics of neoliberal expansion, it is difficult to identify the ways in which recourse to or collaboration with the sectarian-neoliberal state as it currently exists – inviting the state into wild spaces, into commons, like the Dalieh, to manage it in ways that are profitable but that keep it accessible, convincing it through expert advice to abandon its support for luxury hotels and embark on this collaborative process – can also unwittingly invite new, unexpected forms of exploitation or dispossession.

We can look to the High Line in New York's Chelsea neighborhood as an example through which to think through such consequences. The High Line project was a celebrated instance of an urban intervention that turned "a long-inaccessible, derelict industrial space" into a public green space through cooperation between residents, experts and local officials (Brenner, 2017, p. 17). But, while the High Line was "oriented towards expanding and activating the urban public sphere," it actually accelerated "processes of gentrification, displacement, segregation and exclusion at the neighborhood and urban scales" (2017, p. 17-18). An inspiring and attractive design intervention, The High Line invited "a wave of new investment, oriented primarily towards elite consumers in surrounding blocks" (p. 17). The creation of "supposedly 'open' urban space," then, can create "new barriers to a genuinely public, democratic, diverse and egalitarian urbanism, not only within the site of intervention, but across the surrounding fabric of buildings, blocks and neighbourhoods" (p. 18). In the Lebanese context, the collaborationist and accommodationist approach to the state outlined in the previous pages appears to me as an attempt to 'green' Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal order, a limited approach to political change that seems capable only of cultivating bounded pockets of urbanism susceptible to co-optation (p. 19).

We can better make sense of this approach by thinking through the distinction between diagnosing society's ills as a product of the *Anthropocene* versus the *Capitalocene*. Those who embrace the latter see an inextricable relationship between capitalism, dedicated to "accumulation by extinction" (Moore, 2016, p. 8), and the treatment of nature as well as large chunks of the world's population as disposable. In response, they call not for "a more equitable distribution of wealth" but "for a *new conception of wealth*" (2016, p. 10). Proponents of the

Anthropocene as analytic, Eileen Crist (2016) argues, are dedicated to saving the 'human enterprise' from itself, not "rejecting history's trajectory of planetary conquest," but rather, "sustaining that trajectory with the caveat of some urgently needed corrections" (p. 20). Anthropocene-focused discourse, she argues, is productive of managerialism, of technocratic responses to the problems plaguing the environment. This results in a restricted approach to urbanism that, rather than disrupting oppressive structures in ways that can allow for radical bottom-up transformations, works to modestly improve quality of life and consumptive capacities within a given system (Brenner, 2017).

For groups like the Dalieh Campaign, the right to the city was predominantly a *juridical* right. It was not the "revolutionary form of appropriation" conceived by Lefebvre (Mayer, 2009, p. 367). It was a claim "for inclusion in the current system as it exists" (2009, p. 369). Such groups attempted to incite and/or convince the authorities to perform the duties they had already been assigned within the current system 'correctly'. Mayer (2009) writes that in this way, the objective (if not the reality) of this approach to urban activism is to reconcile, "sustainability with economic growth," enabling "neoliberalism with a human touch" (p. 369).

Like many of their contemporaries elsewhere, the activists of Lebanon's urban social movement linked infrastructural and environmental injustice to an exceptionalised "broken political system," rather than neoliberalism itself, which has been enabling similar injustices in seemingly distant locales to which Lebanon is thought to share no connection (Dean, 2014, p. 270). Where Occupy Wall Street activists, for example, "tried to make money in politics the primary issue" (2014, p. 270), urban activists in Beirut focused on corruption. Their solutions

were procedural ones, to do with the proper functioning of democracy, its proper management, rather than "the content of the politics" (p. 269).

III. Conclusion

Margaret Mayer (2013a) distinguishes between "calls for a fundamental transformation of cities as they exist versus demands for 'good urban governance' and rights to the city" (p. 192), the former being more characteristic of what Henri Lefebvre meant when he proposed the concept. While urban activists like those associated with the Dalieh Campaign did appear committed to a more radical vision for the city, the anxiety to act in the short-term that seemed to grip these actors forced them to compromise their long-term vision, and to engage in "specific struggles for particular rights (not *the* right to the city)" (p. 206).

Within this approach, the right to the city becomes a mechanism that can ensure the distribution of already "recognized human, social and citizenship rights," like the right to housing and public services, and "boils down to claims for inclusion in the current system as it exists, it does not aim at transforming the existing system – and in that process ourselves" (Mayer, 2013a, p. 207). Not only is this approach to the right to the city limited in relation to the vision for Beirut these activists were committed to, but it is difficult to imagine how it could extend to and fold in the many dedicated users of informal commons like the Dalieh who did not hold citizenship and in many cases even formal residencies in Lebanon.

Swyngedouw (2014) argues that the "temptation to act out" (p. 184), is actually what is invited by the neoliberal state in what he and others label the post-political conjuncture. It is, he writes, "an injunction to obey, to be able to answer to 'What have you done today?'" (2014, p. 184-185). Within this context, Swyngedouw and Wilson (2014) argue, "we should resist the neurotic compulsion to act," the:

> obsessive commitments to 'do something', to 'act' in the names of humanity, cosmopolitanism, anti-globalization, the environment, sustainability, climate change, social justice or any of the other empty signifiers that have become the stand-ins to cover up for the absence of emancipatory egalibertarian political fantasies. The failure of such obsessive activism is now clearly visible. Humanitarianism is hailed to legitimize military intervention and imperial war; the environment becomes a new terrain of capitalist accumulation and serves ideologically as a 'new opium for the masses'; cosmopolitanism is cherished as the cultural condition of a globalized capitalism (p. 308).

To be clear, I am not attempting to polemically argue that my interlocutors *should* aim to transform Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal system in its entirety. I am, rather, attempting to evaluate their tactics and strategies in relation to their own grander vision, one that aimed for the politicization of public space, for a new political subjectivity and an egalitarian approach to civil and human rights, and for the dissipation of divisive values, ideologies and worldviews. I am interested in examining the potential, more broadly, of the urban social movement within which the Dalieh Campaign was situated, and of which it was a crucial part. This movement had come to be distinguished, when my fieldwork was unfolding, by the belief that pragmatic and technocratic politics, grounded in non-contentious, atomized issues related to liveability and well-being, could lay the foundations for more transformative changes. I watched, during my two years in Beirut, this strategy in action, and I watched it repeatedly hit a wall in relation to its desire to introduce technologies of subject formation via certain forms of standing together

in public. I'm interested, as an ethnographer, in contributing to my interlocutors' thinking through of their frustrations, and what they perceived as their failures, in the hopes that I contribute, somehow, to their persistence.

Coda

In this chapter, I described the work of the Dalieh Campaign, whose members were influential actors within Beirut's urban social movement at the time of writing. I argued that the pragmatic strategies and tactics adopted by my urban activist interlocutors in order to log short-term successes, hindered their long-term goals and visions, and were the product of an anxiety to act in order to counteract widespread hopelessness and power the engine of change. I argued that the adoption of corruption as an analytic through which to make sense of Lebanon's problems has played a key role in authorizing an approach to activism focused on negotiating and collaborating with the state in order to get things done.

Pragmatic politics have grown increasingly popular among activists worldwide, and the development and appeal of Beirut's urban social movement needs to be understood in light of what scholars like Swyngedouw, Wilson and Dean call our global, post-political conjuncture, within which the hegemony of capital has introduced mass processes of depoliticization, which have inspired forms of activism that aspire towards consensus and claim non-political or apolitical intentions, focusing on the lowest-common-denominator to bring people together and adjust, rather than fundamentally challenge and transform, oppressive systems.

In the aftermath of the garbage crisis of 2015, key activists within Beirut's urban social movement came together to form Beirut Madinati, arguing that to challenge the helplessness-inducing, hegemonic conception of Lebanese corruption as a permanent, culturally-engrained practice, urban activists needed to enter into the governmental mechanism and demonstrate what its proper functioning could look like when managed by people who know what they are doing and are invested in the public good.

Beirut Madinati failed to win the fight for the Beirut municipality, but after the elections, some of its core members realized the need to invest in more than just advocacy, lobbying and strategic litigation, but also in creating an 'urban politics of the inhabitant', to borrow from Lefebvre. "In Ramlet el baida," Nabila told me, "we did everything we could, but no users emerged. They're the ones who have a stake. In the law they are the only ones who can sue – the directly harmed."[39] And so a desire to introduce a practice of participatory democracy emerged – its goal, to enable the emergence of a *mujtamaʿ fāʿel* [proactive society].

In the following chapter, I continue my focus on Beirut's urban social movement, exploring Beirut Madinati's attempts at community building and organizing. I explore why the activists I collaborated with maintained a firm commitment to 'activating the state' as their primary strategy, despite recognizing its shortcomings, and the ways in which this tactic risked inadvertently solidifying the very form of power to which my interlocutors were opposed.

[39] Ramlet el Baida is Beirut's last public beach, threatened at the time of writing by a more than 5,000 square meter planned development called the Eden Rock resort, initiated by Achour Development.

Chapter 3: Take Back the City – Community Organizing in Beirut

What would it mean to live

in a city where people were changing

each other's despair into hope?—

You yourself must change it.—

what would it feel like to know

your country was changing?—

You yourself must change it.—

Though your life felt arduous

new and unmapped and strange

what would it mean to stand on the first

page of the end of despair? – Adrienne Rich

In the previous chapter, I described the "narratives of perfection" (Schielke, 2015, p. 48) or visions of "the utopian city" (Gunder, 2005, p. 173), particular to the Dalieh Campaign, whose members were influential participants within Beirut's broader urban social movement. I charted the factors that enabled, or forced, deviations from the Dalieh Campaign's vision for public space, without implying a lack of commitment to or investment in this imagining on the part of my interlocutors. The need to get something done, I argued, to log measurable achievements, forced urban activists to adopt an accommodationist or collaborative approach to the very state that they identified as being responsible for their city's pain.

It is no coincidence that the founding members of Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative were activists associated with the Dalieh Campaign. One of the reasons why they joined Beirut Madinati was because they had reached what felt like a dead-end within their activism around public space – lobbying unqualified ministers in ministries crippled by mismanagement to protect the Lebanese coast; stumped by a corrupt judiciary; and unable to mobilize the primary users of the sites they were advocating on behalf of. Three months of campaigning on Beirut Madinati's part, however, were not enough to move masses of people to action, with a mere 20 percent of registered voters turning up at Beirut's polls. In the aftermath of the municipal elections, activists like Alia, Nabila and Nour insisted that what the city and country needed was to be introduced to the benefits of participatory democracy, through which a *mujtamaʿ fāʿel* [proactive society] could be cultivated. And so, Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative was born.

In written material they produced to explain the impetus behind the neighbourhood initiative, the volunteers involved argued the need to establish direct communication with all segments of society, regardless of creed, social or economic standing, political beliefs and educational backgrounds, and to activate residential communities that could "serve as sustainable political alternatives and work on shared issues."[40] The civil war and what followed it, the authors argued, pulled neighbourhoods apart and disintegrated the bonds between Beirutis, the quarters they inhabited, and their wider city. Through work at the neighbourhood level, the initiative hoped to begin to stitch back together the social fabric it argued once animated neighbourhood-based communities; to encourage communal work and debate; and to cultivate feelings of

[40] This quote was derived from written material produced by the neighbourhood initiative for circulation amongst volunteers and Beirut Madinati's wider organization, to which I was granted access.

belonging to the neighbourhood and, through it, the city. Its goal was to counter hopelessness, and the fragmentation, individualism and divisive forms of meaning making and identification it is productive of.

The neighbourhood initiative imagined a form of activism grounded in an ethics of *care*: in demonstrating what could become of Beirut if its residents looked out for and defended each other and their city instead of simply trying to survive or cope with the day-to-day chaos of Lebanon on their own. It was hoped that this routine coming together could aid in the democratization of political life by helping people make sense of the conditions under which they lived and suffered as shared with others they might have previously perceived as alien to them (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 17).

In what follows, I make two primary arguments. Firstly, I argue that the neighbourhood initiative's progressive vision for the potentiality of community organizing was limited by its dependence on a response to this grassroots work from the state, framed as the sole, legitimate provider for city and citizenry. Caring for one's neighbourhood and fellow residents, in this case, manifested as a routine, collective lobbying of local authorities to 'do their job'. Building on Hermez's (2011b) work on the shortcomings of the anti-sectarian movement in Lebanon, I will argue that, in a similar vein, despite recognizing that Lebanon's "power structures were farcical," and wanting to agitate against them and cultivate alternative loci of power, without the availability of substitute methods for challenging the status quo, the activists associated with the neighbourhood initiative were forced to abide by the rules of engagement offered up by a system they knew would inevitably disappoint them (p. 44). Many other Lebanon-based

activists have been forced into this relation within this particular political conjuncture that has, at best, lacked "revolutionary fervour," and, at worst, been characterized, as it has most recently, by a counter-revolutionary energy (Hermez, 2011b, p. 44).

Secondly, I argue that by neglecting to connect its care practice to a particular theory of justice (Tronto, 1993, p. 171), the neighbourhood initiative fell victim to parochialism, creating communities of individuals, rather than cultivating a sense of belonging to a potentially transformative and contagious politicized social collectivity. Pressured both by the communities it worked with and by Beirut Madinati's wider umbrella structure to generate fast results, the neighbourhood initiative was unable to dedicate attention and energy to cultivating the structures of feeling it hoped for, and which it believed were a necessary component of imbuing this practice of community organizing with political potential.

Before moving on, I'd like to clarify that, as was the case with the Dalieh Campaign, I was as much a participant in the neighbourhood initiative's work as I was an observer, if not more. What I hope to do in this chapter, as in the previous one, is to make sense of contradictions that I was very much complicit in. As our work unfolded in a way that seemed to distance the initiative from the progressive vision that I believe characterized it, and to which I also shared a commitment, it often felt as though, despite the consequences we could foresee, there was nothing else we could do – there were no strategies to adopt besides those we were embracing. When I doubted the efficacy of a strategy, I was not alone – by no means a wise ethnographer capable of abstractions beyond the capabilities of my interlocutors. We were all, to a certain degree, fumbling our way through community organizing that most of us had no previous

experience with, and despite doubts about the tactics we were adopting, we were all gripped by the desire and anxiety to act, to get something done and log a success. I did not find myself exempt from this temptation.

As mentioned in the introduction, what drew me to my PhD topic in the first place was the *promise* of issue-focused, pragmatic and technocratic politics in Lebanon – a welcome alternative to the alienating discourses so popular within anti-sectarian circles in Beirut. As I watched my interlocutors hit dead-ends, I began to see the limitations of this approach. I do not wish to imply that I could see where we were headed or disapproved of the strategies adopted all along. The journey that I chart in this chapter, from praxis to reflection, is one I shared with my interlocutors. My analysis is very much indebted to their processes of self-reflection, which they generously shared with me, and without which I wouldn't have been able to piece together this narrative.

From the Streets to the Municipality

In this section, I begin by detailing the development of Beirut Madinati in the aftermath of the 2015 garbage protests into a campaign to contest the 2016 municipal elections in the capital. I describe the movement's transformation in the aftermath of its electoral loss, which included the establishment of its neighbourhood initiative, and highlight the characteristics that distinguished it ideologically from other groups, and which united its otherwise politically diverse members.

While the neighbourhood initiative was in many ways ideologically and strategically distinct from the wider umbrella organization, I argue in the sections that follow that its adherence to Beirut Madinati's conception of 'the people', on the one hand, and 'the state', on the other, hindered its ability to work towards its more progressive goals.

I. The Election

"Beirut Madinati is made up of people who felt hopeless and depressed but *came to know*," Nabila told me:

> On the 29th of August [2015], all of those people who went down [to Martyrs' Square] not knowing why, just knowing that, *dakheelkon* [we beseech you], we must change things. The *Hirak* lost these people, but they had become aware that they wanted to change things.

Municipal elections in post-war Beirut have traditionally been a "stage-managed affair in which the electoral pie is split between a coalition of traditional Beiruti families and national parties along with a confessional parity between Christians and Muslims" (Sharp, 2016, para. 2). However, in the immediate aftermath of the *Hirak*, some saw an opportunity to capitalize on the fresh rage that flooded Beirut's streets by shaking things up at the municipal level, easier to contest by independents than the much more rigid parliamentary elections.[41]

[41] "Smaller voting districts, the absence of sectarian quotas, and different functions and jurisdictions allow for a framing and mobilization not possible at the parliamentary level. The diversity of contexts across different municipalities also opens up the possibility of competition between groups that are otherwise allied at the national level" (Abu-Rish, 2017, para. 26).

Beirut Madinati began as the initiative of professors based at the American University of Beirut – economists, architects, urban planners, and others – many of whom lacked a formal background in politics. It gradually expanded to include a diversity of middle and upper middle class actors, some of whom had experience working with Lebanon's traditional political parties but had grown disenchanted with them over time. Its campaign went public a mere three months before the May 8th elections. It featured 24 candidates, half of them women, from all of Beirut's sects, marketed as "young professionals" with the skills and experience required to implement a ten-point program that aimed to address and rectify the years of "mismanagement" from which, it was argued, Beirut had suffered (Ghattas, 2016).

The architects of Beirut Madinati wanted to find a way to translate the anger made palpable in the streets of Beirut during the summer of 2015 "into hope and action" (Sharp, 2016, para. 9). They committed themselves to putting forward an affirmative campaign, devoid of hostile or negative discourse. Beirut Madinati adopted a "professional, and maybe even corporate," tone, and an opaque political positionality (Sharp, 2016, para. 9), "reflected in its [candidate] list that placed real estate developers and engineers from multinational corporations alongside academics, activists, and artists" (Sharp, 2016, para. 10). It justified its distance from politics as it was traditionally understood in Lebanon by distinguishing between national and municipal concerns. As the activist Johnny Kairouz (2016) put it in an enthusiastic review of Beirut Madinati's platform for the newspaper An-Nahar:

> We can disagree when it comes to the legitimacy of armed groups in the Lebanese territory or the interference of these groups in the Syrian war, but this does not mean that we should also disagree when it comes to improving our city. *Where the large-scale*

> *politics have failed, the local ones should at least succeed* [emphasis added] (para. 13-14).

Beirut Madinati's ten-point platform focused on making the capital more liveable for all of its residents by addressing traffic congestion, the lack of parks and public transportation, the housing and waste crises, and other issues that pertained to the wellbeing of the city's inhabitants. Who, Cambanis (2017) writes, could challenge the desire to make Beirut a more easily inhabitable city – "more affordable, more walkable, more green, more accessible, and, simply, more pleasant?" (para. 23). Critics, he continues, "rarely disagree with their aims, only expressing doubts that technocrats, even in control of the city council, would have enough authority to thwart the wealthy, politically-connected cabal of developers and family dynasties that had driven the city to ruin" (2017, para. 23). In fact, Hariri responded to Beirut Madinati's program by running technocrats on his own list, "who could speak of public spaces and public transportation just as well as their rivals" (Ghattas, 2016, para. 10).

In its campaign material, Beirut Madinati emphasized the *achievability* of its program, isolating and delving into each issue sector by sector, introducing manageable solutions to targeted issues that could serve as catalysts for more ambitious interventions in the future. The campaign highlighted the proposed reforms that were most easily and immediately implementable.[42] Beirut Madinati's members and supporters, Cambanis (2017) writes, "believe that political power requires small causes embedded in a grander vision" (para. 56). But without an

[42] "Traffic, public transportation, parks and public space, affordable housing in the rampant new construction around the city, waste management, and more transparent and inclusive administration. These weren't necessarily the most important problems in people's lives, like health care and education, but they more easily addressed and fell under the prerogative of municipal authorities" (Cambanis, 2017, para. 24).

identifiable ideological identity and encumbered by a desire to maintain good relations with "all stakeholders," he argues that BM's reach and potential was inherently limited.[43]

While Beirut Madinati's snagging of 30 percent of the total vote (60 percent in the city's largest Christian district), is undoubtedly impressive, especially for a campaign of political unknowns who formally appeared on the scene a mere three months before election day, it is worth emphasizing again that only 20 percent of registered voters actually participated in the Beirut election. How should we make sense of the apathy assumed to have kept many voters away from the polls, despite the emergence of a viable alternative to politics as usual? To begin with, citizens of Lebanon are not permitted to vote in their place of residence, and must instead vote in their village, city or town of origin, determined patrilineally. Many of Beirut's residents, therefore, were not eligible to vote in the city's municipal elections. But, additionally, as Louthan (2017) writes, Beirut Madinati's political program primarily represented the concerns of "its upper-middle-class base," making its message less relevant to "Beirut's lower-income residents," or those eligible voters who were pushed out of the city because of economic necessity (para. 11). Cambanis (2017) attributes Beirut Madinati's inability to move large swathes of Beirut's voting population to its decision not to directly criticize mainstream political leaders or the sectarian political system.

[43] "Its members and founders often have bold and clear ideological convictions, but the movement itself seeks to be inclusive and nonideological, at the expense of a coherent, constructive unifying principle. One founder, Khoury, neatly if unintentionally summed up the problem. 'We are trying to be a positive campaign, and asking voters to vote FOR something not AGAINST something. We are trying to keep positive relations with all stakeholders.' Of course, even the most successful politicians and movements don't appeal to everyone, and while it's possible to strive for civility while addressing fundamental civic concerns, it is impossible to engage in meaningful politics and at the same time 'keep positive relations' with everybody. That fear of offence, exclusion and conflict characterizes many activist movements, and beyond a certain point paralyses them" (Cambanis, 2017, para. 57).

After the elections, following a summer of heated discussions, two opposing desires for Beirut Madinati's future emerged: a desire to continue focusing on Beirut, and a desire to embrace politics at the national level (Cambanis, 2017).[44] The issue of whether or not to contest parliamentary elections (which were scheduled for 2017 at the time, but would eventually take place in the summer of 2018) was put to a vote, and Beirut Madinati decided to abstain by a slim margin. At the time of my fieldwork, Beirut Madinati had divided itself into three working groups – an initiative dedicated to community organizing at the neighbourhood level; an 'alternative municipality' shadowing the sitting municipal council and critically commenting upon its work; and a third group studying electoral possibilities across a variety of scales, from universities to syndicates and more.[45]

The two years during which my fieldwork unfolded were fragmentary rather than unifying ones for Beirut Madinati, as the group struggled to draft its political vision in order to, as one member put it in a brainstorming meeting I attended, "locate ourselves in the ecosystem of change." Additionally, a few core members left the organization in order to run as independents in the 2018 parliamentary elections, creating confusion amongst the public given Beirut Madinati's decision not to officially participate. At the time of writing, the group's political manifesto had yet to be published online, despite having been voted on after multiple drafts were created and discussed, beginning months before the May parliamentary elections. It was, expectedly,

[44] "The Beirut faction believed the group should consolidate its electoral achievement, build a viable organization in the city, and spend the next six years of the city council's term pushing for better governance and fighting various toxic urban development projects. The core of this group included some activists who had already spent decades working on urban causes in Beirut. The politics faction believed that the entire purpose had always been to challenge the failing sectarian political system, the municipal elections had been the vehicle available to challenge the status quo, and the future would soon bring more important targets, like the 2017 parliamentary elections" (Cambanis, 2017, para. 46).

[45] Beirut Madinati found success at the syndicate level when its candidate, Jad Tabet, was elected head of the Beirut Order of Engineers in April 2017.

difficult for Beirut Madinati to agree on a holistic vision, given the multiplicity of worldviews and political philosophies it played host to.

II. From an Electoral Campaign to a Political Movement

Despite the divisions that characterized Beirut Madinati, it is possible, I think, to pinpoint the principles around which its members and supporters were unified. I was exposed to some early drafts of the political vision through my work with the neighbourhood initiative and, as a result, better able to parse through the debates characterizing Beirut Madinati, what remained unagreed upon or divisive in the aftermath of the municipal elections, and what there developed consensus around. I turn now to some thoughts offered by Maha amidst the debate about the political vision.[46] Maha is a professor of urban planning at a prominent Lebanese university, a founding member of Beirut Madinati and also one of its public faces, speaking frequently to the media on its behalf. Her perspective, I think, succinctly highlights the principles I observed to be defining and unifying features of the movement.

In outlining how Beirut Madinati should project itself moving forward, Maha first defined who it was positioned against and who it saw itself as working for – the sitting political class, on the one hand, and everyone else, the bulk of the population, on the other. Beirut Madinati's concerns

[46] I will continue with my decision to use pseudonyms in my discussion of Beirut Madinati, despite many of my interlocutors being public figures, for the same reasons discussed in the previous chapter. The same decision applies to the proceeding chapters. I will make an exception only for interlocutors whose published work I cite directly. The thoughts detailed below were shared by Maha* in document form on a digital folder to which members of the political vison committee had access. The neighbourhood initiative participated actively in the process of negotiating the political vision, and I gained access to documents like Maha's as a result. I asked Maha permission to reference this particular document in my dissertation, since the meetings and discussions held by the political vision committee were not formally a part of my fieldwork.

were people's concerns, and its goal was to address these concerns with realistic and beneficial proposals backed by trustworthy and capable people.[47] Its aim was to end corruption and, importantly, it differentiated between "a liberal economy and crony, unbridled theft." It championed the constitution as guarantor of Lebanon's multiplicity and the rights of all its citizens, whatever their beliefs or ways of life. To achieve a civil state, Beirut Madinati advocated for the proper implementation of the Ta'if Accord. It was not opposed to private-public partnerships, but believed the public arm, the arm of the state, first had to be strengthened for such partnerships to spawn projects beneficial for all.

While it fancied itself anti- or post-ideological, one could actually understand Beirut Madinati's core, unifying principles as a manifestation of what Smith (2017) calls liberal egalitarianism. Liberal egalitarians, he writes, advocate for a "regulated capitalist market society" (p. 36), one in which the state plays "a central role in establishing and maintaining the proper background conditions for social life" (p. 37). Liberal-egalitarians are optimistic that the tensions within a market society "can be overcome" (p. 31). They position themselves as neutral actors who are primarily concerned with "the right of persons to live lives of their own choosing based on their own conception of the good" (p. 39).

What this last point intimates, I think, is that liberal-egalitarian movements like Beirut Madinati are invested in constructing and activating a *multitude*, in Hardt and Negri's sense of the term. The multitude is "not *the* people, but rather many peoples acting in networked concert" (Hale

[47] Here, I hear echoes of Podemos' division of the Spanish political terrain into *el pueblo* vs. *la casta* – the people vs. the elite – with the former associated with "moral integrity" and the latter with "corruption" (Augustin & Briziarelli, 2017, p. 15). Political disagreement "was moved from the traditional ideological position Left-Right to that of people-elite" (Augustin & Briziarelli, 2017, p. 18).

& Slaughter, 2005, para. 4). According to Hardt and Negri, "the very fact of its [the multitude's] being will utterly transform politics" (Kavanagh, 2010, para. 9). The multitude is imagined to be capable of supplanting "the tyranny of the majority with the consensual rule of everyone by everyone" (Kavanagh, 2010, para. 9).[48] Critics of Hardt and Negri's concept of the multitude, and the political movements that appear to embrace it, worry about prioritizing its existence over the *kind* of politics it enables. "How do we articulate the segmentary struggles into a strategy for wide-ranging and generalized struggle?" asks Amin (2014). "Hardt and Negri have nothing to say about this" (para. 18).

Underlying Beirut Madinati's tactics and strategies also appears to be a particular conception of the state. Hermez (2015) argues that, in the imaginations of Lebanon's citizens, "the state exists in the subjunctive mood, as something that *would be* [emphasis added] rather than as something that is" (p. 509). The political pull of sectarian leaders, rampant corruption, importance of political connections for survival, and more, are seen by many as "reflective of a non-state." But, Hermez argues that "in the gap between fantasies of what could be and everyday actions and negotiations, the grounds of a Lebanese state are reproduced; people's fantasies of what should be the state strengthen the state's power and existence" (p. 512). Similarly, in her work on Arsal, a neglected and impoverished town in Lebanon's northeast, Obeid (2010) argues that despite "skepticism of 'the state', residents do believe in it as a project that fulfils citizenship" (p. 332). She quotes Penny Harvey to argue that, like in other contexts, the Lebanese state "has

[48] Here, we can again draw a parallel with Podemos, whose ideological architects drew on Ernesto Laclau's framing of populism, within which 'the people' was an unstable category, in need of being subjected to "a constant, contradictory, and unstable process of constructing and reconstructing an articulated unity through discourse." For Podemos, this meant "the constitution of the widest possible popular base and the mobilization of people through meaningful images, empty signifiers, and psychological investment" (Augustin & Briziarelli, 2017, p. 15).

survived scandal and disruption, incapacity and weakness…the notion of a potentially effective external power is kept alive" (Harvey as cited in Obeid, 2010, p. 332). Drawing on Navaro's (2002) work, Obeid argues that in the context of Arsal, the state is presented as having many faces:

> The Arsalis locate the 'ideal face of the state' outside the boundaries of their town. They talk about the state as an entity that exists in some sort of centre. They have seen the effects of that face on other, more 'developed' areas of Lebanon, those less marginalized, and those with patrons who convey their demands and cater to them (p. 343).

I would argue that the above extends beyond Arsal, to encompass much of Lebanon's large population of disenfranchised and/or disenchanted citizens. Harvey and Knox (2012), in their work on infrastructure, argue that "it is not in spite of unruly processes that infrastructures emerge as a form of social promise, but rather that it is through the experiences of life within and alongside unstable forces that infrastructures gain their capacity to enchant" (p. 525). In the Lebanese case, it is through absence and neglect that the *state* gains its capacity to enchant, inspiring its enactment and reproduction through what Hermez (2015) calls the subjunctive mood, a performative process to which, I argue, Beirut Madinati has contributed. The *materiality of neglect* – the experience of witnessing the state provide more than adequately, for example, to affluent residents of Downtown Beirut, while most other residents of the capital struggle through electricity and water cuts alongside myriad other everyday problems – paradoxically strengthens faith in the Weberian state as the locus of political change.

Beirut Madinati members like Maha, spoke and wrote of a lack of "*political will"* to solve problems; of the *marginalization* of state institutions, which had resulted in a decline in public

services; of the "*emptying"* of the state from its content, which made it unable to hold on to natural resources or apply the law.[49] While the routinization of neglect might have decreased Lebanese citizens' faith in their government's ability to provide for them, this routinization simultaneously bolstered the desire for this form of *care* (Harvey & Knox, 2012, p. 534). In Beirut Madinati's case, this manifested as an effort to replace incompetent or corrupt bureaucrats and politicians hindering the proper functioning of 'neutral' state institutions with capable technocrats and, if this was not possible, staging a managerial intervention in the affairs of government, through lobbying, advocacy work and offering state institutions the services of experts.

III. Conclusion

In this section, I described Beirut Madinati's understanding of the agent of politics as the multitude, and the liberal-egalitarian approach to running Lebanon's politico-economic affairs it put forward. Additionally, I briefly touched on the conception of the Lebanese state that it advanced, and which played an instrumental role in shaping its diagnosis of Lebanon's ills and the solutions it championed.

In a political conjuncture that is experiencing the aftermath of the dismemberment of the Weberian state, its corporatization, the "capture of governance by capital," how can we make sense of the enduring promise of the state amongst activists, particularly among those who are

[49] "The encounter with processes of material disintegration produce a 'mood' of unease and disquiet about the capacity of the state to perform its role. At the same time, it is in this challenge and this anxiety that we find conversations and the interventions that remake the state anew, an enchantment that re-imbues it with the power to change lives for the better" (Harvey & Knox, 2012, p. 531).

aware of the limits of state-building and reform, and of lobbying state institutions and politicians for redress and justice, but who continue to embrace this form of political praxis?[50] In what follows, I look at how Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative, while problematizing some of the umbrella organization's core principles, reinforced others in a manner that crippled its work and led it to an impasse as my fieldwork came to a close.

From the Municipality to the Neighbourhood

In this section, I chart the development of Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative, before detailing the lukewarm reception to its work by the remainder of the organization. I argue that the neighbourhood initiative attempted to introduce a form of activism grounded in an ethics of care that, because it was slow, non-linear and modest in its perceptible results, was treated as unproductive.

The goal of the neighbourhood initiative was to reverse the paralyzing affective consequences of the prolonged precaritization afflicting much of Lebanon's population, justified through a discursive normalization and essentializing of crisis in Lebanon as permanent. Precaritization, Butler and Athanasiou argue (2013), is a "process of acclimatizing a population to insecurity…these affective registers of precaritization included the lived feeling of precariousness, which can be articulated with a damaged sense of future and a heightened sense of anxiety about issues like illness and morality" (p. 43). The neighbourhood initiative wanted

[50] The above quote is attributed to John Comaroff, who articulated this thought during the workshop "Infrastructures of Injustice: Law and Conflict" at Cambridge in October of 2018.

to place the future back in the residents of Beirut's field of vision; to combat resignation by arguing for both the material and emotional rewards of a coming together to struggle for fundamental, shared rights.

I. Why Neighbourhoods?

In December 2016, I attended an open house organized by the neighbourhood initiative for potential volunteers at Mansion, a 1930s-era villa in the historic Zoqaq el Blatt neighbourhood, abandoned during the civil war and repurposed into a community space in 2012. It was Nabila who first drew my attention to the work of the initiative, which Beirut Madinati was keeping under the radar, during our first interview about her work with the Dalieh Campaign. "You can't enter politics without people's support," she told me. "It takes time to gain people." The neighbourhood initiative was imagined as a long-term project, one that would hopefully last until the 2022 municipal elections and, ideally, much longer than that.

"We need a base," Nabila explained. "People need to know that they are involved; that they decide their lives by going out and demanding their rights." You're stronger in places you know, she told me, explaining why she chose to focus on the neighbourhood of Zoqaq el Blatt, where she had lived for 24 years. The initiative was barely a month old then, but Nabila already seemed to have everything planned out for the next six months: number of surveys to fill out; number of activities to organize; how many neighbourhood group members should eventually become BM members; how big the audience for each activity should be; which neighbourhood stakeholders to reach out to and ally with.

She was highly critical of what she called You Stink's 'proselytizing' during the *Hirak,* arguing for an approach to non-activists as partners:

> We need to work on getting people engaged. That's what we want. Change isn't going to come from us. I'm not coming to change things in these neighbourhoods. I'm coming to get residents to change things. I'm like them. I'm from Zoqaq el Blatt, but because I have experience and expertise, I want to share this knowledge so that they can start having it too, then, *khalas* [that's it]. The first meeting we're going to have in the neighbourhood will be about what citizens' rights mean and what their responsibilities are. Citizens don't know that they have a right to go to the municipality and ask about everything that has to do with it, and to ask where the money is going. They need to start saying what their problems are and what their priorities are, and we need to start working on solutions together. Then we can all go to the municipality to demand our rights and hold it accountable.

Nabila's was a pay-it-forward approach to political subjectivation and change. If people knew their rights and exerted collective pressure on local government to honour them, things could look up.

At the first open house, Nabila joined her Dalieh peers Nour and Alia, as well as Dana, an urban researcher, in presenting the rudimentary plan for the neighbourhood initiative to between 20 and 30 potential volunteers. Nabila commanded attention as always with her idiosyncratic approach to presenting – somewhere on the spectrum between enthused and panicked, always communicating a feverish excitement at the prospect of a fresh approach to change tinged with an urgency that, it can be assumed, fed off of the repeat 'failures' of civil society and the fear that, at some point, the hopelessness that gripped the country would concretize into an irreversible disposition. Over 60 years old and active in some form or another since her student days, it made sense to me that Nabila was both more cautious and more optimistic than her peers in both the Dalieh Campaign and the neighbourhood initiative – confident we could get

somewhere but zealous in her rejection of ideology and negativity and devotion to pragmatism. Her presentation on what she had planned for Zoqaq el Blatt was peppered with managerial buzzwords like ‘stakeholders’, ‘workflow charts’, ‘surveys’, ‘achievements’, ‘lessons learned’, and ‘action plan’.

Alia, on the other hand, when discussing what was to be the second of the two pilot projects, to unfold in the neighbourhood of Mar Mikhael, despite referencing a detailed Power Point presentation and extensive background research on the area, minimized data and buzzwords in favour of a more stripped down, emotive approach focused on the transformative potential of collectively advocating for our shared right to the city.

Why had only twenty percent of registered voters descended upon Beirut’s polling stations in 2016? For the activists behind the neighbourhood initiative, the most compelling explanation was that most of those who actually reside in Beirut aren’t allowed to vote there. This, they argued, sent a strong message that people were being deprived of the ability to have a say in how the city they lived in and called home developed, and the goal for activists like Nabila, Alia, Nour and Dana was to empower those voiceless and vote-less residents, who knew their own neighbourhoods best, to identify and shout out their problems, and demand their rights from the responsible authorities.

“What does it mean to enter a neighbourhood?” Nour asked the audience rhetorically during that first meeting:

> We want to extract knowledge from people, not just study them. They know their own neighbourhoods and what they need. Lots of problems can be solved by sharing information with residents, so that they know what to respond to and how to respond. We want to provide people in neighbourhoods with Beirut Madinati's tools, so that they can lobby for their needs.

The goal, in a nutshell, was to encourage people to be proactive on behalf of their communities, primarily by facilitating communication between residents and authorities. "We don't want to do something too complicated," Nour explained. "We just want to get people to organize and to help them solve their problems."

"Our goal," Alia explained during another open house to recruit potential volunteers from Beirut Madinati to the initiative, "is to collaborate with residents. I would consider that a success in itself, to get people to work with us within the first six months." Chiming in, veteran activist and journalist Philip said the long-term goal could just be to have these neighbourhood committees last 30 or 40 years. For Nabila, it was most important to emphasize what neighbourhood work was *not*. It wasn't about Beirut Madinati entering neighbourhoods to solve their issues. "We need to get people to take charge of their neighbourhoods," she repeatedly told volunteers:

> We want to collaborate with residents. To show them that we are not strong without them, and they are not strong without us. We're not coming to solve their problems. We're not capable of doing that. We're coming to work together to call for our rights.

As my fieldwork neared its end, Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative remained confined to its two pilot projects, for reasons I will discuss later in this chapter.

II. An Initiative Ignored

Beirut Madinati's General Assembly loomed like a spectre over many of our neighbourhood initiative meetings. There was a lingering anxiety over the fact that hundreds of Beirut Madinati members were largely unaware of what the dozen or so volunteers in this initiative were working on, and why. And, there was a fundamental tension that seemed to divide Beirut Madinati, between those few who valued grassroots work for its potential to better the lives of ordinary citizens and provide them with the tools for facilitating much needed changes to their circumstances, and the majority who saw it as a means for building an electoral base.

In one of the earlier open houses organized for Beirut Madinati members curious about neighbourhood work, one attendee insisted that the initiative should have as its long-term goal the formal recruitment of neighbourhood residents to the movement. "I don't think that's important," Nour responded:

> What matters to me is that people be loyal to their neighbourhoods, not to Beirut Madinati. If Beirut Madinati is the way for people to better their neighbourhoods, then okay, and if something better comes along, that doesn't matter to me.

Irritated, the attendee asked rhetorically, "what am I, a charity?" Alia emphasized the importance of not developing an exploitative relationship with residents. "The point is not to build a base that wants to hand loyalty to us or follow us while we get things done, which is how people already think." Nabila explained that in the case of Zoqaq el Blatt, the residents themselves didn't want to overtly identify with Beirut Madinati, because they wanted to ensure that when they got something out of the municipality it wasn't just because they had the

movement's stamp on their demands. Later, in a separate neighbourhood initiative meeting, Alia complained that Beirut Madinati's GA and Central Committee had no idea how the initiative was thinking and working. "They complain that Beirut Madinati's logo isn't on the events we organize. They're just happy we are working on the ground, but they don't know what we are doing and why."

"Do we have the same vision?" asked one participant, in a meeting between the neighbourhood initiative and the alternative municipality working group as my fieldwork was nearing its end. "We didn't understand what your goal was in the neighbourhoods," said another. "We felt you worked a lot and did nothing in the end." The participants in the neighbourhood initiative explained that their "theory of change" was that organized neighbourhoods could lead to a better city. They explained that had the trash crisis erupted at a time when these types of communities existed, they could have mobilized quickly and to better effect. Beirut Madinati, they insisted, had to decide what its own theory of change was, whether its goal was to work with people or to win municipal elections.

I find Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) distinction between "thinking with" and "thinking for" useful for distinguishing between Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative and the wider organization. I see the prioritization of elections as endpoint instead of tactic, and the desire to avoid controversial issues so as not to alienate potential voters, as indicative of a view of the average Lebanese citizen not as a partner in decision making, but as someone in need of being guided by those qualified to occupy positions of authority. When thinking for, Puig de la Bellacasa explains, we risk "confusing ourselves with spokespersons, using marginalized

‘others’ as arguments or falling into fascination with the inspiring experiences of ‘the marginal’ or the oppressed” (p. 85). Those members of the neighborhood initiative who were also members of the Dalieh Campaign had experienced the limitations and shortcomings of ‘thinking for’ in the case of their spatial activism.

I understand the vision of Beirut Madinati’s neighbourhood initiative for community organizing as a form of *care* work, and the skepticism with which it was met by the wider organizational body as typical of the ways in which care has been dismissed as insignificant in many other conjunctures and domains. What is care? According to Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), care can “feel good,” but “it can also feel awful;” it can “do good” but it “can oppress” (p. 1). Sectarian-clientelism, it can be argued, is a relation of care that, for its recipients, can feel awful – both oppressive and humiliating. In a society crippled by politics as care that leaves recipients indebted or indentured, can an alternative, emancipatory practice of care be introduced, which is capable of dismantling the existing one?

Care can take many forms and be defined in many ways. For my purposes, I follow scholars like Tronto and Fisher (1990) in thinking about care as a broad umbrella term that can include “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (p. 40). In this chapter, I trace the work of a handful of activists as they tried to cultivate community and the foundations for its reproduction, as a means of giving life to and sustaining activism as something that should exist always – a routine demanding of one’s rights and challenging of state neglect, forever holding authorities accountable. This was multi-scalar work – care in the sense of activists leaving their bubbles to work with ‘ordinary’ people,

hearing and taking their articulations seriously. Care in the sense of neighbours recognizing their co-dependence, nurturing it and deriving strength from it. Care as a relation to one's neighbourhood, city and eventually country, all of which need their inhabitants to lobby on their behalf, tend to them daily and protect them from danger.[51]

Political praxis as care work has a temporality different from that of politics proper, as it is conventionally understood, allowing it to make room for issues that would otherwise be considered irrelevant (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 23). For example, the group formed by Alia and others in Mar Mikhael – an area that has suffered from a rapid process of gentrification, flooding this once residential, artisanal and industrial neighbourhood with bars and restaurants crammed side by side, competing for customers through sound decibels – focused on residents' exasperation with what they perceived as the colonization of their homes by the night life in the streets. In a meeting with Beirut Madinati's communications team, one participant explained that the people she wanted to reach, by which she presumably meant the movement's existing base, "don't care about noise or parking, but the issue of water and electricity. We're talking too much about issues that aren't a priority for people."

But, what gets elided in these conversations is that the 'issue', in this case nightlife in Mar Mikhael, was a tactic, not *just* an end-goal; a means to a much larger end aligned with an ethics often associated with feminist theories and practices, which argue "that to value care is to recognize the inevitable interdependency essential to the existence of reliant and vulnerable

[51] Tronto links "an ethics and politics of care" to the "pursuit of a 'good' life, expressed in an affectively charged 'as well as possible'" (as cited in Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 4).

beings" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 70). Whenever she was asked about the importance of community organizing, Dana offered up the same hypothetical example, worth quoting at length:

> There's a public staircase that's broken and people want it repaired. There are two options we push for in neighbourhood work, and a third that we refuse. The one we refuse is that Beirut Madinati repairs it. Beirut Madinati won't do anything for people if it does what the state should be doing, which is what a lot of NGOs do. Either we give them support to lobby the government, or the municipality in this case, or we help them organize in order to repair it themselves. In this case, where you help them organize to repair it themselves, it's not you caring for yourself as a citizen, individually buying a generator, or individually fixing something someone else should be fixing. It's collective work, going door-to-door to talk to all of the people who live along the stairs. It's meetings, thinking together to decide – if we want to repair it ourselves, where will we get the funds? Maybe there is someone from BM who can tell them that there are studies that show if the stairs are repaired, and become a space of passage, the shops that are around it are going to earn more money. So, maybe we can go to those shops, ask them to contribute 100 USD each. We can fix the stairs all together, then we can plant things along its sides and create a system for watering them. In this case, you've created a network of people. The day something bigger happens, like a whole building being evicted, for example, they know each other, they've worked together, they know how to talk to each other, and they can mobilize to block this. So you're creating one of two things, either a community or a mobilization aimed at the municipality to fix the stairs. In case they want to mobilize, they have to understand the system. Whose responsibility is it to fix the stairs? The municipality. What's the structure at the municipality? Who should we talk to? You're getting to know your government. Do we submit a petition? How do we write a petition? Then we go door to door, getting people to sign the petition. We sit together and strategize. We learn that every Thursday, the head of the municipal council receives public complaints in his office. Everybody starts to know that their government is accessible on Thursdays at 3 pm. So, you see, it's all about the process, and how it creates political communities.[52]

[52] Dana's understanding of community or neighbourhood-based organizing aligns with that of similar, notable mobilizations elsewhere. In Poland, for example, community-based mobilizations developed along a trajectory similar to that imagined by Dana. "From a local particular goal (to fix the street, build the playground, clean the graffiti, create a neighbourhood garden, stop the unwanted investment, etc), they moved to a more generalized goal or set of values (caring about the immediate urban environment, generating social capital, building local community, promoting urban residents' wellbeing, and finally expressing a political goal, establishing the new set of norms for city development" (Domaradzka & Wijkstrom, 2016, p. 300). A sense of having been *effective*, "provides the group with a sense of direction and it often also serves as a basis for building group identity through the shared story of successful activities" (Domaradzka & Wijkstrom, 2016, p. 303).

For Dana, elections were not and had never been a priority in and of themselves. Beirut Madinati's electoral campaign in 2016 was important to her because election season is a time of vibrant political discussion, and the movement was able to use this opportunity to introduce a new discourse about municipal politics. "We went from normal elections with parties fighting each other, to saying this is about the city; what kind of city do you want?" Running in elections, for Dana, was to be approached as one element in a wider, to borrow from Tilly (2006), 'repertoire of contention'. Organizing at the neighbourhood level was a more sustainable means of cultivating and maintaining an amalgam of contentious tools alongside and in conversation with the residents of Beirut, which could be routinely utilized over the long run – a complementary, if not more fruitful, approach to politics from below than the ephemerality of an electoral campaign.[53]

Dana framed the two approaches to neighbourhood work she advocated for as different paths that could nevertheless both lead to the cultivation of progressive political communities. In Mar Mikhael, where I volunteered, we found ourselves walking the path of mobilizations directed at local authorities. As our work unfolded, it became increasingly evident that this direction wasn't leading to the kind of politicization we had hoped to generate. And, we found that in practice, the second path outlined by Dana was a difficult one to sell residents on.

[53] As opposed to developing "survivalist or instrumental" relations with people, often a feature of electoral campaigns, "standing by the vital necessity of care means standing for sustainable and flourishing relations" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 70).

III. Conclusion

Care work is the "imperceptible politics of the everyday," opposed to the "irruption of events" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 171). Beirut Madinati as a whole seemed to ignore as "unproductive" (2017, p. 177) the kind of slow, non-linear work the neighbourhood initiative was engaged in. But care can allow a "thinking about and with others" to develop into a palpable and politically generative sense of what it means to live with them (p. 17).

For the activists in the neighbourhood initiative, as well as for generations of feminists who've written about the political potential of care work, this kind of praxis was believed to have the ability to interrupt the status quo and to aid in democratizing political life (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 170).[54] What distinguished this work from the kind of service provision we often see from NGOs is "knowledge that cares" (2017, p. 92), the kind of "involved knowing" (p. 118) that comes from working on locales these activists had an intimate familiarity with and investment in, where they met with residents on an almost weekly basis, deliberated and debated

[54] Feminist engagements with care emerged out of a pressing need to address the gendered dimensions of familial and communal maintenance work, so often not recognized as labor and therefore under or unpaid and devalued. Social Reproduction Feminism, for example, "explores the ways in which the daily and generational renewal of human life (and thus of human labor power) is absolutely essential to the decade-over-decade tenacity not merely of *inequality*, but of *capitalism*," a theoretical approach indebted to the seminal work of Marxist Feminist scholars like Lise Vogel and Silvia Federici (Ferguson, n.d., para. 2), who emphasized the necessity of linking gender inequality to capitalist hegemony. What scholars like the influential Joan Tronto – whose book *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993) is considered a seminal work of feminist political philosophy and ethics, and which Puig de la Bellacasa builds on in her own more recent work – propose and examine are subversive approaches to care as a process of *undoing* and metamorphosis through the cultivation of interdependency, rather than a practice of maintenance in the service of the status quo that Marxist Feminists, Social Reproduction Feminists and intersectional feminists have done such an important job at dissecting, despite the disagreements amongst these strands of feminist theory/methodology. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) refers to this as a mode of "unsettling" care, referring to the work of Aryn Martin, Natasha Myers and Ana Viseu, as well as Donna Haraway's famous invocation to 'stay with the trouble' (p. 8). In this section, I was particularly interested in engaging this tradition of thinking care as a form of 'unsettling', and more generally in this dissertation, I am interested in the long-term potential of a contentious politics dedicated to 'staying with the trouble', to a disruptive practice of care.

with them in What's App groups almost daily, and allowed themselves to be interrupted by them, to be steered in uncomfortable directions by them.

Beirut Madinati as a whole positioned itself as an extension of and potential representative of the multitude, but to quote Deleuze and Guattari by way of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), it is "not enough to shout, 'Vive the multiple!'…the multiple *has to be done*" (p. 72). What we see with the neighbourhood initiative is a concerted effort to lay the foundations for the forging or activation of a multitude – a city of people working in concert, actively caring for their environment. Its adherents recognized that politicization is not an event but a process; that what they were trying to do was not simply to jolt people into one-time action, but to cultivate a taste for action and the bodily and psychic endurance to withstand failure, what Puig de la Bellacasa calls "maintenance against breakdown" (p. 171).

But the multitude, as critics of Hardt and Negri have argued, is not 'the people'. A city of residents collectively lobbying the authorities to do their job so as to meet their personal needs, is not necessarily going to be productive of a sustainable and potentially contagious sense of community not grounded in sectarian, racial, gendered and sexed markers of distinction. While the neighbourhood initiative was invested *theoretically* in care as a practice of 'kinning', a mode of "performing belonging through care" (Drotbohm & Albe, 2015, p. 7), the pressure to produce material results through community organizing, which meant that the survival of neighbourhood lobby groups hinged on recognition by and responses from the state, forced kinship to take a back seat. Without affective social ties grounded in a shared theory of justice, however, there was nothing to guarantee the survival of these groups for 30 or 40 years, their reproduction in

other locales, and the political scaling up from neighbourhood, to city, to country, as the initiative had hoped. An issue-focused, pragmatic approach meant that, whether they succeeded or failed, the neighbourhood groups were designed to be finite – instruments in the service of an immediate goal, rather than new forms of collective political being.

Organizing Mar Mikhael

In November 2016, Alia and Ghazi (a product designer and member of Beirut Madinati) initiated the Mar Mikhael neighbourhood group, with which I decided to volunteer. The fairly small, predominantly Christian neighbourhood of east Beirut had been suffering from an aggressive process of gentrification that began in 2008 and continued to chip away at its socio-economic fabric when I was carrying out my fieldwork.

In this section, I introduce the neighbourhood and the residents who joined us in fashioning a community organization aimed at challenging the bars and restaurants adversely affecting the lives of those residing in close proximity to them. Faced with a community convinced that the only way it would be able to rest would be through appeals to the same system of sectarian-clientelism that had enabled its suffering by turning a blind eye to the violations of bar owners, I describe the alternative relationship to authority that the Beirut Madinati volunteers worked to facilitate.

I. The Neighbourhood

When my fieldwork unfolded, Mar Mikhael was distinguished by the fact that most of its residents were born and raised there, and were over the age of 40.[55] The neighbourhood is made up of three parallel streets and bordered by Avenue Charles Helou, which guides drivers coming to and from the north of the country. Its beginning and end are marked by two iconic buildings – the headquarters of Electricite du Liban, to the west, and the old train station, to the east. Until 2008, it was a lower middle class residential, artisanal and industrial neighbourhood,

> not fully recovered from the closure of the railroad in 1976 and the civil war. After the Armenian genocide of 1915, many refugees settled in the district. The character of the area remains distinctly Armenian today (Krijnen & De Beaukelaer, 2015, p. 296).

The gentrification of Mar Mikhael followed the transformation into nightlife hot spots of neighbouring streets Monot and Gemmayze, and their subsequent decline:

> In approximately 2006, Mar Mikhael's low rents began to attract its share of young creatives, who were predictably followed by restaurants and nightlife venues, as well as investors and real estate developers, particularly after 2008. The arrival of this cycle to Mar Mikhael has contributed to changes to its urban and economic fabric – specifically through the construction of several new high-rise apartments…as well as an increase in rents (Gerbal, Hrycaj, Lavoipierre & Potasiak, 2016, p. 11-12).

[55] "Mar Mikhael, with a population of roughly 20,000 people, is home to a smaller population of single adults compared to the national average (30.2 % compared to 56%), a large population of adults over the age of 55 (47.7% of the population), a high proportion of renters compared to the national average (51.8% – a majority of whom pay old rents – compared to 29% nationwide) and a highly rooted population, with 51.4% having lived in the neighbourhood for 30 years or more" (Gerbal, Hrycaj, Lavoipierre & Potasiak, 2016, p. 20).

The ground floors of the Mandate-era (1920-1943) buildings that dotted the neighbourhood (Krijjnen & De Beaukelaer, 2015), "once occupied by car mechanics, small-scale industrial facilities, and local grocery stores…rapidly turned into a hub of bars and restaurants with 'creative industries,' including small-scale designers and art galleries invading the secondary streets of the area" (Fawaz, Krijnen & El Samad, 2018, p. 359). Narrow streets crammed with bars sent shockwaves upwards through the residential buildings they occupied (sometimes more than one bar to a single building), and scores of patrons nightly poured out of these relatively small establishments to occupy the sidewalk and enjoy cigarettes and the night air with their cocktails.

Figure 10: Bursheh, A. (2016). Armenia Street, Mar Mikhael [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2Os78HX

Figure 11: Kassab, G. (2014). Patrons at a Mar Mikhael pub [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2GAcHOa

The Mar Mikhael neighbourhood group was established in November 2016, and was quick to identify the problems plaguing long-term residents and business owners in the area: the effect of the high density of bars and restaurants, as well as the valet companies that accompanied them, on the quality of life and work, and the threat of expulsion facing many tenants living in rent-controlled apartments.

Alia and Ghazi were joined in the neighbourhood by Marwan, a supporter but not a member of Beirut Madinati, who collaborated with Alia's research and design studio. Marwan, a Syrian-Palestinian based in Beirut and interested in urban activism, preferred to take a backseat during neighbourhood meetings, choosing to mostly observe, wary that his background would

introduce awkwardness or tension. I adopted a similar approach during meetings with residents, preferring to share my thoughts during separate neighborhood initiative meetings. Ghaith, a friend of Alia's but not a formal Beirut Madinati member, who had long lived in the neighbourhood and rented the villa we met in, was an active participant at first, before personal circumstances forced him to take a backseat.

Every time new residents entered the fold, Alia or Ghazi explained that the neighbourhood group was not created for political or electoral purposes, and participants did not need to be or ever become members of Beirut Madinati. The organization was simply there to lend a helping hand; to offer its knowledge of the inner workings of various governmental institutions, and its well-researched analyses of the causes behind Beirut's decaying urban infrastructure.

Of the problems identified to be adversely affecting the quality of life in the neighbourhood, Alia and Ghazi suggested the group begin its work by focusing on the nightlife issue. While the crisis around rent was designated as more urgent, Alia voiced concern about dedicating the group's energy to a problem to which it probably couldn't contribute much, given its position as a controversial national issue. The neighborhood initiative had suggestions for how to tackle the bars and valet parking companies that serviced them, but it didn't have any substantial recommendations for how to effectively tackle the new rent law set to end rent control – at least not yet. By working on nightlife, Alia explained, the group could make gains it otherwise wouldn't be able to achieve by trying to address something as complex as rent control. An exclusive focus on the nightlife scene did cause the group to lose a few members, especially those whose lives were consumed by struggling to keep from being evicted, but for those

residents who remained and lived on Mar Mikhael's main road, Armenia Street, which housed the bulk of the area's bars, there was nothing more urgent than ridding themselves of what they framed as 'colonizers'.

II. The Residents

When Alia described Mar Mikhael, she spoke of the structural changes to its social and economic infrastructure: the lack of public spaces; the difficulty of moving around on foot, especially at night along badly-lit streets; the noise from construction work during the day and restaurants and bars at night; the lack of public parking facilities that hadn't been claimed by valet parking companies; and how these circumstances were particularly detrimental to an elderly population, much of which still had to work in order to support itself.

While Alia's analysis provided her listeners or readers with an almost birds-eye view of the neighbourhood, encapsulating the various factors that made it a difficult place to live through appeals to both logic and civic responsibility, when the residents spoke of their plight they aimed for the mirror neurons, arguing not merely that this should not be the case, that this wasn't what a well-ordered, modern city looked like, but that this *could not* be the case – that this reality was unbearable and would be to anyone who had to live through it daily – dragging the listener from the birds-eye perspective into their own trembling bodies, speaking not so much from the heart as the nerves.

Our meetings were always charged, punctuated by angry rants that made it difficult to stay on topic:

"They're taking over our neighbourhood, and they don't care about anyone but themselves."

"They don't care about us. People here don't matter."

"Why is God angry with us that we have to live like this?"

"Six valet companies are occupying the neighbourhood like the militias used to do."

"Mar Mikhael is occupied."

"They are expelling us and killing us."

"We'll break things and show them who we are."

We often walked away without a clear task to work towards before our next meeting. It wasn't that the residents were incapable of working in an organized fashion; of making efficient use of their time and setting clear goals and deadlines. They, more than anyone, wanted to see their troubles dissipate, to see their neighbourhood return to some semblance of what it once was – a quiet, residential area where business owners and residents lived in apparent harmony. But the residents were saturated. Their senses were daily overwhelmed. Their nights had been taken away from them. Their bodies were prevented from rest at the end of a long work day. Their heads ached. Their ears pulsated. And their dignity had been stomped on by fellow citizens as well as the state, who treated them as though they were worth sacrificing for the prosperity and entertainment of others. They were the elderly, the lower-income, the single or widowed women, the disposable. They arrived at meetings at dusk, anticipating the night to come, reeling from the night before, which made it difficult to resist the impulse to explode – to shout and

curse; which made it difficult to sit, cross-legged, mild-mannered and soft-spoken, to discuss petitions and municipal visits. Often, they came ready to burn it all down, unable or unwilling to see past their rage.

None, however, articulated the horror of living in Mar Mikhael amidst the cacophony more poignantly than Rita – a horror that might seem exaggerated to those who did not share work days and bedrooms, drives or walks home, bills or chores, with these residents. Rita was a fixture in the neighborhood group, from the early days when 20 to 30 of us would gather, to two years into our work, when the group had whittled down to between five and ten core members. Rita always looked defeated. She didn't speak very often during our meetings, but when she did, she sucked the air out of the room; her soft, trembling voice reminding us all that however miniscule this issue seemed to the outside, it was a dire one for her and her kin.

Rita had lived in Mar Mikhael for over 35 years. She shared an apartment with her elderly mother, who was more than 80 years old, and her fiery twin sister. The middle aged twins awoke between 5:30 and 6:00 am each day. Rita worked as a freelance manicurist, and her sister worked in a factory run by Taghziah, a large manufacturer of processed meat. "I take as much work as I can get," Rita told me. "You know what the economic situation in the country is like. I can't tell a customer, I'm sorry I didn't sleep all night. They'll say okay and go to someone else." On most nights, the twins didn't manage to fall asleep before 2:30 am, and much later on weekends. "My sister works in a factory, so there is noise where she works too. She comes home at 5:30 pm, wanting to relax after a whole day of noise, and she has to live this all over again." Walking to Rita's apartment building, located in a back alley along Armenia Street, I

was shocked by the proximity with which she lived to not one but three resto-bars. During our interview, she took me out onto the balcony to look down at what, in the afternoon, was an already bustling corner of an already bustling street. “Imagine what it’s like at night,” she said. Fewer than ten meters separated her apartment building from these establishments.

Rita had been pushing back against these bars for six years prior to the formation of the neighbourhood group, talking to bar managers and customers either on her own or with a contingent of residents from her building, calling the police when promises to turn down the volume and minimize the noise making were reneged on, only to be told that it was out of their hands:

> They tell us to go complain to the municipality. They tell us they can’t tell them to turn the music down before 12 am on weekdays. Am I forced to stay up? What if I have kids? They’re taking our rights by force. They’ve made us hate the night. God made the night for sleep and the day for work. They’ve switched this up. This isn’t natural. We have to sleep with the window closed during the summer. We’re forced to turn on the AC always because its buzzing covers up the sound from outside a little bit. I’ve put a TV in my bedroom to drown out the noise. When I complain to the bar managers, they say I want to deprive them of their livelihood, but what about *my* livelihood? How can I work if I get no rest?

In his work on Americans who have suffered from a gradual, long-term process of formaldehyde poisoning in their homes, Shapiro (2015) argues that “the tracking of small changes to body and atmosphere across time and space can accumulate into a process I call the ‘chemical sublime,’ which elevates minor enfeebling encounters into events that stir ethical consideration and potential intervention” (p. 369). Habitual exposure to “indistinct and distributed harms,” he writes, “are sublimated into an embodied apprehension of human vulnerability to and entanglements with ordinary toxicity, provoking reflection, disquiet, and contestation” (p. 369).

Bodies that are "chemically wounded, even minutely so," he elaborates, "bear revelatory power" (p. 370). Similarly, I argue that through an imposed sensorial engagement, residents like Rita gained a somatic understanding of themselves as people considered disposable by the Lebanese state. They could physically *feel* its neglect of their wellbeing. It was bodily knowledge that brought Rita to the conclusion that the Lebanese state very much exists and is more than capable of getting things done when it wants to; it was through bodily reason that she countered the common refrain that it is a failed or non-existent state, not in control of the chaos unfolding in the streets it is meant to govern.

"I don't say there is no state; it's just missing. There is a state, we have a legal system, but they are ignoring the issue. When the state wants to impose its authority, it easily does so." Rita was forced into an intimate attunement with her surroundings, which imposed on her "somatic modes of attention" (Csordas as cited in Shapiro, 2015, p. 373) that, in turn, allowed her to *see* the state; see its workings in the granting of more and more licenses to bars, the waiving of fines, the smugness of bar owners with political cover; and to understand her relationship with it as that of a citizen whose life and labour was not considered valuable and useful. Through her body, electrified nightly by pulsating music, the state and its many faces became knowable (Obeid, 2010).

If "the chemical sublime is the accrual of bodily reasoning to the point of articulating patterned practices and infrastructures that distribute pockets of exposure across space" (Shapiro, 2015, p. 380), in Mar Mikhael it was a sort of acoustical sublime that traced on the insides of these residents' bodies a rudimentary sketch of a state that deemed some lives worthy of support while

discarding others. What the Beirut Madinati volunteers hoped to do, was to translate this somatic apprehension of neglect and uneven distribution of state resources and support, into a holistic understanding of gentrification and its consequences for city and country in their entirety, beyond this little neighbourhood, in the hopes of generating loyalty and solidarity not only between the residents and their locale, but between these residents, their city as a whole, and all those who called it home. It was hoped that "the *irritations* of one's immediate environment" might "become *agitations* to apprehend and attenuate the effects of vast toxic infrastructures" (Shapiro, 2015, p. 380).

Figure 12: Beirut Madinati. (2017). Sign placed on a resident's balcony in Mar Mikhael asking, 'how will we sleep?' [Digital Image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2OtBObK

III. Caring for Mar Mikhael

There was, for much of our time in Mar Mikhael, a tension between how the residents understood the situation in the neighbourhood, what they saw as the proper solution to their plight and the best way to go about achieving it, and the analyses and approaches put forward by Alia and Ghazi.

The residents felt personally targeted. They wanted all the bars gone. They insisted on their illegality, referencing the prohibition on bars in residential areas, pointing out that most of the night life establishments in Mar Mikhael held licenses for cafes. They wanted to bypass the municipality and the governor's office and appeal to higher authorities like the Ministry of Tourism or even the office of the President of the Republic, or to influential, local political figures or parties, who could force the governor or municipal council's hand. They understood that political rights in Lebanon "seem to be 'determined less by rules and more by relationships' …that 'Lebanese citizens needed brokerage, *wasta* [personal connections], to gain access to services and resources'" (Obeid, 2010, p. 340), and felt it necessary to activate this dynamic in Mar Mikhael, a 'mentality' that Alia and Ghazi were committed to countering.

One particularly assertive member of the neighbourhood group, Joseph, took it upon himself to draft a letter to the president. "Is there a plan," he wrote, "to force the residents of this neighbourhood out? We don't believe what's happening is tourism or urban development." He compared the residents of Mar Mikhael to prisoners trapped in torture chambers. Mahmoud, another resident, believed there was "something big" behind the changes to the neighbourhood,

something involving "politicians, judges, cops. They all have the same response prepared before we speak to them. They try to confuse us. Maybe it's drugs. It's not just pub owners, there's something behind them." Lebanon is a country of strongmen, most of the residents believed, and strongmen can only be confronted by someone stronger. Another resident believed Mar Mikhael was 'chosen' because "there is poverty and there are no strongmen, no *zaʿran* [thugs]. These people have no connections. The social class is slightly below average. If they tried to open these pubs in Ain el-Remmaneh, they would get beaten up."[56] One well-connected resident believed they would get nowhere without local political cover, calling repeatedly for visits to Massoud "Poussy" Al-Ashkar, a local politician, founder of the party Union of Lebanon and former member of the Lebanese Forces, who oversaw the latter's military operations in Achrafieh during the civil war. A controversial figure, to say the least, he was considered by many in Lebanon to be a war criminal.

Residents rejected the suggestion that they try to appeal to customers. They didn't see the point in talking to "hash smokers and alcoholics." Many called for the formal policing of behaviour in the neighbourhood. They wanted to take over the street, to close it off and prevent customers from reaching the bars, dealing a blow to the latter's profits. "This has become the street of prostitutes." One resident regularly referred to bar owners as uneducated 'rats'. He believed that if the neighbourhood group caused a "scandal," revealing these bar owners for "what they are," the politicians backing them would have to pull their support "from their rats, because it's not worth it."

[56] Ain el-Remmaneh is a working class, predominantly Christian-Maronite neighbourhood and stronghold of the Lebanese Forces.

I understand the approaches favoured by the residents of Mar Mikhael in relation to what Nucho (2016) calls Lebanon's "multiple overlapping jurisdictions" (p. 9). Against portrayals of Lebanon as having a missing or frail sovereign state subordinated to influential religious organizations or sectarian political parties, Nucho argues that "whatever we can define as the 'state' cannot be separated from these very organisations that make up the formal and informal political institutions of governance" (p. 110). She promotes the analytical adoption of the notion of overlapping jurisdictions, instead of sovereignty, to help us make better sense of "the role of the various actors involved in urban planning initiatives, infrastructure building, and the procurement of services in Lebanon" (p. 110).

In their preferences in terms of who to reach out to not simply for assistance, but for justice, we see this understanding of the Lebanese state as composed of multiple and overlapping jurisdictions and scales being articulated by the residents of Mar Mikhael. What the Beirut Madinati volunteers aimed to do was to direct the residents away from what were framed as illegitimate, non-state actors, as well as from 'distant' state actors, towards the local authorities constitutionally authorized to address the neighbourhood's concerns – the municipal council and the governor. The volunteers positioned one form of jurisdiction, by which I mean "the ability to enact authority" (Nucho, 2016, p. 3), as legitimate, and others either as irrelevant or illegitimate.

Alia and Ghazi were overwhelmed by the residents' discourse, anxious to counter it but unsure how. They felt compelled to show the residents that there were other means of reclaiming their right to comfort and dignity. They hoped this process would temper the moralism and

scapegoating provoked by the residents' anger and reveal to them that what was needed was better city-planning, and not more policing and better access to patronage networks. In order to do that, they had to win; they had to offer up achievements and successes, or they risked losing the residents to a local strongman or sectarian party. Against the hegemonic belief that in Lebanon "the means for individuals and groups to live dignified lives does not lie squarely in the hands of the state, but rather with different individuals in the state who provide it to their own clients" (Hermez, 2011a, p. 531), Alia and Ghazi insisted the state and its formal institutions could be held accountable and forced to do their jobs if pressured sufficiently by citizens.

The residents believed that the state was willfully absent from Mar Mikhael, that it had 'withdrawn its hand', as they would often say, and 'taken sides'. They understood the state as corrupt, rather than failed, perceiving the situation in Mar Mikhael through the lenses of clientelism, bribery and *wasta*. In response, they pushed to insert themselves within the intertwined systems of political sectarianism and sectarian-clientelism, which they recognized as having failed them and as being improper within a modern, 'civilized' state, because they saw no other means for securing their rights.

Alia and Ghazi affirmed the residents' narratives of neglect and corruption. They worked to highlight what they framed as existing, legally authorized mechanisms for fighting this corruption and neglect – and they were successful, at first, in encouraging residents to seek out and engage these mechanisms. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, a focus on corruption as cause, rather than symptom of something systemic, structural and, in many cases,

legally-enabled, can obscure more than it reveals. A focus on corruption, as Leenders (2012) explains, results in anti-corruption plans and strategies meant to be "superimposed on Lebanon's political settlement while ignoring the possibility that the settlement is incapable of generating the desired institutional changes" (p. 236).

Figure 13: Beirut Madinati. (2017). Sign demanding the right to comfort in Mar Mikhael [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2LN0zgW

IV. Conclusion

In this section, I introduced the work of the Mar Mikhael neighbourhood group, and Alia and Ghazi's attempts to encourage its members to lobby what they considered legitimate local authorities to address their needs. As I will show in the following sections, however, little came from this practice of lobbying, a result that didn't surprise Alia, Ghazi, or the residents, all of whom knew that not much could be expected of the Lebanese authorities that wasn't part of some kind of exchange, even when it was not only perfectly within their jurisdiction, but legally incumbent upon them, to honour a demand. Why did Beirut Madinati's volunteers in Mar Mikhael advocate for a strategy they knew would likely lead them nowhere?

Activating the State

Building on work by Philip Abrams, Timothy Mitchell, and Michael Taussig, Navaro (2002) argues that "the notion that there is such a thing as the state – real, neutral, and stable above governments, the army, political parties, bureaucrats, schools or the police – is the greatest ideological myth of modern times" (p. 155). But, contra Taussig and his framing of state as *fetish*, Navaro argues against the adoption of false consciousness as the analytical means for making sense of state-society relations. This analytic, she explains, cannot account for "the widespread everyday habit of narrating stories of disgust and abhorrence vis-à-vis the state" (p. 158). Instead of fetishism, following from Sloterdijk and Zizek, she proposes cynicism as an analytical lens through which to make sense of the habitual reification of a state that citizens appear to see through. Cynical subjects, writes Zizek, "know very well what they are doing but

still they are doing it" (as quoted in Navaro, 2002, p. 159). This raises the question, 'why persist as if the notion of the state were straightforward?' (p. 161). If, in the case of the residents of Mar Mikhael, their cynical engagement with sectarian-clientelism and political sectarianism was a matter of survival, what was the impetus behind the Beirut Madinati volunteers' reification of the state?

I. Between Analysis and Praxis

The founders of the multidisciplinary research and design studio Public Works were fixtures within both Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative and the Dalieh Campaign. A perusal of the studies and analyses produced by their urban research collective reveals a deep understanding of the intricacies of Lebanon's political system and the limits of using corruption, weakness or inadequacy as the primary lenses through which to examine its shortcomings. How is it, however, that in their political and/or diagnostic work, such actors find themselves having to "ignore their critical capacities" (Kosmatopoulos, 2011, p. 118) and providing prescriptions and solutions that their own research reveals is inherently limited?

In an article about what has been termed 2014's mass eviction law, Public Works' Nadine Bekdache (2015) presents a sophisticated analysis of what the law can tell us about how the state-citizen relationship in Lebanon has been redefined. A new rent law drafted in 2014 invalidated rent control. The law gave building owners the right to incrementally increase the rent paid by occupants of rent-controlled apartments, and to eventually evict them. Around 180,000 properties were subject to rent control under agreements drafted before 1992 (Marsi,

2017). By ending rent control, Bekdache argues, the state violated a "seventy-three-year old social contract" (2015, p. 321). While the existence of rent control indicated respect for the need for affordable housing, its demise, she argues, points to:

> elite forces…ransacking the social pact between citizens and the state, which older tenants strongly symbolize. In the process, the concept of a sovereign state is shifting from positing the state as a provider of basic rights to casting the state as an enabler of the market. A prevailing narrative of the "weak state" has legitimized this shift in the Lebanese context. However, such a reconfiguration of sovereignty masks the workings of a strong state behind a new emerging *sovereignty of eviction* (p. 321).

Bekdache (2015) paints a compelling picture of the global economic dynamics that have contributed to changes in "rent laws, building laws, and exceptions to the zoning regulations" in Lebanon, as well as the entanglement of developers and Lebanon's political elite, who work together to draft "economic and urban policies to continuously boost the country's real estate sector" (p. 320). She paints a picture of multiple, overlapping jurisdictions. She describes the state not as a neutral, abstract entity but as an amalgamation of actors, institutions, laws, tax systems and policies driven, today, not by a social contract but by market considerations.

If what is being pointed to is not failure, weakness, or poor, defective planning, then what purpose does it serve to assert, as Public Works (2018a) does in a piece for *Jadaliyya*, that:

> the state and local authorities have *forgotten* [emphasis added] the main role of regulations and general master plans, namely, to be a means of organizing communal life and negotiating between different interests. They have also *forgotten* [emphasis added] that these plans and regulations serve a social purpose in dealing with urbanization and environmental issues that have a daily effect on all our lives (para. 6).

Public Works' research output provides an account of the "hollowed-out character of the state" (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 394); the ways in which neoliberal capitalist globalization "has eroded those functions of the Weberian state that were once its defining feature" (2003, p. 394). And yet, its studies also articulate "the desire for statehood" (p. 394).

Another Public Works (2018b) piece published on the Lebanese NGO Legal Agenda's blog, chronicles the evolution of master planning in Lebanon, describing the country as having been "service-producing" since its beginnings, rather than a "welfare state" (para. 8). The Lebanese Construction Law of 1940, conceived by a collective of architects who had studied in Europe and were influenced by the modernism that dominated approaches to architecture on the continent during the first half of the twentieth century, designed a law that would serve as an "extension of the modernist-colonialist project;" an "expression of the service and tourism-based orientation of the economy" (para. 9). In the contemporary period, explain the authors elsewhere, the plans and regulations issued by the Directorate General of Urban Planning "serve the interest of the landowners and constitute a tool of political pressure for local *zuama*" (2018a, para. 11). Is today's practice of master planning in Lebanon, they ask in Legal Agenda:

> still rooted in a modernist vision that presents a clean, orderly image at the expense of the undesirable classes? Or is it a neoliberal practice rooted in free market policy via the logic of granting exemptions from the law, which has become a main tool of planning? Or does the current, non-participative legislative framework exacerbate the power of decision-making circles that are restricted to personal relationships and pave the way for the rise and spread of corruption in the form of nepotism and clientelism? (2018b, para. 22).

Public Works put forward a description of modern urban planning in Lebanon as "a tool of the powerful, whether they be the central state, the wealthy, or the social elite" (2018b, para. 28),

but they then go on to decry a "complete *failure* [emphasis added] in handling the environment and urbanization" (para. 1) and diagnose "poor planning" as well as a "defective vision" as the causes behind this failure (para. 5). They call for increased resident participation in the process of urban planning as a fundamental component of rectifying this failure. What they describe, however, is not so much failure, as a particular, intentional configuration of governance that has purposefully violated "the right to health, to dignified reconciliation, to housing, and to development," and which prioritized clientelism and private interests through an "intentional legislative vacuum," honouring the vision originally set out for Lebanon, as they themselves write (2018b, para. 21). One could easily envision ways in which the ruling class could invite resident feedback on urban projects and find ways to address their concerns without affecting these projects' abilities to generate profit, diverting their consequences onto another marginalized population, for example, or distracting from small-scale issues through recourse to national security concerns, as the Lebanese authorities are prone to do.

There is a discrepancy, then, between the compelling, nuanced analyses of the ways in which political/sectarian and economic elites have effectively used state planning to implement a sectarian-neoliberal vision, and the diagnosis of poor planning and neglect, linked to an opaque notion of corruption, as the sources behind the decay of urban infrastructure in Lebanon, among my interlocutors.

Aretxaga (2003) explains this common paradoxical tendency by drawing on Bourdieu to reference the state's "meta-capital, its hallowed form commanding an imagery of power and a screen for political desire as well as fear" (p. 394). But there is also, importantly, "real capital

circulating through the elusive body of the state in the form of international aid, development projects, and capitalist ventures of various kinds" (p. 394). It is this "aura of capital," she argues, that generates a discourse of corruption in response to the dubious dealings of local bureaucrats, as well as a discourse of abandonment by those whose access to this capital is said to be hindered by the corrupt practices of individuals in positions of power.

This aura of capital, productive of the enchantment of the state, of the enduring desire for the state to play the role of primary provider in a contemporary context where analyses like those done by Public Works reveal it has no interest in doing so, results in fetishization of the law and of participatory democracy by activists such as those with whom I worked, even when they realized, as evidenced by the discussion above, that the law plays a role mainly as a tool for the powerful, rather than as a distributor of justice, and that increased participation can reinforce, rather than necessarily undermine, the status quo. The narratives of failure and neglect, of a lack of managerial skills and scientific expertise, allow the social promise of the state as care-giver to endure, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that refutes its desire to fulfil this role – evidence put forward by the same activists clinging to this social promise.

The anxiety to act, it seems, overwhelms even the most astute analyses of the contemporary Lebanese state. It is this anxiety that fashions an optimistic commitment to managerialism, despite the evidence these activists are themselves providing for its inherent limitations and likely pitfalls. What drives managerialism and its takeover of so many spheres, Grey (1996) writes, "is the contradiction between the inability of human beings to control the world, the stubborn persistence of the belief that such control is possible, and the social conflicts and

problems generated by attempts to exert this control" (p. 605). The narrative of poor planning authorizes managerialism in Lebanon, the belief that if only things were better ordered in the country, "collective goals can be achieved" (Parker, 2009, p. 4), and that the only way to achieve this ordering is to make room for the state to do its job by lobbying it out of dormancy.

"One's theory of 'the state' does greatly matter in formulating strategies for political action," writes Gupta (1995, p. 394). The discourse of corruption, he explains, enables "people to construct the state symbolically and to define themselves as citizens" (p. 389). It makes sense, given the neighbourhood initiative's goal of 'activating' the residents of Beirut, and demonstrating to them what an engaged citizenship could look like and be productive of, that it would reproduce and rely on the hegemonic narrative of a state hindered by corrupt bureaucrats. Constructing the state through this narrative, in a context where the state is imagined as, because of its capture by corruption, having many faces – a brutal face, a generous face, in addition to its neglectful and weak faces – can be generative of the hope that "there *must* be government officials and agencies…interested in helping people" (Gupta, 1995, p. 391) like the residents of Mar Mikhael. The search for the ideal face of the state (Obeid, 2010) in Mar Mikhael manifested as a search for the governmental figure who was loyal to his proper role, to the residents he was meant to represent, and to an also abstract and reified legal system.

What were the consequences of this search for the ideal, incorrupt face of the state in the context of neighbourhood work in Mar Mikhael?

II. Co-opting Mar Mikhael

During its first year, the neighbourhood group produced two petitions, one directed at the Ministry of Tourism and one directed at the municipal council and governor. In earlier neighbourhood initiative meetings, when the Mar Mikhael group was still in its strategizing phase, Alia talked about how heartening it was to see the residents routinely expressing joy in response to their collective work. They had been struggling individually for so long, it was gratifying to finally be working collectively towards their shared goals. “They see the value in this collective work, because they weren’t able to get anything done individually.” Ghazi emphasized the importance of providing residents the opportunity and space to talk, vent and meet. Both explained the symbiotic relationship they believed was developing between Beirut Madinati and the residents, within which each played their specific part in edging towards a victory: the residents expressed their anger and frustration and articulated their needs and demands, and Beirut Madinati provided a commentary in parallel on how the city should be run, and how to go about lobbying for better city-planning. This, Alia emphasized, the residents appreciated. The value of Beirut Madinati, the neighbourhood initiative agreed, was to create a link between the grassroots and policymakers.

The petition meant for local government was submitted to the governor by a delegation from the neighbourhood on May 12th, 2017, which pressed him to apply the law. The petition, signed by more than 200 residents, emphasized the right to comfort [*al-ḥaq bi al-rāḥa*], as well as a quiet and dignified life. It demanded the application of existing laws and regulations, in the absence of which, it was argued, the lives of residents in Mar Mikhael had become harrowing. The petition highlighted that the residents of the neighbourhood were merely asking that their

most basic rights be respected: their right to be able to sleep in their homes, and to have those violating the noise limit set in place by the Ministry of Environment and, with it, the sanctity of private, family life, penalized. It called on the governor to "assume the powers granted to him by municipal law, and to impose necessary and preventive measures to ensure the welfare of residents and remedy what had been adversely affecting them." It called on the municipal council to "assume its primary role in developing a comprehensive policy that will make Beirut a liveable city, by issuing an integrated regulatory framework to manage bars and their clients, to safeguard and preserve the rights of neighbourhood inhabitants."

The residents felt satisfied and hopeful after their trip to the governor's office. "It was positive. He said the bars don't have licenses, and he told us where to go, to the Ministry of Tourism," one delegate reported to the group. But the Beirut Madinati volunteers were quick to point out that a discussion they had had with the NGO Legal Agenda had revealed that while bar licenses were initially issued by the Ministry of Tourism, the authority responsible for making sure bars adhered to the law and closing those that did not, was the governor. The governor, the group concluded furiously, was trying to divert responsibility and dismiss the residents.

I remember distinctly the infantilizing and condescending attitude with which he addressed us – a group predominantly made up of women – chuckling as we talked, interrupting us to chat with his assistants and sign documents, as though we were not worthy of his full attention. I remember how he looked at and addressed those few of us who were younger, in our thirties – it made my skin crawl. I presume he thought we would find his behaviour charming, and he moved and talked like someone who thought himself young and handsome, and perhaps he could be considered so, within the landscape of Lebanese politicians who were predominantly

neither of these things, although I'm unsure whether these characteristics registered with or mattered to the residents. They wanted some kind of assurance and, for a minute, they thought they had it, and little else mattered. Following the delegation's visit to his office, the governor made a superficial spectacle of a surprise visit to the neighbourhood, to check in on the bars and visit a few residents in their homes. Subsequently, a particularly brazen establishment named London Bar was shutdown, only to reopen again in a matter of days. The owner declared to inquiring residents that the municipality could not 'touch him'.

In response, in July of 2017, the neighbourhood group organized a press conference entitled "Mar Mikhael is a residential neighbourhood and cannot be made a touristic one by the stroke of a pen," on a local staircase in the neighbourhood, during which the residents declared that, "due to the *resignation* of the authorities, the confrontations are daily in the neighbourhoods of our city."

Figure 14: Mar Mikhael press conference, July 7, 2017

In the group's one-year self-evaluation, residents expressed that they had begun to lose hope. They had dedicated a lot of effort to their cause but managed to achieve very little. One resident insisted that the group hadn't failed, because the bars had *wasta* that allowed them to reopen. "The circumstances are bigger than us. It's like swimming against a current." Another resident argued that, if anything, the group's first year had revealed the importance of pursuing the legal avenue. "We're all tired," she said. "The whole country is exhausting. We didn't continue with the legal suit because we put faith in the governor." Over the course of its second year, the Mar Mikhael neighbourhood group began preparing to submit a collection of official complaints to the public prosecutor, and to collectively sue those bars engaging in the most egregious violations of the law, a process that, at the time of writing, was stalled as a result of events I elaborate on below.

In the run-up to Lebanon's May 2018 parliamentary elections, the Mar Mikhael neighbourhood group decided to organize a public forum entitled, "What do we want from our parliamentarians?" During the forum, the residents asserted that they had been doing the work of MPs, the municipality, the police and the governor for a year and a half. Rita took the mic, at one point, to serve as a vehicle through which, it was hoped, the residents could make a visceral connection with the audience of potential MPs, concerned residents of Beirut, and wanderers by. "This is a residential neighbourhood," she said. "Almost overnight, the neighbourhood changed, *as if by the spell of a sorcerer*."

Mahmoud called on the government to apply the law. "The point of having laws," he insisted, "is for everyone to be able to interact in a way that ensures equal access to their rights. Apply

the laws that guarantee us our rights." A member of Beirut Madinati, who introduced herself as hailing from the Sunni neighbourhood of Tariq Jdeedeh, took the mic next to emphasize that was happening to the residents of Mar Mikhael was happening all over Beirut, under different guises:

> The root cause is the same. *There is no state organizing our lives*. There is no authority for us to go to and say, you're responsible, *please come handle this situation*. We're here to say today, to the MPs we're going to elect, if you don't give us what we want and secure our needs, four years from now we are not going to re-elect you. MPs need to have the background and experience to convince us that they can do what they say they want to do. We have to elect people with substance.

Ghaith stepped up to reiterate that what people wanted from their MPs was *planning*. "Somebody is benefitting from all these violations of the law," he said. "If the MPs don't see that, it's a catastrophe, and if they see what's going on and they're not doing anything, it's an even bigger problem." He brought up the closure and subsequent re-opening of London Bar, and the brashness of its owner. "He humiliated the municipality, and when the municipality is humiliated, *we all feel humiliated* and stomped on." A young activist chimed in next to insist that the solution to all of the problems being expressed was election day – "to elect people who represent us, and who look like us." The State, Alia explained towards the end of the event, "is made up of institutions. If each institution worked properly, we would no longer have problems."

Figure 15: Beirut Madinati. (2018). 'What do we want from our MPs?' event [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2ZoCjFi

This event took place in April of 2018, sixteen months into the work of the Mar Mikhael neighbourhood group. During those sixteen months, the event made clear, the volunteers from Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative had neglected to introduce socio-economic context to the developments in the neighbourhood, and so the residents continued to see themselves as victims of a neglectful state that had allowed them to come under, as Rita put it, an evil sorcerer's spell. The law, the state and the sorcerer continued to be discursively detached from one another. The residents called for state intervention, assuming that neglect meant absence. But, what feels like neglect can also be understood as a product of the state's role in intricately organizing the lives of its citizens and denizens in ways that benefit the market, on the one hand,

and the sectarian balance of power, on the other.[57] My interlocutors knew this, as evidenced by their own research output but, as explained earlier, they did not know what to do with this discourse or analysis. Corruption and neglect were easier paradigms to work with, more generative of the sense that something could be done to reform the status quo in the short-term and, therefore, of hopefulness.

Contrary to the popular conception of the neglectful or weak state, under neoliberalism, writes Aretxaga (2003), "there is not a deficit of state but an excess of statehood practices: too many actors competing to perform as state" (p. 396). The contemporary state under neoliberalism has "lost many of the ordering functions that produced the effect of a unitary force" (p. 398). Aretxaga explains that "the mystifying illusion of a center of power called the state must be unmasked for the reality of disparate relations of power to emerge" (p. 401).

In the aftermath of the 2018 parliamentary elections, representatives of the office of Free Patriotic Movement-associated MP for Beirut's first district, Nicolas Sehnaoui, who served as minister of telecommunications between 2011 and 2014, were invited by a Mar Mikhael resident to attend one of the group's meetings. The residents were quick to ask staffers to relay their congratulations to the former minister on his parliamentary win and thank him for his interest in their cause. They discussed organizing a joint press conference, as the staffers explained they were in attendance to take suggestions from the residents and hear their demands,

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[57] With regards to the latter, for example, in the case of Mar Mikhael it was widely known that the valet companies were associated with speaker of parliament and head of the Shiʿi Amal Movement Nabih Berri, and were not only a source of profit for him but part of the patronage network through which he secured employment for underprivileged Shiʿa, in exchange for their support.

as a means of following up on a campaign promise made by Sehnaoui to address the needs of the neighbourhood were he to be elected to office.

A lawyer involved with the group explained that the law was on the MP's side, and he could easily shutdown violating bars if he chose to pursue the case. Alia insisted that the press conference focus on the fact that the government wasn't doing its job, which had forced residents and business owners into a confrontation in Mar Mikhael. "This is what happens when the tourism sector isn't properly planned," she explained. She urged that this be discussed as a citywide problem, and that it be insisted on that the tourism sector can play an essential role in the economy without it coming at the expense of residents. "We are not saying we want to kill the tourism sector," she clarified. "We want it to be organized." A resident chimed in to point out that the residents of Mar Mikhael felt weak because they didn't have political backing. "The MP promised us, so hopefully this will change – *let's see how he's going to solve this for us*. If parliamentarians support us, we'll support them."

It was as though, once the elections were over, Sehnaoui could only take an interest in Mar Mikhael based on good intentions and the desire to honor his promises; as though he were no longer a part of the traditional ruling class. The MP was framed as some kind of manifestation of the benevolent paternal state, finally come to resume its duties, masking over the dynamics that made this particular parliamentarian able and willing to take on such an issue – the motivations, electoral, economic or otherwise, that made Mar Mikhael a zone of interest for him. A press conference between the residents and the MP took place shortly thereafter.

After the residents spoke, Sehnaoui addressed the press. He explained that he was speaking not only on his own behalf, but on behalf of an alliance that included 20 members of parliament. He insisted that what was unfolding in Mar Mikhael was *not* a political issue. "This should be a collective demand. It's nothing more than getting residents their rights. There is neglect from authorities. I want to say something to the authorities," he said, as though he were not one of them:

> I'm going to involve all of the MPs of Beirut's first district in organizing a series of actions with the residents, so that no one says this is sectarian or partisan. If we work together, we'll show that this issue *isn't political at all*. *Temporary* solutions are easy, it is just a matter of respecting the law. Maybe in the long-term some laws need to change, which we can look into, but that will take time.

Watching the residents stand behind Sehnaoui, proud and elated, I understood better Hermez's argument about the intersections between dignity and clientelism (2011a), which I elaborate on in chapter 6. The residents of Mar Mikhael had long framed themselves as humiliated by bar owners, customers and the authorities turning a blind eye to their behavior. To be recognized by this influential figure, long and deeply embedded within Lebanon's system of political sectarianism – who was at the time a key player within the political party associated with the president of the republic – to co-organize a press conference with him, to be taken seriously by drawing on his authority, were a source of pride, validation and gratification, however temporary. Being supported by Beirut Madinati, a group without any 'real' power, with little to offer besides knowledge capital, did not bear the same kind of symbolic fruit, or, as evidenced by two years of collective labor, promise the same kind of material rewards.

Despite the successes that they logged, Alia and Ghazi gradually came to characterize the Mar Mikhael pilot project as a failure. “It became like an island,” Alia said, in neighbourhood initiative meetings. “We didn’t link it to Beirut Madinati or the wider city. What is its relationship to our ideals? We didn’t know how to develop a discourse about the neighbourhood as a political entity.”

The neighbourhood initiative criticized its inability to develop a political discourse around neighbourhood work. Even within Beirut Madinati, its work was perceived as something akin to charity or NGO-work. Its members acknowledged that they had potentially created agents of change, but not of the kind of change they aspired to in the long-term. Two years on, the initiative didn’t have models to replicate in other neighbourhoods, which was one of the initial points of the pilot projects. Communities, they discussed amongst themselves, pull you in particular directions. And, they treat you like an NGO, because that’s who they are used to collaborating with in the Lebanese context.

III. Conclusion

In my assessment, in the case of Mar Mikhael, as my fieldwork was coming to an end it looked like the neighbourhood initiative had successfully created agents of change fueled by self-interest to work collectively. The organizers of the initiative had not laid the basis for an inclusive conception of community that could eventually fold in other residents and denizens of Beirut and the wider country. This was evident, for example, in one resident’s repeated, derogatory suggestion that we hang a banner at the entrance to the neighbourhood welcoming

visitors to Dahiye (working class, predominantly Shiʿi suburb), version 2.0. “These people who are educated would be shocked,” he said. This was evident in the calls for more policing in the neighbourhood, with one resident who drew on his authority as a former ‘respectful’ bar owner in Monot insisting that what was actually needed was a military presence. This same resident bemoaned the disappearance of Mar Mikhael’s traditions – Christmas lights, the Armenian Christmas parade. “It was very classy, not like the ‘gypsies’ who play music now during the holidays.” And, this was evident in the diatribe that Carole – a notable sociology professor who had emerged towards the end of my fieldwork as a kind of de facto group leader – often delivered, whenever anyone made the mistake of referring to Mar Mikhael as a working class neighbourhood. She insisted on its middle-classness, emphasizing explicitly that their cause wasn’t about the poor, and implicitly that it wasn’t about the many non-Lebanese residents of the country, from refugees to migrant workers, but about “the majority of Lebanese who work hard and make money. We’re not working for the poor; we are working for ourselves. The Lebanese are not poor, they just don’t have their rights.”

Dana attributed the inability to draw Beirut Madinati volunteers to neighbourhood work to the initiative’s failure to communicate the importance of this form of organizing. And, others explained that, after two years, the initiative itself hadn’t clearly set out why it wanted to do this work in the first place. Was it to build a base for elections? To make voters stronger vis-à-vis candidates during elections? To develop a culture of organizing that could ready them for something bigger? What was that something? “Is the point to create a group, or to create a group with particular, progressive political perspectives?” Nour asked, in a neighborhood initiative

meeting called to address the question of politics and neighborhood work as my fieldwork was wrapping up in the summer of 2018.

Nabila chimed in to say that was never the intention. “We said we were going to make active groups – active on their issues, social not political.” And, she was right. That is what the neighborhood initiative had set out to do. Recall Alia’s statement, quoted earlier in this chapter, that it would be a success just to create a lasting neighbourhood organization. But the initiative members realized two years on, that without the political, this work was inherently limited, and would inevitably reach a dead-end relative to what these activists wanted to see their city and country become in the long-run.

It could be argued that what happened in Mar Mikhael, in the immediate aftermath of the Sehnaoui press conference, constituted a budding success for the residents, but it was a failure for the Beirut Madinati activists and their vision of how neighbourhood work could contribute to something more fundamentally transformative. “Our ambitions far surpass the conditions we live under,” Nabila said. “This is long-term, turtle work. We have to work at the community’s rhythm. We can’t force people to think differently or act differently.”

“Do we want to do what they want to do, or what we want to do?” Alia asked. Nabila insisted that what neighbourhood residents wanted was simply to work on their issues and to feel like they could succeed. “People are sleeping,” she said of the residents of Zoqaq El Blatt and elsewhere, as she had about the users of Ramlet el Baida and the Dalieh in other contexts.

"It's judgmental to assume people will only move if they feel they will succeed," Nour responded, indicating a significant change of opinion from when I first interviewed her, early in my fieldwork, to that meeting, as I neared the end of my two years. In theory, working on small, practical, non-controversial issues linked to livability and well-being had seemed pregnant with potential, but Nour had come to see its drawbacks, as we all had – the ways in which it reinforced individualism rather than community and collectivity. What had been framed as a success in itself, collaborating with residents on non-contentious issues and initiating neighbourhood groups, as the possibility of co-optation loomed, began to feel increasingly like a short-sighted approach.

The neighborhood initiative had voiced, repeatedly, the need to find a way to get people to think beyond their interests, to see their issues as linked to bigger, citywide issues and, most importantly, to create a real *political alternative* to political sectarianism and clientelism and, through its routinization over the long-term, a new political subjectivity that transcended divisive categories of identification and meaning-making. But what transpired in Mar Mikhael, instead of a politically generative form of community, of standing together and working together in public, appeared more like a collective of individuals looking out for their own interests, who recognized that they were stronger together than apart, and that collective work could strengthen their positionality vis-à-vis Lebanon's traditional sectarian ruling class.

Instead of serving as a challenge to the powers that be, the neighborhood became a potential new weapon in their arsenal. Capitalism, which in Lebanon's case manifests in a symbiotic relationship with sectarianism, has an astonishing ability to devour critique, to incorporate it

into a mutated version of itself, drawing on it as a source of strength and, in so doing, "disarming" it (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). Beirut Madinati's neighborhood initiative, like many anti-status quo initiatives that came before it, was unable to provide not only material but also symbolic relief or alternatives to the residents of Mar Mikhael, both of which they seemed, as my fieldwork came to a close, to have found the potential for in Sehnaoui.[58]

Coda

If the humanitarian industry, as many scholars have compellingly argued, has abandoned "the utopian *telos* of total transformation in favor of short-term relief and a 'minimal biopolitics'," the same, I hope to have shown in this chapter, can be said of pragmatic politics and techno-populism, making both of these approaches to rights advocacy – regardless of intention – complicit in the spread of a rationality that "evacuates the near future in strikingly similar ways" to that of the "neoliberal imagination" (von Schnitzler, 2016, p. 172).

If, following from James Scott, we call this rationality 'seeing like a state', internalizing as "obvious and necessary" a certain form of activism despite the clear ways in which it appears "counterintuitive and socially engineered" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 9), we can better understand,

[58] A year after the press conference, as I was writing up this dissertation, Sehnaoui launched the project "My Color is Rmeil," in collaboration with the committee of business owners in that neighborhood of Achrafieh, located close to Mar Mikhael. The project intended to renovate the facades of buildings in the area, as a means of helping boost business in Beirut's first district. The residents of Mar Mikhael were appalled to see that after having heard nothing from the MP in the aftermath of his promise-filled press conference, he had launched this project. In Beirut Madinati's annual newsletter, the organization asked on behalf of the residents: "Is painting facades more important than giving citizens their basic right to comfort, and applying the law? What of the promise of a peaceful sleep for residents burdened by the noise produced by touristic establishments?" In the statement, BM re-articulated its demand for the authorities to listen to the residents and fulfill their responsibilities. In a What's App discussion about this development, the residents voiced disappointment and anger, but not surprise.

for example, Beirut Madinati volunteers' aversion to supporting the residents of Mar Mikhael in their repeat calls for a disruptive approach to demanding their rights (closing off and occupying the street, boycotting municipal taxes). Such practices, while appearing "less efficient" in the short-term and less productive of "marketable results," might, in the long term, have been "more sustaining" of the kind of political community these activists were committed to cultivating (Halberstam, 2011, p. 9).

I would like to conclude this chapter by returning to the critical literature on post-politics, and to Swyngedouw's (2014) call to resist "the temptation to act out" (p. 184) and abandon "the fear of failing again" (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 310).

In Lebanon, it is not only easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism but, it seems, it is also easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of the sectarian political system and the clientelism it enables and feeds off of. But, what I saw towards the end of my fieldwork, in the aftermath of the catastrophe that was the parliamentary elections for independent candidates, was an increasing acknowledgement among proponents of pragmatic politics in Lebanon that, perhaps the socio-politico-economic system as it existed could not be adjusted or improved upon. I saw them begin to take pause and contemplate whether it was more fruitful to take pause and contemplate. Increasingly, their short-term pragmatism began to appear as that which was, perhaps, "dangerously 'utopian'" (Swyngedouw & Wilson, 2014, p. 310). How long that would last, however, before the anxiety to act would kick in yet again, is beyond the scope of this dissertation to predict. I'll touch on this development further in my epilogue.

Where is the space of the political in all of this, in this counter-revolutionary conjuncture, in states captured by capital? Merrifield (2014) argues that:

> attempts to either storm or escape the castle are equally futile, and that radical politics must retain a fidelity to the conviction that 'underneath everything we see, everything we know, even beyond what we can currently imagine, there lies another reality, one uniting all hitherto un-united aspects of reality, all hitherto un-united social movements' (p. 19).

In the following chapter, I explore an attempt at cultivating a fidelity to alter-reality in the contemporary Lebanese activist context by engaging with study as a mode of political praxis, turning to the work of the revolutionary socialist political organization, The Socialist Forum.

Chapter 4: Imagining Utopia – Reading Marx in Beirut

How can one reimagine 'being revolutionary' at a time when to be revolutionary in the old Marxist or Sartrian sense is to be 'vulgar', 'impatient', uncivilized and 'unable to wait properly'? – Ghassan Hage

In the previous two chapters, I discussed the urban social movement that began gaining momentum in Beirut in the aftermath of the garbage protests of the summer of 2015. I drew on fieldwork amongst the Dalieh Campaign and Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative to demonstrate the pragmatic and technocratic approach to politics favored by adherents to this movement – their focus on non-controversial issues related to liveability and wellbeing, rejection of ideology and dedication to managerialism as the solution to Lebanon's plight. I argued that, while my interlocutors were committed to more progressive visions for Lebanon's future, their anxiety to act in the short-term and log achievements led them to adopt an approach to politics that could, at best, allow for moderately increased inclusion within Lebanon's current socio-political system and, at worst, reinforce this system – an approach that betrayed their own long-term goals. I situated the growing appeal of this approach to activism within a global conjuncture that other scholars have labelled 'post-political'.

In this chapter, I draw on fieldwork with the revolutionary socialist political organization the Socialist Forum (*al-Muntada al-Ishtiraki*) to explore an alternative, comparatively marginal and unpopular, approach to political organizing within Lebanon's activist scene. I ask what the marginality of radical and revolutionary leftists like those associated with the Socialist Forum

can tell us about the conjuncture in which activists in Lebanon found themselves at the time of my fieldwork and explore why certain activists were drawn to this unpopular form of political organizing. I continue with the theme of care as political praxis in this chapter.

The first half of the chapter will contextualize the Socialist Forum both within the history of the Lebanese post-civil war left, and within Beirut's contemporary activist scene. The second half of the chapter will focus on the Socialist Forum's Marxist reading groups. I will argue that this mode of collective study was productive of a camaraderie and solidarity that constituted it as a *political practice* suitable to the counter-revolutionary moment these revolutionary socialists found themselves inhabiting – an instrument of political subjectivation in preparation for a future revolution. I will argue that this practice of collective reading, thinking and discussion, commonly perceived as either a form of paralysis or elitist self-indulgence, might actually have constituted a 'practical' response to a political conjuncture characterized by stasis and hopelessness. As was the case in the previous two chapters, in what follows I will also explore the role that the anxieties and desires particular to my interlocutors played in limiting the potentiality of the reading groups and the Socialist Forum more broadly.

Before moving on, it is important to note that this chapter is haunted both by the ghost of Bassem Chit and a version of the Socialist Forum – or Muntada, as I will refer to it from here on out – that seems to have died with him in 2014. Bassem was a co-founder of the Muntada and one of its most beloved members. We never met in person, but during my time in Beirut, I encountered him over and over again, as fragments of the memories of others; a decisive element in the journeys of so many of the leftist activists I worked with and interviewed. I cannot say I really

knew him, only how he was and continued to be perceived; how he'd been embalmed in the minds of so many: a manufacturer of young Marxists. A theoretical and analytical savant. A mentor. A comrade. An irreplaceable leader. "He was the Muntada, and the Muntada was him," one interlocutor told me. This chapter is haunted by the present-absence of Bassem Chit, by his ubiquitous trace, which was at once enlivening and deadening, by the question of what happens to an organization when its heart is attacked and killed (Mikdashi, 2014), and why it wasn't able to find a new source of circulation.

The Death of Stalin

In this section, I will provide a brief overview of the features that could be said to broadly characterize the Lebanese left in all its diffuseness. I describe the traditional Lebanese left's decline from a promising counter-hegemonic movement into a fragmented collection of disenchanted intellectuals, as well as parties that aligned themselves with the ruling class, and the attempts by young radicals and revolutionaries in the post-civil war period to pave an alternative leftwing path in the wake of what they saw as their predecessors' failures. I will follow this up with a short genealogy of the Muntada.

I position the Muntada and the revolutionary left more generally as a peripheral element within contemporary Lebanese civil society compared to those organizations and collectives that had embraced a pragmatic approach to politics. I end this section by explaining what we can learn from examining such a sidelined aspect of an already small activist scene.

I. Defining the Lebanese Left

What does it mean to label a resident of Lebanon a 'leftist' or to speak of a Lebanese or, more generally, an Arab 'left'? According to Hanssen and Safieddine (2016):

> Ideologically, the term 'the Arab left' designates a broad progressive position in Arab politics, both transnational and local, that historically coalesced around secularism, anti-imperialism, class struggle, Arab unity, and the liberation of Palestine. While most self-identified Arab leftists agree with these principles, myriads of differences have persisted regarding the meaning of each of the above progressive principles as well as questions of priority, timing, velocity, tactics, and strategy (p. 195).

For Haugbolle (2013), in a Lebanese context where "sects are inscribed in the experience of living in Lebanon," a leftist broadly defined is a "person who transgresses, subverts and fundamentally challenges social boundaries and their institutional organization in law and customs" (p. 428). Despite its diffuseness across multiple, often ideologically and tactically opposed organizations and movements, Haugbolle argues that we can speak of the continuous existence of a Lebanese left beginning from the 1920s, made up of a diversity of groupings and individuals who, despite their differences, shared a commitment to social justice and a preoccupation with challenging sectarianism and imperialism, and who were engaged in ways of thinking and practicing politics that stemmed from "different interpretations and traditions of secularism" (p. 430).

Writing in 2013, Haugbolle argues that "*taʾifiya*, or sectarianism, is a core concept for the Left because it is – has become – the 'other' against which the selves of leftists are consistently set" (p. 434). But, while this might still ring true for Lebanon's traditional/mainstream left,

exemplified by long-existing organizations like the Lebanese Communist Party, for the 'new, new left', as Haugbolle (2016) has called it elsewhere, I would argue that *nationalism* has emerged as another, equally important core concept against which to position itself locally, both in its confrontations with the powers that be *and* in its debates with anti-status quo peers.

During the 1970s, Lebanon was a hub for Arab Marxism, specifically following the arrival of Palestinian resistance groups after the Palestine Liberation Organization was expelled from Jordan in 1970. However, while in the pre-civil war period the left in Lebanon constituted a real counter-hegemonic threat, the civil war, as Hanssen and Safieddine (2016) write, "seemed to have indefinitely suspended the Arab left's counterhegemonic utopias" (p. 197). In the post-civil war period, many leftists abandoned their commitment to revolutionary change in favor of "a slow march 'towards citizenship'" (Haugbolle, 2013, p. 441) characterized by a more reformist approach to socio-political transformation.

Yacoub (2014) defines the post-civil war Lebanese left simply as "parties opposing the sectarian quota system" (p. 84). In his 2014 report for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's anthology *Mapping of the Arab Left: Contemporary Leftist Politics in the Arab East*, Yacoub only mentions the Lebanese Communist Party and the Democratic Left, both of which, in the aftermath of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination in 2005, chose to ally with the March 8th and March 14th political camps respectively. Yacoub divides the Lebanese left into "the resistance left which supports March 8th and the modest left which supports March 14 forces," concluding that "the two left groups were not able to come up with a real political project which moved beyond sectarian lines" (p. 99).

This narrow focus on the most visible elements of the Lebanese left erases those leftist activists and political organizers who did not identify with either camp and, disenchanted with the fractured and co-opted traditional left, had since the early 2000s at least been actively trying to establish radical alternatives to the factions that defined it. Hanssen and Safieddine (2016) argue that such efforts took place "largely in cultural circles or outside the sphere of politics" (p. 198). Over the course of this chapter, I hope to challenge the assumption that post-civil war, independent/alternative leftist activism in Lebanon unfolded solely outside the sphere of party politics or in an unorganized, cultural or more ad hoc fashion. What we see with the Muntada and its post-civil war era predecessors, I argue, is an attempt to rethink and redefine party politics, and to offer an alternative understanding of what it means to be 'organized'.

II. A Brief Genealogy of *al-Muntada al-Ishtiraki*

Officially established in 2011, the Trotskyist *al-Muntada al-Ishtiraki*, known in English as the Socialist Forum, was the product of the coming together of two groups – The Revolutionary Communist League, associated with the Fourth International, and the Leftist Assembly for Change, which had informal links with the International Socialist Tendency. Both groups were disenchanted with the Lebanese Communist Party and its domineering approach to bringing together the Lebanese left in 2008, in the aftermath of the 2005 Cedar Revolution and the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War.[59]

[59] They also discovered, as one founding Muntada member told me, that this attempt at coalition building was merely a tool the LCP planned to use as a bargaining chip in its discussions with the March 8th political camp ahead of the 2009 parliamentary elections – a means of running more of its own candidates under the faction's umbrella.

Despite differences, most markedly a generational one between the Revolutionary Communist League, established in the 1970s and made up of leftists active during the civil war period, and the Leftist Assembly for Change (established in 2005), which was more youth-led, after two years of discussions and negotiations the groups found common ground based on their mutual desire to build an alternative to the Stalinist rhetoric of the Lebanese Communist Party, to challenge its collaborationist approach to the mainstream, Hezbollah-led opposition in the country, and to push back against the Democratic Left's defence of its cooperative position towards the establishment as means of opposing Hezbollah and the Syrian regime's influence in Lebanon.

The Muntada began with around 20 members and defined itself not as a political party, but as a project for the building of one (*mashrūʿ bināʾ hizb*). Its members distinguished themselves politically from other leftist and liberal parties and anti-status quo activist groupings based on their revolutionary theory of change, which necessitated equal attention be given to gender and sexuality-based rights, the building of socialism from below, the liberation of workers, the critique of capitalism and the protection of the environment, and that saw reformism and electoral politics as inadequate strategies for long-term political change.

The Muntada's early years were active ones, despite its limited numbers. Members joined and supported strikes, wrote and published prolifically on local, regional and international social, political and economic developments, organized protests, participated in Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaigns spearheaded by Palestinian activists, worked in refugee camps, and regularly distributed political flyers. The revolutionary momentum of the Arab uprisings, the

beginnings of which corresponded to the group's founding, kept its members going and allowed for internal differences to be temporarily ignored or overshadowed.

Haugbolle (2016) situates groups like the Muntada within a history of 'rebel intellectuals' in Lebanon who drew inspiration from the British 'new left' of the late 1950s, and who were critical of the communist parties of Syria and Lebanon, the Soviet Union and the Arab nationalist brand of socialism adopted by Nasser in Egypt and the Baath parties in Iraq and Syria.[60] The *new*, new left of today, it can be argued, belongs to a tradition of Lebanese leftism that emerged in the 1960s with groups like Socialist Lebanon, who "saw in Marxist theory and practice…the appropriate tool to effect the revolutionary transformations of their societies" (Bardawil, 2016, p. 319), and whose disillusionment with Arab nationalism led to a return to the textual source in order to argue against "Stalinist interpretations and undercut the official Soviet doxas of the time" (Bardawil, 2016, p. 323).[61] Although in the post-civil war period, the political organizers associated with Socialist Lebanon had become, for the most part, the disenchanted, independent intellectuals about whom Haugbolle and Bardawil have written, many of the core principles that shaped their beliefs and strategies lived on among revolutionary leftists like those associated with the Muntada.

[60] "This group included people who were influenced by Trotsky and the so-called Fourth International. Traces of Trotskysm can be found in the work of Yassin Hafez, George Tarabishi and others who clustered around the group Arab Socialism in the early 1960s, which later developed into what Tareq Ismael, writing in 1976, called a New Arab Left" (Haugbolle, 2016, p. 67).

[61] As Bardawil explains "at the heart of Socialist Lebanon's interpretation of the [Communist] *Manifesto* is an argument against the historicist 'not yet' that relegates the working class and the revolutionary act to the 'waiting room' of history, to borrow from Dipesh Chakrabarty, since the objective conditions of the moment are not ripe for its autonomous action" (2016, p. 323).

In his late forties at the time of writing, Ghadi, a previous member of the Leftist Assembly for Change and a founding member of the Muntada, was one of the few people I was able to turn to for an oral history of the post-civil war revolutionary left in Lebanon. Most of the activists I worked with were politicized either by the garbage protests of 2015 or, if a little bit older, the *isqāṭ an-niẓām* protests of 2011. In some cases, the Israel-Lebanon war of 2006, which saw the emergence of an impressive grassroots relief campaign in the form of *Samidoun*, served as a moment of politicization. But, rarely did I hear talk of earlier activist/leftist configurations, except when I sat with Ghadi.

Ghadi criticized what he called the stage-ism of the traditional Lebanese left, which prioritized national liberation and anti-imperialism above all else, and treated subjects like gender and sexuality as secondary. "They delink issues," he told me,

> saying first we fight Israel, then we build a state, then we call for the working class's emancipation, and then women's emancipation. Part of what we believe should be the platform of any political movement should be to bring together all groups fighting for their liberation in the sense of their rights. In order to build a new left, or to rebuild the left, the questions of national liberation, economic liberation, and social liberation need to be linked together. We can no longer afford to have the priorities set the way they were in the past.

For Ghadi, the history of the revolutionary left in post-civil war Beirut could partially be explained through recourse to the personal. A lot of the organizers and the movements they were starting to build in the early 2000s, were queer, he told me. The new revolutionary left, and groups like the Leftist Assembly for Change, served as spaces for queer people and feminists to 'do politics'. Activists who had been kicked out of groupings like the People's Movement or the Lebanese Communist Party, either because they wanted to address questions

of gender and sexuality or because they wanted a more radical approach to politics, somewhat organically found themselves coming together and creating a political gathering that was more accepting than other spaces. “Nobody said we are going to create this space,” Ghadi explained. “We just came together.”

At the time, Ghadi told me, there weren’t any identity-based groupings besides those associated with religion or sect. The process of NGO-ization said to have overtaken Lebanese civil society was only just beginning, and activists who had been involved with local volunteer organizations working on social issues were yearning for something more political, and found themselves gravitating towards the burgeoning Assembly, or *tajammuʿ (al-tajammuʿ al-yasari min ajl al-taghyeer)*. So many things were happening in parallel during this period that a lively activist environment began to develop. Activists rallied around and met each other through a variety issue-specific campaigns – the campaign to lower the voting age, for example. The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) was founded. There were campaigns focused on fighting globalization, targeting, for example, the World Trade Organization meeting in Doha in 2001; or on opposing wars like those unfolding in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many active in civil society campaigns around social issues felt their work inadequate and not political enough, pushing them to seek out something more – a wider, more holistic movement to fold their work and themselves into. In 2000, the occupied south was liberated, and activists turned their attention away from Israel and towards the occupying force at home – the Syrian regime and its intelligence apparatus. The issue of Syrian involvement in Lebanon was a polarizing one, forcing many activists and movements to split from the formal left. Ghadi was kicked out of the People’s Movement for his stance against the Syrian regime, for example. These marginalized

and dissatisfied actors found themselves coming together, with a plethora of issues to address, in the shared, vibrant space of the Assembly.[62]

Ghadi was one of the founders of Helem, established in 2004 as the first LGBTQI+ rights organization in the Middle East. Helem was intimately involved with the work of the Assembly – part of Ghadi and others' vision for a holistic leftist politics that was attentive to questions of gender and sexuality, critiquing both identity politics and the stage-ism of the traditional left. "Helem created a split on the left," Ghadi told me, "pick your side in terms of gender and sexuality. We can't put this issue aside anymore." Eventually, however, with the mushrooming of local and international NGOs in Lebanon and the hemorrhaging of activists from campaigns and collectives due to ideological differences, personal tensions, ego clashes, and frustrations with failure, many began to direct their energies in more identitarian, or issue-specific directions.

Bassem managed to serve as a link between the Assembly and later, the Muntada, and various identity-based collectives, NGOs and independent activists. But his death by heart attack in 2014 at the age of 34 dealt the Muntada a serious blow. Faten, a member of the group's Central Committee for most of my time in Beirut, told me that many assumed the Muntada had died with Bassem. The responsibility fell on a handful of people to keep it alive and to counter this narrative of organizational collapse. "We wanted to prove that we were capable of continuing. Bassem wasn't on his own, he couldn't have done what he did without people around him."

[62] It is not my intention to romanticize this space, rather to communicate the ways in which it was described to me by activists currently disenchanted with the state of Lebanese civil society.

In our conversations, Wassim, another founding member of the Muntada, recalled the period between 2013 and 2015 as the golden years of the organization:

> There was a political vacuum in the country and a retreat from the left on a number of issues, which led to a desire and search among activists for a revolutionary organization to join or ally with. We blossomed during these years, which is also when we decided to start organizing the reading groups.

The Muntada might have lost Bassem in 2014, but with the eruption of the garbage protests in 2015, the organization gained renewed purpose. A number of Muntada members I spoke with who were active during the garbage protests, argued that the organization had an unprecedented effect in the summer of 2015, playing a key role in *al-Shaʿb Yurid*. The aftermath of the garbage protests, however, which saw the crumbling of *al-Shaʿb Yurid* and the rise of Beirut Madinati, dealt a critical blow to the discourse the Muntada had helped introduce and popularize during the protests.

III. The Witch Hunt

The summer of 2017 was a traumatic one for the Muntada, particularly for three of its members – Eyad, his brother Mounir, and Adnan. Before the trauma, however, came momentary elation when the organization came together for its biannual internal conference to elect a new central committee and review its structure, goals and political positions. A faction (*takattol*) had formed prior to the conference, ready to wrest power from an older generation of Marxists active before and during the civil war, whose approach to revolutionary socialism was believed to be

outdated. The faction had the numbers to ensure its candidates would be elected to the central committee, and among its initiators, who included Eyad and Mounir, the air was dense with the euphoria of political potentiality. Things were about to change. The queers, feminists and their allies were going to take over and relegate the patriarchal father figures that had dominated the Socialist Forum since Bassem's death and burdened it with the reputation of being yet another misogyny-riddled leftist organization, to the margins. There would no longer, for example, be talk of sexuality and gender as secondary issues that belonged in the non-profit world.

But then, someone's cellphone rang. It was a journalist fishing for a comment on an exploding story. Not long before the conference, the Lebanese Army had raided a Syrian refugee camp, arrested a number of Syrian nationals on suspicion of engaging in terrorist activity and, it is believed, tortured several of them to death.[63] Those elements of Beirut civil society not associated with the *mumānaʿa* mobilized.[64] A protest was scheduled, and Eyad, Mounir and Adnan volunteered to submit a notice of intent to protest to the municipality of Beirut. The goal of the protest, as the Muntada wrote on its website al-Manshour on July 16th, 2017, was to

[63] The Lebanese Army raided two Syrian refugee camps, Nawar and Qareiah, located in the town of Arsal, on June 30th, 2017. The raid was designated a "preventive" one meant to weed out suspected terrorists in the camp. More than 350 refugees were arrested. On July 4th, the army announced that four of the detained had died in detention "as a result of 'chronic diseases and climate conditions'" (al-Muntada al-Ishtiraki, 2017a, para. 4). But, as the Muntada wrote on its website, "the images that were circulated through social media channels clearly revealed bruises, wounds and the effects of torture on the bodies of the victims" (2017a, para. 4). Amnesty International published a statement calling for further investigation after carrying out an independent forensic analysis of photographs that revealed "signs of recent beatings and trauma to the head, legs and arms suggesting they may have been tortured" (Amnesty International, 2017, para. 2). The army pressured the families of the deceases to promptly bury their bodies, denying them the right to a forensic examination, and Military Intelligence intervened to "disrupt a judicial decision issued by the Judge for Urgent Matters in Zahle, authorizing the examination of samples from the autopsies" (Al-Muntada Al-Ishtiraki, 2017a, para. 6).

[64] *Mumānaʿa*, which comes from the Arabic term 'to prevent', "and which connotes all forms of non-military resistance, confrontation and rejection" referred originally to "the politically confrontational stands assumed by Iran and Syria" (Meier, 2015, p. 115). In the aftermath of the eruption of the Syrian uprising, which polarized leftists across the globe as many voiced support for Bashar Al-Assad, framing him as an anti-imperialist force threatened with regime change by the West, the term began being used by supporters of the Syrian revolution to refer to leftists sympathetic to the Assad regime as well as Hezbollah, Russia and Iran's interventions in Syria.

"attempt to restore, and strengthen, the relations between Lebanese and Syrians, hoping to counter the discourse of hatred and racism" (para. 7).[65] A sit-in was called for July 18th, 2017, to be held at the Samir Kassir Square in Beirut.

Someone, an employee of the municipality most likely, leaked the notice, with Eyad, Mounir and Adnan's full-names and phone numbers, which were subsequently published on tayyar.org, a website associated with the Free Patriotic Movement, the party of the President of the Republic. Screenshots of their Facebook profiles were shared all over social media. They were bombarded with texts and added to What's App groups for the purpose of being harassed. Hordes of Lebanese locally and in the diaspora publicly accused them of treason, calling for their imprisonment and in some cases execution.

Despite the Muntada's insistence that the protest was meant to serve as an act of solidarity with Syrian refugees and a condemnation of the torture a number of those arrested by the army were subjected to, for the Lebanese accusing Eyad, Mounir and Adnan of treason, there was no doubt that those arrested were terrorists associated with groups like ISIS or Jabhat Al-Nusra, and that the Lebanese Army's actions were, therefore, justified. To condemn its actions was to stand with the terrorists. This, despite a complete lack of evidence that the Syrians detained, tortured and killed had any links to terrorist organizations. It was framed as unacceptable, within this context, to question the necessity of the army raid and the validity of the accusations levelled

[65] The Muntada defined the army raid as a "dangerous escalation within the framework of an organized racist campaign against refugee populations by ruling class parties, who are using various state apparatuses in Lebanon to impose curfews, close the border to those fleeing the war in Syria and deprive them of their most basic rights, which are universally guaranteed under international law" (Al-Muntada Al-Ishtiraki, 2017b, para.6).

against the refugees, or to question the use of torture to extract information and exact punishment. A number of vigilantes threatened to take action in the name of country and army. The Muntada cancelled the sit-in and was forced to release a statement of clarification on July 16th, 2017, insisting that it was not "attempting to incite against the Lebanese Army" (para. 8).

Prior to the civil war, the Lebanese army, despite being a modest institution compared to the militaries housed by some of Lebanon's neighbours, served as a symbol of national unity because of its nature as a multi-confessional institution. When it fragmented during the civil war, it signalled the country's spiralling into sectarian chaos. While today Lebanon is not a militaristic state, the army has continued to serve as a symbol of national unity and, therefore, any perceived threats towards it have continued to signal a threat to the cohesion of an already fragile nation.

A chauvinistic expression of Lebanese nationalism rooted in pride towards and support for the Lebanese army first became overtly manifest in post-civil war Lebanon in response to the Lebanese Army's 2007 military assault on the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Barid in the north of Tripoli. Hanssen and Safieddine (2016) write that this assault was "accompanied by a surge in Lebanese ultranationalism reflected in media coverage, public displays of loyalty, and state publicity" (p. 211-212). I would argue that this militarized ultranationalism was further exacerbated with the adoption of the 'war on terror' discourse after the start of the Syrian uprising by all mainstream political forces in Lebanon, which bolstered support for the army and its crackdown on Syrian refugees in the name of fighting terrorism and keeping ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra militants away from Lebanese territory. With the adoption of the war on terror

discourse by security apparatuses in Lebanon, the army emerged as the primary defender of the nation, demanding total allegiance and support. It came to serve as a source of meaning-making, pride and identification for an otherwise fragmented citizenry.

In the aftermath of the backlash against the Muntada, Adnan, Eyad and Mounir sequestered themselves in their homes, shaved off their beards, deactivated their Facebook profiles, deleted What's App, and waited as their comrades collected the names of those threatening them. Adnan, who housed a few undocumented Syrian refugees in his home, was thankful he had never registered his apartment with the municipality of the city he lived in. Eyad and his younger brother Mounir, had luckily vacated their registered apartments a few months before the incident. The Muntada was unsure what to do with the names, texts, tweets and Facebook posts its members collected, wary that a defamation lawsuit the plaintiffs would likely lose would only further endanger their comrades. But there was little else they could do besides gather information and meet with friendly lawyers. A few of us volunteered to liaise with the NGO Legal Agenda on our comrades' behalf, located as its offices were near a major army barracks.

Eyad, in particular, believed his political life was over. He was afraid of being recognized in the streets and beaten on any given day. He feared the potential repercussions on his loved ones: on the younger brother he had recruited; on the university student and friend to whom he was subletting his old apartment; on his father, whose recognizable last name was plastered all over the media. He couldn't even begin to imagine himself at a protest, let alone recruiting potentials for the reading groups he ran. But it wasn't fear, so much, that evaporated his spirits, as disappointment with the popularity of what felt distinctly like a witch hunt. For the first time in

his life, Eyad was resigned to leave, to make himself elsewhere, or at least try to, aware as he was of the limited mobility his Lebanese passport imposed on him. This 'witch hunt' sprouted weeds of hopelessness in what was once an optimistic spirit. The garden of political potentiality Eyad had so carefully tended to for so long was stomped out that summer.

Worst of all, perhaps, was the faint whisper of solidarity that emanated from civil society itself, from the activists the Muntada expected would ally with it. No matter their political disagreements, after all, hadn't they all come together, time and time again, to fight against racism and defend refugees and migrant workers? The army, it seemed, was emerging more and more as a red line. The Muntada members were aware of the heightened support for the institution since 2007, but they were nevertheless taken aback by the magnitude of the backlash, especially given the number of protests they had previously organized in solidarity with Syrian refugees. What surprised them most, however, was the reluctance of civil society activists to voice support for them amidst the hostility. The events of that summer revealed, at best, a debilitating trepidation and, at worst, a chilling chauvinistic nationalism, within Lebanese civil society. Some activists, of course, did come forward to voice their support, signing and sharing a statement of solidarity and publishing Facebook posts, but they were few and far between.

Shoved into the national spotlight in the summer of 2017, the Muntada tried to return to its marginality, to its 'space on the side of the road', to borrow from Stewart (1996), in this case a heritage building known as Zico House, which hosted the ghosts of other subversive collectives past.

I have provided this vignette to illustrate that, when my fieldwork unfolded, the Muntada was grappling with what it meant to be a revolutionary socialist political organization attempting to operate within a state that was increasingly cracking down on all forms of dissent in the name of 'security'. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the 'anti-rituals' within which these millennial leftists, these rebel intellectuals, sought solace from hopelessness and the hostile environment that routinely provoked it; the ways in which these practices produced the illusion of a paralysis that we can, conversely, understand as political praxis; and the difficulty of making a contagion of a 'negative' politics grounded in utopian imaginativeness in Lebanon's contemporary activist milieu.

IV. Why Study Lebanon's Contemporary Revolutionary Left?

There is more to be done, when studying the Lebanese left in the present, than merely examining established parties and groupings like the LCP and the Democratic Left, or contextualizing the "intense soul-searching", "reflexivity and memory work" engaged in by disenchanted former Marxists (Haugbolle & Sing, 2016, p. 95). The post-civil war era of reconstruction and development, the anti-globalization movement of the early 2000s, and the Arab uprisings that began in 2011, cultivated a new generation of Lebanese radicals whose commitment to revolutionary change and rejection of the reformist politics of many of their anti-status quo peers is worth studying because of what it can tell us about our contemporary political conjuncture and the kind of political imaginaries it has enabled and disabled, and because it can aid us in rethinking our understanding of what constitutes worthwhile or substantial political

praxis within a conjuncture marked by limited possibilities for mobilization and the hopelessness and frustration this lack is generative of.

Writing about radical activism in the Egyptian context, Duboc (2013) argues the importance of highlighting such marginal practices. Like me, she looks not only at forms of activism that attract a small number of individuals, but at those that could be perceived as a form of 'demobilization,' a phenomenon she argues "collective action studies have mainly overlooked" (p. 50).[66] She argues for a focus on marginal forms of activism that recognizes them as a means of sustaining "some form of political engagement. When activists are weary of forms of activism that have not produced concrete results, how do they express what is left of their desire for change" (p. 52)? In the Lebanese context, I want to argue for an understanding of Marxist theoretical practice not so much as a means of bringing about immediate, transformative change, but as a means of rejecting forms of reformist politics that have been analytically and practically deemed inadequate and limited, and of keeping the "belief in a utopia" alive (p. 61). I believe, like Duboc, that it is important to examine how activists "make political sense of their own experience…maintain the continuity with earlier political ideals" and engage in "waiting" as "an important aspect of this sustained activism" (p. 61).

What happens to activists when they acknowledge that "their ideals have been postponed" but refuse to compromise these ideals for inadequate but achievable aims in the present? What happens when "what seems more important is to continue to believe, not necessarily to act?"

[66] "Demobilization is not understood here as a structural problem related to organizations' deficiencies, and the focus here is not on an evaluation of movements or their failure to perform or achieve. Instead I argue that the experience of individuals and their relationships to political participation need to be studied to account for the existence of less intense or committed patterns of activism" (Duboc, 2013, p. 51).

(Duboc, 2013, p. 61). Like Haugbolle (2013), I prefer the term liminality to marginality when analyzing the Lebanese left. “I use the term liminality,” he explains,

> and not marginality, because unlike many other accounts of the Left I do not view their position as excluded from wider society and influence, but rather as a position between fixed places and hierarchies, which opens up possibilities for cultural change (p. 429).

Thinking through this liminality can help us make better since of our contemporary political conjuncture, and of the forms of political praxis appropriate to moments of transition or stasis, instead of deeming the theoretical labor of contemporary Marxists as irrelevant or indulgent. Furthermore, the liminality of the left can be used as a ‘sensitive gauge’ (Haugerud, 2013, p. 19) through which to measure the effects of NGO-ization, managerialism and pragmatic politics on anti-status quo activism, and its theoretical labour can be understood, instead of as something futile, sterile or detached from reality, as an attempt to puncture a hegemonic conception of reality that limits the scope of political imaginativeness and action (Hage, 2011).

Instead of taking my Marxist interlocutors’ political unintelligibility for granted, I want to contextualize this unintelligibility. And, instead of succumbing to the popular notion that utopian thinking implies a break from or refusal of reality (Hage, 2011), which encourages one to assume the irrelevance of a certain body of ideas, I want to excavate why certain worldviews are unintelligible to most, but essential to some (Kramer, 2017). Without romanticizing Marxist theoretical labor, we can acknowledge its continued capacity for shaping sentiments and actions and for puncturing dominant discourses and practices. The role of an anti-rite, as Mary Douglas defines it, is to reveal that “the ordained patterns of social life,” deemed inescapable, are in fact escapable (as cited in Haugerud, 2013, p. 82). In adopting the analytical approach outlined

above, I am inspired by Haugerud's (2013) understanding of the ethnographer's task as discerning "in antiritual the alternative values it celebrates" (p. 82), which contributes to my overall aim in this dissertation not only to make a contribution to the academic literature on social movements, but to provide a narrative and analysis that may be beneficial to activists as well, in Lebanon but also beyond it.

V. Conclusion

In this section, I positioned the Muntada within a post-civil war Lebanese political landscape in which a once formidable left had either retreated or joined the political mainstream. In response to the failures of their predecessors, I explained how young revolutionary socialists attempted to carve out an alternative political space, but found little support not only from a general public that, amidst national and regional crises, had become further entrenched within political conservatism, but also from a civil society that was increasingly embracing a pragmatic and technocratic approach to political work. Lastly, I argued for the value of studying such liminal, anti-status quo activism for, on the one hand, the challenge it poses to normative understandings of what constitutes worthwhile political praxis, but also for what its liminality can tell us about our contemporary political conjuncture.

In the following section, I will flesh out the ideological divide between so-called liberals and leftists within Lebanese civil society. I will describe the criticisms levelled against Beirut Madinati by actors on the left, which were widely dismissed by a civil society that had designated the left detached, sterile and paralyzed. In the section that follows, I will move to an

in depth discussion of the Muntada's reading groups as a means of challenging this charge of paralysis, arguing for an understanding of collective Marxist study as a generative political practice.

Lebanon's Urban Social Movement and its Leftist Detractors

I will begin this section by outlining the reasons behind the frequent dismissal of criticisms from the left by activists associated with or supportive of Beirut's urban social movement, after which I will present a condensed version of leftist critiques of Beirut Madinati in particular, to illustrate their position. Critics of the left did not often engage the substance of the latter's critiques, as will become evident, but dismissed them on the grounds that the left was detached and idealistic, and that it proposed no alternatives to the status quo. In a civil society dominated by pragmatism, by the need to 'get things done' and log short-term achievements, there was little room for the utopian thinking of the left.

I. A Sterile Critique

With the growing popularity of the issue-focused and expertise-driven activism that crystallized into a more cohesive political movement with the emergence of Beirut Madinati, the revolutionary left increasingly came to be seen by independent anti-status quo activists and intellectuals in Lebanon as an out of touch and elitist club. 2015, Ghadi and Eyad told me, was a turning point for civil society. Many of the radical and revolutionary independents critical of You Stink, who came together to form *al-Shaʿb Yurid,* found themselves in the aftermath of the

garbage protests joining or supporting Beirut Madinati, alongside those same activists they criticized a few months earlier.

Attempts by radical leftists to critically engage Beirut Madinati and the urban social movement more generally were largely dismissed as impotence-inducing idealism, or purism. Maria, an artist known for organizing critical reading groups in Beirut that engaged with pressing political issues, such as gender-based oppression, and who identified with many Marxist-Socialist principles but also supported Beirut Madinati during the municipal elections, when asked about criticisms of the campaign from the left, dismissed them as "disembodied and righteous." It is a "sterile critique," she told me. "It's good in an academic context, but it doesn't go beyond that." The left failed to think, she explained, that maybe what Lebanon *needed* was a movement like Beirut Madinati:

> We need to think in a more *opportunistic* way. We need to be more strategic about things. The critique of capitalism, fine great, but what is it really *doing*? Are we just reproducing it in our own bubble? After the garbage protests and the Beirut Madinati campaign, we came to terms with the fact that it's the middle class that's going to change the country. It's done well for itself; it's large and educated; and it wants to defend its interests at the end of the day. It wants a livable city. It doesn't want corrupt politicians. Our goal is to expand this middle class so that it can include the lower and upper middle classes.

Maria argued that the left, meanwhile, had chosen to isolate itself securely within its comfort zone:

> They're not involved. They are not getting dirty from their pure leftist positions. It's such a purist position. This is my problem; *it doesn't go anywhere*. It's just defensive.

> Everything is just shit to them. They're only about *ethics*. This is what the left has become. It's a very Catholic way of thinking.

For many of those involved with or supportive of movements like Beirut Madinati, the left was framed as being mired in something akin to what Berlant (2011) calls cruel optimism – an obsessive attachment to, in this case, a political philosophy and praxis that prevented these leftists from facilitating any kind of real change. Radical and revolutionary leftists, according to advocates of non-contentious, issue-focused, reform-based activism, refusing to acknowledge the *impossibility* of achieving their socialist desires in the Lebanese present, chose to abandon 'realistic' and 'rational' political work for the luxury of ethical paralysis. But, I want to challenge this framing of so-called leftist inertia and negativity as a relation of cruel optimism.

It is possible to read the Muntada as paralyzed by its fear of not living up to its own ideology, of repeating the mistakes of the traditional left or perpetuating the very middle class politics it so harshly critiqued. It is possible to read it as inhibited by an inability to figure out how to help the working classes lead their own revolution without instructing them on how to go about it. This was, at first, how I understood the organization. But, the more time I spent with its members, the more I came to see pockets of it – its reading groups in particular – as spaces where something akin to a *politics of queer utopia* could be and was being practiced. Following from Munoz (2009), I use the term queerness to designate "a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough" (p. 96).

Members of the Muntada and the 'new new' radical and revolutionary left more generally, criticized Beirut Madinati and the issue-focused, expertise-driven activists associated with the urban social movement more broadly, for their micro- and meso-reform based approaches to Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal order, and their attachment to forms of advocacy and lobbying based on their potential for success, however small, insignificant or even counter-productive that success might be in the grander scheme of things. For the leftists I worked with, this approach amounted to the dilution of politics from activism, what Eyad, for example, labelled a form of "lesser evil-ism" that shut down debate and focused on urban space and public services superficially because they were seemingly uncontroversial, failing to take the wider socio-economic and political structures with which they were entangled into consideration; refusing ideology and borrowing discursively from both the right and the left; treating sectarianism, "as a people problem, not as something structural."

II. A Liberal Pipedream

Writing in the online version of al-Manshour, one of two publications associated with the Muntada, freelance journalist Mohamad-Ali Nayel (2016) argued that:

> maybe the best way to illustrate Beirut Madinati's campaign is to view it for what it was: a creativity and design competition promoting first world countries' solutions. Perhaps Beirut Madinati's campaign was a prelude to Beirut Design Week, since the municipal election was portrayed through flowery social media videos that featured fifty shades of a futuristic city but not Beirut. It made one think that the failed state of Lebanon will simply be solved through creative design ideas the kind that usually result in more gentrification. In other words, Beirut Madinati's campaign was a vision by the one percent projecting the dreams of the one percent to the one percent (para. 14).

Nayel (2016) referred to Beirut Madinati's proposals as "imported first world dreams…promising a (unrealistic) brave new Beirut. And that brave new Beirut was more of the same one that currently exists: a glitzy private club for those who got it" (para. 15). Unlike Johnny Kairouz, a journalist referenced in the previous chapter, for whom the election in the capital represented a clash of radically different mindsets, Nayel describes it as:

> a competition between two capitalist visions or modes of production. Both the ruling class and the upcoming entrepreneurs vied to implement their capitalist visions. There was the old school Mafioso-feudal-sectarian-bourgeoisie capitalist politics who found themselves a no match foe but a foe nonetheless dressed in a neoliberal capitalist outfit. Both camps had their eyes on the one cow in Lebanon that everyone wants to milk: the service sector (para. 16).[67]

The accusation that Beirut Madinati aimed for a better-managed form of neoliberalism – or neoliberalism with a human touch – was a common one amongst the radical and revolutionary left. Even Farah Kobaissy, a socialist who ran as a candidate with Beirut Madinati, believing she could push its program further to the left, criticized its approach to issues such as housing. "It was not very clear," she says in an interview with Socialist Worker, "since the campaign didn't want to enrage entrepreneurs. There wasn't a clear position regarding real-estate developer Solidare [sic], which has been responsible for much displacement of local residents" (Elasady, 2016, para. 14). Farah distanced herself from Beirut Madinati after the municipal elections, despite remaining an official member for some time. "They told me I was too much

[67] Nayel (2016) also accused Beirut Madinati of limiting its campaigning to neighbourhoods where it felt its message was most likely to resonate (Achrafieh, Mar Mikhael, Badaro, Downtown Beirut and Hamra), abandoning more challenging but important areas like the working class Hariri-stronghold Tariq Jdeedeh to their sectarian overlords, failing to take advantage of the growing disenchantment of these disenfranchised communities with their traditional leadership.

of an extreme leftist every time I tried to contribute something," she told me. "They would say, 'you are a leftist, what else can we expect from you.' You feel all this tension every time you say something that opposes the majority. I didn't feel like I could get anything done there, so why invest my energy."

Walid Daou, a long-time revolutionary socialist political organizer, activist and teacher, also voiced his concerns in al-Manshour (2016). He questioned the utility of trying to reform from within a system that did not wish to be reformed, echoing, in some ways, Leenders' (2012) work, which I discussed in chapters two and three. Daou criticized Beirut Madinati's lack of a defining political ideology. He argued that the disregard for the rights Beirut Madinati wanted to defend was enabled by particular political processes, and any attempt to tackle these issues could not be divorced from politics and its associated sensitivities:

> This reality has to do with a number of laws passed by the parliament and a number of decrees passed by subsequent governments and ministries, starting from the treasury bonds and Solidere, the hit on public transportation and public education and the confiscation of public property, reaching to the displacement-inducing new rent law and the 'solution' to the garbage crisis, and this is without mentioning the long process of investment in real estate and construction and privatization policies that have displaced thousands of Beirut's residents, and deepened the social divide between classes. Can these campaigns, with these discourses, even if they managed to make it to the municipality, change a single letter of any of the above? (2016, para. 11).

Daou (2016) also asked who the rights of which Beirut Madinati spoke were intended for, pointing out the movement's silence on the issue of refugees and its neglect of the capital's more impoverished residents. He ends his article by writing that initiatives like Beirut Madinati should be "welcomed, encouraged and supported" (para. 16), not viewing his criticism as a way of dismissing the movement, but rather, as a means of encouraging it in what he considered

more fruitful directions. As Eyad explained to me, for the Muntada, critique and dismissal were not coterminous. The former was meant to be productive. Critique, he told me, enables dialectical change. “If you’re privileged, you have to be constantly critical to keep from slipping up, from taking things for granted.” As I will argue in the next chapter, however, Muntada members were not always loyal to this practice of critical generosity.

Leftists like those associated with the Muntada, in criticizing movements like Beirut Madinati (and later, similar collectives that ran as independents in the 2018 parliamentary elections), saw themselves as pointing out the shortcomings of socio-political movements led by a middle class perceived to be incapacitated by privilege and lacking the theoretical and analytical tools needed to tear down the walls this privilege erected between activists and the populations they hoped to serve. In other words, to borrow Eyad’s terminology, they were seen as lacking the tools and awareness needed to become *class traitors*.

Time and again, the actions of civil society as a whole, from the momentous to the minor, were brought up and discussed in depth within the Muntada’s reading groups, and the conveners displayed the dedication with which, through social media and the daily news, they monitored the activities of those who, like them, were agitating against the status quo. Detachment and dismissal did not seem quite the right descriptors for their praxis.

III. What Have You Achieved?

The criticisms that emanated from leftists like those associated with the Muntada were most often met with one of two responses – 'what is it you've done? At least we're doing something.' Or, the slightly more accommodating, 'what alternative do you propose?' Now is not the time for criticism, those wary of Beirut Madinati's approach were told in 2016. Unless you have a feasible, rather than idealistic, alternative to propose. In one meeting of Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative, Hani, a seasoned activist who considered himself part of what he called a leftist stream within Beirut Madinati, frustrated with the independent candidates who ran for parliament in 2018, voiced what he felt was an urgent need to fashion a new political party that was secular, socialist, feminist, pro-LGBTQI+ and pro-refugee. Knowing of his friendly relationship with the Muntada [his theatre company wrote a moving eulogy for Bassem upon his death, published on al-Manshour], I pointed out that the revolutionary socialist grouping already technically met these criteria. Why form a new party rather than join or at least negotiate with the Muntada? I asked. He laughed. "The Muntada? That's just an elitist club."

The Muntada found itself repeatedly silenced, or ignored, for criticizing while failing to 'do' anything; for failing to make 'something' happen – even by those who shared its convictions. As mentioned earlier, one could argue that the group was paralyzed by its fear of not living up to its own ideology and of repeating the mistakes of the old, traditional left. But in the preparatory reading groups it ran for potential members, I want to argue, the Muntada was quite vibrant and 'productive'. This form of collective study, I hope to show throughout the rest of this chapter, was certainly a form of 'doing' something political, of laying the groundwork for

engaging in public action when the opportunity to do so presented itself. Where the Muntada 'failed' was in transferring the ethos and energy it generated through the reading groups to the wider organization, pressured as it was by an increasingly hegemonic understanding of activism in Lebanon as something that should result in tangible and measurable successes, deeply wounded as it was by the loss of its charismatic leader and its inability to replace him, working as it was at the time of my fieldwork in a post-*Hirak* context devoid of opportunities for mobilization and, finally, focused as it was on recruiting university students who, while dedicated to the reading group as a space of *communitas* and, therefore, by definition a space of liminality, were not necessarily committed to the *permanent*, everyday and often tedious work required to disseminate the political vision articulated through this mode collective study beyond the Muntada's tiny office in Zico House.

Of course, since its founding in 2011, the Muntada had 'done' things and materialized alternative forms of political organizing that didn't involve, for example, collaborating with the institutions of the state in counter-productive ways. A perusal of the archived writings of the late Bassem Chit, reveals an organization actively invested in grassroots organizing. Like the activists associated with Beirut's urban social movement, the Muntada had refused an approach to political organizing that required the disenfranchised to adopt the 'correct' ideology before being met with solidarity. In a 2014 article, Chit criticized Arab nationalists and the Stalinist

left for evaluating the 'movements of the masses' "according to their closeness to a particular regional or international alliance and their distance from another" (para. 4).[68]

The Muntada's rejection of this approach is best exemplified by its unwavering position of support towards the Syrian revolution. For the Lebanese Communist Party, on the other hand, Muntada members told me, the Syrian revolution was seen as "not socialist enough." Their attitude, Eyad explained, was "to wait until people are ready, until they are aware enough so that we as leftists can act as agents of history with them."

Figure 16: Al-Muntada al-Ishtirqaki. (2015). A flyer advertising a Socialist Forum-organized protest to mark four years since the start of the Syrian Revolution [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2Yx85CK

[68] "The 'resistance' axis is said to include Iran and Syria, and is supported by Russia. An opposing 'American-Zionist-Takfir' axis is viewed as being backed by the US and includes regimes like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. A mass movement is subsequently legitimized or de-legitimized according to where it stands in the struggle between these axes. The ongoing struggle is pictured as a struggle between identities that are legitimized by the political language used to describe them, regardless of how genuine these entities themselves are, particularly in the face of the revolutionary transformations that govern the situation today" (Chit, 2014, para. 4).

In 2012, when around 2,300 electricity workers in Lebanon went on strike, demanding permanent contracts from Electricite du Liban, the national distributor of electricity in the country, many leftists and anti-status quo activists refused to stand in solidarity with the strikers because of their affiliation with Amal – the Shiʿi political party associated with Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, a bastion of corruption – despite the fact that the state responded to the strike with "extreme hostility," with the backing of Hezbollah and Amal (Chit, 2012, para. 7). In fact, it was the minister of energy at the time, rather than the strikers, who used sectarian logic to justify his position. Associated with the Free Patriotic Movement, Gebran Bassil argued that "giving the casual workers fixed contracts would destabilize the Christian-Muslim balance in state employment. The majority of casual laborers are Muslim" (Chit, 2012, para 7). The workers' countered this argument by insisting that "permanent contracts and benefits are a right and not a sectarian deal to be manipulated by politicians" (2012, para. 8). The Muntada joined the strikers on the picket line. "It's not like we are going to import a working class from another country," Wassim told me. "We know it's entangled with sectarianism. We participated in the strike and had we been better organized, *we could have affected their thinking about sectarianism and clientelism and introduce them to Marxism, like we hoped to do*."

Unlike the activists associated with Beirut's urban social movement, the goal for leftists like those associated with the Muntada was not so much to transcend divisive political ideologies as to de-cultivate or negate them, beginning from the lowest common denominator but then working their way up.[69] The Muntada opposed the casualization of labor and supported workers'

[69] In drawing on the categories transcendence and negation, I borrow from Hage (2015), for whom "to transcend means to be able to let go and consequently 'be able to live with' more so than to 'want to negate' which signals the affective opposite: an inability to transcend" (Chapter 6, Conclusion, para. 1).

calls for permanent contracts as a legitimate cause in itself, but also contextualized this battle within a wider struggle against the sectarian-neoliberal order governing Lebanon, believing it was not enough to merely ally with the workers, and that it would be necessary to eventually use this standing together in public as an opportunity to engage in a debate and dialogue about the oppressive structures that be and what was needed to oppose them. This was a philosophy of seizing moments with radical potentiality and acknowledging that they needed to be cultivated, nurtured and built on; moments that, to borrow from Roitman (2014), could engender a 'crisis of the subject,' in this case the sectarian subject. In its online commentary on strikes like those of the EDL workers, the Muntada worked to frame these events as part of a larger battle against the sectarian-neoliberal order.

Limited resources, however, prevented the organization from persevering in this type of time-consuming work in the aftermath of Bassem's death, a point to which I will return later in this chapter.

IV. Conclusion

In this section, I have outlined the relationship between radical and revolutionary leftists and their fellow activists within Lebanese civil society, which had become increasingly dominated by a pragmatic and technocratic approach to politics when my fieldwork was unfolding. Within this milieu, the 'extreme' left, as it was often called, with no current 'achievements' to show for itself and no 'realistic' roadmaps for change, had been dismissed as paralyzed, elitist, and

idealistic. In the following section, I will draw on participant-observation with the Muntada's reading groups to argue against this charge of paralysis, and for an understanding of collective study as a form of productive political praxis because it could be generative of the camaraderie and solidarity needed to survive and persevere in both revolutionary *and* counter-revolutionary times. Later on, I will discuss the factors that hindered the Muntada's ability to translate this camaraderie into the *comradeship* needed to sustain the organization's political work in the long-term.

Reading Marx in Beirut

In this section, I will introduce the Muntada's practice of collective study, explaining its appeal to those who were committed to it, what it involved, and what labour this engagement with Marxist theory was doing in the lives of those participating in it. I will argue that to understand what types of actors were drawn to the Muntada's reading groups, we have to follow Ghadi's advice and look to the personal.

I. The Recruits

With Bassem's sudden death, the Muntada lost the member most capable of "theorizing," as Faten put it, most able to "read the political scene, analyze it, and give a convincing opinion in terms of the positions we should take." This was partly why so much attention was devoted to the reading groups in the aftermath of his passing – an attempt to fill the theoretical and political void he left behind.

I began attending Muntada reading groups in July 2016. They took place in the organization's small office, located in Zico House, a heritage building in the Sanayeh neighbourhood of west Beirut, a few feet from the one of the most iconic outlets of local fast-food chain Barbar, as well as the infamous Ministry of Interior. Sometimes three or five, sometimes twenty of us, would sit in a tight circle of plastic chairs, sweating under the mild breeze of a weak, old air conditioner in the summer, and shivering in our coats by a small portable heater in the winter. Eyad convened all of the sessions I participated in during my fieldwork, occasionally accompanied by Ghadi. Sessions sometimes lasted for an hour and a half, sometimes three hours, punctuated by cigarette breaks marked by extended debates after heated arguments, or the periodic awkward silence following a dull discussion. Each reading group ran for an eight-week cycle and involved participants reading Marxist texts as well as articles written by members of the Muntada. These were assigned by the organization, made available in both English and Arabic, and read alongside texts participants suggested themselves.[70] The weekly sessions alternated between Muntada-assigned and participant-selected texts. Three to four volunteers were expected to give short presentations on the assigned or selected readings each week, to help guide the discussion.

[70] Participants were assigned material such as Ernest Mandel's (1980) "Historical Materialism and the Capitalist State"; an interview with Michael Roberts about his 2009 book "The Great Recession"; an interview with David Harvey (2013) on struggles over urban space; John Molyneux's (1997) "The Future Socialist Society"; Chris Harman's (1979) "How Marxism Works"; Alexandra Kollontai's (1909) "The Social Basis of the Woman Question", and many more. All of these texts had been translated to Arabic by a member of the Muntada. Texts written by Muntada members usually dealt with particular themes and how to approach them within the Lebanese context – gender, sexuality, race, and sectarianism, for example. Participants were assigned texts such as "Socialism and Sexual Liberation in Lebanon" by Anthony Rizk, Ghassan Makarem and Nada Zanhour, published in 2016, and Bassem Chit's "Sectarianism and the Struggle for Secularism in Lebanon During the Arab Uprisings" published in 2014. Participant-selected texts were much more diverse and included material like Valerie Solanas' (1967) "SCUM Manifesto", Kelly Sue DeConnick's comic book (2014-2017) "Bitch Planet", and a variety of other texts on everything from same-sex marriage to ecosocialism.

The participants were young, for the most part, born in the late 1990s or early 2000s, overwhelmingly university students or recent graduates from Beirut's two American universities, as well as the public Lebanese University. They brought a diversity of interests with them – Trump, university life, feminism, queer theory, BDS. Few would come having read all of the assigned texts beforehand, but the discussions were almost always lively regardless – imbibing was not the goal. Participants were encouraged to speak in Arabic, to promote inclusivity but also, as Eyad put it, "to keep from being elitist and to develop the linguistic capacity to address people from other classes."

When they discussed *The Communist Manifesto*, they questioned its relevance both geographically and temporally. When they wanted to explore the three waves of feminism, one participant read aloud Maya Angelou's poetry. When they addressed the mainstream Lebanese left, they decried its domination by middle-aged heterosexual men who arrogantly assumed they knew what 'the people' wanted and needed, as well as the gendered division of labour that was believed to characterize organization's like the Lebanese Communist Party. When they engaged Marx's theses on Feuerbach, they used the kind of cultural, racial and ethnic essentialism common in Lebanon in order to make sense of idealist thinking, and they used Marx's criticism of Feuerbach to think critically about how many secular organizations and collectives in Lebanon approached sectarianism, depriving it of context and historical conditions of possibility, distinguishing and creating a hierarchy between the sectarian and the enlightened. And, when they wanted to understand the concept of dialectics, they turned to Beirut Madinati's decision to participate in a municipal election it was likely to lose, and Eyad's decision to vote for its candidate list despite his distaste for their platform.

Different experiences, anxieties and desires led these students to the Muntada. Adel, who grew up in a middle class Sunni household loyal to Hariri's Future Movement, found himself turning to Salafism following the start of the Syrian revolution. Enraged at the sight of Sunnis being killed by Bashar al-Assad's forces in Syria, who had stoked sectarian tensions in order to undermine the legitimacy of the revolution, Adel turned to the local political force most vocal on their behalf. An adolescent at the time the notorious events of May 7th, 2008 took place, growing up in a mixed-sect neighborhood of Beirut, he was sectarianized by an environment of confession-based bullying and loyalties. But, unconvinced by the religious underpinnings of political Salafism in Lebanon, Adel soon found that its adherents' position on Syria and Hezbollah was not enough to keep him committed.

Family whispers of a long dead relative who used to be a member of the Lebanese Communist Party sparked an interest in Marxism, and Adel tried his hand at reading *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*, confessing to having understood very little. The little he did understand though, he found compelling:

> This idea that things are the way they are because of capitalism. That means that maybe the source isn't us, that we're not the ones that are wrong or doing something wrong, but the source is the conditions we're living under.

A teacher who spotted him wandering the halls with these books in tow put him in touch with her brother, an LCP member, after Adel graduated high school, but he found the party unimpressive. "There were pictures of Che Guevara all over their offices. People all dressed the same." What he found most off-putting was their pussyfooting around serious issues like the Syrian revolution. "One guy tells you one thing, and another tells you something else. One

minute they are with Hezbollah, one minute they are not. I felt they were lost. A communist party shouldn't collaborate with the ruling class." Disillusioned, Adel still chose to participate in the garbage protests of 2015, which reinvigorated him. "It made me feel like we can work against the status quo. I saw there was movement in Lebanon, and there are other people out there." Soon after, he saw a photo of a protest the Muntada had organized shared on Twitter. Spotting their logo and name on the banner in the photo and realizing he followed one of their members on Twitter, he decided to get in touch with her. She referred him to the reading groups.

Jean, a graduate student in journalism at the Lebanese University who was also balancing a full-time job at a local humanitarian NGO working with Syrian refugees, started off as what he calls "very rightwing." His relatives were supporters of the Free Patriotic Movement, which he uncritically went along with for a time:

> My grandma used to take me to FPM meetings in our village. At first, I felt like there were no other political ideas in my entourage. My context was very FPM – the city, the school. I didn't used to go to Beirut. And when I went to university the FPM was a powerful force there.

Jean saw involvement with the FPM's student wing as a medium – somewhere to belong and through which to be more active politically. For a while, the FPM occupied the Christian element of the Lebanese mainstream opposition, and it spoke of secularism and fighting corruption in a way that allowed it to appeal to many disenchanted youths and members of the middle class – Christian, but also Shiʿa – more broadly.[71] Jean admitted that he was also driven by what he called his racism towards refugees and Muslims. At some point, however, he stopped

[71] Many of these FPM supporters would come to be disenchanted with the organization as it became further entrenched in the cabinet and parliament, where its actions resembled those of the remainder of the ruling class.

feeling like he belonged in this space, a shift he thinks could possibly be attributed to his sexual orientation as a gay man:

> *It didn't represent me*. There was a lot of misogyny in FPM circles, although I didn't know to call it that at the time, but I knew what I saw was bothering me. They would make fun of effeminate men, for example. So, I started to remove myself slowly.

Around this time, the early 2010s, the civil society scene in Lebanon was quite lively, with protests taking place regularly – for example, in opposition to the possibility of a parliamentary extension. Jean began participating in these protests, and shifting towards what he called a more liberal stance:

> I'm against the political class, that sort of thing. I started to hate communists too. I felt they were silly. Everything I knew about leftist ideas at the time was associated with the communist party, particularly one friend I found really annoying. I became super liberal for around a year – advocating for personal freedoms and the removal of the political class. But nothing to do with neoliberalism, etc.

Over time, Jean began to notice that the groups he was active with never talked about the 'bigger picture'. He increasingly found their discourse vague and, eventually, he yet again began to feel like he didn't belong:

> In these spaces there were heroes. They imitated traditional political groups, with a star at the head who tells us what we should do. They were like cliques. Some people were benefitting from being part of these spaces and others weren't. *I wanted a space to be equal in*.

A friend introduced him to the leftwing feminist student club Radical at the Lebanese University, and he began attending meetings to acquaint himself with leftist thought. This same friend was also a member of the Muntada, eventually recommending he join the reading groups.

Nasser, a teacher and graduate student in Middle East Studies at the American University of Beirut, attended one of the country's most elite private schools for free, where he became enamored with a communist teacher who was critical of the institution Nasser felt so alienated by. Nasser described himself as a black sheep in a school where most of the students were affluent and he came from a middle class background. If it wasn't for his high school teacher, he thinks he might have ended up an engineer, or something of the sort. Instead, his teacher handed him *The Communist Manifesto, Animal Farm, 1984,* helping direct the feelings and questions he had about his environment.

Only in his late 20s at the time of writing, Nasser's life was peppered with activist experience. He attended the climate talks in Copenhagen in 2009, worked with the anti-racism movement in Lebanon, received training in non-violent direct action from IndyAct and Green Peace, and even spent around four months camping with Occupy Wallstreet activists in Colorado, Nevada, Arizona and Oakland. Everything he participated in, however, eventually failed, faltered or petered out. He decided his time would be better spent trying to help people on an individual basis. He joined Teach for Lebanon and spent two years teaching in a school in Akkar, an impoverished city in the north of Lebanon. But that, he told me, was also a disaster:

> They tried to fire me twice because I was striking with the teachers. They said your job is to focus on the kids, you can't talk about this. You represent an NGO. It's such a

> neoliberal band-aid fix. Okay, you spend two years in a school, five days a week, in Akkar or the South, but in the end, what are you doing? The whole educational system is a problem. They didn't want to touch anything that involved politics. You have to follow this little book handed to them by Teach for America. In the end, you go, you teach 100 kids for two years, and then it's over. It's like saying, give the poor some soup.

Disenchanted, Nasser figured graduate school was the best option for him, but even there he still felt the need to be involved in *something*, advocating for a better wage for graduate students working as teachers' assistants, protesting tuition hikes, and joining the Red Oak, AUB's leftist student club, through which he heard about the Muntada.

Like Nasser, Tina found her way to Marx by way of teachers. As a double major in English literature and philosophy at the American University of Beirut, she took a course on 19th century philosophy which, she told me, by introducing her to Marx's work, helped her make sense of how the rampant racism she grew up witnessing 'functioned':

> I grew up in a very racist environment in Keserwan [a predominantly Christian-Maronite district northeast of Beirut]. When the Syrian revolution started, I was in school, and there was always talk about Syrians and Palestinians. At the time I felt it was absurd that people were able to say one thing about such a variety of people. How can you say all Syrians are one thing? So when I got into that class I felt I was able to understand what it means to give someone an essence, and when you are in the position of being given an essence, how you fight it – and I realized it's with a materialist understanding.

Tina joined the Red Oak Club to learn more, eventually becoming its president. She joined the Muntada's reading groups at around the same time, wanting to be better epistemologically equipped to recruit students to the Red Oak.

Mounir, Eyad' brother, who fell victim to the witch hunt described earlier, attributed the development of his political consciousness to his move to France for university, where he first felt like 'an Arab'. After university, he left a France he was disillusioned with for a Lebanon he found equally disenchanting. He did find in Lebanon, however, a changed version of his brother:

> I remember when I came back, he was going through this phase where he didn't talk about anything besides Marxism, and I remember thinking, this is the first time in a while that Eyad is talking about stuff and I'm not exasperated. We had a very hard relationship when I was in France. We barely talked and he was going on about other types of stuff. I felt like we were drifting apart. He was throwing himself into work and the conventional idea of success and making money. I didn't judge, it just made us different.

The conversations with Eyad piqued Mounir's interest. "I was actually agreeing with my brother a lot more than usual, and I liked that."

Elena grew up in a home and milieu dominated by members of the Lebanese Communist Party. Her parents, however, refused to introduce her to their political ideology or background, or to tell her about their experiences during the civil war. Living in Saida, she tried to get involved in the protests that erupted in 2011 but found that Arab nationalist parties dominated the scene in her city, and they didn't appeal to her. "Growing up, I always thought that a political party is equal to what is present, and what was present was for me not an option." When her partner joined the Muntada she followed suit after hearing about the reading groups.

Like many of the Muntada members I interviewed, Elena told me that prior to joining the reading group, she was secure in her values – she could *feel* them, but she couldn't find a way

to articulate them or formulate them coherently until she began participating in this process of collective study:

> I didn't know how to discuss, build arguments, defend why I see myself as a socialist. This is where I found the right *words*. Left to my own devices I would have said I don't have time to read, but once it was structured, things were different. I saw the reading groups as a safe space to say whatever I was thinking.

What Elena, Adel, Jean, Nasser, Mounir, Tina and many of the other reading group participants I spent time and spoke with seemed to have in common prior to joining the reading groups, was a desire to make sense of things in their environment that were gnawing at them; to find the words and frameworks to articulate and argue for why certain things made them uncomfortable, angry or depressed, why they felt alienated within so many social milieus; and to be anchored in something that *felt* right and *looked* right, instead of floating solitarily from one inadequate socio-political space to another – to see themselves reflected in a collective.

"I always thought of myself as not having enough information. I wanted information," Elena told me:

> 2015 happened and I felt, now everything I know I can somewhat apply in these protests. We didn't only go and protest. We would talk to people, plan, write statements. I felt like we could do something. In 2011, I would just go to protests alone then go home. It was important to me, to feel like I was part of something, and I was doing something, even if with a small group. Opinions were heard. I work in civil society [non-profit sector], so all of these concepts of participation and decision making, I always wanted a space to apply them politically, and this was that space.

Carrying out these life interviews, it became clear to me that the impetus for joining the Muntada was, for many, as much about the personal as it was about the political; about what these

individuals needed to survive in an existential sense; what they needed to cope with life in Lebanon and make *something* of it more substantial and fulfilling than merely getting by; it was about not feeling abnormal or insane, idealistic or irrational for their views of and visions for the world; and, it was about gaining validation and gratification.

II. A Safe Space for Study

In the case of the Muntada's reading groups, I argue that study was meant to serve as a mode of preparing for revolution distinct from knowledge production for the sake of reform as we saw, for example, among the expert-activists of Beirut's urban social movement. The study mode was "dissonant", as Halberstam (2013) writes in his introduction to Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons* (p. 9). It was "disorganized study" (p. 9), which refused order and expertise; "a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you" (p. 11); a way of "being together in brokenness" (p. 12). This study mode was meant to transform the subject and teach her the conditions and techniques necessary for transforming others. The contrasting mode of activism, explored in the two previous chapters, was characterized by expertise-driven knowledge production: a being together in enlightenment – sharing ideas deemed neutral and scientific and only in need of being heard, already designed and ready for assembly. Reform the system and the subject will transform; or alternatively, transform the subject and she will dismantle the system.

Before being able to collapse sectarian-neoliberalism, the Muntada recognized the need to end the standpoint from which this system of governance *made sense*, from which it read as a reality

that was always already inevitable.[72] Lebanon's population, like that of much of the world, has been made accustomed to precarity (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). The normalization of precarity as the way things simply are makes it difficult to mobilize people in the service of change that, as a result of this normalization, feels impossible. Many develop coping mechanisms to survive and navigate the everyday precariousness that characterizes their lives. To abandon these coping mechanisms in the name of rebellion or revolution is often seen as too big a risk to take for an alternative future that has been made to feel unachievable.

Neoliberal rationality, Brown (2015) argues, incapacitates the imagination, rendering it incapable of designing visions of the good life, limiting its focus to survival and the acquisition of wealth.[73] Comarroff and Comarroff (2000) write that it could be convincingly argued that neoliberal capitalism "in its millennial moment, portends the death of politics" (p. 322), or at least its dilution to the "pursuit of pure interest, individual or collective – or to struggles over issues (the environment, abortion, health care, child welfare, human rights) that, important though they may be, are often, pace Jameson (1999: 47), dissociated from anything beyond themselves" (p. 322).

[72] As Brown (2015) notes, it is important to understand neoliberalism and its myriad instantiations as "a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality" (p. 9). Importantly, she explains that "to speak of the relentless and ubiquitous economization of all features of life by neoliberalism is thus not to claim that neoliberalism literally *marketizes* all spheres, even as such marketization is certainly one important effect of neoliberalism. Rather, the point is that neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities – even where money is not at issue – and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo economicus*" (p. 31).

[73] By the good life, Brown explains (2015), thinkers like Aristotle and Marx "did not mean luxury, leisure, or indulgence, but rather the cultivation and expression of distinctly human capacities for ethical and political freedom, creativity, unbounded reflection, or invention" (p. 43).

Through its reading groups, the Muntada not only brainstormed how best to engage in "a struggle within a reality," but also how to approach "the struggle *between* [emphasis added] realities" (Hage, 2011, p. 11). The reading group was a space for contending not only with a material but also an ontological violence that had imposed a particular understanding and experience of reality and, with it, what constituted realistic or worthwhile political struggle, foreclosing more radical possibilities. The refusal of what many other activists had accepted as a reality – sectarianism, neoliberalism, the failed state – that could only ever be adjusted, reformed, improved upon, made, to borrow from Harney and Moten (2013), *fugitives* of these radical leftists, fugitivity here being a product of a refusal to settle, a "being together in homelessness," and an embrace of "dispossession" (p. 96) not only from mainstream society but from the already peripheral community of anti-status quo activists as well.

When I shared my thoughts on fugitivity with Ghadi, I found the idea resonated with him. "The question of fugitivity is important, because in the first few years of the *tajammuʿ* it was people who were kicked out of more formal groups." It was queers, feminists and radicals without a platform. In the case of the youths and students the Muntada embraced in its later years, nomads who wandered between socio-political milieus until they were drowning in disappointment and boredom, they sought solace in the reading group as study mode, where they could remind themselves routinely that they could not "be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgement generated by the very system that denies that anything was ever broken" (Halberstam, 2013, p. 6); that they had to refuse "the choices as offered" (2013, p. 8) in order to create a productive dissonance; that they had to strive to "access the places that we know lie outside" the walls of the present (p. 6). Marxism, for the reading group participants and for the

members of the Muntada more broadly, functioned much like queerness as described by Munoz (2009) – as a "structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (p. 1).

One of the most memorable reading group sessions I attended was one where Jean opened up about the abuse he had experienced from his family because of his sexuality. He described, to a room full of recent acquaintances, the experience of having been beaten by male relatives in front of his parents. What made him feel comfortable enough to share such a harrowing and personal story? "I hesitated before I talked about personal stuff," he told me,

> but I felt like the people in the reading group, because they understood from a *structural* perspective the thing I went through, wouldn't judge me. They understood. Before, I didn't understand things as, I'm oppressed. I used to think, *that's it*. My parents didn't accept that I'm gay, and that's it. They kicked me out, and it ends here. I didn't think that this was part of something bigger, part of misogyny and patriarchy and a number of other things. In the reading group, these people understood what I went through. Before I spoke, I had spent enough time with them to see that. By the time I felt I could talk, it felt like a super safe space.

It didn't matter to Jean whether the other participants shared his experience. It didn't matter to him what anybody else's sexual orientation or gender identity was, or if they shared his working class background:

> You see this with a lot of LGBT organizations: you're gay so, *khalas*, we're gays. I tried to be there, and I couldn't, and *now I understand it, why I didn't belong there*. These people are looking for people like them – people who have money, are educated, come from a particular class.

What mattered to Jean was that the people around him *understood*, rather than shared, his particular struggle, that they understood it as not particular at all:

> I don't have this desire for identity politics anymore. The people in the Muntada, they have a different story and experience. I don't need to know it, but these people share the ideas that explain or make sense of the thing I went through.

Over and over again, during the interviews I conducted with reading group participants, I heard interlocutors vocalize the same impression in a variety of ways – the reading group had helped them articulate and make coherent, scattered, cloudy thoughts and opinions they already possessed, but didn't have the tools to properly express. Before the reading group, many had a *sense* that something was off, a cauldron of feelings bubbling inside them – anger, discomfort, anxiety, disgust. In the space of the reading group, these feelings were validated, given material roots, their sources explained. This process of emotional excavation, of making analytical sense of the visceral, was therapeutic and enlivening. Even those who had discovered on their own in Marx and others a convincing explanation for their alienation and rage, needed this process of *collective* analysis and acknowledgement.

"You have to have confidence in what you're fighting for," Nasser told me.

> It strengthens your conviction. Where else will you critique yourself or others except in these intimate spaces where you're discussing theory and history? You can't do that in a political meeting where you're supposed to vote about things, or a lecture where you have someone talking the whole time then there is a Q&A for ten minutes. There's no space to really engage in self-critique or analysis. These places are very important, or you become static. It's not intellectual masturbation. That would be like if we were talking about something completely irrelevant, with no link to material reality, but these texts were very historical, relevant, they touched upon things people cared about, not the collapse of the universe or quantum mechanics.

For those I spoke with, there was something empowering about being able to understand and deconstruct their oppression as part of a collective. “Leftism gives me a sense of solidarity,” Tina told me,

> in the sense that a lot of people felt just as hopeless and mistreated as me, and misery really loves company. It also gave me a sense of agency because it provided me with tools to understand oppression, rather than just accept it as a static fact. But most importantly, it gave me an alternative, and hope that our political situation is not, by essence, *unchangeable*.[74]

When the present constitutes a drawn out impasse, “preaching to the choir” can emerge as a valuable and political act, as a “world-confirming strategy of address that performs solidarity and asserts righteousness” (Berlant, 2011, p. 238). This sort of anti-rite can serve as a means of performing a future utopia – what it might be like when or if a particular worldview becomes hegemonic. It is in this sense that, Berlant (2011) argues, optimism that manifests as “a stubborn collective refusal to give out, wear out, or admit defeat,” might not actually be cruel, “but the bare minimum evidence of not having given up on social change as such” (p. 259).

In the space of the reading group, the present was confronted, analyzed, taken seriously but also transcended, left behind, with the collective gaze of the participants working together to unblur a vision of what could be. It wasn’t a space of pragmatic solutions, but of rethinking and reformulating questions and problems. Sessions were, to build on Munoz (2009), moments of

[74] As Berlant (2011) writes, “discussions about the contours and contents of the shared historical present are therefore always profoundly political ones, insofar as they are about what forces should be considered responsible and what crises urgent in our adjudication of survival strategies and conceptions of a better life than what the metric of survival can supply” (p. 4).

temporal disorganization, "when the here and now is transcended by a *then* and *there* that could and indeed should be" (p. 97); a challenge to the limits that neoliberal rationality had imposed on the political imagination. Over and over again, reading group participants worked to dismantle the 'governing myths' shared both by mainstream society and many anti-status quo actors (Stewart, 1996).

III. The Affective Output of Marxist Theoretical Labor

Tina didn't last long as the Red Oak's president – about 2-3 weeks, but she stuck with the Muntada and its reading groups long after she left the student club. It had consumed much of her life for two years. Her grades were plummeting, she had difficulty maintaining class attendance, her friends were also her comrades. Losing the Red Oak, she told me, felt like "a break up." Suddenly she found herself with more time on her hands and a desire to continue learning and developing her critical skills.

Tina describes the *Hirak* as one of the most intense experiences of her young life. As a member of the Red Oak, she wasn't only attending but participating in the organization of protests as part of the al-Shaʿb Yurid collective. The failure of the *Hirak* didn't hit Tina as hard as she says it hit people in her milieu. She didn't find herself becoming a cynic, but she did diagnose her friends and comrades as experiencing a kind of post-*Hirak* lostness – not knowing what to do next, what to organize around, what the pressing issue was post-garbage. She saw the reading group as a way of getting back to basics and engaging in worthwhile intellectual labor, and she also saw it as a safe space. She had briefly joined a radical feminist cooperative that prided itself

on being a haven for women and trans people, but it was never a space in which she could settle comfortably:

> When you go to the co-op and to most groups here, you are expected to have a set of questions already answered; to know what you think about Syria and Israel, and when you're expected to know it creates a taboo around certain questions, so it's kind of like blasphemy to ask, why not a two-state solution? Why not intervene in Syria? In the reading groups, there was none of that. Even in terms of feminism. I used to think that you had to be into identity politics to be a good feminist, or to say things like 'it's not my job to educate you,' but I wanted a space to explore these things. In the reading group I was allowed to experience a side of my beliefs that were silenced elsewhere.

Tina needed the reading groups on an emotional level. She couldn't divorce the period of time she spent in them from a traumatizing sexual encounter that occurred slightly before she joined, and which distanced her from friends, studies and much more:

> I was really trying to find out whether I was crazy for feeling as devastated as I did, because my friends kept telling me it wasn't a big deal, but I felt I wasn't doing well at all, and in the reading group what was going on in my head was going on with other people and it was an intellectual exercise instead of something clinical. One of the most traumatizing things about being aggressed as a feminist is that the aggression makes you feel like you're not a feminist anymore, and I felt like he took that away from me, and in the reading group I was still allowed to be a feminist, and a good one.

Mounir described the reading groups as a form of therapy:

> I might have lost my mind if I didn't have these reading groups, because I hated my job, my relationship was complicated, I lived in a place I didn't like outside of Beirut. Coming back from France was hard, but the reading groups empowered me – thinking with people who are actually asking questions and looking for answers, and the unwritten rule was *solidarity*, listening for alternatives, being able to change your mind in response to other people's experiences, and also taking into account privileges. The reading group was able to defend itself, censoring people who took up too much space.

Mounir had long had an aversion to the news, irritated by the usual means of narrating it. Talking about regional and local problems in the reading group, however, made him want to invest in what was unfolding around him, to 'get out of his own head', and weigh in:

> I'm generally unimpressed and disappointed by the world, but in the reading group I felt like, if I had my say, things could be better. I felt like we were part of a power struggle between people and their alternatives, rather than just saying the world is shit and we have to accept it.

Feeling convinced by the ideas and the logic being articulated in the reading group was important for Mounir, but equally key was what he called the 'emotional' factor; the therapeutic component:

> Because people were giving examples of their actual lives and reinterpreting them. And they would make more sense. You feel oppression, you don't need to think about it to feel it, but when you put words to it, you become empowered. That's not because ideas empower you, but because you have a group of people with these ideas empowering you. They probably won't have readymade solutions, but this solidarity, I felt it, and it did help me in my life, to move away from the job I didn't like, the people who were draining me, everything and everyone I thought I owed anything to, and to practice this idea that I am legitimate, my ideas are legitimate, and other people share these ideas.

In her ethnography of an Appalachian community in the United States, Stewart (1996) asks her readers to "picture how, in a world of loss and unreality, people tell stories first of all to bear witness, to leave a trace, to confer form on life and so survive" (p. 58). The Muntada's reading groups were not strategy sessions – teleological exercises meant to result in a step-by-step manifesto to guide revolutionary change. They were spaces for discussing readings but also for telling stories through which to cultivate what Hage (2012), following Bourdieu, calls "a specific radical *illusio*: not just a conception of the world but an investment in it" (p. 291).

How do you politicize the working classes without telling them what to do? How do you diversify your audience? How do you engage the struggles of vulnerable communities like Lebanon's migrant domestic workers, without co-opting them? How do you challenge identity politics in a way that doesn't dismiss the importance of engaging oppression based on gender, sexuality and race, and supporting the fight for rights associated with them? What does the working class, or the proletariat, mean in the Lebanese context? Is the primary struggle in Lebanon against feudalism or capitalism? How do you deal with sectarianism – do you ignore it, or treat it as a secondary or primary problem; do you confront it? What does it mean to be an imperialist power today? Are Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran imperialist powers? Can we build a socialist country in Lebanon, is it even possible?

These are some of the themes that consistently informed the Muntada's reading groups. The goal wasn't so much to answer these questions, to draft strategies capable of immediately addressing the behemoth-like problems being identified, but to engage in collective study as, to riff off of Agamben, a means without an *immediate* end; to be with others who refuse the present and the limited choices for increased inclusion it offers, and to develop alongside them a fidelity to this refusal bolstered by an understanding of democracy and politics as a collective "commitment of incessant contestation" (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 156), and a dedication to routinely performing one's (un)belonging to the lifeworlds enveloping and suffocating those who feel alienated by them – from ways of being, thinking and acting grounded in nation or sect, ethnicity and class, or even enlightened secular elitism. Refusal and negation are not necessarily mere forms of escape or distraction, but technologies of self and collectivity.

The reading group participants and conveners did not believe they were necessarily going to reach the grander vision of the world they were cultivating a commitment to together within their lifetimes. As Nasser articulated it:

> It's a fantasy, but a necessary one. It's an ideal, we accept that, but at least we can attempt to keep getting closer forever, and it becomes a continual dialectical process of becoming. That's both historical and idealist – it's not one or the other.

Nasser argued that one of neoliberal ideology's primary goals is to set the bounds and parameters of what is and what is not realistic, and part of being engaged in the theoretical exercises of the reading group was to create a space for constantly challenging and fighting against this vision of reality. "I can't talk about a utopian society or communism in a hundred years," Mounir told me:

> but I can talk about solidarity and communism as it's practiced every day. Obviously, it's not the dominant structure*, but just because it's not winning doesn't mean it's not there*. It's there every time someone cooperates with someone else, every time someone resists oppression, this is how I see it. I don't believe something is coming that is going to sweep us all away – *it's already here*, we just need to go down to its scale and work with what we have.

I see the Muntada's reading groups as spaces defined by "an attachment to the process of maintaining attachment" to the political (Berlant, 2011, p. 260); where a form of "affective reanimation" was routinely provoked as a means of displacing "disabling political pessimism" (Munoz, 2009, p. 9). In the space of the reading group, utopia was cultivated as a structure of feeling.

IV. Conclusion

The Muntada wasn't 'doing much', when I was carrying out fieldwork, outside of organizing its reading groups, publishing statements on current affairs, and organizing or participating in small, marginal protests, which had caused many to label it an elitist, self-indulgent bubble. But what I've attempted to show so far in this chapter is that what looked like inertia actually constituted an active politics of refusal – a refusal to engage in political compromises that these activists believed would not lead anywhere beyond limited inclusion in an oppressive system.

This doesn't mean a complete refusal to act. On the contrary, the Muntada regularly stood in solidarity with and participated in political events or movements with which it shared common ground, distinguishing between strategic moves that were seen as part of an inching towards its socialist vision and moves that would compromise that vision. Its members participated, for example, in protests in defense of public space, marched with migrant domestic workers, stood with striking employees, joined calls to oppose cultural censorship, defended those arrested by the cyber-crimes bureau for Facebook statuses even if they disagreed with them. But, they refused, for example, to back independent parliamentary candidates in 2018 who offered no real alternative to Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal system, even if they were anti-sectarian and supportive of women's and LGBTQI+ rights.

Devotees of Trotsky's notion of permanent revolution, it makes sense that the most dedicated members of the Muntada seemed to subscribe to something akin to what Badiou calls fidelity to 'event-ness'. For Badiou, an event "refers to a real break, which destabilizes a given

discursive articulation, pre-existing order" (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 152). Lebanon's garbage protests of 2015, as I argued in the introduction, could be classified collectively as an event. Every event, however, Badiou argues, is accompanied by the "ever-present risk of terror and *absolutisation*" (2007, p. 127). In order to avoid this, political actors must cultivate what he calls fidelity to event-ness, rather than to a one-off event, a dedication to "*a permanent democratic revolution* in our political ethos, a sceptical passion that will have to be re-inscribed in every political act" (p. 157). This is what Badiou calls ethics, and it is in this sense that I agree with critics of the revolutionary left who claim its adherents subscribed to a primarily ethical positionality, but I disagree that it was necessarily an inert positionality, or a safe and comfortable one. On the contrary, within the space of the reading group, it was a means of routinely reaching beyond the present towards a "horizon imbued with potentiality" (Munoz, 2009, p. 1). It was not critique for the purpose of dismissing 'everything', as one interlocutor put it, but dismissing a present that was not enough and would never be enough, approaching politics as a "critical mode of hope" (Munoz, 2009, p. 4), a striving against what Munoz calls "*straight time*", which "tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life" (2009, p. 22). It was a mode of abandoning "prescriptive ends" in favor of "an opening or horizon" (p. 91).

It is in this sense that I argue the politics of the Muntada's reading groups as utopian. "Utopia is an idealist mode of critique that reminds us that there is something missing, that the present and presence (and its opposite number, absence) is not enough," writes Munoz (2009, p. 100). In the negative work of critique is a positive projection forward, away from a pragmatism that imprisons one in an insufficient present. But, as I will show in the next section, striving towards

utopia did not always result in the kinds of euphoric experiences that seemed to define, for many of my interlocutors, their time in the reading groups. Instead of a transcendental projection upwards, it could feel like a slouching nowhere – laborious, tedious, banal even, and therefore, difficult to maintain a commitment to.

Figure 17: Al-Muntada al-Ishtiraki. (2017). The Winter 2017 print issue of al-Manshour. The caption reads: "Solidarity now and everywhere against fascism, militarism, and rising reactionary forces [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2OtDhig

A Left in Crisis

In this section, I return to the ghost of Bassem Chit, building on the previous section's argument that it was the affective infrastructure of revolutionary leftist political praxis in contemporary Lebanon that maintained and reproduced it, to discuss the effect that his loss had on the Muntada. In the aftermath of his death, I argue, the Muntada lost many members for whom leftist organizing was intimately entangled with their love for Bassem.

For a time, the reading groups served as an important tool for rebuilding the affective infrastructure that was dealt a serious blow by Bassem's death. This infrastructure, however, turned out to be temporary, because the personal investment that many of the reading group participants had developed in Marxism and Marxist study was never translated into an investment in the organization itself. The Central Committee was preoccupied with proving continued relevance to the rest of Lebanese civil society, rather than guiding its new recruits and developing itself internally. This, coupled with a socio-political environment devoid of possibilities for productive mobilization, would gradually come to cripple the Muntada.

I. Mourning Bassem

Bassem was one of the initiators of *Samidoun*, the grassroots relief organization founded in response to the Israel-Lebanon war in 2006. *Samidoun* generated a wealth of data inaccessible to international NGOs, gathered by what Eyad told me were around 2000 volunteers servicing

20,000 families. After the war, Bassem and others used this data to establish a local research organization. Eyad explained that this gave Bassem otherwise hard to get mobility and access:

> He was the head of a research center, getting funding to do research on the working class, migrants and refugees – the people he wanted to organize with. He could do things like spend two months in Nahr El Bared after the army assault.

The research organization was lost to the Muntada after Bassem's death, depriving the group of the access, mobility and funding he had to engage in organized political work. "Who has time for this now?" Eyad asked me. "This was the genius of that project."

Bassem was charismatic and, as the head of an NGO, he cultivated relationships with a variety of civil society actors. When he died, eulogies poured in not only from socialist organizations across the globe, from the global north to the global south, but from Lebanon-based activists and organizations who, at the time of my fieldwork, had no real relationship with the Muntada. Individuals who I knew only as former members of the organization, who seemed politically apathetic or cynical, wrote shattering odes to their fallen comrade:

> He was our window to socialism, a mentor taking us on a journey starting with one book only to transition to another, as each writer opens the door to others. He changed our world's map, as he bended the borders that once limited our knowledge, and taught us that the latter can only be put to use through a critical reading, linking theory to practice (Ayoub, Abdo, Rizk & Zanhour, 2014, para. 2).

They called him "a world of knowledge represented in a person," and asked how one can "come to terms with the disappearance of a whole world" (para. 2). Others wrote of him as an advocate of thinking for oneself in "a time of ready-made ideas," a proponent of "the politics of intelligent

optimism" (Zoukak Theatre Company, 2014, para. 3). Writing in Jadaliyya, the anthropologist Maya Mikdashi, who was acquainted with Bassem, said he "made the world a less lonely place…he made being political in Lebanon a less lonely, less hopeless and less alienating way of being" (2014, para. 2). Thinking together, she writes, "is an intimate thing, and Bassem inspired this desire for intimacy in many" (para. 5). Much like Mounir, Adel, Nasser, Tina and Jean – all of whom became acquainted with the Muntada after Bassem's death – seemed to have had an affective attachment to the reading group, many former members or allies of the Muntada seemed to have had an affective attachment to Bassem, who emerges from the powerful elegies mentioned above as a charismatic leader of sorts. With his death, their work as socialist political organizers or as allies/collaborators of a socialist organization lost the intimacy that made it feel worthwhile, regardless of whether they were getting anything done.

Writing about the legacy of Hugo Chavez in the Venezuelan context, Michelutti (2017) emphasizes the role of "religiosity and the sociality of the 'charismatic bond' in shaping and transforming the people themselves both personally and politically" (p. 234). She argues that analyses of charismatic leaders and persons as "inspired or superhuman" fail to account for the importance that Max Weber, in his influential theorization of charisma, placed on "the followers who attributed charisma to leaders" (2017, p. 233-234). In Bassem's case, he vehemently and explicitly rejected his own idolization. When he heard that Eyad, for example, had been referring to him publicly as his mentor, he asked that he stop. It was anathema to the kind of work he was doing and wanted to do that people's desire to organize politically be linked to their relationship with him. But, regardless of his desires, he was actively constructed as a charismatic leader by members and collaborators of the Muntada.

Unlike Bassem, Chavez invested a great deal in cultivating his charismatic persona. Michelutti (2017) writes that in studies of populism, scholars have tended to frame charismatic leaders "as products of economic and institutional structures, while their religious and affective kinship dimension are left unexplored" (p. 246). In Chavez's case, Michelutti explains that he managed to cultivate a form of 'divine kinship' through which to fuse himself with his supporters by actively fashioning and emphasizing a link between himself and the heroic figures of the Venezuelan and Latin American past – claiming literal "descent from common deified revolutionary ancestors" (p. 236), for example, and also emphasizing his ethnic and racial grounding both within Afro-Venezuelan and indigenous communities. He cultivated a form of messianic socialism "that embraced and to a certain extent institutionalized local sociocultural and religious practices" (p. 234). What this allowed was for Chavez, even in death, to continue to have:

> the capacity to change people's routines…The Chavista project has not only produced 'a new communicational and symbolic ecosystem that seems to endure the physical absence of its leader Hugo Chavez' but also left (as a legacy) citizens with transformed religious and political faiths (Michelutti, 2017, p. 234).

It was through the cultivation of this divine kinship that Chavez was able to continue influencing "Venezuelan revolutionary selves" (Michelutti, 2017, p. 233) after his death. Rejecting his role as a charismatic leader, Bassem did not invest in cultivating his charisma and turning it into a force that could be "embodied by people and things and circulates through networks of kinship (and fictive kinship)" (2017, p. 234). His vision of politics was of one grounded in comradeship, not identity or reverence – a distinction to which I will return shortly. He therefore did not, or refused to account for, the role that his own person played in drawing so many people to the

Muntada. With his death, there was no divine kinship to live on and keep those for whom Bassem was the Muntada connected to the world of revolutionary socialism they believed he, and perhaps only he, truly embodied, and that could not exist without him by their side.

Eyad explained that, "in a time when there was low to no social movement, what Bassem did was give life to the Muntada when nothing was happening." He became the link between civil society activists, political organizers, and NGO workers who otherwise didn't like each other but respected and were enamored with Bassem. With his death, the Muntada lost many members and allies who had stuck around because of the authority they invested in Bassem, and the joy they derived from being inspired by him. Part of the desire to invest in the reading groups was to compensate for the loss of these people who felt that, as Faten explained, the Muntada had lost its theoretical and analytical epicenter, and to bring in new recruits who didn't carry this baggage and were excited to think and learn collectively. But, without a charismatic leader and without the routine or even occasional eruption of events imbued with political potential that, regardless of whether they succeeded or failed, would constitute spaces for putting theory to practice, as Elena said of the *Hirak*, for publicly performing one's commitment to the ideals and visions being cultivated in spaces like the reading group, for *actually* reaching past the present and inching a step closer towards utopia, there was little to keep people attracted to the Muntada. How can you cultivate fidelity to event-ness without events?

In the flurry of needing to respond to Bassem's death, to rebuild the organization and prove its continued worth, the Muntada jumped into organizing reading groups, splitting its work into committees, and welcoming new members. "We were happy they were coming in," Faten told

me, “but we didn’t know what we would do with them later. The central committee was going through its own battle at the time, which made the Muntada heavy and lost.” In retrospect, Ghadi thinks it was a mistake to open up to new members after 2015. The Muntada wasn’t ready to receive them.

Figure 18: Al-Muntada al-Ishtiraki. (2014). Bassem Chit [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2GArTLg

II. Is This What Organizing Looks Like?

In general meetings and over email, issues on which the Muntada could work were proposed but rarely, if ever, followed up on – worker recruitment, the new rent law, and much more, for

example. A fear repeatedly articulated when we gathered was that the Muntada was becoming an organization that just published statements in response to current affairs – a force that just reacted. The problem of the membership's lack of engagement also came up regularly, as did the fact that the pace of work was much slower than that of other groups in civil society/the activist scene. "We had capabilities," Faten told me,

> people with experience, and intellect and all the stuff needed to fill the gap Bassem left. The question is, why didn't this happen? We were under all this pressure to prove ourselves. This protest happened, where were you? This thing is happening, where's your response?

For most of the reading group participants I met and spoke with, joining the Muntada after their experience in the reading group was akin to a bad comedown from a euphoric high. In general meetings, Adel found himself suddenly surrounded by people he didn't know, well beyond his age group, paralyzed by a fear of saying the wrong thing. He joined the anti-racism committee, wanting to address the rampant anger towards Syrian refugees in Lebanon, but the committee was rarely active. He helped established a neighborhood committee to initiate community organizing and address environmental issues and, while promising, it never really developed beyond the initial brainstorming phase.

For Jean, while the reading groups always felt like a safe space, when the whole group got together, he lost that sense of security. It was 'technically' safe, he told me, "but you felt like you needed to self-police, because you didn't know how these people were going to perceive you and you didn't want what you said to be taken the wrong way." When a member of the Muntada came to introduce the work of its feminist committee to the reading group participants,

Jean felt like he was sitting in on an NGO presentation. “It was like a different body. It didn’t feel very in sync with the leftist ideas we were talking about.”

Nasser bemoaned the long stretches of nothingness that, for him, characterized membership in the Muntada:

> We should have more get togethers, more parties. Given our capacity, if we’re going to accept that this is a counter-revolutionary time, then why don’t we get together, sit down and eat together, watch movies, go camping, get to know each other? When the link is just abstract – we’re just socialists and we come to meetings because of a loyalty to certain ideas, fine, but it’s not enough. We need something more communitarian, more of a sense of belonging to the community. *The Muntada can feel like a community.*

Instead of investing in the cultivation of camaraderie and solidarity, the Muntada was focused on, as Faten put it, proving its worth to the surrounding community of activists doubting it, which pushed it towards a preoccupation with asserting a public presence, rather than maintaining itself. In Lebanon, Nasser told me,

> there’s a sense of activists and organizers wanting to take action *now*. There’s almost moral guilt or shame, or embarrassment if you don’t. It’s commendable in its intention but it’s not very effective materially. Sometimes the best thing to do is to not do anything – to sit and think. The alternative is stressful and not healthy. We’re not in the Olympics.

Tina *needed* the reading group, but she had trouble wrapping her head around what it meant to be a member of the Muntada after she joined officially:

> What are we doing as Muntada? What is the goal? Why do we have this group? What is its raison d’etre? How are we fighting classism and sectarianism? I didn’t know why I was there. In the Red Oak we were pushing a leftist agenda within a rightwing university, fighting the administration. In the Muntada, I felt like we were always

> discussing bureaucratic things, and I get that that's important, but I didn't feel like doing it. *It felt like homework*, especially when we were shamed for not going to meetings or events.

After attending his first meeting, Mounir felt angry. He wanted to defend that 'thing' that existed in the reading group:

> I always felt that, mathematically, it's stupid to assume that I would not find people like me in Lebanon or in the world, although I always felt that. I knew it was irrational to believe that you have no peers. Through *al-Shaʿb Yurid*, I met all these people and finally I felt like there are people like me. I wanted to save that feeling of camaraderie, which is something you build and it's important for me, this concept. In the reading group, I saw people evolve in one session sometimes. I saw myself evolve. We wanted to see each other afterwards, we became friends, we cooked together, we started something because *we longed so much for someone to just get it, that it gave us this ambition to go further*.

In interview after interview, conversation after conversation, the reading group was described to me as a space of epiphany, a holy temple almost, where an embodied, implicit understanding of the world was put into words, made coherent. It was a space where the world made sense because other people saw it the same way; where tools were offered for those who wanted to learn how to better argue their view of the world and vision for the future; where texts were read to help participants understand how they could gradually claw their way out, or at the very least a few inches up out of, the context they lived in. It was okay that the thinking was utopian because nothing else had been or was going to be enough. Investing in this space, building it with others, collectively flexing intellectual muscles, sharing personal trauma, and reveling in a shared desire for a particular kind of world and a desire to keep working towards it, allowed many of those I spoke with to feel like they were doing more than merely surviving or getting

by, but living a version of the good life within this pocket office, a few blocks from the Ministry of Interior.

"When I joined the Muntada," Mounir told me,

> I thought to myself, okay, we are people that don't necessarily have that much in common. We don't live in the same places, work in the same places, *we're not friends*. Fake camaraderie doesn't work. Reading groups can solve that, dinners can solve that, and I would push for this – dinners, movies – not because they are important in themselves, because we need to have something in common, otherwise how can we have solidarity and camaraderie?

By something in common, Mounir did not mean only a cognitive, political commitment to socialism, but an affective bond to one another as well. "Creating a radical political space *is* political; fighting patriarchy inside your organization *is* political. Talking about what's happening in Russia shouldn't be the priority. We're not disembodied spirits just observing the world."

Mounir insisted that he didn't blame anyone for the failure to cultivate this solidarity and camaraderie outside the space of the reading group. When the backlash happened and his name was all over the press and social media in response to the protest in solidarity with Syrian refugees that the Muntada was helping to organize, the group worked to protect its members, but it was all very formal. I didn't feel that many were personally invested in or concerned about Mounir, Adnan and Eyad's mental and emotional well-being. Few called, even fewer visited. It was all very official. But Mounir said he didn't feel entitled to this kind of solidarity because he knew the organization hadn't cultivated it:

> If you need a party or a vanguard, and it's a necessary component of revolutionary change, and I believe that it is, you should at least make it in a way that it's able to *reproduce* itself. Just reproduce yourself, your willingness to do something, your ability to work. We couldn't even do that. Nobody uses the space, for example. We pay 500 USD a month. We've paid thousands of dollars on that space for pretty much 500 dollars' worth of meetings. We stack books there that no one reads.

Bassem, the towering father figure, died and no one could fill the position of leadership he occupied. Those former members who wrote that Bassem instilled in their hearts "an endless revolution" that "will never stop beating," abandoned said revolution. The "permanent revolution" which Bassem "implanted" in them, withered away with his death. "The only tribute that befits Bassem is continuing the struggle and the fight for a better life and a better world," they wrote (Ayoub, Abdo, Rizk & Zanhour, 2014, para. 5). But with the passing of time, and the fading of the embodied memory of what it felt like to have him as a comrade, their commitment waned. Wassim told me that when Bassem was alive, the Muntada was only made up of a handful of active members all taking on a lot of responsibilities, but they always worked collectively, meeting after work, gathering around a small table in Zico House. After Bassem's death, they began delegating tasks, everyone worked separately, "like in a factory." The *tajammuʿ*, he told me, "was built really on the word *tajammuʿ* [assembly]. Now things are different. It makes a difference to have people around you who think like you and are persevering with you. You take *rūḥ* [spirit/soul] from them."

Faten tried to pick up the pieces, but was perceived by many as a domineering, overbearing mother figure, as she chased the indifferent, trying to make sense of why they were skipping meetings, and attempted to moderate and manage general meetings where she didn't appear to

command much respect, not due to any fault of her own, from what I could gather, but because she didn't possess, in the eyes of most participants, the kind of charisma that seemed to have drawn many to Bassem.

"These circles," Tina told me, "often become coping mechanisms, and once they don't deliver, the feeling of hopelessness strikes hard." Over the course of my two years with it, I watched the Muntada become a shadow of its former self. After the first reading group cycle I attended came to an end, the Muntada was boasting between 50 and 60 members, most of them university students on a high of critical thinking, bolstered by what they perceived as the inadequacy of movements like Beirut Madinati, ready to collectively imagine and advocate for an alternative. But the group's leadership was at a loss as to how to direct this youthful energy. Faten, who was a member of the central committee, told me the structure:

> was incapacitating us from utilizing the new energy coming in. It was slow and heavy, so there was no movement in the organization. Don't forget, you're recruiting students coming from lively universities with lectures, strikes, protests, sit-ins, campaigns, movie screenings. You're not recruiting older activists who've gone through all sorts of experiences and are willing to work slowly. There was an inability to imagine a structure that could absorb these people and help them initiate things routinely.

The idea to divide the members into committees was meant to be a means of addressing this stagnation. In September of 2016, the Muntada introduced its subdivisions – the feminist committee, the anti-racism committee, the student committee and the workers' committee. But instead of better integrating new members into the Muntada, these committees further alienated them from the organization. Tina, for example, enjoyed the work she did with the feminist committee, and felt it important and necessary, but she didn't understand its role in the wider

organization, and found the Muntada's lack of homogeneity off-putting. Nasser wanted to join the feminist committee but found himself being told he wasn't welcome as a cis-gendered heterosexual man. Jean, despite being a gay man and therefore eligible to join, didn't feel welcome in the feminist committee. "I didn't know how they perceived me, if they saw me as non-conforming." He joined the anti-racism committee to make up for what he considered his racist past.

Elena, a member of the central committee at the time of writing, who was also a founding member of the feminist committee, told me that this sub-division of work meant that the Muntada no longer met as a whole. She felt that the group had begun to mimic the structure of traditional leftist parties, with their youth and women's wings and central committees. When the group did meet, it was always boring and overly structured.

"This is the problem," Wassim told me. "The reading group *isn't enough*. Organizational life is not just about theorizing. We needed people to participate more." Wassim thought that perhaps the shift in the membership's class make-up was partly to blame for the low participation. Previously, the membership was mostly lower middle class or working class. Most came from the Lebanese University, and led uncomfortable lives. In the post-*Hirak* period, middle and upper middle class students began to take an interest. With them, Wassim argues, came the very middle class desire to see one's political work produce a tangible outcome.

> It's a very NGO mentality. Let's work on something tangible, something achievable. The language that the Muntada uses is a long-term one, even in the statements where we respond to current affairs. They sound heavier than the occasion. Maybe we need to learn how to write again, how to get our thoughts across.

But in my conversations with reading group participants and based on what I observed, I'm not sure that it was the middle classness of a substantial number of them that was solely responsible for the Muntada appearing as inadequate, although I understand the appeal of this argument, and I do think that the desire for personal gratification and a sense of belonging in a socio-political environment that was otherwise largely alienating, a common driver amongst middle class activists, did play a role in their dedication to the reading group and aversion to actual 'organizing', as I will elaborate below. But, I think that this NGO-ised mentality of fixating on outcomes was actually adopted by the Muntada and its central committee, pressured as they were in the aftermath of Bassem's death to prove the organization's worth and ability to carry on, and burdened as they were by what felt like his inimitable, hefty achievements.

Instead of embracing the reading group as a form of political praxis and allowing the Muntada to be, well, a *muntadā*, a forum for study and exchange, for making sense of the world and planning for the future, the organization embraced this mentality of logging achievements and outcomes in the present which, contra Beirut Madinati, completely paralyzed it, because its ideology and driving vision couldn't allow it to engage in practices leading nowhere, at best, and at worst to the kinds of reforms that would only strengthen Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal order in the long run.

But, there's also something to be said for the *personal* investment that many reading group participants had in collective study – their desire for camaraderie and solidarity as *goods in themselves*. In her "Four Theses on the Comrade", Dean (2017) distinguishes comradeship from friendship, arguing that the former "requires a degree of alienation from the needs and demands of personal life to which friends must attend" (para. 34). She draws on Aristotle's

Nichomachean Ethics to define friendship as a "direct relation between two people for the benefit of each other" (para. 35). I think what Tina, Mounir and others described as camaraderie, with its therapeutic potential, sometimes sounded less like comradeship, which is a collective affective attachment to a *political project*, and more like a form of friendship that was productive of self-fulfilment and gratification via the medium of the political collective.

The political, for many participants in the reading group, was a gateway to the transformed self, rather than the other way around, as Muntada members like Ghadi and Eyad hoped it would be. "The term 'comrade'," Dean (2017) writes, "points to a relation, a set of expectations. It doesn't name an identity; it highlights the sameness of those who share a politics, a common horizon of political action" (para. 3). I watched Ghadi, Faten, Eyad and Wassim, the Muntada's most dedicated and loyal members during my time with the organization, maneuver in relation to what felt like an ever-present, phantom absence. When I reflect back on it now, it feels as though this phantom was the comrade or comrades they yearned for and which they knew were imperative to their work, but which, as time went on, they did not see the potential for in these new recruits, who were, perhaps, in search primarily of *camaraderie*. Utopian imaginativeness was a means to a personal end, an end that was by no means illegitimate, but simply distinct from affective and theoretical labour geared towards getting *beyond* the self – its desires, needs and anxieties – in service of a political project. Collective study could not remain a form of political praxis if it became an end in itself. Comradeship does not necessarily feel good or gratifying. It can be painful and alienating. It is a relation to others and to a horizon grounded in a sense of *duty*, rather than enjoyment or love even, a sense of duty that also has to be

cultivated and tended to, that is also grounded in the visceral, in a fervent commitment to a political otherwise.

This distinction, I think, can help us make sense of the references to Muntada meetings as boring, as a form of homework. The reading group sparked joy, to make a Marie Kondo reference that seems oddly fitting, but the Muntada did not, and so it was not worth keeping around. But for Eyad, Faten, Wassim and Ghadi, their commitment and perseverance were not rooted in a well of joy – if anything their experience within the Muntada during my time with it seemed wholly otherwise: exacerbating, de-moralizing, humiliating. Camaraderie and solidarity were necessary structures of feeling in order to be able to push through and against pessimism, failure and alienation, but they did not comrades, on their own, make. If anything, camaraderie carried a danger, if approached as therapy, as a means to personal gratification, as an end in itself – as it could aid in a succumbing to or living with Lebanon's political, economic and social realities.

III. Conclusion

Instead of investing in what Elena called personal relations, the Muntada, in its general meetings and even sub-committee gatherings, focused on what to do – how to respond to various developments in the country, which usually meant writing a statement or organizing a small protest. After the army incident, even these strategies were abandoned or dialed back. And so, when reading group participants entered the organization, the "utopian promise of theirgetting

outside of the broader society that had brought or driven them there," disappeared (Faubion, 2008, p. 37).

But, if what Victor Turner described as the experience of *communitas* was the product of states of 'liminality' – "a betwixt and between" (Robins, 2006, p. 319), we could argue that what many reading group participants wanted was to simply inhabit this liminal space, and to revel in the intimacy it was productive of. For Ghadi, Eyad, Faten and Wassim, the reading group carried political potential because it was a mode of preparing for revolution, laying the groundwork of political subjectivation for the event to come. But, for the participants it seemed to be the limit of their horizon, a condition I will explore in more detail in the epilogue to this dissertation.

In describing Turner's work on "millenarian religious movements, hippies, and Franciscans," Robins (2006) writes that "these movements strive to instantiate a permanent state of liminality and communitas – a statusless egalitarianism" (p. 318), but communitas was wholly opposed to what the Muntada as an organization wanted, which was to actively and publicly work towards a socialist future, however delayed this future might be. Could it be that in the absence of explosive events like the *Hirak* and the euphoric hopefulness they were generative of, what most of the reading group participants had come to want was not permanent revolution, but permanent liminality?

Coda

At the time of writing, the Muntada was grappling with its whittling down to a few core members, and with a wider activist scene deeply disenchanted with the independent candidates who ran for parliament in 2018 on platforms hardly distinguishable from those of the ruling class. While the atmosphere in civil society in the immediate aftermath of the election, as my fieldwork was wrapping up, was characterized by *iḥbāṭ* yet again, that deep frustration or hopelessness brought on by a sense of defeat, the remaining core of the Muntada saw a promising potential in the lostness of the activists surrounding them, who watched the reformism and electoralism they passionately advocated for fail them as Beirut Madinati faltered and the independent candidates who ran for parliament disappointed.

Watching activists with whom they'd had longstanding disagreements wandering listlessly, lost and alienated from the platforms they supported or participated in, the Muntada, as my fieldwork came to a close, had begun to see an opportunity to go back to doing what it did best, as a hunger for an alternative means of challenging the status quo seemed to be emerging once again. "The idea," Ghadi told me,

> is to focus more on building propaganda, counter-propaganda, rather than daily confrontations, and that way when you confront, you're ready for confrontation. We're really good at this. The website is very successful, it's one of the more successful leftist platforms in Arabic. *Permanent Revolution* [a journal] comes out every two years but people wait for it, and it provokes discussions in different circles. We have a lot of people that are really good at doing propaganda work.

To make sense of the failures of independent candidates during the parliamentary elections and brainstorm an alternative, long-term strategy for challenging the status quo in Lebanon, a gathering of activists was formed as I was finishing up fieldwork in the summer of 2018. Its focus was more on collective discussions, thinking and long-term planning, than on acting, given that Lebanon was, at the time of writing, four years away from another election. The Muntada was invited to participate. "We should be talking now, not organizing," Ghadi insisted. Talking to him about the coalition, I saw that he was cautiously excited and optimistic about a local development for the first time in a long while:

> The next momentum is going to be around the next election. We have four years. Instead of pushing, pushing, pushing, year after year, let's start planning from now. We don't need to make decisions, all we have to do right now is talk to each other, get to know each other, and try to find some common ground.

It remains to be seen what will come of this gathering, if it can birth a space for the cultivation of comradeship that can survive longer than the Muntada's reading groups, given the personal dynamics that seem to hinder the longevity of political work in Lebanon. In the next chapter, I will address the toxic dynamics internal to Beirut's activist scene, as well as the factors that enabled activists to persevere despite the obstructions and failures they had become accustomed to.

Chapter 5: The Political is Personal

What is it about Beirut that afflicts me with chronically heavy eyes, making waking feel laborious – like sluggishly climbing a gym rope out of slumberous fantasies into days that never feel deserving of alertness? What is it about elsewhere that pushes my body to wake itself up at dawn and survive a morning without caffeine? Why do hours flip past here like empty cards in a rolodex, and time spent frozen in one place for the sake of productivity amounts, at the end of each day, to little? Far from here, despite commutes and chores, I manage more despite necessary mobility, deprived of long stillnesses. Is it the air, the politics, the national mood? Aren't these things everywhere disappointing and isn't everywhere, at this moment, depressing? What is it about Beirut that makes staying awake, that makes even momentary relief from boredom, feel like an achievement?

Maybe it's the sense that here, but not elsewhere, we cannot speak, we cannot critique, we cannot think aloud and question, without words being measured against our presumed subjectivities and the privileges assumed to accompany them; without being measured against the personal – who we hate and who we like, who we date now and who we've dated, where we hang out and what spaces we avoid. Maybe it's because we are constantly filtered through the categories of others, unable to speak the critical-analytical without it being tainted by our warts and all.

Some of us find ourselves wanting to protect ideas and arguments we value from ourselves – to hope someone else, less controversial, will initiate conversations we feel incapable of engaging

in, lest we stain an idea we believe valuable and worthy of engagement with the fluids of our repellent selves.

Elsewhere, I wake to what feels like the potential of endlessly renewable anonymity. Here, I wake to the knowledge that the personal is political in a way that forecloses, rather than makes manifest, possibilities.

On a hot day in September of 2017, as I sat at my desk in my Beirut apartment, trying to keep my eyes open as I scanned secondary readings, fearful of taking a nap and missing the activist meeting I was meant to attend, I decided to turn to Facebook to express my frustration with the city I hadn't called home since my freshman year of college. I had arrived in Beirut for fieldwork wide-eyed and excited. Hard as I had tried to get back to the city since I first left it at thirteen, something always seemed to get in my way, but now I was finally 'home'. Not only was I back in my Lebanon, but I was finally going to participate in the activist scene I had admired from afar. I was going to be part of something, to belong to something that could finally represent me.

Today, when I re-read the essays I penned about Lebanon, Lebanese-ness and Arab-ness as an expatriate in my twenties, now that I've experienced what it is to settle into the city, to let your guard down in it only to find that it has wrapped itself around you like a straightjacket, crushing the ribs that used to inflate with joy at the prospect of a visit 'home', I can't but cringe.

I arrived in Beirut a blank slate in terms of my social standing, without the baggage that my interlocutors all seemed to have collected over years of working in small spaces rife with tension and competition. I could move between spaces, amongst cliques that despised one another, bridging divides where I could, bringing people into conversation – and I did, while I could, while I was still perceived as an outsider who nevertheless belonged. It didn't take long, however, for my body to be marked as well, for me to come not only to observe but to embody the toxicity of life both in Beirut at large and in its supposed counter-cultural sanctuaries.

In some spaces I was a leftist who couldn't be taken seriously, in others a detached academic, and in others a certain figure's partner, a certain figure's friend. I went from entering spaces as the awkward, unknown academic, granted entry through trusted participants, to becoming, somewhat against my will, a member of this scene – an always partisan positionality, however one identified. This 'membership', this stamp of belonging, I embraced at first, because on a personal level it was what I had long sought, but also because, as an ethnographer, it granted me intimate access. I would come not so much to regret it, as to be exhausted by it, emotionally and intellectually. Beirut was never the 'field' for me, and perhaps it never could have been. It was the alien home I had committed myself to dissecting, and in so doing I allowed it to dissect me.

In this chapter, I turn to affect and habitus to try and make sense of this toxicity, as well as the ability of the activists with whom I worked to persevere, despite multiple failures, and despite multiple personal sacrifices and abuses experienced and dealt, the scars and guilt from which many of them still sport.

Additionally, towards the end of this chapter, I ask how affect can also help us make sense of the reluctance to agitate against the order of things said to afflict Lebanon's wider population, thinking through the consequences of my interlocutors' neglect of the visceral pull of both cynical resignation and active complicity with the status quo, in preparation for a speculative and more hopeful epilogue about the imaginative possibilities of a politics otherwise.

Middle Class Habitus

In the aftermath of the *Hirak*, Tina told me, there were suicides. During my two years in Beirut, I found myself all too often scrolling through posts by young university students on my Facebook feed, mourning friends who had taken their own lives. Did the moment of prolonged, dead time during which I carried out my fieldwork, which followed the euphoria of an event pregnant with potentiality, push these youths towards 'real' death as an alternative to zombified living; to a stuckedness in a permanent present; to a future without possibility? Tina seemed to think so, but I, of course, cannot say. What made a life in Lebanon without the promise of generative activism so unbearable to many middle class youths, whose day-to-day survival wasn't necessarily threatened by the status quo? And, what defined a particular form of activism as promising?

I. The Political is Professional

In the previous chapter, I emphasized the personal trajectories that led my interlocutors from the Muntada's reading groups towards an embrace of collective Marxist study. If we return to

the urban activists we met in chapters three and four, they all shared cultural and knowledge capital that made Lebanon seem wholly inadequate, aware as they were of the workings of urban infrastructure and public services in other countries, which they had visited or lived in as students, trainees or conference and workshop participants, and which they had studied as models to aspire to. They couldn't shake their knowledge of the feasibility of erecting similar structures and applying similar processes in Lebanon, if only there was a will to do so.

"Go to Portugal," Cindy, a young architect and one of Nahnoo's most active and treasured volunteers, told me:

> The whole coast hasn't been built on. You put your towel on the shore, and nobody interferes with you. Behind it you have the public domain, then the pedestrian street, then the main road, then hotels. We are not against investments, but we are against them being built directly on the coast, especially given that the law says you can't block access.

Cindy had planned to move to Paris after finishing university, to specialize as an urbanist, but volunteering and activism, she told me, changed her life:

> I don't know if I want to leave. If I leave, I'm sure I'll come back. People didn't have this awareness before, that we could be a means of pressuring the government – my eye is on you, so be careful what you do. Even if it's slow change, it's change.

"I can afford to go to the beach," Alia told me,

> but I don't want to pay to go to the beach. Not because I can't, but because…I don't want to call it ideological, but I have a set of beliefs and they are linked to what I've read and what I've learned, and what I think about justice. There's something in my experience that makes this reality unacceptable. Of course it's linked to what I've

> studied. I don't come from a revolutionary or leftist family. I guess it's what you get exposed to and what you make out of it.

There was nothing new about Lebanon's contemporary professional middle class' disenchantment with the country. The activists I worked with belonged to a tradition of middle class disillusionment and the urban activism it had been generative of, which can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Watenpaugh (2006) describes the rise of a Levantine middle class in the aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, which asserted its 'modernity' as a distinguishing factor both from the ruling Sunni Muslim oligarchy and the urban and rural lower classes. Despite its cultural capital, this class, like its contemporary iteration, was deprived access to structures of power, which it challenged through appeals to the "right to equality, citizenship, and political participation in the idiom of modernity" (p. 8). Writing more specifically about the emergence of a middle class in Ottoman Beirut at the turn of the twentieth century, Abou-Hodeib (2017) explains that what distinguished this stratum of society was "education, upward mobility, and an investment in the city's position" (p. 16).

When I was carrying out my fieldwork, I also observed what could be called a distinct habitus that distinguished Beirut's cosmopolitan middle class, one that cannot, I think, be disassociated from the genealogy traced by historians like Watenpaugh and Abou-Hodeib. Bourdieu identified an "over-involvement" on the part of the middle classes in the political and cultural spheres, linking it to nurturing environments where "taste, disposition and know-how, not to mention the inherited 'ticket' of cultural capital, such as a university degree" cultivated a desire

to engage in the "political public sphere" (Crossley, 2002, p. 175). In the Beirut I observed, the habitus of the cosmopolitan middle class continued to be defined by a certain epistemological and cultural mobility, one that had nurtured a desire for a Lebanon that was better suited to the tastes of this class, and to its "ethics of consumption" (Abou-Hodeib, 2017, p. 6).

It is this habitus, I think, that encouraged activists like Nahnoo's Mansour to proclaim: "I have something *inside* that tells me I can change;" that nurtured his desire for:

> A country, or let's say a city, that belongs to all its people. A city that relaxes me, where I can walk around calmly and feel happy. Not where I'm stuck in all this traffic. This is too aggressive for me.

It is this habitus that pushed Joumana, Nahnoo's second-in-command, to argue that what she wanted to challenge was Lebanese 'self-loathing' – the idea that the country's population did not *deserve* access to public spaces.

Nabila was generating a lot of money for herself and her family as a senior landscape architect for one of the country's leading architectural firms, but she couldn't turn a blind eye to the corruption that had infected the private as well as the public sphere – "how they buy land, how they build structures." She saw so much *potential* in the country and didn't want to participate in hindering that potential.

The skills and expertise these middle class professionals had amassed through their educations, trainings and careers, were *wasted* on the Lebanese status quo. It felt impossible for Alia, knowing what she knew, to accept to have no say in how her city and country were run:

> One of the main ideas behind the right to the city and urban rights is to say that you have a right to say your opinion about your city and about how it's changing and to change it in ways you want and think are important. As far as I'm concerned, change is an accumulative process. So even if this thing won't change now, I feel compelled to do it because if we don't start now and with this, how will we continue?

This dedication, this insistence on having a say, can be understood as deriving from these activists' confidence in their abilities, in their expertise as urban planners, lawyers, doctors, engineers who *should* have a say and whose talents were being *wasted*.

My urbanist interlocutors seemed to derive pleasure from their victories, however small or ephemeral; a pleasure rooted in their positionality as activists who were driven towards causes because of their professional background – from a need, I suppose, to feel useful, but also to be taken seriously – to have their authority recognized. Recall Nabila and Sally's proud descriptions of the relationship the Dalieh Campaign cultivated with the Ministry of Environment. While Sally bemoaned having had to pick up the slack of various ministries and state institutions, she acknowledged how much the campaign members had gained from this effort, broadening their networks, receiving work opportunities, but also coming to be needed and relied upon by official governmental bodies.

In our conversations, Mansour boasted about Nahnoo's evolution from consulting with experts in 2012 to being paid for its own expertise. Nahnoo rarely applied for foreign funding, he told me. "Foreign funders come to us." He credited his organization with placing Horsh Beirut in people's memories, with making public space a populist (*shaʿbi*) discourse. And, he prided himself on having cultivated relationships with the governor and the mayor, on being able to

approach them for documents, to meet and negotiate with them, all the while confronting them publicly when he didn't get his way. He'd become, in his framing, a power broker.

"There should be a purpose for your professional evolution for a form of activism like the Dalieh to survive," Balkis from the campaign told me.

> It's not easy to find the right marriage. The people most active, like Alia and Nour, this is core to their work. This is what helps the sustainability. Sally is building on this in her research. To continue, there should be a purpose for your professional evolution.

II. The Politics of Respectability

Post-civil war Lebanon, it has often been argued, exists in a state of permanent crisis. This crisis has often been blamed on the unaddressed causes and reverberations of the civil war, but, as Hage (2015) writes, "a state of permanent crisis seemed to have become the very way in which capitalist economies and societies ensure their reproduction" (Chapter 2, para. 2) more generally, making this condition not exceptional to Lebanon. Hage argues that the permanentization of crisis under capitalism tends to be generative of conservative, rather than revolutionary subjects, which can help us understand the reluctance to agitate against the order things amongst Lebanon's wider population. The normalization of crisis, Vigh (2008) explains, "leads to tentative orderings of disorder – it does not lead to indifference to disorder" (p. 11).

Perhaps this helps explain the Lebanese's reputation for deriving dignity and pleasure from an ability to creatively navigate the country's chaos. If we think of sectarianism as more than a clientelistic prison that forces the Lebanese into unequal and mindless relations of dependence

on sectarian leaders, but rather as a way of being in the world from which citizens can also derive enjoyment or pride by imaginatively manipulating the system that oppresses them, then its durability in the face of discourses that have for decades been attempting to undermine it becomes easier to comprehend. But how is it, however, that a portion, albeit a minority, of people in Lebanon are seemingly unable to derive personal satisfaction from the labor and creativity involved in navigating and manipulating the country's chaos? From surviving its crisis of time and making the most of their permanent present?

Perhaps the status quo is paradoxically more intolerable to those who don't have to try as hard to navigate it, because the enjoyment and dignity that can to be derived from laboriously and creatively manipulating this system has been denied them, in a sense. Stripped of this dimension, the country's predicament appears as nothing more than embarrassing and frustrating corruption and dysfunction. This way of perceiving the country, coupled with the values that a certain kind of epistemological mobility has allowed them to embody, appears to have burdened my interlocutors with a sense of dutifulness, with the feeling that their privilege requires that they do something, even if unsuccessfully.

Abir, for example, founder of a local public arts platform, explained to me that, "as people who know how society *should* function, we feel a responsibility. If we don't take initiative, the country will be abandoned." There is a sense in which knowledge, and a certain type of cosmopolitan experience, then, came to be felt as a productive burden, propelling such figures towards civic engagement. Abir didn't believe that civic or cultural activism would necessarily result in substantial change. "I don't know that we are hopeful," she told me,

> We don't have faith in the ruling class, but we have faith in this collective effort to take things into our own hands. I think that when you see people making an effort, it gives you hope. It makes you less cynical or apathetic. It makes you question your behaviour when you see people collectively trying to improve your life.

The desire to be taken seriously that I have thus far been discussing, to not have one's talents wasted, to cultivate a more acceptable Lebanon where one did not feel completely devoid of purpose or belonging, can be seen as one source of the drive to continue with one's activism despite the likelihood of failure, but it can also be seen as generative of the anxiety to act that was a central analytical component of the last three chapters. This desire to be recognized and listened to, to make a difference, not only propels but *shapes* contentious politics in contemporary Beirut, encouraging a politics of compromises and consensus – what we can also refer to as a politics of respectability.

While my interlocutors distinguished themselves from society at large, many felt they needed its approval in order to work towards their goals. Abou-Hodeib (2017) writes that at the turn of the twentieth century, Beirut's "middle class strove to distinguish itself not only within its social setting…but also from a putative 'Western' or 'European' culture, referred to as *ifranji*" (p. 39) in order to counter accusations of inauthenticity, striving to "fashion an image of themselves as modern yet rooted in tradition" (p. 40). In the Beirut I observed, middle class activists strove not so much to claim authenticity, as a rootedness in reality, countering the charge that they were detached idealists making demands inapplicable to Lebanon, marshalling their expertise in order to do so.

Writing about the evolution of AIDS-related activism in the 1980s and 1990s amongst LGBT activists in the United States, Gould (2001) elaborates on what she refers to as an ambivalence about self and society amongst lesbian and gay men. Gay pride, she argues, existed alongside and in a dialectical relationship with "fear of social rejection" (p. 139), shaping the LGBT response to the AIDS crisis. I observed a similar dialectic at play amongst middle class activists in Beirut. Despite their critiques of society, these activists also wanted to be taken seriously; they wanted to win over the population at large. In order to do so, they not only needed to challenge the claim that they were detached from reality, but they also needed to actively work against smear campaigns directed at them by the government. While activists expressed pride at their rejection of what they considered problematic social and cultural norms, they also wanted and needed to be accepted and taken seriously by the social majority who embraced such norms.

During the *Hirak*, for example, the government levelled accusations of "indecency and immorality" at protestors, accusing them of sexual deviance, drug use and violence. Instead of challenging the demonization of drug users and the LGBT community, many activists tried to distance themselves from these claims by positioning themselves as "well-behaved, decent and respectful" (Kiwan, 2017, p. 133), engaging, for example, in what Nayel and Moghnieh (2015) call the "bogiemanization" of the lower classes, framed as thugs and infiltrators. Lebanon's government has routinely used shame to shape the strategies and targets of activists, successfully wielding life-threatening brutality and discourse, helping popularize an anti-status quo politics of respectability by playing on a fear of social rejection or irrelevance.

III. Conclusion

In this section, I discussed the desire for purpose in a stifling Lebanon, feelings of shame and embarrassment towards the country, and the desire to be taken seriously that not only enabled my interlocutors to persevere, but thrust many of them towards a politics of consensus and respectability. Habitus, I hope to have shown, is composed of more than just "schemas, interests, know-how" (Crossley, 2002, p. 172), but also of cultivated and embodied desires, fears and revulsions.

In what follows, I want to move from the embodied dispositions shaping the tactics and enabling the perseverance of activists, to those enabling the fracturing or breakdown of anti-status quo movements and collectives. In previous chapters, I placed significant emphasis on the role that neoliberalism as a governing rationality played in limiting my interlocutors' imaginings of what oppositional strategies were available to them, inflicting them with an anxiety to act in the short-term, and guiding their activism down paths that led away from their own long-term goals. In this next section, I want to build on this analysis in thinking about competitiveness and egoism within activist circles.

However, I want to also think beyond neoliberal rationality, about the role that emotions play not only in the motivation and perseverance of activists, but also in the breakdown of movements and collectives. This is not to say that neoliberalism does not leave an affective imprint, but that discussions of neoliberalism as a governing rationality tend to focus on *reason*, on what gets constructed as *common sense*, rather than on the ways in which this pervasive

rationality also effects how people navigate and inhabit contradictions, how they address a commitment to or desire for that which they themselves construct as anathema to their personal interests.

Toxicity in Activist Beirut

Missing from discussions of the relationship between neoliberalism and resistance, I would argue, are overt discussions of the role of the visceral. Particularly, the role of what we might call *negative* emotions. Many a Lebanese social movement or mobilization has collapsed under the weight of internal conflict. 2011's *isqāṭ an-niẓām* campaign brought thousands of protestors together and was considered one of the country's most significant post-civil war movements, but it was quick to fracture as participants debated how to formulate the mobilization and what its overarching objectives should be (AbiYaghi, Catusse & Younes, 2017, p. 76).[75] The *Hirak* of 2015, as outlined in the introduction, experienced a similar process of fracturing.[76]

AbiYaghi, Catusse and Younes (2017) argue that anti-sectarian movements in Lebanon "face a kind of sectarian trap in which sectarian discourses appear to reproduce themselves" (p. 84). I am reluctant, however, to diagnose the fragmentation that seems to characterise Lebanese civil society as indicative of the country's 'culture' of sectarianism manifesting amongst anti-

[75] "Discussions mostly centred on whether activists wanted 'to bring down or reform the regime,' or on which 'position to take regarding political leaders' or towards the Syrian conflict. Such issues very quickly led to the disintegration of the movement, which gave birth to several smaller campaigns (AbiYaghi, Catusse & Younes, 2017, p. 76).

[76] "While the 'youstink' group (mainly formed by independent and 'civil society' activists, as well as ecological and human rights associations, among others) primarily pushed for short-term sectoral measures to solve the garbage crisis, other groups had a more political – and often radical – approach, with demands ranging from denouncing corruption to criticizing the consociational system to working to bring about its downfall" (AbiYaghi, Catusse & Younes, 2017, p. 78).

sectarian actors. Rather, I think it more fruitful to turn to neoliberal rationality's role in cultivating a pervasive commitment to entrepreneurial individualism, *as well* as the pleasure that can be derived from activism, and the desire not to have one's enjoyment sullied by others with whom one does not particularly *enjoy* collaborating – even when that desire gets in the way of the entrepreneurial drive.

I. Clash of the Egos

Khneisser (2018) writes of the "high level of 'ego'" (p. 14) that her interviewees pointed to when describing the struggle between activists vying for leadership of the *Hirak*.[77] But egoism, I observed, had an everyday presence in Lebanon's activist scene, even in the absence of explosive movements and mobilizations. Particularly palpable was the tension between some of the collectives and organizations who came together during my fieldwork as part of the two iterations of the alliance for the Lebanese coast – one defunct, the other ongoing at the time of writing.

The newer alliance was announced around the time of Watch Day, during the summer of 2017, but its organizational structure was only voted on in October of 2018, which indicates the degree to which competitiveness and tension can inhibit or slow down work within activist circles. The alliance meetings I attended were often punctuated by passive aggressiveness, attempts to

[77] "The criteria for inclusion or exclusion from the coordination meetings of the *Hirak* were, as argued by several members, inherently tied to actors' positionality within the networks of activism or their self-proclaimed superiority in mobilizing more numbers to the streets" (Khneisser, 2018, p. 14).

position some forms of knowledge, expertise or experience as more relevant to a given issue than others, and an obsessive need to identify and call out anyone seen to be attempting to creep into a position of leadership. Cindy, for example, who regularly represented Nahnoo in these meetings, was often frustrated with the desire of other participants not to schedule a follow-up meeting if Alia could not attend it. Although Alia never insisted that a meeting not take place if she couldn't be present, Cindy often implied that Alia had allowed herself to emerge as de facto leader of what was meant to be a horizontal collective, and had failed to question the group's deference to and reliance on her.

The founder of another one of the groups within the coastal alliance also seemed to harbour a lot of resentment towards Beirut Madinati, its habit of offering public commentary on developments in the country, and its emergence as the public face of environmental advocacy. When I attended one of his organization's volunteer meetings, I asked him what he thought of a Facebook livestream Beirut Madinati organized to discuss the ongoing waste crisis, which he and his team had also committed time and energy to addressing. "It's interesting that they're using this tool," he told me,

> but why speak when you have nothing to say? When you have no solutions? We've been working on garbage for two years, but we don't say anything because we're still in the research phase. If the government failed to solve this over the course of 25 years, I'm not going to solve it in four months. These things take time.

In our conversations, Nahnoo's Mansour regularly pointed out the egoism of other activists, exempting himself. "I trained people in You Stink years ago," he told me, "and they walked past me as if they didn't know me during the *Hirak*."

At a Nahnoo volunteer meeting called to discuss a joint protest related to yet another threatened site in the city, Mansour explained that he'd invited another group to write and read out a collective statement during the protest. Shocked, one of the volunteers asked why he would do that when his organization was the primary organizer. "They can have the protest," Mansour responded. "It's only our name in the press anyway. What does a rich guy care about giving a poor guy 1,000 LL?"

Mansour saw humility in Nahnoo's discretion, but others saw this approach as suspiciously covert – a strategy for cunningly coming to dominate issues. "He's a member of the Dalieh Campaign," Nabila told me, by which she meant the wider net of supporters and collaborators, rather than the core group of routinely active members with whom I worked:

> He's a member, but not once did he share a single A4 paper with us, despite being exposed to all of our data. And anytime we ask him for anything, he refers us to their website where the logo is so huge you can't print anything. All of our stuff is published. He says something, then he goes to the governor and says something else. He works independently, doesn't coordinate with anyone, and then screws up your work. How can you cooperate with the governor when we are in battle against him? We are working over the table and getting burned while he visits with the governor because he's helping him with Horsh Beirut. *It's become an issue of personal stakes. We're supposed to be fighting personal interest*. What guarantees to me that he won't go to the governor and tell him everything we're doing? How can I trust him?

Nabila expressed a particular distaste for NGOs in general:

> They get a grant for a project, do it and put it in the drawer. Tell me, what are NGOs getting done? Nahnoo wanted to apply for a grant for Dalieh and take over the project. We objected, and they said, what's the big deal, it's public, do you own it? And we said, it's not about owning it, but when you're doing all the work and working day and night on something – if I show you the hours of work, it's worth thousands, thousands of dollars, and we did World Monument Fund and we did the competition, and he's sitting

> there watching and not doing anything even though he was technically supposed to be part of the campaign. What does he mean he's going to go get a grant? How can I trust someone like this?

But Mansour and Joumana felt similarly about the Dalieh Campaign. During one of the first meetings of the original coastal alliance, which was meant to kick off with an event on the Dalieh, the gathered organizations, collectives and independent activists discussed whether to work under the banner of the Dalieh Campaign, or to present themselves as a collective of independent groups working together for the Dalieh. Nabila insisted that, given the campaign's existence and success, the network should line up behind it. Nahnoo's Joumana objected. "Strategy should never be finalized and imposed – it should be routinely revised. If we are partners, we should be able to amend the strategy, not just implement someone else's strategy." Nabila was visibly distressed. "What you're saying *scares* me," she responded, taking Joumana aback. "The campaign is active, working with ministries and international organizations. If we want a collaboration, we need to work within the strategy that was three years in the making." Joumana held onto this articulation of 'fear', unable to fathom why her desire to share her input, based on her own particular experiences and expertise, should be met with such trepidation. "To build an alliance we have to trust each other," she responded. "Of course, if the strategy is great, we'll implement it, but if we have things to add we should be able to discuss them." The altercation came up the following week during a Nahnoo volunteer meeting. "Why fear?" Mansour asked:

> It's all ego. Wanting to be the face of these things. We are the ones carrying out the 25 percent lawsuit because they can't, but they don't mention that. Why are they afraid of partnership? We could have organized the event ourselves on a larger scale.[78]

Mansour needed collaborations to get where he wanted to go, and he asserted that he was confident Nahnoo would always find a way to shine, no matter the number or quality of participants. However, his displays of confidence and ostensible commitment to taking a backseat in a gesture of goodwill to enable collaboration were contradicted by the anxiety he displayed about being overshadowed, which came out in his seemingly endless tug of war for influence with the Dalieh Campaign and others, which threatened to hinder if not collapse the coalitions they were trying to collectively build.

Khaled, of the non-profit Green Line, which had been active since the 1990s, criticized the Dalieh Campaign's blanket "demonization" of NGOs. "They lump NGOs with political parties. We're demons. Why? Because we get funds. Okay, tomorrow you organize an activity and do it without funds." But Green Line had a particularly tense relationship with Nahnoo, which was no surprise, given that it had addressed the issue of Horsh Beirut long before Nahnoo came into existence, only to be eclipsed by the latter's success. "He doesn't want to recognize the work done before," Khaled said of Mansour:

> He says there was nothing before, to inflate his own work and himself. Who is going to take responsibility for institutional memory? It's missing and we have to develop it. We

[78] "Several organizations (The Green Line Association, and Nahnoo Society, in cooperation with the National Campaign for the Protection of the Dalieh of Raouche and the Legal Agenda) submitted a review to the State Shura Council to revoke a decree that went into effect towards the end of the civil war in the late 1980s. The decree resulted in stripping the municipality of the right to own 25% of any property eyed for construction in Beirut's 10th district, and returning the property seized by the municipality to its owners without compensation. Due to its grave effects, the decree was never published, allowing activists to challenge it 25 years after the end of the war" (Karameh, 2017, para. 8). Because the Dalieh Campaign is not registered as an NGO, it does not have the power to sue, and has to collaborate with registered non-profits like Green Line and Nahnoo when filing legal claims.

> have to clean things up so we can have harmony in our approach to long-term objectives, or else we will be easy to defeat. Politicians already have tons of NGOs. *Selfishness is being nurtured as we try to raise awareness and introduce common thinking about the social. Individualism is being nurtured, because it's only through individualism that people get what they want.* Everyone wants to be on the media. Civil society is not unified. Few are the people willing to risk their own personal reputation and interests. These new movements they tell us, let us live our own experiences. But I've been around for 25 years. I don't have the luxury of time to wait for you to learn.

Accounts of tension and competitiveness amongst activists in Lebanon can perhaps be explained through recourse to Brown's (2005) discussion of how neoliberal rationality has reshaped practices of citizenship. "The body politic ceases to be a body but is, rather, a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers" (p. 43). Ideal neoliberal citizens are "rational, calculating creatures" (p. 42), invested primarily in self-care, in providing for their own needs and servicing their own ambitions. But making sense of the fragmentation of Lebanon's activist scene *solely* through the analytical lens of neoliberal entrepreneurialism leaves something to be desired. It is, I think, an essential part of the story – we have, after all, seen the role that professional considerations play in propelling many towards activism and shaping their approaches to it. What it doesn't completely account for, at least not explicitly, however, is the fact that the ubiquity of competitiveness, egoism and cliquishness amongst activists gets in the way of their own personal ambitions, acknowledged as most of them have that coalition work is the only way forward – that they can't get where they need to go on their own.

While some of their decisions might seem 'rational' and 'calculating', activists also often seemed *incapable* of the collaboration across collectives and organizations that they had deemed necessary for meeting their own individual aspirations. "If us handful of people don't find a way to work together, we're not going to be able to do anything," Alia told me:

> If I couldn't work with Beirut Madinati, if I couldn't find common ground, I'm not going to find it with anyone else. Because I'm sure I have more in common with them than with many other people. We went to the same universities, and we live in the same neighbourhoods of central Beirut. If I can't find a common platform with them, I won't be able to find it with anyone else.

II. Marxist Infighting

If we turn to the Muntada and the faction formation I discussed in the last chapter, it wasn't the positively transformative event its initiators hoped it would be. In a conversation we had as my fieldwork was coming to a close, Ghadi expressed regret over the way things turned out. "The way the bloc was formed, it was a bit harsh, it didn't need this. We could have just had elections and things would have been solved in the same way." But the faction wanted the older generation out – it did not want to merely shift the Muntada's discourse and way of doing things, which the guaranteed electoral victory would have facilitated.[79] These younger Marxists not only disagreed with the older Muntada generation, but *despised* them, and there was no room for considering what it might do to the organization to lose a chunk of its members, along with their experience and connections. The Muntada slowly began to crumble after the elections, not only because of the media debacle described in the last chapter, but because the faction itself was composed of members who did not quite *like* each other; who had simply managed to agree on a common enemy but did not know how to work together after they had gotten rid of it.

Faten, a founding and dedicated member of the Muntada, whose loss was keenly felt when she decided to resign, also felt pushed out of the organization towards the end of my time in Beirut,

[79] The faction had enough members committed to voting for its candidates to guarantee a victory.

but in a less direct way. In 2016, Faten decided to join Beirut Madinati's candidate list, to the chagrin of many of her comrades in the Muntada who were offended not only by her decision but by her failure to consult them before announcing it. Faten was disappointed with the lack of support she received, both from the organization as a whole and individual members:

> You feel like, I'm with these people, doing politics for 10-12 years. *Either you don't trust what I represent*, or we're not playing politics right. There's something really off. Nobody advised me, made suggestions. Nobody knew how to stand by my side.

Not only did Faten feel let down by her comrades, but she also felt they were allowing an important opportunity to pass them by – an opportunity to inject a leftist discourse into a popular and well-publicized campaign; to criticize it from within rather than without, like detached observers; to push its agenda further left, or at least to help its supporters see the limits of its program and approach, and to potentially recruit them.

> I went into the BM movement barely knowing anyone. But if I had some kind of support from the Muntada, I could come tell them this is what's being discussed in BM and ask them what they think my position should be. This would have strengthened me. If someone from the Muntada, someone who is in its leadership [Faten was a member of the Central Committee], enters a movement it doesn't mean they are no longer in the Muntada. Where was the support? Not a single comrade shared a [social media] post. These things affect you. Not just the Muntada, the whole radical environment around me didn't support me.

Faten returned to the fold after the municipal elections and tried to ignore the experience, but she couldn't shake the abandonment she had felt. She gave much of herself to the Muntada. She was at every meeting, always enthusiastic, willing to stretch a discussion for hours upon hours, full of ideas, approachable by anyone – young recruits, new members, the leadership. In the

end, she told me, she left because of the exhaustion. She lost her ability to generate new ideas; she could not find the energy to organize and run meetings anymore.

> After I left, none of the comrades called to ask why. Ghadi did but he wanted to convince me to come back. Maybe one or two other members checked on me. This made a huge difference. Being a comrade isn't just about attending meetings together. If I'm going into a crisis, I would have hoped I could rely on my comrades. Then, no one asked about me, when this was so personal. You spend 10-13 years building something, building at the expense of your personal life, your relationship with your family, things you want to do and – I'm not holding anyone accountable; these were my decisions. No one told me I couldn't go learn how to teach yoga, but I had certain responsibilities and had to make choices. I made all these choices, and no one called to say: hello, are you ok?

Faten didn't leave because the Muntada was failing or stagnant, because it wasn't getting things done or charting a path towards a clear, alternative future, but because the comradeship that made it possible to persevere was snatched from her. She had tried to make up for Bassem's death without aiming to replace him. But, while many accepted Bassem as a sort of towering father figure, they refused Faten's attempts at 'mothering'; at organizing meetings, checking who could make it and who couldn't, keeping time, writing out a list of discussion points, checking on members who had been absent for a while, worrying about them, worrying about us all.

While Bassem was seen as a charismatic leader to whom it was a joy to listen, from whom it was a joy to learn, Faten, who took a much more managerial approach to things, was seen as a nuisance, and I watched her on a number of occasions humiliated by members who saw her attempts at keeping the organizational engine going either as an illegitimate bid for a position she lacked the stature to occupy, or as a mode of sucking the fun out of things. Mounir, who we met in the previous chapter and who bemoaned Muntada members' inability to "care about their

political selves within this organization," was one of the few with whom I spoke who found the way Faten was treated objectionable:

> It's easy to criticize patriarchal society. If the division of labor in leftist organizations sucks so much, then you need to pick up the slack, pick up the phone and call everyone. Secretaries usually do that, and they are usually women. Faten was given this responsibility for a long time. It was thrown at her in a very subconscious way. She was more affected by it not being done and couldn't help but take it on. This motherhood role shouldn't have had to be filled by her.

Even the Muntada's reading groups, which for many were cherished spaces of solidarity and camaraderie, of politics otherwise (Povinelli, 2011), for others were tainted by personal pettiness that limited their radical potential. Bashir and Eric, who were a couple when I met them, as well as university students recently returned from Europe, were among those most enthusiastic about the potential for collective study, but they found, as Bashir put it, that there was "a moralism attached to more materialist texts. Like, this was not us wasting time on theory, whereas other readings would make us indulgent. It was like with Marxist texts we had a mission and a cause." For Eric, it wasn't so much the texts as the composition of the group he participated in itself that made him uncomfortable:

> We were kind of homogenous. We came from similar milieus and had similar concerns. That spilled onto our personal lives, because we would see each other afterwards. In my case, I lived with Eyad at the time. I think there is something gratifying about being in a room where there is anonymity and heterogeneity, and you're all discussing this and that. Whereas with us, things got muddled up, the personal became political, and we were trying to assert leftier-than-thou attitudes towards each other, and I think this made things a bit toxic.

The groups I described in the previous chapter were made up of people who rarely met socially – young university students who Eyad was focused on recruiting; a task which made him overly

cautious about his demeanour and approach. I was equally cautious in those sessions not to flaunt my experience with theory and alienate the younger students. The reading group that Eric and Bashir participated in, on the other hand, was made up of several individuals who were already friends or, at least, socially acquainted with one another, and most of us were well-versed in theory, which led us to attempt an advanced study group that resulted in an escalation of tensions, as Eric described above. In our conversations after the dissolution of this particular reading group, Eyad chastised himself for recruiting people he could converse with easily, for adopting an approach that he argued went against his own Marxist thinking. "The problem is," he explained, "we know the theory; we know what we should be doing, but it's more *comfortable* to stay in your circles, although you know it's a losing strategy. Targeting middle class activists was a mistake and always will be."

Eric confessed to being guilty of the practice of shaming he argued was generated by our sessions. He spoke of him and Eyad mocking Tina for reading Maya Angelou in her spare time:

> We would do that to each other as well. He would see me reading [Jaspir] Puar and make fun of me, and I'd say you know nothing about queer theory, look at you, Marxist douche bro, reading China Melvielle. It just got weird and toxic. There is an intimacy in choosing your readings outside of a reading group that I felt we had completely violated, because we thought we all had the right to transform daily instances of studying on one's own into an agora where we could just literally piss on one another. It took me a lot of time to deconstruct all of this. My relationship to Eyad was a very important one for a while, and then when it just got cut, it took me months to figure out and deconstruct it, to understand why it led to so much animosity, why I can't get myself to forgive him and why he can't forgive me. This is what a micro-cult leads you to become. This is why I left the Socialist Forum.

Both Eric and Bashir felt that what began as collective study became an exercise in labelling and attempting to one up each other. The first time he met me, Eric explained, laughing, he 'judged' me for presenting a text by Judith Butler to the group:

> This sort of hatred grew from the minute you walked in and then a few months later I was like wow, this is toxic. How do I grow to hate someone because of a reading? I personalized someone's theoretical preferences, internalised them, and demonized the person in front of me just because she was into post-structuralism.

If, in the case of the alliance for the Lebanese coast, competitiveness, egoism, personal distaste, and cliquishness hindered attempts at cooperation and collaboration across activist organizations and collectives, in the case of the Muntada these factors prevented the organization's internal development and strengthening. If activists acknowledged the importance of cultivating solidarity and comradeship, of working collectively and collaboratively, and what it took to do so – putting aside egos, being critically generous and tactically flexible – why did they persist in engaging in divisive practices and rhetoric?

III. Conclusion

What I have tried to show in this section and the preceding one, is that the activists with whom I worked did not only derive enjoyment from the successes of their activism, but also often sacrificed their own progress to hold on to their particular ways of doing things. This desire to cling to the peers one was used to collaborating with, the strategies one had thought up, the texts one was fond off, etc, did not always stem from a process of rationalization, but was also rooted in the enjoyment that could be derived from one's own activist routine in a context and

conjuncture where most of my interlocutors acknowledged that they were unlikely to log big wins.

If what activism was doing in the conjuncture I observed in Lebanon, was allowing those who engaged in it to perform their version of the good life, to live ethically and keep hope alive for themselves, then it must be thought of also as an affective practice, trapping activists in a cycle of enjoyment and pain, as they strived, on the one hand, to push their work forward, towards whatever ideal telos they aspired to, and, on the other, to preserve the heterotopias within which they had cultivated a sense of belonging, purpose and pride.

It is important to point out that the element of enjoyment was always a sub-text in interviews, conversations and activist gatherings – a subcutaneous stitch I tugged on to better make sense of the composition of the groups I moved between. This was serious work – few would frame it as leisurely. But enjoyment crept in repeatedly – it did not need to be directly articulated as an essential factor in the making and reproduction of activists and activist spaces for me to notice it. I saw it in the inside jokes shared amongst Dalieh Campaign members; the laughs as they exchanged gossip about others in the activist scene or poked fun at each other's personal lives. I saw it in the advertisements Nabila circulated in What's App groups, announcing her daughter's comedy show. I saw it in the pride that emanated like a perfume off of conversations about 'liberals' amongst Muntada members; in the pleasure these marginal actors seemed to derive from the conviction that they possessed the gift of seeing the total picture where others refused to take off their blinders. I saw it in Mansour's coy smile as he discussed his fruitful relationship with local authorities. I experienced it myself, of course, in secret glances that Alia,

Ghazi and I often shared in Mar Mikhael, engaging in an ocular back and forth, knowing exactly what the other was thinking and feeling about the proceedings at a given neighbourhood meeting without needing to exchange words. I experienced it in the Muntada, amongst friends who loved to read and think aloud as much as I did, who revived a fascination with Marx, which I had first begun to nurture as a freshman in high school but had neglected in college and graduate school.

However essential enjoyment seemed to be, however dependent these movements appeared to be on a kind of affective infrastructure, it was taboo to forefront and politicize the visceral. In the denial of the emotive, we can see neoliberal rationality at work, imposing the need to be productive, to produce or at the very least cultivate the illusion of working towards results. "There are certain material conditions that impose this feeling of guilt on us here," Eric told me,

> a feeling that what we are doing is irresponsible, futile, masturbatory. You ask, what did we really achieve today? The spectre of the *Hirak*, all these atomized movements and groups, all very attached to pragmatics, and then there's you, who claims to have a totalizing image of what's going on, who wants to impose a totalizing image of the material conditions we live under, and offer a solution about how to fight back, but you spend seven months decoding the problematics of Kollontai. Maybe that anti-intellectual asshole who told me I was a petty bourgeois pig was kind of right.

After leaving the Muntada, Eric considered joining Beirut Madinati, but he admitted to me that, more than a desire to make a contribution by engaging in pragmatic politics, he was – like in the case of the reading groups where he wanted to read and think collectively rather than alone in his room – again motivated by what he calls "narcissism," but what I think can also be understood more generously as a desire for a sense of belonging and purpose in an alienating context:

> I wanted to have a heated debate on including an LGBT issues clause in a political program, stuff like that. I felt I had missed out on that extremely pragmatic experience of coming up with a political program, publishing it the next day, monitoring people's responses, having internal debates, storming out of a room because someone was being homophobic. I had missed this experience. It was a very egotistical way of trying to cure my guilt. Ultimately it is quite a narcissistic thing. I don't know if it comes from this genuine need to…is it because you feel like you need to be asking for more rights at this point or because you feel like you need to feel productive because it makes you feel better at night to think that during the day you went to a one-hour meeting to discuss the *kafala* system instead of underlining bits from Derrida's radical hospitality? Either way it centres around yourself.

It became evident to me, as the second reading group I participated in with Eric and Bashir – the more theoretically advanced version – began to crumble, that it wasn't just the mutual shaming and one-upping that drove them away, but also a certain degree of boredom. They came to meetings without often having read texts they previously expressed an interest in, and we would often end our sessions about an hour into them, compared to the two to three hour sessions we engaged in during the first reading group we participated in together. Eric's fantasy about the possibilities that Beirut Madinati might have offered were tinged with an anticipation of invigoration, contrasted with the disappointing experience of sitting around debating texts, which hadn't proved the stimulating encounter he had expected it to be.

What Eric was in search of, I think, was an alter-community. And, for those committed to them, even if temporarily, the various spaces I navigated during my fieldwork, in different ways and degrees, can be thought of through this lens. More than coping mechanisms, they enacted alter-ontologies. These spaces and the practices that informed them, regardless of their outcomes and wider impact, often appeared as goods in themselves, worthy for the personal, *secular* salvation they facilitated, for enabling a sense of the good life in a national context considered wholly corrupt and corrupting. Within these spaces, a minority of disenchanted middle class denizens

of Beirut were able to derive temporary gratification and fulfilment from a being together with those who longed for "a different way to cohabit the political" (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 159). The reluctance to change one's tactics or to collaborate, the fear of being 'invaded', can be seen to derive from a concern about the contamination of a carefully cultivated, intimate alter-ontological space and the subsequent disruption of one's practice of the good life.

Sectarianism and Inaction

I would like to continue with this discussion of affect and the visceral, moving to the question of why, despite repeatedly demonstrating not only the moral bankruptcy of Lebanon's leaders and the endemic corruption plaguing the country's system of sectarian-political governance, but also the inadequacies of the clientelism that props both up, the civil society actors discussed in this dissertation had not managed to 'move' the wider population towards a transformative confrontation with the status quo. Sectarian leaders and the sectarian system have been increasingly unable to provide even the illusion of care for the country, as demonstrated by the trash crisis that swept it in 2015, and the increasingly insufficient socio-economic support that most Lebanese get in exchange for backing a given political figure. Why did knowledge and expertise repeatedly fail my interlocutors then? They continued to be stumped by widespread complicity with or acquiescence to a system whose neglect for the overwhelming majority of its population was, at the time of writing, becoming more and more unabashed.

I. Sectarianism and Meaning-Making

While reading Harb's "On Religiosity and Spatiality: Lessons from Hezbollah in Beirut" (2010), for a dissertation workshop I participated in during the summer of 2017, I was struck by the similarities between Hezbollah and Beirut Madinati's approaches to building a popular base, both of which emphasized a commitment to the proper and transparent management of urban space. Hezbollah's institutions, writes Harb,

> operate as a holistic network that provides a comprehensive set of services to users, addressing diverse components of their daily needs. Moreover, since Hezbollah was chosen by voters to take charge of local governance in Dahiye in 1998, these institutions have been partnering with its municipal councils, which significantly rely on Hezbollah's expertise for elaborating and implementing local development strategies as well as social policies (2010, p. 135).

Harb (2010) attributes the success and longevity behind these institutions to them being:

> responsive and accountable thanks to a decentralized system of operations. This system maximizes the reach of Hezbollah's networks; ensures their responsiveness to local needs while disseminating participatory values; and guarantees regular feedback to service providers, enabling them to adapt their services to local needs (p. 135).

Expertise, accountability, professionalism, management, proper and equitable service provision – these are the same values that Beirut Madinati stood for and that it campaigned on. But were they the sole source of Hezbollah's success? "On closer examination," writes Harb (2010),

> these features are systematically related to religious rhetoric which emphasizes social justice (*ʿadala*) and participation (*ishrak*), and which relates professionalism to excellence (*itqan*), while grounding effectiveness in modern values (*hadara*). Indeed, Hezbollah's organisational structure incorporates a pious morality that defines codes,

> norms, and values referred to by the terms of *hala*, *biʾa*, or *jaw*…and which I translate as the 'Islamic milieu' or 'sphere'. Sometimes this milieu is also described as *mujtamaa' al-muqawama* – the society of Resistance (2010, p. 136).

Hezbollah's service networks, then, "not only provide material resources to their beneficiaries, but they also define a world of social and moral meanings" (Harb, 2010, p. 137). Hezbollah's success in building and maintaining a loyal and engaged base cannot be adequately understood without an attentiveness to its investment in meaning or, as Harb calls it, sense-making.

Hezbollah, by drawing on a sacred tradition, was able to cultivate something similar to the divine kinship discussed in the previous chapter in relation to Hugo Chavez. It linked its organizational philosophy and ethics of communal living to the ethos embodied by Shiʿa forefathers and mothers, to be emulated in the present, and to a transcendental mission of inching closer towards God. This allowed it to forge a sustainable, self-perpetuating community, whereas groups like Beirut Madinati, while able to generate *communitas* momentarily within the space of a townhall, for example, or a neighborhood meeting, were not able to produce new, lasting and reproducible social and political collectives.

I have emphasized and briefly pointed out the labour that Hezbollah has invested in forging a 'resistance community' in order to better illustrate why I have insisted that the failure to engage in their own practices of counter-hegemonic meaning making aimed towards initiating new processes of political subjectivation that could cultivate both affective and cognitive commitments to alternative political projects, was a major shortcoming of Beirut Madinati, as well as many other civil society groups and movements in Lebanon. Focused wholly on the suffering and ennui wrought by the Lebanese status quo, these actors too often collapsed what

was also a question of desire, enjoyment, identity and dignity into a question of mere knowledge and rationality, therefore providing inadequate alternatives to sectarianism's symbolic offerings, even as they insisted on its material failures.

It is only by 'dis-investing' (Stavrakakis, 2007) political or communal subjectivities from the dignity, enjoyment, sense of belonging and identification that can be derived from embodying them, that a population for whom crisis has become ordinary and liveable can be moved to transformative action. In order for this to happen, a re-investment needs to occur in alternative sources of attachment. These relationships of dependency, after all – on sect, family, village, etc – are not mere tools for survival, but are also productive of intimacies, of forms of kinship, which activists have neglected to pay attention to.

"I think, especially in Lebanon, politics has an existential side to it," Tina told me:

> I think the problem with leftist groups and intellectuals is that they forget the psychological aspect of politics; how hard it is for someone who was brought up to think a certain party was their reason d'etre. When that's taken away, it's really hard, so you have a moral responsibility to see where people are coming from. That's why I think in Lebanon politics is so toxic. There's no human aspect, no empathy, it's just constantly about winning.

It was understandably difficult to imagine an efficient, secular means through which to counter such a potent habitus. But it was also not assumed, however, that the population in its entirety was necessarily enmeshed in a sectarian lifeworld. What of those who were said to have succumbed to hopelessness, or who derived a degree of enjoyment and dignity either from a manipulative, cynical engagement with the status quo or an active refusal to participate in it,

but felt no compulsion to 'act' against it in ways that my activist interlocutors would have defined as worthwhile?

II. The Politics of Refusal

There was also, I argue, a failure amongst the activists I worked with to see the agency in carrying on and persevering amidst the permanentization of crisis, and to see acts of refusal – a refusal to vote in elections, for example – as acts of resistance; as acts potentially generative of alternative political imaginaries, rather than mere coping mechanisms or empty postures of defiance. Even Hezbollah, for example, has been affected by this politics of refusal, fractured as the narratives through which it has fueled an engagement with its technologies of collectivity became as its intervention in Syria grew more penetrative and the Shiʿa community lost more and more lives to a battle its adherents found increasingly difficult to justify ethically and pragmatically, as compared to the conflict with Israel. One need only examine the number of oppositional campaigns that contested the 2016 municipal elections in districts Hezbollah had traditionally dominated along with its electoral ally, the Amal Movement.[80] Can individual modes of persevering, and individual acts of refusing to play the sectarian game, be harnessed, both in discourse and practice, and used as the basis through which to cultivate larger, more

[80] "The results of municipal polls across Lebanon have shown that long simmering public discontent with the performance of the political elite has burst out into the open. This was manifested primarily in the low voter turnout in Beirut and other areas, and also in the strong showing made by candidate tickets formed by local families and civil society groups who challenged the traditional parties' influence in many areas…Despite the major victory achieved by the Hezbollah-Amal alliance in the south municipal polls, the election results have indicated that the two main Shiite parties faced unprecedented challenges by families and the Lebanese Communist Party who formed rival lists in an attempt to break the two groups' established sway in several southern towns" (Dakroub, 2016, para. 5-7).

sustainable social movements? Can they serve as the basis for new processes of political subjectivation?

When I first began working with the Mar Mikhael neighbourhood group, I volunteered to carry out a mapping of the old businesses still operating in the area, asking them about their status and how changes to the neighbourhood had affected them. Most businesses were family-run, and while traditionally they had been passed down from generation to generation, most of the middle-aged or elderly business owners I spoke with, many of whom had also long resided in the neighbourhood, had no plans to keep their businesses in the family, hoping for something 'better' for their children, trying to secure more stable futures for them by dedicating as much of their savings as they could to their educations. But these business owners themselves had no plans to leave their shops behind, unless they were forced out by landlords.

Most expressed anger and frustration at endemic corruption in the country. Some business owners I spoke to bemoaned their struggles with the justice system, which had failed them on a number of occasions. Serge, who had run a store selling spare parts for automobiles, air conditioners, refrigerators and heaters since 1966, lost a case against his former business partner who owed him money, despite having had the documents he needed to implicate his partner. When I interviewed him, the water had been cut off in his home for ten days. He had been cleaning himself with rubbing alcohol and sleeping in his store when his wife was away.

Many had no plans for the future, focusing on the day-to-day of keeping their businesses afloat. Garabet, a carpenter, told me there was no point in complaining to officials or government

bodies about anything in the country because of the rampant corruption. He lamented the fact that he had raised his kids in Lebanon, with the socio-cultural values he cherished, only to feel forced to send them to Europe or America. When I asked one garage owner if he would like to join our neighbourhood meetings, he told me he had taken care of himself since 1968:

> No one has helped me; you have to deal with your own issues in this country. These people are all liars. Beirut Madinati, if they had won the election, they would have helped only themselves and not me, and if you let them win because of you they will kick you aside.

One could read the above anecdotes as indications of paralysis or hopelessness, but they can also be read as an assertion of what Povinelli (2011) calls "not that" – a refusal to participate in Lebanon's faux democracy and the institutions that claim to serve and facilitate it; a refusal to buy into the illusion of an impartial justice system; an insistence on labelling political-sectarianism as corrupt and to refuse to participate in it; and an insistence on holding one's ground, on staying in one's place, despite the risk, in the above cases, of physical expulsion.

Perhaps what Lebanon needs in this counter-revolutionary conjuncture is less action, following from Swyngedouw (2014), and more thinking; thinking about existing ways of living through and against the stifling Lebanese present, existing ways of refusing inadequate futures, and how to direct them towards a collective imagining and working towards alternative horizons. There do exist examples of this approach in recent activist memory – for example, blank vote campaigns, which drew on the pervasive desire to boycott elections, encouraging individual acts of refusal to come together under the umbrella of a campaign aimed at publicly quantifying country-wide rejection of the status quo, attempting to make visible the ubiquity of a certain

structure of feeling in the hopes that the realization that it is shared, that one is not alone in one's realization that the system is unacceptable, could be generative of future mobilizations.

III. Conclusion

In this section, I remained with the theme of the visceral in order to think about inaction against the status quo. Much like my interlocutors were both motivated and hindered by the personal gratification they derived from their activism, the wider population, often deemed asleep or complicit, can also be thought of as deriving a certain measure of dignity and enjoyment either from an enmeshment in a particular sectarian lifeworld, or from a retreat from politics altogether. If what is missing from activist Lebanon, at present, is an investment in meaning or sense making that can work against sectarian subjectivities and harness the potential of cynical ways of being, what forms might such an investment take?

Coda

In this chapter, I turned to the affective infrastructures propelling and shaping activism in Lebanon, on the one hand, and hindering wider agitations against the order of things in the country, on the other. I pointed out the personal stakes that propelled my activist interlocutors to persevere despite repeat failures, and the toxic dynamics that could result from an activist life becoming a good in itself, a mode of personal salvation, in response to an environment of pervasive cynicism or acquiescence with the status quo. What could become of activism in Lebanon if it became less about the personal, about carving out space for some semblance of

the good life in the present, and more about the political in the sense of a refusal of the present and a commitment to more radical horizons of possibility?

In a context where unions have been decimated, where syndicates have been colonized by proxies of sectarian parties, where mobilizations have not only been crushed but had their narratives marginalized, refusal emerges as one of the only appealing alternatives to participation in the system that is responsible for one's pain. Lebanon is full of narratives of "sheer persistence in the face of a set of seemingly unmovable barriers" (Povinelli, 2011, p. 188), which brings pain but also, as I discussed earlier, moments of enjoyment and feelings of dignity. This is often framed by activists as a tragic reality, and I am not arguing that it is not. What I wish to question is the insistence that something, meaning anything, be done to alter this reality in the short-term, without questioning whether that something will provide little more than temporary relief, at best, or further setbacks, at worst.

The politics of refusal on display in Lebanon constitutes a challenge to "techniques of power that allow the claimed world to appear not merely as the actual world but the best of all actual worlds" (Povinelli, 2011, p. 191). Can this refusal, which at present is restricted to individual lives and experiences, be transformed into the condition for "some new social content" (2011, p. 191)? "Not this," Povinelli tells us, "makes a difference even if it does not immediately produce a propositional otherwise" (p. 191).

I am not calling for a romanticisation of the 'weapons of the weak', but rather, asking whether it is possible to play off of and even harness the private, quiet enjoyment or dignity that can be

derived from sticking it to, ignoring or refusing the system of governance that envelopes one and prods one to contribute to it, into a technology of political collectivity. Disparate bodies in Lebanon are, whether knowingly or not, maintaining the "otherwise" through acts of refusal. What possibilities for activism emerge if we rethink what meaningful action is? If we rethink our perspective on existing ways of living through and against the status quo? These are the questions I turn to next, in the epilogue to this dissertation.

Epilogue: Failure and the Radical Imagination

Dyke anger, anticolonial despair, racial rage, counterhegemonic violence, punk pugilism – these are the bleak and angry territories of the antisocial turn; these are the jagged zones within which not only self-shattering (the opposite of narcissism in a way) but other-shattering occurs. If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate – Jack Halberstam

For as long as I can remember, progressive activists in Lebanon, despite their disagreements, had been positioned against one generalized enemy: *al-niẓām al- ṭāʾifī*, or the sectarian regime. But, over the last few years, a new term has creeped more and more into the Lebanese activist lexicon; a term that indicates the metamorphosis of this regime into something more ominous: fascism.

The Lebanese ruling class has used the war on terror and the refugee crisis to cultivate a chauvinistic nationalism, a virulent strain of patriotism, amongst large swathes of the population, and to fuel the sense that Lebanon is under constant threat, justifying the need to summarily squash any and all destabilizing forces to keep the country's many supposed enemies from taking advantage of internal fissures. Crackdowns of various kinds, on refugees, on

dissidents, even on NGOs had, at the time of writing, become increasingly routine – a means for the state, via its security arm, to demonstrate its strength via brute force and carceral politics; a very convenient and effective way of distracting from its many failures.

The security forces and the military have increasingly morphed in Lebanese public discourse into sacrosanct institutions – support for their extra-judicial practices a form of loyalty to the nation. Their arms extend out and grab the many monsters (Puar & Rai, 2002) threatening the precarious country: not just refugees and suspected Islamist terrorists, but queer people, journalists, migrant workers, dissidents or 'deviants' of any stripe. In a country long held in place, paradoxically, by the narrative of delicacy and fragility, any jab at the status quo can be framed as an attempt to de-stabilize the state. And, by propping up its security apparatuses, the ruling class projects the illusion of fighting back against these supposed enemies, presenting the state both as threatened and capable of defending itself.

It doesn't matter that, for example, all evidence points to the Lebanese economy having fed off the presence of Syrian refugees. The spectacle of sending security forces to expel them from neighbourhoods and shut down their businesses is much more satisfying than empirical facts that point the finger back at the state to explain the precarity from which much of the Lebanese population suffers, when the feeling that nothing can be done with this information is so overwhelming for many. The language of "genetic superiority, racial purity" (Houri, 2019, para. 17) returns a dangerous form of dignity to disenfranchised Lebanese, making hatred for and discrimination against Syrians and other vulnerable 'outsider' or anti-normative communities one of their only sources of redress.

Within this environment and at the time of writing, Syrian refugees are being policed, the threat of a forced return to Syria looming over their heads. Palestinian refugees who have long resided in Lebanon continue to experience routine discrimination and restricted mobility across all spheres of life. Activists are being detained regularly for a variety of Facebook statuses, from jokes, to serious political commentary, to jabs at politicians. An environmental activist, as I typed these words, had just lost an ear in an attack by a group of men associated with the supporters of a controversial dam project in the Bisri Valley, where he was running a tour for visitors (Megaphone News, 2019a). And, famously, in November 2017, theatre actor Ziad Itani was arrested by State Security and charged with spying for Israel. His confession was extracted under torture.[81] Itani was imprisoned for 109 days and released in March 2018, when it came to light that the charges against him had been wholly falsified by former head of the Internal Security Forces' Anti-Cybercrime Bureau, Suzanne Hajj Hobeich. In May 2019, Hobeich was acquitted.

I have provided this brief, 'state of the nation' type summary, in order to emphasize that, in the preceding chapters, my goal was not to imply that the activists with whom I worked, whose accommodationist approach to the state I attempted to constructively critique, should have been more confrontational, more aggressive, more hostile. I understand, given the national mood, activists' hesitation; their fear of how street mobilizations, for example, might be responded to in such a climate. I recall one meeting of the Alliance of the Lebanese Coast, when Nabila, frustrated, exclaimed that to save public spaces users needed to be willing to hold sit-ins, to

[81] "Itani quickly confessed that he had been seduced on social media by a green-eyed Swedish beauty with the exotic name Colette Vianvi, who worked for the Israeli spy agency Mossad. He said the confession was made under torture, an accusation the authorities have never responded to" (Rose, 2019, para. 2).

occupy these threatened spaces, but that this would result in 'blood'. Who wants that? She asked. How can we ask that of people? At the time of writing, footage of a bulldozer ploughing through beach umbrellas and chairs on Beirut's last stretch of public shore, where families were attempting to spend a day by the sea, was circulating online, depicting the machine and its wielder's indifference to the lives they threatened as they attempted to make room for the resort that had laid claim to this public property.

Writing in 2012, Hermez argues that many in Lebanon live in constant anticipation of a war to come, which fosters the conviction "that their leaders are necessary for their sense of communal security within a constantly unstable state headed for violence" (p. 330). I would argue that the activists with whom I worked also lived in anticipation of violence, but not necessarily in the form of a sectarian war or a foreign invasion – although these continued to be intermittently felt possibilities – but violence of a *nationalistic* kind, perpetrated by the state or by those claiming to act in its name. This can, perhaps, explain why so many of them felt compelled to appeal to the state, to couch their demands in the language of national citizenship and the constitution, not merely because they could not imagine alternative possibilities, but because they were afraid of what would happen were they to adopt a more subversive lexicon. If war, and civil war in particular, had long been a "structuring force in social life" in Lebanon (Hermez, 2012, p. 330), forcing activists away from provocative and towards neutral discourses and uncontroversial issues, increasingly, we could argue, a new energy has entered the playing field that has pushed activists to assert their nationalist credentials – a development with potentially grave repercussions for contentious politics in Lebanon.

I felt it necessary to incorporate this caveat into this epilogue, to not discount the very real threat of violence with which activists in Lebanon have to contend, but which it was beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore in sufficient detail, and to emphasize that my goal, in the preceding chapters, was not to claim that activists could or should have done things differently, and to outline an alternative path. Rather, my goal has been to show that the ways in which my interlocutors responded to the forces they were up against, *did something* in the world, had consequences, which seemed to drag these activists further and further away from the futures they were trying to lay the conditions of possibility for.

Depoliticization and its Consequences

In exploring the turn towards a pragmatic and technocratic approach to politics in contemporary Lebanon, my aim has been not so much to argue against the principles that informed it, to engage it ideologically and demonstrate its ideational vacuity, but rather, to demonstrate what this approach to agitating against the status quo *did* in the world – the effects it had or could have had, and how these effects contradicted the long-term goals my interlocutors' were committed to. My aim has not been to argue, in the abstract, against their understanding of the Lebanese state, political-sectarian governance, corruption, etc., but to demonstrate how this understanding enabled or could enable particular effects; to emphasize the ways in which it was implicated in and reinforced the very processes it sought to disrupt (Ferguson, 1990).

Echoing Ferguson's (1990) approach to the study of development, my interest has not been, so much, in evaluating "an abstract set of philosophical or scientific propositions," but in

examining "an elaborate contraption that *does* something" (p. xv). While Ferguson was interested in the depoliticizing effects of the development apparatus in a context like Lesotho, my focus has been on the ways in which civil society in Lebanon has also increasingly come to function as an 'anti-politics machine'. I have focused on a mode of activism that atomized struggles and addressed them by lobbying legal bodies and governmental institutions for recognition and compensation. My goal has not been so much to critique advocacy work around specific issues, or even practical approaches to activism, but rather to highlight the consequences of divorcing single-issue lobbying from a wider social movement with a clear ideological bent, and of framing the state as the *sole* source of redress for the disenchanted and disenfranchised. Not only have I argued, as Duggan (2003) puts it, that "single-issue politics can only ever ameliorate, but never reverse" inequalities (p. xx) but, like Ferguson (1990), that this mode of activism can unintentionally contribute to the legitimization and reification of a particular mode of state power and, in doing so, re-entrench inequalities or their conditions of possibility.[82]

In the case of public space activists such as those associated with the Dalieh Campaign, I discussed the consequences of inviting the neoliberal Lebanese state into a wild space in the city. This invitation, I argued, threatened the 'unscripted' character of the site, which my interlocutors were committed to preserving – it threatened the underprivileged users of the site. When it came to Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative, I highlighted the ways in which the approach towards community organizing adopted by my interlocutors unintentionally

[82] "The growth of state power in such a context does not imply any sort of efficient, centralized social engineering. It simply means that power relations must increasingly be referred through bureaucratic circuits" (Ferguson, 1990, p. 274).

enabled Mar Mikhael to become a potential new weapon in the arsenal of Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal ruling class.

In both cases, a focus on the institutions of the state as the sole mechanisms capable of facilitating change, and a divorcing of issues such as gentrification and privatization from the wider structures of power and oppression in which they are embedded, inhibited a conceptualization of site users and neighbourhood residents as agents of political transformation, and of a bottom-up taking back of cities and public spaces as a strategic node in a wider, long-term project of societal transformation. In their stead, a practice of lobbying grounded in basic, skeletal needs was introduced, one that framed users or residents as victims who weren't asking for much at all, who were making reasonable and easy-to-meet demands. This approach necessitated that activists repeatedly make their case before the state, that they convince its operatives there was something to be gained from instituting certain kinds of reforms, or that no harm would come to their interests by meeting these fundamental, basic and reasonable needs. In both cases, we witnessed a reification of the state, an insistence on its role as sole legitimate provider for Lebanon's citizenry, encouraging the expansion of this state into the cracks of everyday life – its intervention in ever more minute details. The answer to the question 'what is to be done?', in relation to a given injustice, Ferguson (1990) explains, is conditioned by the initial question, 'by whom?' To locate the possibility for change *solely* within state institutions, he writes, is to encourage more people to "stand in line and await rubber stamps to get what they want" (p. 274).

There was a reluctance, amongst my interlocutors, to recognize the centrality of corruption and inadequacy to the reproduction of Lebanon's ruling class, when it came to designing and carrying out their strategies. I say a reluctance to recognize, rather than a failure to understand, because as was emphasized in my chapter on Beirut Madinati, my interlocutors often demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the workings of state power in Lebanon. We can, perhaps, further make sense of this reluctance by turning to Franz Kafka by way of Fisher (2009). Drawing on the novelist's masterful engagement with bureaucracy, Fisher argues that, "at the level of the political unconscious, it is impossible to accept that there are no overall controllers, that the closest thing we have to ruling powers now are nebulous, unaccountable interests exercising corporate irresponsibility" (p. 63). And so, like Kafka's characters, in seeking redress for an injustice or a response to an unmet demand or need, many of us move from one bureaucrat to another, following their deferrals of responsibility like breadcrumbs, striving to reach "the ultimate authority" (p. 43) we know does not exist. I demonstrated this in my chapter on neighbourhood organizing in Mar Mikhael, where residents and their supporters tried desperately to locate the authority capable of bandaging their wounds – was it the governor? The Ministry of Tourism? The courts? An MP associated with a sectarian political party with vested interests in the district that housed their little quarter? The "supreme genius of Kafka," Fisher writes, "was to have explored the *negative atheology* proper to Capital: the centre is missing, but we cannot stop searching for it or positing it." It is not, he elaborates, "that there is nothing there – it is that what *is* there is not capable of exercising responsibility" (p. 65).

"The centerlessness of global capitalism," Fisher (2009) argues, "is radically unthinkable" (p. 63), and so this quest for authority can also be understood as a form of self-care; a therapeutic

practice much like the Muntada's reading groups were for many of the participants I worked with; a means of taking initiative over one's life and misery; a practice of searching and seeking that, while deferring redress, also defers a succumbing to hopelessness, to the unthinkable.

> Although people are interpellated now as consumers – and, as Wendy Brown and others have pointed out, government itself is presented as a kind of commodity or service – they still cannot help but think of themselves (as if they were) citizens (Fisher, 2009, p. 63).

Indeed, there was an affective attachment to the ideal of citizenship, and to the performance of the exemplary citizen, amongst activists like those associated with Beirut Madinati's neighbourhood initiative, as well as the Dalieh Campaign. In my engagement with pragmatic and technocratic politics in Beirut, I have attempted to emphasize the effects of an approach to change that cannot imagine a socio-political transformation facilitated by anyone or anything other than "the paternal guiding hand of the state" (Ferguson, 1990, p. 281), responding promptly and satisfactorily to the demands of its citizens. It is not only a certain understanding of the state that animates this approach, but of citizenship as well, the assumption being that if we know our rights, how to properly and formally lobby for them and who to hold accountable when they are violated or denied, we will eventually get what's ours. These imaginaries erase alternative, existing tactics for not only coping with and adjusting to the order of things, but resisting it as well, and they belie the necessity of a project of political subjectivation grounded in a particular theory of justice for the achievement of a radical social, political and economic transformation.

We can think of the above as a politics of respectability, as I've described it before, but also as a politics of *visibility* similar to that engaged in by Western liberal gay activists, with whom the term is most often associated. "The liberal gay politics of visibility and recognition," writes Ritchie (2010), "is ultimately about the '[development of] a righteous critique of power from the perspective of the injured' (queer) victim, who demands the protection of the benevolent state from the 'social injury' of homophobia" (p. 562). The politics of visibility and recognition aimed at an ameliorative state, Ritchie argues, is grounded in the ideal of national citizenship – in a contractual link between duties and rights – making it a tactic with inherently limited inclusivity, lacking in radical transformative potential. It is a form of speaking truth to power that is also completely dependent on that power's acknowledgment of its grievances, and that goes out of its way to position itself as unthreatening to a political system whose most egregious flaws it simply seeks to address and reform. This was evident in the kind of constitutional fetishism discussed in the previous chapters, which also reared its head during the parliamentary elections.

One popular (amongst civil society actors), progressive parliamentary candidate associated with one of a number of independent electoral platforms, for example, insisted in a live interview that every single demand her collective was committed to was rooted in the constitution. "We built our entire political program around the constitution, which is our foundation," she explained (Nharkom Said, 2018). This insistence was meant to justify such candidates' entry onto the political scene, positioning them as lovers of nation and country, devotees of the constitution and, therefore, mere reformers, rather than disruptors. The politics of visibility and recognition, the politics of respectability, in this guise at least, requires appeasement and

compromise, it requires that one design one's public image in a way that is acceptable to the very power one ostensibly seeks to oppose, and in so doing it more often than not results in the dilution of more transformative and egalitarian political visions – ones that, in a context like Lebanon in particular, could fold in the *millions* of precarious residents or denizens who lack citizenship – if not their dissolution.

The Hegemony of Capital

A key goal of this dissertation has been to demonstrate the ways in which actually existing neoliberalism shapes those very practices that seek to resist it. In the oscillations between "cynical resignation" and "naïve optimism" (Halberstam, 2011, p. xiii) that I witnessed amongst disparate activists in Lebanon, I saw echoes of Fisher's (2009) writing about what he termed capitalist realism. For Fisher, capitalist realism refers to "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system," but that "it is now impossible to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (p. 2). But, the term is also meant to describe the sense of purpose and fulfilment that those positioned against a capitalism to which no realistic alternative can be imagined, derive from committing themselves to the belief that it is 'bad', regardless of whether they continue to "participate in capitalist exchange" (p. 13). If capitalism, and in Lebanon's case, sectarian-neoliberalism, cannot be dismantled and fully replaced, then we can resign ourselves to alleviating its most dire consequences or to discursively deconstructing and standing against it holistically in thought and word, rather than action. "What late capitalism repeats from Stalinism," writes Fisher, "is just this valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement" (p. 42-43).

This can help us, I think, make further sense of the commitment that the urban activists with whom I worked had to strategies they knew were unlikely to assist them in inching towards their own grander visions. But, it can also help us make sense of the contentment, the sense of purpose and fulfilment, that Muntada reading group participants derived from collective, Marxist study, and their reluctance to participate in the wider group's political organizing. We can consider this, perhaps, a kind of anti-capitalist performativity that can unwittingly serve the perpetuation of capitalism or, again, in Lebanon's case, actually existing sectarian-neoliberalism, further entrenching it as an irreversible, insurmountable reality that can only ever be slightly reformed or, alternatively, deviated from through recourse to heterotopic spaces like that of an intimate political reading group.

This is a mode of "adapting to the conditions in which we find ourselves," something, Fisher (2009) argues, "we've done…rather too well" (p. 28). The value of the reading group, and of urban activism, was for many never really about what they actually did or had done in the world, about their *material* achievements, but rather, their value derived from "perceptions of, and beliefs about…(future performance)" (Fisher, 2009, p. 44) – be that faith in the incremental change that issue-focused, expertise-led pragmatic politics could enable, or faith in the righteousness of the utopian vision for the future cultivated by a collective of alienated Marxists. The gap between reality and belief, present and future, did not need to be addressed if it was believed, on some level or another, that there was no actual alternative to the order of things. This, then, was a cynical kind of faith and these were, in a sense, half practices or traditions whose maturation was constantly halted by a kind of subcutaneous haunting – the spectre that everything was for nothing.

It is this haunting, I think, that enabled action without reflection, in the case of the urban social movement, and reflection without action in the case of the version of the Muntada I carried out fieldwork with (Hermez, 2012). In the first case, the grander visions that were meant to guide the actions of my interlocutors receded further and further into the background as they dove more and more into the practicalities of everyday activism, even as they acknowledged, occasionally, that their actions were, in that sense, counter-productive, because there was something to be gained from persevering when more radical alternatives were felt to be impossible to achieve. Similarly, in the case of the reading group, there was no need for action if what the collective was meant to be inching towards was an impossibility. There was fulfilment to be gained from simply maintaining an affective attachment to it and refusing reformist politics in the present. As I explained in the preceding chapter, activism, for many of my interlocutors, had become a good in itself, a means of living the good life, a kind of ethical positionality, but not necessarily in Badiou's politically generative sense of the term.

"A viable life," writes Hage (2009), "presupposes a form of imaginary mobility, a sense that one is 'going somewhere' – what I have called existential mobility" (p. 97). In our contemporary conjuncture of permanentized crisis, many experience a pervasive sense of stuckedness, as well as what Hage refers to as the "heroism of the stuck" (p. 100). The dignity derived from 'waiting something out,' has emerged not just as a coping mechanism but as a mode of governmentality, he tells us, one that prevents a mass, oppositional response to naturalized conditions of precarity. The sense that one is heroic for enduring existential immobility, moreover, is generative of all manner of hostile sentiments towards those perceived to be *moving*, regardless of the direction their mobility is guiding them in: refugees, immigrants, racial, ethnic and religious minorities.

But, if as Swyngedouw (2014) argues, the anxiety to act, to agitate against the status quo regardless of outcome, is enabled by a ubiquitous neoliberal rationality as a means of satisfying the question 'what did you do today?' in a way that turns the attention of potentially disruptive of actors and movements away from a more generative engagement with the structures that oppress them, what alternatives to this 'nervous' activism can be imagined that would not result in either paralysis or the creation of bounded heterotopic spaces?

In this dissertation, I have highlighted the limitations of an approach to activism that abandons the radical political imaginary, and I have described the kind arduous, routine labour that must be invested in cultivating a commitment to such an imaginary so that it may enable new processes of political subjectivation. Without an investment in cultivating and maintaining a commitment to such a political imaginary as a guide to action, I have argued, activists risk reinforcing the very structures they seek to oppose, and appear incapable of reproducing, maintaining, expanding and powering the social movements to which they belong.

Hage (2015) argues that the role of the critical anthropologist working on and with dominated or disempowered groups is not merely to highlight the power dynamics shaping and oppressing them, but also to "think outside such…relations to see what exists outside them as a radically *other* form of sociality" (Chapter 3, Conclusion, para. 7). This is not to say that the anthropologist's role is to offer political prescriptions, "tools and justifications for a radical politics" (Chapter 4, para. 2), but rather to invite those we work on and with to pause, rethink and reflect on the ways in which they address their oppression. It is not to designate any one form of contentious politics as righteous or fruitful, but to encourage a constant questioning –

it is, in a sense, to encourage something akin to Badiou's fidelity to event-ness, or Bulter and Athanasiou's positing of democracy as a practice of perpetual contestation.

What I hope to do in the remainder of this conclusion is to invite a reflection on whether there exist other modes of relating to the state in Lebanon that do not reify the kind of power described earlier, and if there are ways of enabling processes of political subjectivation, of radical political imaginativeness, that do not require an appeal to self-interest or a guarantee of success, and what such practices might be generative of. This dissertation has been concerned with the consequences of a certain type of activism, what it did in the world and how it set those with whom I worked back, generating frustration and, in some cases, feelings of hopelessness. To end, I want to think through the possibilities not only of other 'doings', but also of a seemingly counter-intuitive *undoing* or *not doing*, in particular what Fisher (2014) calls a "meditative detachment from the commotions of the current" (2014, p. 153) – but, a detachment not in the service merely of self-care, a means of enduring stuckedness and framing this endurance as heroic (Hage, 2009), but rather, a stepping back in order to map future propulsions aimed at a utopian horizon; a collective retreat into mind and body in order to cut out the embodied disposition fuelling the sense both that there is not and cannot be an otherwise.

In the speculative sections that follow, I want to think through the potentiality of what Haraway (2016) calls staying with the trouble, of cultivating, more specifically, a politics of refusal, which I discussed briefly in the last chapter – a refusal to act, on the one hand and, on the other, a refusal to make *requests*, rather than *demands*, of the state. I want to contemplate the potential that these approaches to anti politics might have to generate an imagining of and fidelity to an

alter politics – to produce a sustainable political community committed to "an alternative to the political order" (Hage, 2015, Chapter 3, On the radical political imaginary, para. 7). My aim is merely to point out other activist realities that exist outside the binary of the pragmatic/technocratic and heterotopic, that have not required either appeasement or complete withdrawal into liminality, and to invite a thinking about and with such practices and their potential for cultivating not only an alter-political imaginary, but a deeply-rooted commitment to it. This is not meant to be a romanticized commentary on such practices, an assertion of their universal applicability or guarantee of success, but merely an attempt at a generous or imaginative engagement with existing or unfolding alternative forms of counter-political practice in Lebanon, in the hopes that such a thinking with can inspire a reconceptualization of what constitutes worthwhile praxis in the country. In briefly exploring alternatives to activism as usual, my aim is to provoke a wondering about and a wandering through the possibility of an activist otherwise, and what such an otherwise might be productive of.

Generative Failure

During the 2018 parliamentary elections, as was the case during the municipal elections of 2016, Lebanese voters overwhelmingly cast ballots aimed at the reproduction, rather than disruption, of the ruling class.

The last time Lebanon had experienced parliamentary elections was in 2009. In 2013, parliament illegally voted to extend its mandate, and would proceed to do so two more times. Various justifications were cited – security concerns linked to the civil war in Syria;

parliamentarians' failure to reach a consensus on a new electoral law, and more. With Michel Aoun's ascension to the presidency in October 2016, after a 19-month presidential vacuum, parliamentary elections were readdressed. In June 2017, an electoral law was finally agreed on and, eventually, elections were scheduled for May 2018. Although the new electoral law preserved regional and sectarian quotas, it was a departure from the majoritarian, winner-takes-all system on which previous elections were based (Megaphone News, 2018a).

The new law was grounded in proportional representation. Electoral districts were reduced from 26 to 15, each of which were assigned between five and 13 seats. Candidates were required to run as part of a list, and voters were instructed to vote for a single list in its entirety, rather than candidates from multiple lists, and were also obliged to assign a preferential vote to one candidate from the list they selected (Megaphone News, 2018b).[83] Because the previously relied on winner-takes-all system made it impossible for political independents to win seats, many in civil society saw the reformed electoral law as a victory and an opportunity. But, from the outset proportional representation in the context of a political sectarian system, "where each sect is assigned a number of seats in parliament and positions in government" (Megaphone News, 2018a), was going to present serious challenges and limitations for anti-status quo figures. Despite the many other flaws associated with the new electoral law, a substantial number of

[83] "The law uses the electoral quotient, which determines number of votes that any list should obtain in order to secure a parliamentary seat. It is calculated as follows: number of votes divided by the number of seats in a specified district. When the number of votes for each list is determined, winners are identified after calculating the number of preferential votes for each candidate" (Megaphone, 2018b).

civil society activists saw the partial departure from the winner-takes-all system as an opportunity to catapult a few independents into the halls of power (Bitar, 2018).[84]

Six former members of Beirut Madinati formed Li Baladi (For My Country), an independent coalition of candidates vying for parliamentary seats in the two electoral districts of Beirut. They eventually joined Kulluna Watani (We Are All My Nation), a national coalition of independent parliamentary candidates – the first of its kind in post-civil war Lebanon. The coalition brought together 66 candidates who ran for 128 seats distributed across nine out of 15 of Lebanon's electoral districts. Out of the 128 seats, however, the coalition only managed two wins – both of them in Beirut's first district. The seat won by journalist Joumana Haddad from Li Baladi was contested by the Free Patriotic Movement, and its candidate was eventually allotted the seat after a recount, the results of which many civil society activists argued were fabricated.

Not only did Kulluna Watani do poorly amongst the general voting public but, as its campaign evolved, it began to be regarded with scepticism by many civil society activists. Its candidates, after all, represented diverse and in many cases contradictory political stances and beliefs, and some of them also sported a history of questionable behaviour and/or affiliations that made them unpalatable to independents. A collective of independent activists was formed during the campaign period in order to evaluate the electoral lists associated with civil society. They called themselves *Mist3ideen* (We Are Ready), and produced a comprehensive voters' guide,

[84] "The law, based on a system of proportionality aimed at reducing sectarian division, lacked fundamental democratic safeguards, including an independent electoral body and a campaign spending ceiling, and facilitated de facto vote-buying." This obviously favoured established politicians with access to their own media apparatuses and hefty financial resources (Bitar, 2018, para. 2).

evaluating lists and candidates against the principles and demands they argued were shared by many in Lebanese civil society. When it came down to the wire, *Mist3ideen* decided to refrain from officially endorsing Kulluna Watani, which it labelled a fragile and politically inconsistent alliance, and instead threw its support behind seven (out of 66) individual candidates who came closest to reflecting its desires and beliefs.[85]

Mist3ideen criticized the coalition's method of putting together candidate lists, arguing that it was focused more on who was most likely to win, rather than the importance of designing and committing to a clear political program and running candidates who reflected this program. Furthermore, it criticized the overall absence of such a unified political vision within the coalition itself, which resulted in candidates within the same list often harbouring opposing positions on a given issue. The coalition failed to reconcile disagreements related to Hezbollah's armed wing, the Syrian civil war, privatization and public-private partnerships, taxation, workers' rights and refugee policy, among other important topics. Kulluna Watani, *Mist3ideen* argued, offered little besides opaque, skeletal slogans and a position against ill-defined 'corruption'.

Many of the core activists behind *Mist3ideen* were committed members and/or supporters of Beirut Madinati. While the contradictions and omissions that characterized the municipal

[85] The information referenced in this paragraph and the following one was gathered as part of a research project mapping electoral mobilizations for the municipal elections of 2016, led by Dr. Mona Harb at the American University of Beirut, for whom I served as a research assistant. Dr. Harb gave me permission to include the research I carried out on Mist3ideen in this epilogue. The information was derived from a close reading of their website: http://www.mist3ideen.com.

campaign could seemingly be overlooked because of the distinction that many civil society actors had made between the municipal scale and the national scale, these same contradictions and omissions could not be tolerated or bypassed in the case of parliamentary elections. In fact, they encouraged a rethinking of the limitations of political campaigns aimed at consensus-building and evading controversy in order to garner votes, and a questioning of the kind of radical change Beirut Madinati could have facilitated had it made it into the municipality on the wings of a superficial electoral platform that failed to attend to the political dynamics underpinning Lebanon's urban governance structure, as well as the multi-scalar nature of these dynamics.

If the *Hirak* was a moment of political euphoria for anti-status quo actors – an event pregnant with potential – it did not seem to me that the parliamentary elections were experienced in the same way. Many canvassed for and supported independent candidates somewhat reluctantly, for lack of a better option, and for fear of standing on the side-lines while an attempt at change unfolded. But many, it was apparent, watched with cringing faces, and scrolling through Facebook in the electoral aftermath it became clear that a substantial number of civil society activists were not all that surprised by the results, although their bodies were surely gripped by *iḥbāṭ* in response to the failure – here is that word again.

However, there appeared to be something different about the frustration that followed this sober, hesitant and critical engagement with an attempt at anti-status quo agitation. Something was laid bare during that election and in its aftermath, at least for a moment, and the kind of naïve or cruel optimism that I had observed amongst anti-status quo pragmatists and technocrats

during my fieldwork, seemed harder to hold on to as the new parliament prepared to convene. Civil society, it had become all too apparent, could not compete with the ruling class in a game of its own making. Alternative politics needed to unfold, or at least to be prepped for, elsewhere.

There were many who did not vote in 2018's parliamentary elections. We could understand their abstention as a result of apathy or passivity, or we could, as Lara Bitar (an independent media worker and journalist based in Beirut) argues in Open Democracy, see "their act of refusal as a vote in and of itself" (2018, para. 5). A little more than 50 percent of people eligible to vote "refused to grant legitimacy to the next parliament and to the electoral process itself," through abstention (2018, para. 5). Bitar frames this "non-cooperation and the refusal to be complicit in the state's self-preservation attempt," as "one of the few acts of resistance the working class could engage in without fear of vengeance by the state and its militias" (para. 5). In her piece, she calls for a concerted effort to bolster this practice of "non-compliance" and to work on introducing it within other spheres. "It is worthwhile exploring the potential of a collective 'no' that builds strategic refusal to engage with an unjust system" (para. 8).

Engaging with Bitar's powerful and provocative article, I began to think about the relationship between the politics of refusal she lauded and wanted to see developed, and practices of civil disobedience in Lebanon, both past and present – about the disruptive politics not just of voter abstention but of strikes, boycotts, cultural productions that defy censorship laws, and more. In April 2018, hundreds of governmental hospital employees went on strike to "protest the delayed implementation of the new salary scale" (Megaphone, 2018c). In June, hundreds marched through Beirut's streets to mark International Domestic Workers Day, calling for the

abolishment of the kafala or "sponsorship" system denying migrant domestic workers fair and dignified work and living environments (Megaphone, 2018d). In August, municipality workers in the northern city of Tripoli held a sit-in at the entrance to the municipal building, keeping staff and citizens from being able to enter, protesting unpaid salaries (Megaphone, 2018e). In September, residents of the southern city of Saida burned tires and blocked off roads after they suffered three days without water, demanding the South Lebanon Water Authority address the issue (2018f). And, when Tripoli held a by-election in April of 2019, a large number of eligible voters chose to boycott, "stating they no longer believed politicians' empty promises." A mere 13 percent of eligible voters turned out to cast ballots (Megaphone, 2019b).

And, prior to the elections, the progressive parliamentary candidate mentioned earlier, who couched her demands in fealty to the constitution, withdrew her candidacy when she could not find a suitable list to join in Beirut's second district. She could not find a list that would not require her to compromise on some of her core principles. "There are some things I cannot ignore for the sake of *pragmatism*," she explained in a televised interview. The interviewer asked her, perplexedly, why she would run despite knowing exactly how the electoral law was going to structure elections, and that she would likely have to enter into a coalition with people with whom she had fundamental disagreements. The former candidate explained that she had wanted to publicize a particular political discourse, and to demonstrate what the role of a parliamentarian should and could be. "My withdrawal," she elaborated, "*is a political act*. To withdraw while still honouring your discourse and demonstrating a commitment to your principles, is a sign of political maturity" (Nharkom Said, 2018).

These examples of disruptive politics plucked from the 2018/2019 news cycle in Lebanon, were not rare occurrences in the country. "At dissenters' disposal," writes Bitar (2018), "are powerful and successful historical precedents and forgotten histories of boycotts, work stoppages, and economic shutdowns," as well as contemporary examples, as evidenced from the above (para. 17). I do not mean to imply that my interlocutors were oblivious of such developments, or unsupportive of them – quite the contrary. But the activist scene I observed was an atomized one, where particularized struggles were divorced from the wider structures of power and oppression in which they were embedded. In the aftermath of the parliamentary elections, the fruitfulness of this 'practical' activist methodology, of a lowest-common-denominator approach to politics, seemed much less certain. There seemed to be emerging room to question, or to begin to question, the shortcomings, limitations and even dangers of divorcing a practical, issue-focused politics from the process of cultivating a wider, cohesive social movement committed to a radical political imaginary. There seemed to be a burgeoning desire for a holistic politics, and for thinking about how to go about imagining and cultivating a commitment to such a politics.

The activist spaces I navigated during my fieldwork brought together diverse selves, attempting to find the lowest-common-denominator to agree on. But what I have tried to argue in this dissertation is that what was missing from activist Lebanon and what, I think, was needed, were spaces for political conversation aimed at an imaginative world-making, at not only designing but cultivating a commitment to a commons. Without this commons to be committed to, it will be difficult to acknowledge the state as "the name of the coldest of all cold monsters" (Nietzsche as cited in Brown, 1995, p. 166) and to reach beyond "institutionalized protection," which "is

always a measure of dependence and agreement to abide by the protector's rules" (Brown, 1995, p. 169). To stand against the protector, be it, "the Mafia, parents, pimps, police, or husbands" (Brown, 1995, p. 169), to "fuck shit up," as Halberstam (2011) says, one needs comrades, solidarity, an open and inclusive queer form of kinship from which to derive strength rooted in a shared commitment to a radical horizon. Can the myriad acts of refusal and civil disobedience outlined above – refusal of the present, refusal of authority, refusal of the government's claims to legitimacy and deferrals of responsibility when it comes to its failures – be harnessed, and used to initiate a coming together of disparate dissenters to fashion themselves into rebels with a common cause? What might it look like, or how might one go about, harnessing the "potential of a collective 'no'," as Bitar (2018) put it, organizing non-compliance, or fashioning disparate 'no's' into a practice and ethos of collective, *strategic* refusal aimed not only at collapsing an unjust system but imagining and inching towards an alternative?

During my fieldwork, I watched how difficult it was for my interlocutors to inhabit, rather than attempt to work against, failure – to do something seemingly counter-productive. Having a plan of action in the short term, it often seemed, was more important than cultivating a shared vision and a commitment to that vision, and to then decide strategies – be they practical or counter-intuitive, disruptive or accommodationist – based on how they served that vision. I have tried to argue throughout this dissertation, that there is a limit to what an anti-status quo movement can do without first imagining a radical horizon to aspire to, and cultivating a community committed to thinking and reaching for this horizon. Without radical political imaginaries, political projects, however well-intentioned, run the risk of bolstering "the very configurations and effects of power that they seek to vanquish" (Brown, 1995, p. ix). To be clear, I am not

attempting to argue that, utopian telos in hand, activists will be assured a victory, but rather, that the conclusion I have come to is that such a victory, while not guaranteed, without a utopian imaginativeness appears impossible (Jameson, 2004). What the "utopian leap" allows us to do, Jameson (2004) argues, is to better diagnose and critique the conditions oppressing us in the present. Utopia is not just a "political vision and program," but also a "critical and diagnostic instrument" (p. 38). And, to quote Jacoby (1999), "the point is hardly that improved air, enhanced welfare or a broader democracy is bad. The question, rather, is the extent a commitment to reasonable measures supplants a commitment to unreasonable ones – those more subversive and visionary" (p. 25).

The Lebanese ruling class has long trafficked in "political disorientation" and "fragmentation." Perhaps what is needed, then, is "the creation of spaces where political analyses and norms can be proffered and contested" (Brown, 1995, p. 49-50), and through which a radical political imaginativeness can be cultivated, a commitment to which can be productive of the comradeship and solidarity necessary for a social movement to persevere and grow. As Hermez (2011) wrote when reflecting on Lebanon's anti-sectarian movement of 2011, "what was pervasive in Lebanon was a unique situation in which we did action alone and reflection alone, but the two were often not done together, in tandem, as part of the same master project" (p. 47). What was needed, he continued, was not so much "to live or die for a cause," but rather, "to create a movement that could be sustained full-time" (p. 49).

Such spaces needn't be "pristine, rarefied, and policed at their boundaries," as Arendt advocated, and they certainly could not be productive of "nondistorted communication

unsullied by power," as Habermas imagined (Brown, 1995, p. 50). Rather, if we return to Halberstam, Moten and Harney, to Munoz and Agamben, perhaps we can imagine as politically productive the seemingly counter-intuitive practice of disorganized study when aimed at something above and beyond the self and its needs and interests. Perhaps we can imagine the study mode as a means of perpetually losing one's self – one's assumptions, one's common sense, one's prejudices and all else that limits the imagination in its reach for ever more egalitarian possibilities. And, if we return to Badiou, perhaps we can imagine such spaces and the processes of political subjectivation they may generate, not as a means of designing and setting in concrete a political program, but as spaces of collective, habitual contestation, of dialectical metamorphosing and reaching towards a utopia that precisely because it is impossible, or forever delayed, because it will never sediment, prevents absolutization and enables a stubborn collective grasping for something better, a conscious folding in of more and more communities and more and more causes, a routine questioning of strategies and of goals. "Our spaces," writes Brown (1995), "while requiring some definition and protection, cannot be clean, sharply bounded, disembodied, or permanent…they must be heterogeneous, roving, relatively noninstitutionalized, and democratic to the point of exhaustion" (p. 50).

It is important to note, before moving on, that what I attempted to do in this section was to imagine an activist otherwise that could potentially unfold in the Lebanon that I observed and, more generally, in contexts where anti-status quo actors still have room, however limited, to manoeuvre – to protest and strike, to create subversive film and art, to editorialize. What I have outlined above, especially in terms of the potentiality of civil disobedience, cannot currently be imagined in a context like Sisi's Egypt. What I have tried to offer in this section is a meditation

on what might be possible in a non-authoritarian, semi-democratic state that has not been wholly militarized or securitized. While crackdowns had increased in the Lebanon I observed, the ability to agitate had not been completely snuffed out. What might constitute an activist otherwise under an authoritarian regime, or even in Lebanon if what has been called the fascist tide is not stemmed, is unfortunately beyond the scope of this dissertation to address. This is why I framed this meditation as speculative, not only because of a desire to avoid a prescriptive analysis, but because of a desire to think around increasingly looming constraints – to end on a generative, rather than paralyzing, note.

The Politics of Visibility Revisited

There is much to be learned, I believe, from examining the political activism of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, who collectively comprise one of the most vulnerable groups residing in the country. I can only touch on it briefly here, and am unable to give it the narrative justice it is so deserving of, but I would like to end this dissertation by referencing a movement that, while lauded and supported by Lebanese civil society activists, hasn't necessarily been examined as a model of activism to aspire to or learn from. The activism of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, it can be argued, also constitutes a form of visibility politics, but of a much more subversive kind than that described earlier.

There are approximately 200,000-250,000 documented migrant domestic workers living and working in Lebanon, and many more undocumented workers. They are overwhelmingly women, and most are nationals of Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Kenya

(Hall, 2018). Collectively, they comprise Lebanon's largest female labour force. Their presence in the country is managed by the *kafala*, or sponsorship system, which binds them "to a single employer (the sponsor, or '*kafeel*') whose consent is de facto required for the worker to return home or seek another job in the country" (O'Regan, 2017, para. 4). Migrant domestic workers, then, are not protected by Lebanese labour law, making them susceptible to myriad forms and degrees of maltreatment.

The consequences of the kafala system include:

> the non-payment or withholding of already minimal wages (average starting salaries are $150 per month), the seizure of identity documents, the inability to change employers or break contract, chronic overwork, no days off, and no guarantee of time spent outside (O'Regan, 2017, para. 5).

Those few migrant domestic workers who manage to turn to the Lebanese legal system to report abuses and seek retribution, often "end up facing trumped-up counter charges of theft or absconding" (O'Regan, 2017, para. 8). Their word is measured against that of their Lebanese employers, and they most often find themselves facing a court uninterested in taking their claims seriously. Furthermore, they have to contend with the arbitrary decision-making of Lebanon's Directorate of General Security, which has jurisdiction over the issuance of passports and visas. General Security has detained and deported migrant workers for having children, for lobbying for their rights, and for publicly broadcasting and criticizing their experiences of abuse.

Despite belonging to a deeply precarious and vulnerable community, a substantial number of migrant domestic workers have been pro-active in responding to and agitating against the de-

humanizing conditions they are regularly subject to, risking detention, deportation, physical and mental harassment in order to fight back against normalized structural but also cultural racism in Lebanon, which has sanctioned their maltreatment and their exclusion from the mechanisms, institutions and organizations meant to protect workers in the country.

Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon have cultivated and nurtured informal networks through which to communicate with and assist one another. Churches, for example, particularly those associated with the Ethiopian community, have served as important spaces of gathering. Through such networks, women in abusive situations can be connected with the appropriate civil society organization in order to find shelter, alternative employment or, if they so desire, a safe means of returning home. These practices, of course, unfold discreetly in order to avoid the gaze and ire of the authorities. Activists from within Lebanon's migrant domestic worker community and their allies have also committed themselves to developing community spaces aimed at collective empowerment. In 2011, for example, the Anti-Racism Movement set up the Migrant Community Centre to serve as "a space for discussions, language classes, and community building for many migrant workers" (Chehayeb, 2019, para. 14).

Not all of the subversive work engaged in by activists from within Lebanon's migrant domestic worker community takes place in secret or under the radar, however. A migrant worker from Nepal, for example, set up the online platform This is Lebanon, which "names and shames individuals who have abused migrant domestic workers" (Chehayeb, 2019, para. 23). Furthermore, in 2015, a Domestic Workers Union was established with the backing of the International Trade Union Federation and the International Labour Organization, under the

auspices of the National Federation of Trade Unions. The Minister of Labour at the time refused to recognize the initiative, but his response came as no surprise. The union was a gesture of defiance, an assertive, disobedient performance, rejecting not just the treatment, but the status, of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. This was, then, a disruptive politics of visibility.

Migrant domestic workers presented themselves publicly the way they wanted to be seen, as independent, unionized workers, without asking permission of the state. They told the state, rather, that this was how it was going to be, and that they would not settle for anything less. They made themselves visible in a way that pushed against the grain of the *kafala* system, detaching themselves from their sponsors, demonstrating that they would accept no less than the complete abolishment of the sponsorship system, and that they would persevere until its dismantlement. They demonstrated their boldness, their bravery, appearing in public in unauthorized ways. They did not demand recognition by the state, but rather, transformation on the part of the state. They did not attempt to make themselves respectable, but rather, shined a light on the unrespectability of the Lebanese state and of a significant chunk of its citizenry by coming out of the shadows.

Perhaps most importantly, these migrant domestic worker-activists refused to engage in a politics of compromises and appeasement in order to further their cause – a politics that risked further entrenching those very inequalities they sought to upend. In 2016, a group of migrant domestic workers split from the Domestic Workers Union, forming the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers. The DWU was too much of a "top-down project – one that, in seeking formal recognition, arguably diminished the autonomy of the women it sought to represent"

(O'Regan, 2017, para 19). Speaking of the Alliance, one of its founders, Gemma Justo, asserted: "We don't have bosses, it's not an NGO…Nobody is, like, on top of our head…it's us: it's our alliance, and our alliance is us; our own decisions collectively, our blood, our sweat, it's our life" (O'Regan, 2017, para. 20).

While it could be argued that, from a practical perspective, it was perhaps better for migrant domestic workers to be associated with a body like the National Federation of Trade Unions, this arrangement was in many ways an extension of the sponsorship system in less sinister form – a capitulation to the notion that they needed to be guided, led even, by Lebanese nationals out of the abusive conditions they were trapped within. Many Lebanese who employ live-in domestic workers have justified abusive behaviour through recourse to paternalism. The Alliance refused this logic, demanded its autonomy, and took it. Its members chose the adoption of a slow, long-term approach to radical change, rather than a short-term approach tainted with concessions that would perhaps allow them to make some gains but would continue to position them as lesser-than Lebanese nationals.

Of course, the goals of groups like the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon was, ultimately, the abolishment of the *kafala* system, but they were aware that this kind of radical, transformative change would not come about merely by lobbying the government. The Alliance was equally committed to challenging hegemonic ways of thinking about migrant domestic work in the country and, as mentioned earlier, risked detention, deportation and abuse in order to make visible their narratives, in the streets during the annual Labour Day March and the Women's March, online by sharing their testimonies, at cultural events, and more.

In 2019, the Alliance produced a provocative, interactive play in collaboration with a local theatre group. The Alliance spent months developing this play, which charted the abuse-ridden journeys of migrant domestic workers, beginning with the recruitment process in their home countries, following their journey through border control in Lebanon, their sequestering in recruitment offices awaiting transfer to their new home, their suffering at the hands of their employers, and their attempts to escape such abuse. I was fortunate enough to witness this play's conception in its early days, when I joined some friends from the Muntada in meetings with the Alliance. When the play's premiere was announced, General Security demanded its cancellation. While it was tragic that such a narrative was not able to be broadcast, to travel, as the alliance hoped it eventually would, from village to village, school to school, the hoopla around its production and the fervent desire to shut it down, was demonstrative of the disruptive impact of this approach to a politics of visibility, of its counter-discursive potential in a context where the abuse levelled at migrant domestic workers is not merely a matter of unjust laws but of the normalization of race and ethnicity-based harassment.

Furthermore, collectives like the Alliance have cultivated a form of kinship for women who are far from home and loves ones, where they can experience and share solidarity, cultivate comradeship, ground their suffering in a collective struggle and hone a political vision and message, routinely laying and maintaining "the groundwork, perhaps, for political struggles in the future" (O'Regan, 2017, para. 39).

There is much to be learned, I think, from this movement of radically vulnerable individuals, who refuse to compromise on their demands, to appeal to a state that treats them as sub-human;

who draw on a variety of techniques – from lobbying to protest to cultural resistance – all aimed at a utopian horizon, at an elsewhere devoid of distinctions and discrimination based not only on race but gender, class and sexuality (the alliance has nurtured strong bonds with socialist, queer and feminist collectives and organizations in Lebanon) and who, in the midst of hopelessness, frustration and stuckedness made ordinary, amidst the everyday ugliness of absent opportunities, do the work of sustaining a social movement as community, as family, keeping each other and their cause alive and actively intersecting the struggle against *kafala* with others in Lebanon.

Staying with the Trouble

Jameson (2004) argues that in moments of political upheaval, the utopian imagination tends to take a backseat, with dissidents focused "more sharply on very specific wrongs" (p. 44). In the midst of political urgency, he continues:

> Political thinking and intelligence are trained on very sharply focused issues, they have concrete content, the situation claims us in all its historical uniqueness as a configuration; and the wide-ranging drifts and digressions of political speculation give way to practical programs (even if the latter are hopelessly unrealizable and 'utopian' in the other dismissive sense) (p. 44).

Conversely, Jameson (2004) locates something hopeful in the moment when the potential for radical political transformation is *suspended*. He calls this the utopian moment, "the calm before the storm, the stillness at the centre of the hurricane," when we find ourselves capable of thinking differently about "structures whose actual modification or abolition scarcely seem on the cards" (p. 45). The "very distance of the unchangeable system from the turbulent restlessness

of the real world," he argues, "seems to open up a moment of ideational and utopian-creative free play in the mind itself or in the political imagination" (p. 45-46).

Perhaps that can help explain why, as my fieldwork came to a close in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections, I sensed a receptiveness to the idea of focusing less on rushed action, and to engaging in a slow process of reflection aimed at generating not only new strategies for the future, but a social movement committed to cultivating a shared horizon and engaging in the time-consuming, permanent work needed to inch towards it. I watched from a distance a group of activists from diverse backgrounds, all of whom could be located somewhere on the spectrum of left/liberal-left politics, come together to set up a political salon of sorts, an exercise in deep, prolonged thought, a charting of the challenges facing civil society, the obstacles to change in the country, a mapping of the desired future. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to predict what will come of these whispers about alternative politics that I heard as I prepared to leave Beirut. I can only comment on the allure of the temptation to act in the short-term, to react, and the difficulty of embracing an intellectual wandering, a political simmering, without feeling self-indulgent. But it did seem to me, for a moment at least, that a desire to reclaim the "lost sense of futurity" that had been productive of "the breakdown of progressive narratives of history" (Brown, 1995, p. xii), was emerging in the aftermath of the electoral failure. If failure is alternatively understood as "a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 88), I wonder what a succumbing to, an embodying of, a sinking within, activist failure, might be generative of.

As I prepared to write the concluding chapter to this dissertation, I found myself returning again and again to Halberstam's (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure*. I had spent two years in Beirut watching my interlocutors attempt to respond to a history of activist failure. I watched what their yearning for success *did* – to their visions for the future, to their choices of issues to address and strategies to adopt, to their personal relations, to their well-being. And, I have tried, in the preceding chapters, to contribute an analysis that could point out not only the detours taken away from the progressive paths that many of my interlocutors were committed to, but the destinations to which these detours could unwittingly lead – to point not only to that which they were moving away from, but that which they were unintentionally moving towards. I aimed not to present these detours as problematic in and of themselves because they led away from something abstractly 'good', but to show that they did lead somewhere; somewhere to which the activists with whom I worked did not necessarily want to go.

In the university, Halberstam (2011) writes, "we spend far less time thinking about counter-hegemony than about hegemony" (p. 17). I would argue that the same applies to contemporary activist spaces in Lebanon and beyond. Lebanon's activist scene has long been preoccupied with navigating and reacting to Lebanese hegemony, rather than in cultivating counter-hegemony, "another, competing set of ideas" (p. 17). As my fieldwork came to a close, I saw some of those with whom I worked begin to consider whether what activist Lebanon needed in a conjuncture of political stasis was to abandon its obsessive politics of 'doing' in favour of collective questioning, contemplation and study. If the path towards change currently on offer was dependent on a devil's contract with the state, with sectarian-neoliberalism, then perhaps

what was needed was a politics of refusal, an intellectual and affective wandering, that could be generative of an alter, rather merely an anti, politics.

If the shadow feminism that Halberstam (2011) advocates is a form of "self-destruction, masochism, an antisocial femininity…a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power" (p. 124), I wonder if the burgeoning democratic spaces I saw in the early stages of their formation in the aftermath of the Lebanese parliamentary elections might be generative of a shadow world as well, one that births a destructive practice aimed at severing the bond between citizen and government; a practice of 'undoing', a "refusal to be or to become" (p. 124) citizen or democratic subject as they have been hegemonically defined; a means of *losing* the state.

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