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Sectarianism, Proxies &
De-sectarianisation

**Urban Spaces and
Sectarian Contestation**



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Introduction: Urban spaces and sectarian contestation

Simon Mabon & John Nagle

In recent years, politics across the Middle East and beyond has been shaped by myriad forms of social movement contestation that have fed into the re-imagining of relations between rulers and ruled. Across divided societies, this contestation has become increasingly widespread, with serious ramifications for all aspects of political life. Religious identities have previously been located prominently within the ordering of political life, particularly in divided societies such as Lebanon and Iraq. As protests broke out in 2015 in what became known as the ‘You Stink’ movement across Lebanon and in 2018 across Iraq, the prominence of religion was contested, as issues – such as public goods and corruption - took on increasingly important roles in the mobilisation of trans-sectarian actors across urban environments and political projects more broadly.

With 65% of the Middle East’s population living in cities, urban environments are prominent sites of political engagement, social projects which are simultaneously a means of production and control. Across the region, urban environments became sites of tension and contestation - between public and private, rulers and ruled - transformed by protesters and regimes alike as actors sought to demonstrate vitality, legitimacy and power. Yet they are also landscapes of the mundane, where daily life operates within the context of regulatory structures. It is in this context that contestation and transformation of political projects, identities and urban environments occurs, with potentially existential repercussions.

This report reflects on the urban and spatial dimensions of the protesters in the re-imagining of identities across the contemporary Middle East and beyond. It seeks to contrast events in the Middle East with those of other manifestations of divided societies and to engage with the following questions:

1. What role do urban spaces play in shaping processes of contestation?
2. How have urban spaces been transformed by contestation?
3. To what extent do spatial approaches aid our understanding of contestation and de-sectarianization?
4. What characteristics facilitate the contestation of urban spaces?
5. What theoretical approaches help us understand the relationship between urban space and identity construction

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Rethinking the right to the divided city: An analysis of non-sectarian memorywork as political activism

John Nagle

While sectarianized conflict cannot simply be attributed to ancient hatreds, sectarian groups construct memory to advance divisive contemporary political projects. Sectarian groups use memory to legitimate the idea that they are the true tenants of the sacred homeland. The respective groups further mark public space to commemorate historical traumatic events that constantly remind members to remain vigilant of their victimhood status and that violent defence of the ethnic community remains always necessary.

This nexus between memory, space and sectarianized conflict is particularly acute in divided cities. Cities such as Belfast, Beirut and Mostar have been characterized by a violent conflict of political legitimacy concerning the wider state (Nagle 2016a, b). In these contested environments, sectarian groups routinely imprint memory into space in order to exercise control over urban environments. Such memorywork is enacted through various forms, including public ritual, parades, and images of martyrs.

The task of peacebuilding in divided cities needs to consider how to disentangle this conflict-driving relationship between space and memory (Nagle, 2017). Yet, in peace processes, rather than seek to deal with the legacy of the past, the state often enacts a culture of amnesia to support the logic of political transition, while at the communal level the rival sectarian groups proliferate commemorative practices as part of ‘memorywars’.

These twin forces –amnesia and sectarianized memory –are also often embedded into postconflict urban reconstruction, particularly the city centres of the municipal capitals. These city centres contain the main political, economic and cultural institutions of the state. For this reason, they are ‘battlegrounds of national memory’ (Nagel, 2002) as contending ethnonational groups and political elites compete to control these spaces. At the same time, city centres are civic, cosmopolitan spaces where individuals can come together to constitute new forms of community that transcend ethnic cleavages.

In this paper, I explore how non-sectarian movements imprint memory into city centre space to challenge the paradoxical forces of forgetting and ethnic communal remembrance. Towards this, I explore the memorywork of non-sectarian groups in Beirut whose politics transcend established ethnic cleavages, such as trade unionists, feminists and LGBTQ activists, movements resisting the privatization of public space and activists mobilizing to protect public services (see Nagle, 2018).



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Downtown Beirut: 'The Forgetful Landscape'

In a state historically fragmented by sectarianism, the city centre prior to the civil war symbolised a public sphere marked by pluralism and tolerance; it is remembered for its openness and fluidity and a capacity to accommodate multiple identities.

For many Beirutis the postwar rebuilding of the city centre needed to help heal the wounds of the war. The rebuilding of Beirut city was central to peacebuilding as it had the potential to foster a rare shared public sphere in a society in which public and urban space is increasingly sectarianized or privatized. This hope was frustrated: the postwar reconstruction of the city centre rendered the space amnesiac, with no reference to the history of sectarian violence, and exclusivist by de facto limiting public access.

The impulse for 'collective amnesia' (Khalaf, 2012,p.78) became sewn into the fabric of the reconstruction of Beirut city centre. Under Law 117 a real estate company, Solidere – owned by the then Lebanese Prime Minister – was granted special powers by the government to redevelop what it termed 'Beirut Central District'. Solidere presented the reconstructed city centre as a symbol of postwar Lebanon's aspiration to overcome its divisions and to rebuild a peaceful state (Makdisi,1997).

For critics, the amnesiac city centre derives a 'detrimental impact on reconciliation and reintegration' (Makarem, 2012), since it reinforces the logic of political forgetting about the civil war. The reconstruction of the city centre further obscures and even reinforces the contemporary process of postwar ethnic segmentation and territorialisation of the city by constricting public space that could be used as vital meeting point for citizens to meet and interact.

In a provocative thesis, Svetlana Boym (2001) distinguishes between two types of nostalgia: 'restorative' and 'reflective'. Restorative nostalgia signifies a return to the original stasis, to the and thus emphasizes the absolute truth. Such memory focuses on fixity, homogeneity and does not broach ambiguity and ambivalence. Reflective nostalgia, alternatively, 'dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity' (Boym, 2011,p.14). Reflective nostalgia encourages fluidity, the imperfect process of remembrance, and it lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history.

Restorative nostalgia captures the logic and affect of the regenerated city centre. Solidere's restorative nostalgia, however, does not strive to restore the inclusive bourj; instead, its intention was to re-create a fantasized depiction of a pre-war past, 'to the happy Lebanon of the "good old days"' (Makdisi, 1997, p.687). Solidere's slogan: Beirut – 'An Ancient City for the Future' –sought to 'create a new collective memory' (Nagel, 2002, p.717) for the nation by paradoxically looking back to Beirut's mythical heritage as a peaceful and affluent trading centre in the Middle East. Yet, rather than this restorative nostalgia re-establishing the 'bourj', it acted "to wipe clean the surface of central Beirut; to purify it of all historical associations in the form of its buildings; to render it pure space, pure commodity, pure real estate' (Makdisi, 1997, p.692). While the bourj is remembered as an 'open space in which diverse groups can celebrate their differences without indifference to each other' (Khalaf, 2006, p.1), the effect of the nostalgic revamp was to sanitize the space. Rather than the 'gathering place of all Beirutis from all backgrounds, the city centre is now an exclusive space for "appropriate" people only' (Makarem,2012). At the same time, the reconstruction sought to forget and

replace the troubling memories of the civil war with ‘safe’ memories that supposedly antedate conflict.

The logic of restorative nostalgia does not stand uncontested. Non-sectarian social movements generate alternative forms of memorywork that counter exclusion and amnesia. These movements articulate forms of reflective nostalgia and haunting to not only make visible what has been obscured through the reconstruction process, but to also irradiate radical alternatives for understanding and using the city (Nagle, 2017). To further elaborate on reflective nostalgia, this mode of memory construction refuses to conform to singular narratives, but actively explores multiple and disordered ways of inhabiting places. Instead of returning to an imagined stasis, reflective nostalgia indicates flexibility and imperfect memories.

An important example of a non-sectarian social movement that deploys reflective nostalgia is the campaign to limit the privatization of public space in the city centre.

Public Space Memories

The process of postwar city centre privatization went beyond the expropriation of buildings to claim public spaces. Solidere and other developers have privatized 800,000 sq. m of the city centre’s natural shoreline in the postwar era. In 2013, developers fenced off a public space along the coastline known as Dalieh. A campaigner to preserve public spaces explained that Dalieh attained ‘sociocultural significance for the memory of the city and as one of the last natural open spaces that is not restricted’ (Interview, January 2016). The shrinkage of city centre public space derives critical importance in a divided city like Beirut which has witnessed the postwar creation of more ethnically homogeneous spaces, which have the effect of maintaining the power of ethnic leaders.

In November 2013 activists launched the ‘Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche’. Activists represented a loose gathering of ‘individuals, environmental, cultural and civil groups 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’. In campaigning to preserve Dalieh as a public and shared space, campaigners view this activism contributing to peace since it facilitates not just intergroup contact, but also engagement of individuals across the sectarian divide. A non-sectarian activist explained to me:

The Lebanese need meeting points. Today, what did we do in order to create physical and social meeting points since 1990? Nothing! This kind of savage privatization of the public space is just contributing to keeping the entrenchment and engulfment of each community and each group (interview, June 2015).

Yet, the issue of how exactly shared public space contributes to peacebuilding is indeterminate. Amin (2002) warns us from expecting too much from public spaces – ‘places of transit’ offering little meaningful or durable contact between strangers. While it’s correct not to overstate the ameliorative properties of public space, such spaces do perform a vital function in divided societies. Space that encourages ‘chance encounter, happenstance, the accidental and contingent, and allows for exploration and discovery’ can, over time, facilitate more porous boundaries between groups (Gaffikin, Mceldowney, & Sterrett 2010, p.498). Such spaces of encounter, it is hoped, can even contribute to the process of eroding the ‘visceral fear of “the other “that feeds conflict and separatism’



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(Gaffikin, Mceldowney, & Sterrett, 2010,p.497). More than sites of chance meeting, public space in divided cities can evolve into ‘dialogic space’: arenas for deliberate debate regarding how conflicts of different identities and interests can be resolved through identifying common political projects and values.

In the memory of the city, Dalieh is presented by activists as a space that refuses to be sectarianized or exclusive and is instead a place of pluralism, tolerance and encounter. In one sense, such narratives reproduce legitimate concerns that the privatization of space compromises and diminishes the public realm. In another sense, these representations risk reproducing nostalgic ‘paradise lost’ visions of public space that elide the fact that these spaces were never fully public and were almost always a particular locus of class interests (Iveson,2007). Nevertheless, as Iverson (2007) argues, the language of retrieval is a useful fiction in setting an ideal of public space, around which a city politics of inclusion can develop. These imaginative stories ‘of public space as life enhancing, exciting, safe and inclusive ... can take us far in creating those spaces in just that way’ (Watson, 2006, p.7).

Thus, the social movement campaign asserts a memory of Dalieh as a place comprising various meanings for Beirutis. These memories act as plotlines through which the city can be reimagined as having public spaces that host multiple uses for its citizenry. The memory work of the Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche stress the complex rage of social groups that use this space. Activists note that Dalieh is used by fishermen and 10 families live on the shore; elderly swimmers access the sea to swim every day in the natural shallow pools; it is a place for lovers to surreptitiously meet and gay men to cruise; for families to picnic in the grassy hills; and a symbolic site for various ethnoreligious groups celebrating and commemorating religious events. The project of reclaiming the city centre by non-sectarian movements also provides an immensely symbolic form of political contestation to challenge the logic and practices of postwar sectarian state. To expedite this political project, non-sectarian movements invest their activism with memory work and reflective nostalgia.

Conclusion

For peacebuilding to take root, Iveson (2007) calls for ‘new scripts’ to change the perception and social use of space in divided cities. Such a vision connects with Lefebvre’s (1991) demand that the most important thing is to multiply the readings of the city – to provide pluralistic narratives in which the city is a site of renewed centrality, a place of encounter and difference which licenses the full usage of spaces for all of the citizenry regardless of background. In order to change how spaces are made accessible to the citizenry in the future requires changing the memories associated with them in the present. The ‘right to represent the past ... can be considered a right-to-the-city’ (Till, 2012, p.8). The right-to-the-city, argued Lefebvre, required social movements to re-appropriate and re-program public space –to fight against ‘specialized space and a narrow localization of function’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p.382–383).

One important way in which the social movements included in this paper contribute to this project of re-imagining the city is by impressing memories into city centre public space that illuminate complex, awkward and disordered histories of the city that defy sectarian and amnesiac visions. Non-sectarian actors can engender new ways of understanding how these spaces can be used



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through memorywork. If judiciously mobilized, these memories can become ‘routes for forging new cosmopolitan identities and transcending loyalties and commitments’ (Khalaf, 2012, p.79). Although it is important not to overemphasize the impact of non-sectarian actors, they can develop into powerful networks that sustain social and political transformation.

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Reimagining Belfast: Obstacles and opportunities since the Good Friday Agreement

Cathal McManus

In April 2018 Northern Ireland marked the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The occasion, however, rather than being one of celebration, was a somewhat sombre affair given the context of a collapsed power-sharing Assembly and with relations between unionist and nationalist parties having almost totally broken down. As such, those events organised to mark the achievement of the Agreement largely took the form of critical reflections on what might have been and how the promise of 1998 had been seemingly lost (McManus, 2019).

Using Belfast as a case-study, this paper will argue that a primary reason for Northern Ireland's continued difficulties centres on a failure to adequately address those processes of Othering that help to enable a form of sectarian politics (McManus, 2017). To develop this, the paper will make several key claims. Firstly, it will contend that the sociocultural, political and demographic changes of the past two decades have greatly unsettled the loyalist working class communities in the city and, consequently, their sense of fear and threat has increased considerably. This has been aided by a distinct lack of political leadership from within unionism which has failed to provide direction to those communities at times of significant change. Secondly, the nationalist community, buoyed by an increased and increasing demographic and visibility for their Irish cultural identity, have helped to reinforce the sense of alienation and threat felt by the loyalist community – despite repeated claims that this would not happen. Finally, the paper will argue that Belfast's civic society, and specifically those who would now claim to be neither unionist or nationalist, have similarly disregarded the fears and insecurities of the loyalist working classes which has served to further generate a new siege mentality within that community – a politics of “us” against the rest (Hayward and McManus, 2019). To argue these claims, it is necessary to provide a short historical context to Belfast society and the changes it has experienced over recent decades.

In using Belfast as a case-study for wider issues faced in Northern Ireland, the paper will draw attention to the role that the urban plays in helping to frame notions of political identity, belonging and, indeed, hegemony. The changing demographic shifts in Belfast are helping to transform it from being the bastion of Ulster Unionism to something new but, as yet, still contested. The power and symbolism of this transformation has not been lost on either nationalists nor unionists and as such generates the potential for further conflict in the years ahead. To argue these claims, it is necessary to provide a short historical context to Belfast society and the changes it has experienced over recent decades.

Belfast – The Decline of the Loyal City?

Between the Act of Union of 1801 – which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland – and the 1911 census, the population of Belfast grew from approximately 20,000 to over 385,000, transforming it from a small commercial town to Ireland's largest and most industrial city. Its



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population was predominantly Protestant and, by 1914, it had become the centre of anti-Home Rule sentiment as moves towards some form of Irish self-government gathered pace. The political tensions generated by the issue of Home Rule between 1885 and 1914 had led to periodic outbreaks of sectarian violence as both communities gave vent to their anger and fears. This intensified during the period 1918-1921 as conflict on the island over Irish independence deepened and as partition became a reality (Bardon, 2001 [1992]).

Northern Ireland first came into being as a result of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act and was reinforced in the aftermath of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty that granted the rest of the island a degree of political independence. Covering the six North-Eastern counties of Derry/Londonderry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Armagh, Down and Antrim, the new Northern Ireland had a significant Catholic/nationalist minority that amounted to around one-third of the population. Despite claims from Unionist leaders that this population would be treated fairly, Catholics were only ever viewed with suspicion and as posing a threat to the new state and the type of “British” society it was seen to represent. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Belfast – the capital city of the new state – where Catholics, already often excluded from particular forms of employment, were physically forced out of employment as tensions heightened. In the period 1920-22, for example, up to 10,000 Catholics (and those deemed “sympathisers – usually trade unionists) were expelled from the Sirocco Works, Mackie’s, McLaughlin and Harvey’s, Musgrave’s and Combe Barbour’s (Ibid: 470-474).

The narrative that emerged from this period – but which was already well established – took on two key forms. Firstly, it became popular opinion that the Catholic community were disloyal and, as such, represented a threat to the state. Secondly, it was also a popularised belief that the Catholic Irish identity was backward and as a result posed a threat to the superior British character represented by Protestantism and which was deemed to be at the heart of the new state. As shall be discussed, this latter aspect has taken a deeper significance in the era of the peace process but can be seen, initially, from a parliamentary debate in May 1923 over the Unionist Government employing an “organiser of Irish language instruction”. One unionist contributor to the debate, Robert Lynn, posed a question to the Minister for Education that, in many ways, highlights the manner in which many unionists have come to view expressions of Irishness:

I would like to know from my hon. Friend whether it is really seriously intended to maintain this organiser of Irish language instruction, and I would also like to ask him whether a circular has been issued, I am sorry to say I did not see it myself until this morning, saying that in cases where Irish is taken up history may be dropped? I respectfully suggest to the Ministry of Education that history, that is, real history, not imaginative history of the Irish type, would be of more benefit to the schools than the teaching of Irish. That is purely a sentimental thing. None of these people who take up Irish ever know anything about it. They can spell their own names badly in Irish, but that is all. I do not think it is worth spending any money on (as quoted in *Stormont Papers*: 1923; 663).

Unionist politicians have often been hostile to expressions of Irishness in Northern Ireland. For unionism it is important that the British character of the state is emphasised whilst even acknowledging any sense of an Irish dimension can be deemed dangerous – it potentially undermines, for example, Margaret Thatcher’s claim that Northern Ireland is as “British and Finchely”.

Such a narrative has been significantly weakened, however, as the demographic makeup of Northern Ireland and Belfast has changed over the past half century. According to the 2011 census there was a continued narrowing of the gap between Catholics (45.1 per cent) and Protestants (48.4 per cent) across the state whilst in Belfast Catholics had become the largest section of the community. According to the 2011 census the number of Catholics in the city had risen from 131,000 in 2001, to 136,000 whilst the number of Protestants had dramatically fallen from 135,000 to 119,000. Current patterns on birth rates/death rates suggest this trend is going to continue for the foreseeable future. Importantly, those identifying as “Others” had more than doubled – from 12,000 in 2001 to 26,000 in 2011.

Loyalism under Siege again?

The political ramifications of these demographic changes have been significant. In Belfast City Council, once a bastion of unionism, the balance of power has completely changed. As early as 1997 unionists lost overall control of the Council, with the middle-of-the-road Alliance Party holding the balance between nationalism and unionism. This subsequently led to the City having its first nationalist Lord Mayor, Alban Maginness of the SDLP, and, perhaps even more symbolically, its first Sinn Féin Mayor when Alex Maskey was elected to the office in 2002. Furthermore, in 2011, nationalists outnumbered unionists in the chamber for the first time – 24 to 21 – which had an immediate political impact. It led to calls from nationalist politicians for City Hall, indeed for Belfast more generally, to better reflect the Irish heritage of the Catholic population and to grant a parity of esteem to the Irish identity. This had been an ongoing issue for over a decade as nationalists increasingly complained about the almost exclusively British character of City Hall with Nolan et al highlighting that:

...it was not just the memorials around the exterior of the building that appeared to represent British identity: the internal decorations could be seen to express the same predominance. Growing controversy about this cultural environment reflects Belfast’s shifting demographic and political landscape in more recent times (Nolan, Bryan, et al, 2014).

This became an increasingly important issue following the 2011 election with attention being turned to the Council’s policy of permanently flying the Union flag at City Hall. Sinn Féin, the largest party in the Chamber, had already been querying the policy but this intensified in the aftermath of the elections. As the issue was discussed in committees it became apparent that both the SDLP and Sinn Féin preferred a policy of no flags but, crucially, the Alliance Party backed a Designated Days policy – that the flag would still be flown but only on certain symbolic days of the year. This division meant that there was deadlock on the issue as neither side had the numbers to get their preference through full Council, but this changed dramatically in December 2012 when Sinn Féin decided to back the ‘compromise’ approach put forward by Alliance.

Loyalists reacted with anger to the Council’s vote and violence erupted across parts of the city – especially in the working-class Protestant districts of East Belfast. The decision was interpreted by loyalists as further evidence of a concerted attempt by republicans to undermine the Britishness of the state that had already included attacks on Orange Order parades/culture and efforts to curtail 11th Night bonfires. At the same time, there was, they believed, a concerted effort to promote symbols of

Irishness such as the GAA and the Irish language and that this amounted to a cultural war that was being waged predominantly by Sinn Féin but with the support of “others” (Ibid).

The Cultural War, “Othering” and the Shared City

“Culture” has come to play an important role in the political divisions of Northern Ireland in the era of the peace process (McManus, 2017). David Trimble, as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party during the early years of the peace process, had suggested that this would be so when he told his party conference that culture would be a “political battleground” (Ibid). His experiences during the 1990s, as the parading disputes in Portadown, Derry and Belfast raged, alongside the cultural dimensions of the Agreement – specifically, the prominent status given to the Irish language – had convinced him that the British identity was under attack and, increasingly, becoming delegitimised. It was a priority of his, therefore, to take measures to fight back against what he perceived as those efforts to normalise Irishness within the context of the North. That this was a priority can be seen from his disastrous 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly election campaign in which the UUP adopted a “Simply British” political slogan and employed every stereotypical image of “Britishness”; from red double-decker buses to union flag emblazoned Mini Coopers to fish and chips served in yesterday’s newspaper!

The actions of republicans have unquestionably served to reinforce the fears of unionists, but they also demonstrate the ongoing processes of Othering within the Catholic community that remain evident within the evolving peace process; an Othering that is helping to maintain and reinforce sectarian divisions in younger generations. Throughout the peace process Sinn Féin have insisted that Irish unity was an inevitability but, similarly, that this did not represent a threat to the British identity of Ulster’s Protestants. Indeed, they have consistently guaranteed that measures would be put in place to protect the Protestant/Orange heritage in any unified state.¹ Yet, their actions, especially since the 1990s, have done little to reassure unionists that this would be the case. The parading disputes, the Belfast City Hall flag issue and, most recently, a war of words on loyalist bonfires, have all suggested an agenda to delegitimise the British heritage of many Protestants. Moreover, they have been quite successful in this and have largely been aided by the often violent reactions of unionists to events. Thus, the parading disputes of the 1990s and, most recently, the stand-off in Ardoyne, has led to a gradual decline of the Orange Order that has been particularly evident within the Protestant middle-classes. (McAuley, Tonge, Mycock, 2011). This has been especially true in Belfast where the Orange Order’s reputation has been tarnished quite considerably and is now often associated with the loyalist working classes and, more specifically, loyalist paramilitaries. What is more, the middle-class exodus has led to a lack of political leadership capable of reversing the fortunes of the Order in the city.

This has had significant repercussions on efforts to build a shared city that represents all communities. Although there is now a real willingness to incorporate elements of the Irish cultural heritage – the Irish language, traditional music and Gaelic games – it has become more complicated to incorporate the Orange heritage as it has become so tainted by sectarianism. Indeed, not only do nationalists and republicans tend to look down on loyalist culture but so too do the middle-class “others”. This has, inevitably, fed the anger and frustrations of unionists and loyalists who increasingly believe that their identity is under threat by a wide conspiracy that incorporates not only Sinn Féin and the SDLP but increasingly the moderate Alliance Party. That their anger and

¹ See for example: Matt Carthy writing in *The Journal*, ‘Unionists have nothing to fear from a united Ireland’: 30th June 2017 <https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/matt-carthy-brexit-unionism-3472571-Jun2017/>

frustrations often manifest in violence only reinforces the negative imagery in the minds of nationalists and those “others” charged with building a shared city.

Conclusions

The experiences of Northern Ireland over the past twenty-one years highlight a number of key points when it comes to the on-going problem of sectarianism. Firstly, sectarianism is the result of long-term historical dynamics and as such it will not disappear overnight. Secondly, no group will claim/admit to being sectarian and often will only identify sectarianism in their “other”. This makes addressing sectarianism increasingly problematic. Thirdly, sectarianism manifests itself in different ways which can make it more difficult to identify in some groups than in others. Whilst it can be argued that the sectarianism of organisations such as the Orange Order is obvious, it is important to recognise the manner in which a more covert form of sectarianism drives the political agenda of others.

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**More than a fight for a park:
How urban spaces in Bosnia-Herzegovina become arenas for
contestation of ethno-nationalist politics**

Anne Kirstine Rønn

The loss of urban spaces has sparked several social movements in Eastern Europe and the Balkans over the past years, from the famous 2013 Gezi park protests in Istanbul to the less known 2005 Peti Park demonstrations in Belgrade, and the fight over Varsavska Ulica street in Zagreb. In all of these cases, the conversion of common spaces into private, often commercial projects, sparked popular contestation, which evolved around issues beyond the right to the city (Bieber, 2013, p. 37; Brentin & Bieber, 2018, p. 3; Fagan & Sircar, 2015, p. 160). Movements defending common urban spaces in Eastern Europe and the Balkans have been interpreted as reactions to the failure of representative parliamentary democracy (Milan & Oikonomakis, 2018, p. 116), and to widespread corruption, gentrification and neoliberal hegemony (Štiks, 2015, p. 139).

In Bosnia as well, the loss of common urban spaces has sparked social movements, which have focused on wider political and economic issues, particularly corruption. Corruption is widespread in today's Bosnia, from federal to local level government and it is widely seen to be facilitated by the extra-legal and de-centralized governance structures, which emerged in the post-war period (Belloni, 2020; Divjak & Pugh, 2008, p. 73; McMahon & Western, 2009). Corruption is particularly endemic in the context of urban planning, where the granting of building permits is usually done on a clientelistic and discriminatory basis (Divjak & Pugh, 2008, p. 375). Moreover, the lack of strong government and urban planning systems has provided rich opportunities for developers to engage in non-compliance with official development (Pobric & Robinson, 2019, p. 285). These developers often expropriate cultural heritage sites and public green spaces, which are of value to cities' residents. Meanwhile, the state and city institutions often refrain from intervening due to the influence of personal connections (Pobric & Robinson, 2019, pp. 285-286).

Despite widespread power abuse and corruption, Bosnia-Herzegovina does not have a historical tradition of collective action against the political establishment, which transcends ethno-national cleavages (Milan, 2018, p. 834). Rather, the political landscape in Bosnia is shaped along the three largest ethnic groups; Bosniaks, Serbs or Croats, and the parties, which represent these groups, use clientelist practices to ensure loyalty from their constituents (Bieber, 2018). Yet, within the past decade the country has started to witness a new form of contention, which emphasizes the rights of citizens rather than the interests of ethnic groups (Milan, 2019). The mobilizations for preserving urban spaces, which I explore in this essay, are therefore not only anti-corruption movements. They can also be seen as belonging to a new form of contention in Bosnia, which challenges the hegemony of ethno-nationalist politics.

This essay explores how the loss of urban spaces can challenge ethno-nationalist politics, by focusing on the construction of frames, which is the articulation and interpretation of grievances (Snow et al., 2014, p. 30). More specifically, the essay investigates how the loss of urban parks can facilitate

narratives of accountability and non-ethnic citizenship. The essay investigates two different mobilizations that have reacted to the loss of public green spaces in Bosnia's larger cities: the Picin Park protests, which took place in the city of Banja Luka in 2012, and the smaller Hastahana Park campaign in Sarajevo, which started to get traction with the public in 2019 and is still ongoing at the time of writing. It asks two questions: 1) How have activists framed the loss of the parks? And 2) Do park movements have a potential to contribute to a wider contestation of ethno-nationalist politics in Bosnia? The essay argues that while the Picin Park protest and the Hastahana Park campaign differ on a number of aspects such as scope and ethno-political context², they are both examples of how public spaces can be used to promote a frame, which links the loss of public spaces to a lack of political participation and rule of law and to a new notion of right-based citizenship which transcends ethno-nationalist divides.

About the Picin Park and Hastahana Park movements

Picin Park was a green space in the center of the city, which is considered the informal capital of the entity of Republika Srpska. Although it was rendered as vacant space on the municipal map, it was used as a park by inhabitants of the city (Wimmen, 2018, p. 20). The demolition of Picin Park in Banja Luka began in May 2012, when a construction firm named Grand Trade began preparing for the construction of a business-residential complex. Grand Trade was owned by the investor and tycoon Mile Radišić, who had previously served as member of the City Council and was considered a close associate of Milorad Dodik, who was president of Republika Srpska in 2012 (Milan, 2019, p. 63). In response to the demolition, a Facebook group called Park Je Naš (The Park is Ours) was created, which grew to have 40,000 subscribers (Wimmen, 2018, p. 20). Meanwhile, on the ground, citizens and NGOs started holding protest for the preservation of Picin Park, the largest of which gathered some 2,000 people, and a network of NGOs petitioned the municipality to put the project on hold (Wimmen, 2018, p. 20). However, these efforts, which lasted until September the same year, did not manage to prevent the construction of the commercial facilities on the park site.

The Hastahana park is, at the time of writing, still a green urban spot in the center of the Bosnian capital, which has sports facilities and a playground and hosts social events throughout the year. Initially, the Hastahana park was planned to be the location of a new museum, commemorating Sarajevo's survival under siege during the 1992-1995 war (Dzidic, 2015). However, in September 2017, the mayor of Sarajevo launched an initiative to sell a portion of the park to a commercial investor, and in November 2019, a majority in the municipality voted yes to sell this portion to the Central Bank, which plans to build a business facility and parking spaces on the location (Avaz.ba, 2019). The selloff sparked anger among many locals. Since 2017, a group of Sarajevo residents has therefore been fighting against the municipality's plans, by attending public hearings, organizing small protests and issuing online statements. So far, the campaign for Hastahana Park has been much smaller than the Picin Park campaign in Banja Luka. Yet, it has started to gain more traction with the public in 2019, where several newspaper articles, mostly local, have been published on the issue. Whereas there have been few smaller protests, a main part of the Hastahana group's recent activity is centered around their Facebook platform, which currently has 3343 followers³

² The Dayton Peace Agreement divided Bosnia into two main entities: The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. Sarajevo is located in the Federation and has a majority of Bosniak inhabitants. Banja Luka is the largest city of Republika Srpska, where Serbs constitute the minority.

³ Facebook page for the Hastahana Park. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/parkzasvenas/>

Framing the loss of parks

The campaigns to preserve Picin Park and Hastahana park differ on certain aspects: they have taken place in different regions in Bosnia with different political and ethnic composition, their scope of mobilization vary, and they used different contentious repertoires. Nevertheless, there are significant similarities in the ways they frame the loss of urban spaces. More specifically, three common elements can be found in the frames used by activists in the the Picin Park protests and the Hastahana Park campaign.

First, both parks are presented as examples of neglect of the right of people to influence decision over the use of public goods. In the case of Picin Park, this is illustrated in the following statement from an activist bulletin: “*We are dissatisfied with the arrogant attitude of the authorities and institutions towards economic, social and ecologic needs and rights of [female and male] citizens!*” (Milan, 2019, p. 65). Likewise, a member of the Hastahana Park group describes how one of the central messages in the campaign is that representatives do not listen to the needs of the people. The activities online and on the ground are therefore a way to say, “we are here” and “we are not listened to.”⁴ The neglect of the right of people to influence is also reflected in the Hastahana group’s Manifest, which is published on Facebook and asks “*can anyone tell us that our common interest is less important than the interest of a private investor?*”⁵ Unlike the Picin Park, Hastahana is formally recognized a public park under the control of the Sarajevo Centar municipality. The activists therefore stress that Hastahana is formal property of the people of Sarajevo, and that any decision about constructions in the park should be based on consultations with them. In fact, residents had already been surveyed in 2017 by the Association of Architects in BiH. This survey showed that nearly 97 percent of citizens surveyed do not agree with the decision to do construction on the Hastahana Site (Radiosarajevo.ba, 2019).

Second, both park movements seek to draw attention to the fact that the authorities do not follow rule of law when granting building permits and selling off urban land. In Banja Luka, the conversion of the Picin park was considered to be illegal by the activists, and the NGO, Center for Environment Health (Centar za Životnu Sredinu), which was assisting the activists, published a list of procedural irregularities to invalidate the legal status of the construction project (Wimmen, 2018, p. 20). An example of such legal issue is that the regulation plan of the area was changed to allow for the construction project to be realized on the Picin Park site (Cvjetićanin, 2016, p. 162). The legal aspect also plays an important part in the ongoing campaign to preserve Hastahana Park in Sarajevo. In their communication, the Hastahana group seeks to create awareness about the different mandatory procedures, which the authorities have not taken in relation to the park. One of the important legal issues is that the municipality has divided the park area into three separate pieces of property, which they are not legally entitled to do, according to the activists. Another legal problem is that the Municipality, by allowing for the construction of skyscraper on the site, violated the Sarajevo Urban Plan regulations, which restricts high level construction in Sarajevo due to air pollution” (SarajevoTimes, 2019).

⁴ Interview with member of the Hastahana Park group, Sabina, November 30, 2019, WhatsApp

⁵ Manifest Hastahana park. Published, June 13, 2019. Retrieved from:
https://www.facebook.com/pg/parkzasvenas/about/?ref=page_internal

Finally, both park movements emphasize their identity as local citizens. Even though there were NGOs involved in the Picin Park campaign, the protesters emphasized that they were first of all citizens of Banja Luka. In some cases, they went even further and presented their identity as citizens as one that defies ethnic boundaries. This is evident in the following part of the group's manifesto, which reads: *"Under the disguise of ethnic interests, this oligarchy puts profit above people, personal interests above justice (...). The system makes us unequal on the basis of our nationality, race, and most of all on the basis of the class and economics. We have become mute, blind, without any rights, scared poor people"* (Belloni et al., 2016, p. 53). Likewise, the activists from the Hastahana Park campaign explicitly stress that they are *just* a group of Sarajevo citizens, who have a piece of land taken away from them. In other words, their actions are not about politics, and that they do not represent any formal organization. Moreover, the right to the park is also presented as a right of citizens to live their daily life. This is illustrated in following quote by one of the group's members, who was interviewed for al Jazeera Balkans: *"The struggle for Hastahana is more than a fight for the park - it is a fight for the normal life of us and our children in this city."* (Maglajlija, 2019).

The role of urban spaces in the wider contestation of ethno-nationalism

The cases of Picin Park and Hastahana Park have illustrated how the conversion of green urban spaces into commercial property can be a catalyzer for broader frames, which emphasize Bosnian people's rights to influence and rule of law and promote a notion of citizenship, which is based to rights rather than ethnicity. During my field work in Bosnia in Summer and Autumn 2019, activists who contested the ethno-nationalist elites tended to present the such ideas of rights-based citizenship as a key to challenge the role of ethnicities.⁶ Likewise, similar ideas have been promoted during larger protests such as the Protest and Plenum Movement, which took place in 2014

Still, the two movements have had a limited reach and have failed to engage participants across the country's regions (Cvjetičanin, 2016, p. 153). This raises a broader question of whether and how the movements can be considered significant contestations of ethnic politics in Bosnia. This essay argues that the park movements can contribute to future contestation of ethno-nationalism in two ways.

First, the protests allow activists to develop experiences with mobilizing citizens and confronting the political elites. During my field work in Bosnia, several non-ethnic activists tended to view mobilizations such as the two park movements as steps towards creating stronger civil society networks rather than failed attempts to create mass scale changes. As one activist highlighted, smaller mobilizations can capacitate activists to better manage large scale mobilizations in the future.⁷ Importance of activist capacity has been highlighted in previous studies of non-ethnic activism in Bosnia as well. For instance, Milan and Oikonomakis (2018, p. 126), argue that resonant mass-movements not appear out of a vacuum but are products of tireless grassroots work. An example of such buildup of experiences from the Picin Park protests is the use of walks around the city instead of traditional demonstrations in the city center. Since walks are not legally considered as demonstrations in Banja Luka, this proved to be a successful way of avoiding the bureaucratic procedures necessary to get a permit to demonstrate in a public space (Zahumenská et al., 2015, p. 53). In 2018, activists used walks again during a series

⁶ The argument was highlighted during several interviews with non-ethnic activists conducted by the author during fieldwork in Sarajevo and Banja Luka in August and November 2019.

⁷ Interview with activist and member of the NGO, Crvena, Ines, November 19, 2019, Sarajevo

of larger protests in the city, which were triggered the murder of a young man.⁸ The second contribution is that the park movements can serve as symbols and reminders of resistance against the political establishment. For example, (Fagan & Sircar, 2015, p. 160) argued that the Picin Park protests can have symbolic importance for future mass mobilization in Republica Srpska. This argument is supported by my interviews with activists in Banja Luka, who consider the Picin Park protests to have a symbolic value for more recent non-ethnic activism in Banja Luka⁹. Being minor in size, the Hastahana Park campaign has arguably been less symbolic to non-ethnic activism in Sarajevo. Nevertheless, it feeds into the broader narrative about citizens' rights and can be seen to have spark consciousness among the local residents living near the park.¹⁰ Still, the challenge for non-ethnic actors in Bosnia, as argued by (Bieber, 2013, p. 38), remains to build an agenda for change to which all citizens of Bosnia can rally around.

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⁸ interview with organizer, in the "Justice for David" movement, Aleksandra, November 21, 2019, Banja Luka.

⁹ Interview with activists and member of the NGO, Getto Vesna, November 21, 2019, Banja Luka and interview with organizer, in the "Justice for David" movement, Aleksandra, November 21, 2019, Banja Luka.

¹⁰ Interview with member of the Hastahana Park group, Sabina, November 30, 2019, WhatsApp



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Sects and the City: Reflections from Manama

Simon Mabon

In 1982, a roundabout was constructed just south of the intersection of King Faisal Highway and the Sheikh Khalifa ibn Salman Highway in Manama, Bahrain. At the centre of the roundabout was a monument serving as a symbol of the archipelago's pearl diving tradition, also demonstrating unity across the nascent Gulf Co-Operation Council. In 2011, when the Arab Uprisings occurred in Bahrain, protesters gathered at the roundabout chanting "not Sunni, not Shi'a, just Bahraini". The roundabout served as a space of unity for the island's population who came together to demand political reform from the ruling Al Khalifa family.

After a month of protests, a GCC-led military force entered the roundabout and cleared it of protesters before destroying the monument. With the outbreak of protests, the monument quickly became a symbol of resistance around which protesters could coalesce, prompting the Al Khalifa to destroy it in an effort to erode memories of the dissent; a 500 fils coin which also depicted the monument was also withdrawn from circulation. In the weeks that followed, a widespread crackdown on dissent took place across the island, with serious repercussions for the ordering of space (Mabon, 2020). The following report reflects on the role of the urban environment and urban spaces in efforts to regulate life across Bahrain in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings of 2011. It argues that the heavily urbanised population of Bahrain provides scope for the Al Khalifa to exert sovereign power over its population in a range of different ways as part of a process of sectarianization, from demographic engineering to the creation of a structurally violent environment, underpinned by sovereign power.

Since the British withdrawal 'East of Suez' in 1967, political life across Bahrain has been contested, in part, because of the existence of sectarian cleavages, yet predominantly because of a range of economic, cultural, ethnic, tribal, and ideological divisions. The population of Bahrain is divided roughly 50-50 along national and non-national lines. Of those with Bahraini passports, a further division takes place roughly along sect-based lines, with estimates suggesting that up to 65% of the population is Shi'a, albeit ruled by a Sunni minority ruling family. Across Bahrain's history, unrest – in myriad forms – has typically been mapped onto religious divisions which provide a convenient veil for deeper political challenges facing the Al Khalifa. As we shall see, these concerns feature prominently within regime efforts to regulate urban environments and the ways in which the Al Khalifa deploys its biopolitical structures of sovereign power in an attempt to ensure its survival.

In the years after the Arab Uprisings, the manipulation of this sectarian identity has provided the Al Khalifa – and their Saudi backers – with the means of dividing protesters in pursuit of regime survival. This process, referred to as *sectarianization* has been widely documented by scholars including Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (2017), Toby Matthiesen (2017), Fred Wehrey (2007), this author (2019, 2020) and others, yet little has been undertaken on the ways in which urban environments have been manipulated by those in power in attempt to ensure their survival. To do this, political elites embarked on a process whereby Shi'a groups were framed as an existential threat to the state, perceived by some to be '5th columnists' whose loyalty lay with their co-religious kin across the Gulf in Iran, much to the chagrin of the Al Khalifa.



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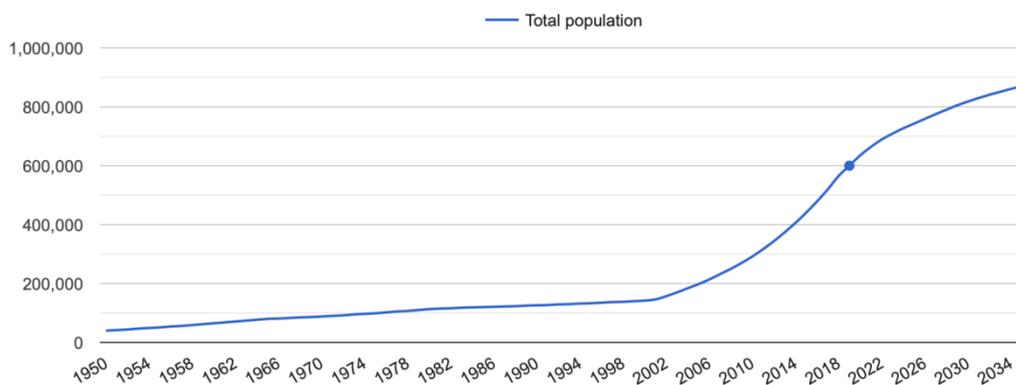
Forging a coherent national project from a society divided around religious, ethnic, tribal and class lines poses serious challenges to those in power. Across the Gulf, state building processes have sought to draw from – and reconcile - competing historiographies in an effort to fuse a coherent state, often commemorating historical processes such as pearl diving as a way of forging unity.

In spite of these efforts, the Kingdom of Bahrain is more recently associated with sectarian divisions stemming from the Arab Uprisings and the broader struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This rivalry has had a dramatic impact upon Bahrain. After the Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia quickly embarked on the construction of the King Fahd Causeway, linking the Eastern Province of the Saudi Kingdom to the western coast of Bahrain, ostensibly to improve economic relations, yet more driven by a desire to provide the means for a swift incursion if necessary (Mabon, 2019). In the decades that followed, Bahrain has been caught within the geopolitical wrangling of a rivalry that has routinely impacted upon daily life across the island, most prominently seen in the ways in which sovereign power regulates the life of opponents of the Al Khalifa.

The Evolution of Urban Space in Bahrain

Bahrain's population of around 1.3 million people is heavily urbanised with around 89.2% of country's population living in cities; a recent estimate suggested that around half of Bahrain's population live in the capital, Manama (CEIC). Despite its relatively small population, according to some estimates Bahrain is the 4th most densely populated sovereign state in the world. In recent years, Bahrain has experienced dramatic population increases, resulting in an increasingly urban based population which has exacerbated demographic concerns, posing an array of governance challenges in the process.

Manama Urban Area Population Graph



Much like other Gulf Arab states, the development of the Bahraini state across the 20th century occurred alongside the cultivation of urban environments. After the discovery of oil, housing compounds were built on the outskirts of Manama and Sitra (the site of the country's oil refinery) for workers at BAPCO (the Bahraini Petroleum Company), perhaps most notably 'Isa Town. As Justin Gengler notes, 'Isa Town was a multi-cultural centre for workers at the refinery. Although mostly home to Shi'a workers, these were predominantly secular and leftist, the more pious predominantly resided in their family villages (Gengler, 2019).



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After the failed *coup d'état* undertaken by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain – with the help of the newly formed Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps – a new community was established under the name of Hamad Town. According to Hasan Alhasan, Hamad Town was created as a home to the influx of members of Bahrain's security forces, reflecting growing concerns about unrest and perceived Iranian influence across the archipelago, capitalizing on perceived divided loyalties amongst *ajam*, Shi'a Bahrainis of Persian heritage.

Long-standing security concerns are visible in reflecting on the design of the two towns. As Gengler (2019) eruditely observes, 'Isa Town is a *mélange* of peoples, regularly interacting across an urban environment replete with the rhythms of everyday life. In contrast, Hamad Town is designed in a linear fashion, creating self contained units divided by roundabouts seemingly in an attempt to prevent cross-communal engagement. As a result, sectarian enclaves are formed within Hamad Town, preventing interaction with members of the out group, with serious social and political repercussions.

These communal tensions are exacerbated by social, cultural and economic factors, seen in the incongruent image of the towers of the Bahrain Financial Harbour looming over Manama's souk, a traditional trading site.



Photo taken by author in Manama, May 2014.

A maze of small passages replete with family run businesses, the souk is the antithesis to the global financial transactions taking place in the Financial Harbour. Built on land reclaimed from the sea, the Bahrain Financial Harbour is situated on prime real estate in central Manama, allegedly bought by the

Prime Minister – Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa – for one dinar (around \$2.6).¹¹ When this news broke, protesters gathered outside calling for political reform, supported by others at Pearl Roundabout angry at the lack of political reforms which were promised after King Hamad came to power in 2002, along with a stagnating economy, bureaucratic inertia and corruption. Unrest had long played out across Bahrain, dating back to the 1950s when Bahrain was under British protection, continuing to manifest across the following decades and playing out in cities across the island. Yet the severity of protests in 2011 prompted a more draconian response from the Al Khalifa, fearing an existential challenge to their survival.

More recently, differences between sectarian communities are visible through the provision of housing. Supporters of the Al Khalifa, predominantly – although not exclusively – from the Sunni community, are provided with spacious houses in desirable areas such as Wadi Alsai and Madinat Khalifa, while those opponents fortunate enough to receive public housing are typically given much smaller houses in less desirable locations such as Sanabis. A number of these more contemporary building projects have been supported by international organisations, including Prince Charles, the British heir to the throne, whose architecture charity is heavily involved in Bahrain.

Sovereign Power in the Urban

As a range of scholars have argued, space is key in understanding political behavior, serving as a means for individuals and groups to articulate claims to legitimacy and for sovereign power to operate. Within this, cities operate both as incubators and platforms, spatial arenas for the interaction of myriad actors, engaging in a range of different performances. A key feature of this are efforts to subjugate cities to sovereign power, to capture all within a particular environment within the biopolitical structures of a particular regime.

Yet cities are also sites of the mundane as people travel to work, to shop, or to socialize (Lefebvre, . With an urban population of almost 90%, Bahrain's population engage with urban environments on a daily basis. As such, the city provides a canvas for actors to compete *in* and *over*, seeking to lay claim to territory, power, and legitimacy. History, culture, narratives and ideas are central here as they interact with the world around them providing opportunities for people to act in particular ways and for political, economic and social structures to emerge and evolve over time, wherein symbolism plays an important role.

Underpinning all of this are expressions of sovereign power which, although often seemingly banal, are continued reminders of Al Khalifa power. During the uprisings, armed soldiers were positioned at entry points to Manama and at key points intersections across the city, operating under emergency powers. Over time, after the revocation of Emergency Laws this armed presence was relaxed, although security forces continued to monitor key sites across the city. Riot police were routinely mobilized across Manama in the following years seeking to address unrest, while raids into the predominantly Shi'a villages were equally common. Underpinning this expression of sovereign power, images of prominent members of the Al Khalifa are prevalent across Bahrain, adorning billboards along the sides of highways.

¹¹ Evidence of this transaction is here: <http://twitpic.com/46s4gq> with news coverage of the event from the national news agency here: <https://www.bna.bh/AboutBNA.aspx?cms=iQRpheuphYtJ6pyXUGiNqladb1RZ0e3I>

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The destruction of the Pearl monument serves as an act of urbicide, a deliberate act of violence against cities. Yet the destruction of the monument was an act of violence against more than the city, seeking to erase a particular memory from the country's recent past and eviscerating a memory of the country's cultural heritage. Moreover, this act of violence was directed against the protest movement, seeking to eviscerate any semblance of unity amongst the protesters. What quickly followed was the widespread regulation of space across Manama as soldiers and members of the security services clashed with protesters before the regime embarked on a process of sectarianization, framing the *other* as an existential threat under the control of Tehran (Mabon, 2019; Matthiesen, 2017).

Unsurprisingly, protesters sought to contest this framing. Walls across Manama become canvases for expressions of political agendas. With the global media coverage of the Formula 1 race that takes place annually in Bahrain, political agendas were expressed in both Arabic and English, calling for political reform, the end of the Al Khalifa monarchy, recognizing the sacrifice of those killed in the protests while regime loyalists sought to cover up these messages to prevent their dissemination. Below is one example from a wall in the Manama souk, taken in May 2013.



Photo taken by author, May 2014.

Across Bahrain, widespread contestation played out across myriad currents, creating a set of parabolic pressures that impacted the ordering of space across the island. In return, these spaces shape the actions of people living and working across Bahrain, reinforcing a sense of inter-communal difference, albeit with loyalty to the state of paramount importance.

De-Sectarianization and Resistance

Reflecting on the history of Bahrain since the British withdrawal East of Suez, it is easy to see the ways in which sovereign power has operated across urban environments. From the coercive measures that resulted in urbicide in 2011 and the checkpoints that penetrate the city to the distribution of housing, the biopolitical structures deployed by the Al Khalifa ruling family are integral to the ordering of urban spaces across Bahrain. Yet this also has a more political dimension, emerging from longstanding biopolitical structures that have regulated all aspects of life across the island since the 1920s (Strobl, 2020; Strobl, 2018; AlShehabi, 2019). Efforts to challenge these structures, much like the on-going protests in Iraq and Lebanon face myriad problems, requiring the transformation of political, legal, judicial, and urban power structures.

Perhaps, though, the transformation of urban environments offers a semblance of optimism. While protesters in Lebanon and Iraq have been commended for their efforts to contest the sectarian ordering of life, an earlier effort to overthrow the yoke of sectarianism took place in Bahrain in early 2011. Through occupying prominent spaces across the state, protesters articulated a clear message of unity in the face of sovereign power that sought to propagate – and regulate – difference. Although ultimately unsuccessful, those moments of possibility in February and March of 2011 were achieved through a temporary spatial transformation of key sites across Manama, demonstrating the importance of space in protest along with the memory of possibility, albeit eviscerated by sovereign power.

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Grassroots Activism in the Divided City: Re-Appropriating Space with Art Practice in Mostar (BiH)

Giulia Carabelli

This is a paper about space-making practices in divided cities. I approach this topic from a Lefebvrian perspective, which means that I am interested in exploring how creative interventions in the urban environment - such as graffiti art and murals - are key in (re)imagining cities from the grassroots. Specifically, I discuss how grassroots activist groups use art as a tool to re-appropriate time and re-build space (Lefebvre 2000) to challenge ethno-national divisions and agendas. Overall, this paper contributes to much broader conversations about how to represent divided cities. Echoing other scholars working in divided societies such as Nagle (2016), I argue for the importance of looking at grassroots organising to explore the contributions of supra-national and anti-sectarian movements to peace.

This paper draws on experience gathered through collaborative projects developed with grassroots activists in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, over the past decade. I have written extensively on the activities promoted by Abart, a platform for urban research and art production in Mostar where I worked from 2009 to 2011 (Carabelli 2018). In this paper, I discuss another example from Mostar; *The Street Art Festival*. This annual event started in 2012 to become a yearly appointment for citizens, tourists, and street artists from the region and beyond. I ask, what lessons can be learnt from grassroots attempts to change the status quo creatively? How can we write about 'divided cities' in a more complex fashion that situates grassroots struggles for social change in a more visible light? How does art, as a space-making tool, attest for these counter-practices?

Mostar in (very) few words

Nostalgically remembered as one of the most 'mixed' cities of Yugoslavia, Mostar became an ethnically 'divided city' in the 1990s following the violent dismantling of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The city was formally partitioned between two antagonistic ethno-national communities – Croat and Bosniak – in order to bring hostilities to an end. In 2004, the city's administration was forcefully re-united by outside actors (international peace building agencies headed by the European Union) adopting a power-sharing system, which has, so far, performed quite poorly in terms of facilitating inter-ethnic political dialogue and cooperation. To give an example, the city of Mostar has not been able to elect a mayor since 2008. Yet, whereas the political elites seem unable to collaborate, within grassroots activist circles, supra-ethnic collaborative efforts seem to be more successful (Carabelli, Djurasovic and Summa 2019).

Art Practice: The Street Art Festival in Mostar

The Street Art Festival started in 2012 surely energised by the enthusiasm of other art-production projects such as those led by Abart from 2008 to 2011. The initial idea was simple: to re-fashion existing (and abundant) ruins in a creative way. The aim was to uplift (if you wish) urban aesthetics but also to stimulate conversations about the future of the city and the material legacy of the conflict. The initiator of the project, Marina Djapić, had long been a key figure of the local cultural scene.



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Marina is very vocal about the need to “move forward”. She strongly believes that young people, like herself, have been robbed by the possibility of being who they wish to become because of the polarising and divisive politics of Mostar. In other words, she advocates for art and culture to be used as means to create a different space that is not ruled by existing and predominant divisions.

Since the end of the war, the city has seen the multiplication of monuments and plates commemorating and celebrating (often controversial) war heroes. As we know, the very practice of inscribing history in the infrastructure of the city is a very powerful means to re-orient urban narratives and cementing processes of identity-making that remains conflictual (PalMBERGER 2012). As such, the idea to use art to re-appropriate the city becomes the opportunity to tell a different story of what Mostar is and could become. I am aware that murals have been also used to reinforce antagonistic identities in divided city, Belfast being an excellent example. So, I am not arguing that all creative interventions in cities become means to challenge divisions. Rather, I want to think about the tools available to grassroots activists and I want to point to how art practice has been embraced for its powerful potential to re-appropriate space and make visible political claims that find no space in existing political arenas.

Ruins are surely abundant in Mostar. Whereas the western side of the city has been largely reconstructed, the central and eastern areas bear the sign of a pervasive destruction. There are several reasons for the existence of these ruins but they are mostly the result of property disputes or lack of funding for large repair projects. The creative committee of the Street Art Festival chose a number of abandoned ruins in the central area along with rebuilt infrastructures volunteered by landlords. A number of street artists –local and international – were invited to propose ideas and concepts to (quite literally) re-envision Mostar’s urban infrastructures. For the past seven years the Festival has brought together artists from many countries including other contested states to work on the very grassroots project of re-imagining Mostar from its walls. The art works display various degrees of political engagement from calls to inclusion, equality, peace, and reconciliation to unity and solidarity (Photo 1, 2, 3). More and more private landlords approach the creative team asking for their building to be considered and art works have now spread from the central zone east- and westwards creating new paths that surely support – at least visually – the reunification of the city.



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Artist: Miguel Pincho. Photographer: Lucija Bogunović



Artist: Koraljko Greben. Photographer: Lucija Bogunović

Henri Lefebvre and Space Production in Divided Cities

The Street Art Festival invites us to reflect further on crucial questions about the relationship between space, culture and social change. Inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre, my approach to divided cities is spatial because it is in space – the making and re-making of urban space – that cities change, shape, and thus channel political aspirations that translate (or contest) visions of the future. Drawing on Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space, my interest lays in understanding how urban space is produced as divided and whether this process could be challenged. I am indeed interested in how space is imagined, designed, and built at the level of political administration but, in this paper, I wish to focus mostly on how the city is re-appropriated, experienced, and lived through art. In doing so, I want to explore the conjuncture and disjuncture between the actual (what the city is), the planned (the ways in which contested cities are planned to remain largely segregated) and the possible (what grassroots groups can develop independently from state-plans).

I start with Lefebvre’s call to multiply the readings of the city as a means to challenge normalised (and normalising) urban representations, and in so doing, forge radical strategies for promoting social change and justice (Lefebvre 2000). Surely the issue of representation is crucial when approaching the study of ‘divided cities’ given their tendency to be portrayed as places of absolute violence, segregation, and intolerant group behaviour, leaving little or no space for imagining them as other-than-divided (in the present and in the future). Lefebvre argues that the ways in which cities are represented is itself a productive practice (1991, 40-46). The representation of a city conveys the essence of an ‘urban reality’ that is adequate to a particular class project. Yet, being an abstract construct, this representation is also a simplification of urban dynamics, in so far as they remain silent on the complex – and yet inconsistent and largely unpredictable - realities of everyday life.

Representations are programmatic in the sense that they facilitate a specific understanding of what the city is meant to be, and to become in the future. In this sense, representations support the idea that the present (and future) is plannable (and predictable). For Lefebvre, these representations play a crucial part in how we get to know a city because they shape our imaginaries and expectations, as well as limit the very possibility to conceive change (Lefebvre 1991, 48-53). In fact, urban representations become normalised and, as such, are rarely challenged. This is how much scholarship on divided cities is shaped by the ‘facts’ of division and focuses less on the often imperceptible (though no less real) dynamics of social change or resistance to such representations. In contrast, Lefebvre’s theory of space production provokes a confrontation with the ways in which cities are mapped and represented (in abstract terms) by focusing on the contingent and contradictory practices embedded in the everyday. In fact, it is by living in cities that people not only make sense of the built environment, but decide how to use it and, often, re-appropriate these infrastructures to counter imposed ideologies and norms as in the case study I am presenting. In other words, it is only by looking at the interplay of urban design, political discourses, and everyday/grassroots movements within the city that a more complex rendering of urban dynamics becomes possible. Such an approach is also conducive to capturing the emergence of actors and movements that rebel against existing urban directives (often imposed without the consent of the citizens) to produce alternatives ways of living and using the city. In particular, I highlight Lefebvre’s claim for creativity and art in imagining and producing possibilities for revolutionary trajectories to shape the future as means to locate struggles for justice in the contested city.

Final Thoughts



In this short intervention, I wanted to give a sense of how art projects re-appropriate and re-make space challenging the divisive logics of the ethnically divided city. Projects like *The Street Art Festival* have flourished in Mostar since the end of the conflict. Some run with little or no budget, others were sponsored by international funding bodies within their peace and reconciliation agendas. It is difficult to assess the impact of these projects in divided cities. Surely we cannot *measure* how much such initiatives support processes of reconciling ethnically divided cities. Yet, and as a way of conclusion, I want to bring the attention on two interrelated points. Firstly, initiatives such as the one outlined in this paper becomes crucial for individuals who sit uncomfortably in the divided city. I refer to those who don't subscribe to ethnic politics and those who proactively fight against ethnic polarisation and divisions. Secondly, the very act of re-appropriating walls (or ruins, in this case) and paint political messages is a different way of doing politics. It starts with the act of producing a new platform where dissent could be voiced and it continues by taking over more and more space in the city to prove that the future needs to be negotiated beyond party politics.

Artist: Ale Senso. Photographer: Lucija Bogunović

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Elements of contestation. Sectarianism as extractive violence and Lebanon's revolution

Sara Fregonese

La ta7riqoo Lubnaan be l ta2ifiyya
[Don't burn down Lebanon with sectarianism]
Sign at fire rangers protest, Baabda, March 2018.

Since October 17th 2019, cities across Lebanon have experienced widespread protest. The trigger was a new monthly tax on VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) calls. In a country, like Lebanon, with an inadequate, under-invested and failing telecommunication infrastructure, this move proved unpopular. According to a recent McKinsey report (McKinsey & Company 2018), Lebanon has the 130th slowest internet out of 133 countries, including current warzones such as Iraq.

On the evening of 17 October, major traffic arteries in central Beirut, including tunnels and flyovers, filled with protesters on foot. The following days, protests spread to other Lebanese cities, and acts of iconoclasm against the built expressions of political and sectarian power (such as posters and banners depicting party members) took place. This constituted a new type of public open shaming of the political establishment sanctioned through the Taif agreement, which in 1989 ended the Lebanese civil war. Despite Taif's claim that "Abolishing political sectarianism is a fundamental national objective", de-facto the country's public sector, including reconstruction and development, still relies on sectarian 'balances' and quotas, often as part of favouritism dynamics. This, as Bou Akar argues "allowed the militias that had fought the war to organize themselves as religious-political organisations overnight, and so continue to rule postwar Lebanon" (Bou Akar 2018, 3).

The protests – still ongoing – have been unprecedentedly widespread: data show a stark increase in the number of collective actions in late 2019. 2107 collective actions took place in late 2019, compared to 256 in 2017 and 2018. This year, so far (29 January) has already seen 476 collective actions¹² taking place (Lebanon Support 2019). What these collective actions also show, is a shift in their objectives. Between 2015 and 2018, collective action was mainly centred around partisan goals – such as support of a specific party cause or party member, or demand for reform against a specific government measure – [fig. 1] while as of late 2019, this has shifted towards a generalised demand for radical change across the socio-political system [fig. 2].

¹² Source: Map of Collective Actions in Lebanon. Data collected by [Lebanon Support](https://civilsociety-centre.org/cap/collective_action/charts) https://civilsociety-centre.org/cap/collective_action/charts

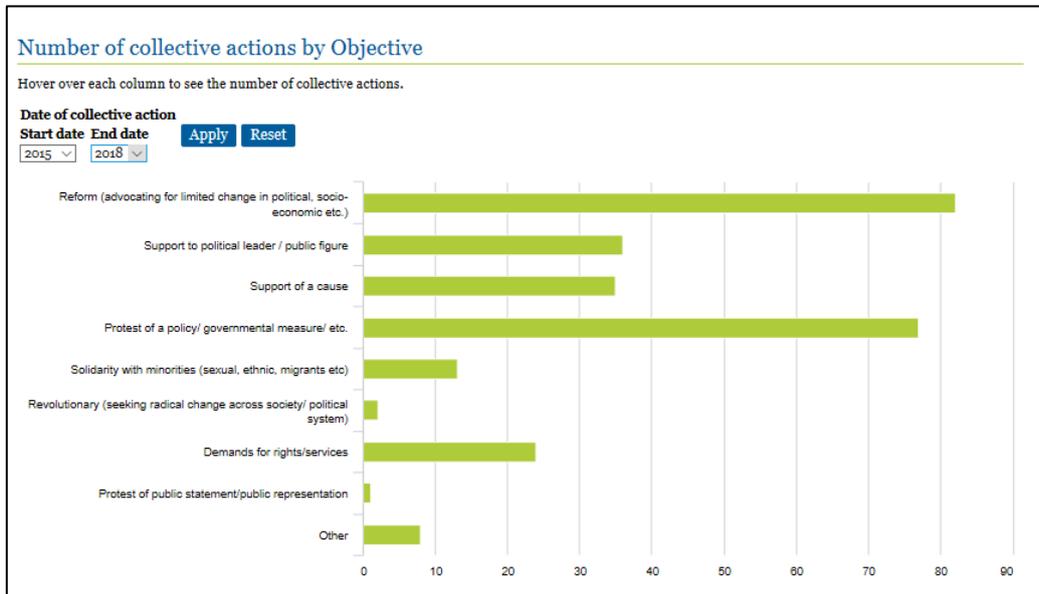


Figure 1. Collective actions by objective, 2015-2018. Source: Lebanon Support - https://civilsociety-centre.org/cap/collective_action

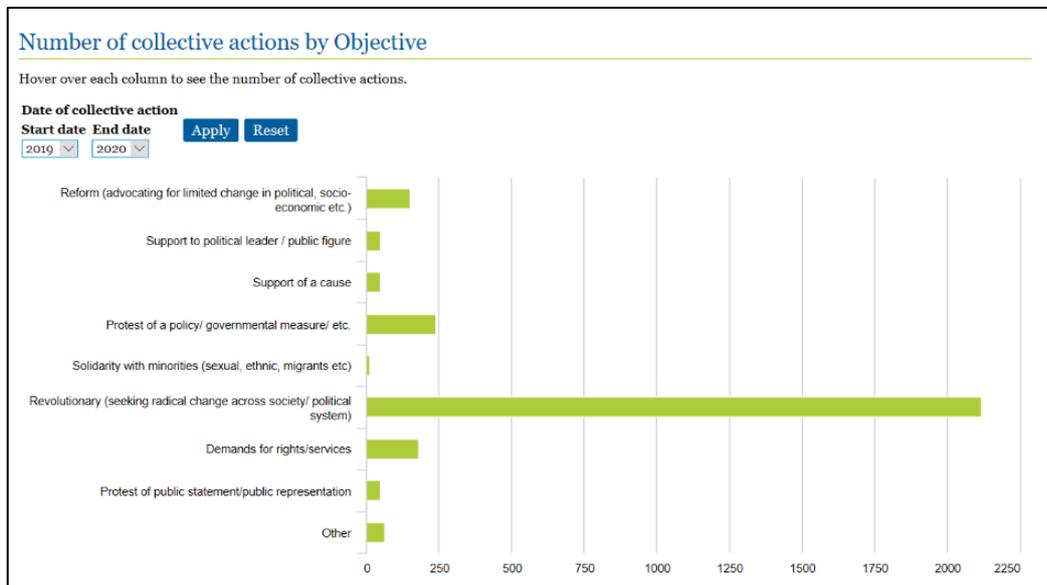


Figure 2. Collective actions by objective, 2019-2020. Source: Lebanon Support - https://civilsociety-centre.org/cap/collective_action

Despite being unprecedented in geographic spread and frequency in 2019, non-sectarian civil movements rallying around individual causes and exposing governmental corruption have brewed up in the last decade. One of the most notable was # YouStink, protesting the mismanagement of a garbage crisis in 2015, and whose momentum built into political movements centred around the right to the city like Beirut Madinati. After more than 100 days, the current protest or Thawra (revolution) has been mostly peaceful, but has also seen numerous attempts to thwart it by violent actors, a recent spike in the severity of response by the Lebanese police and army including heavy use of teargas and installation of defensive barriers in the street of the city centre. All this is happening amidst a deepening banking and liquidity crisis, the resignation of the PM, and a 2-month stalemate before forming a new government, approved on 11 February.

In this short intervention, I offer an elemental perspective for analysing the current events in Lebanon. This lens is mindful of the role of urban space and sectarianism in the current contestation, but it also focuses on physical elements beyond the city and their political ecologies, the political forces they mobilise, and ultimately, the entanglements they expose between sectarianism, neoliberalism, and the politics of resource extraction.

Urban geographies of protest

Lebanon's protests are relatable to a transnational context of urban uprising - including the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, and more recent protests in Hong Kong and Santiago – that since at least 2010, demands basic rights and access to services, resources and infrastructures. Across these urban settings, militarised police responses have been similarly heavily against protestors, blurring regional distinctions between 'global north' and 'global south' when it comes to policing protest. For example, John Yates, former Assistant Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police, while advising the Bahraini government on police reform after the Loulou Roundabout protests in 2011, called the Bahrain riots 'not dissimilar to those the UK itself faced only a couple of decades ago' (Jones, 2011b). The Egyptian post-revolutionary Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in 2011/2012 erected 'temporary' fences and concrete walls across the streets of central Cairo to create buffer zones between the protesters and the sites of state power located around Tahrir Square. This breaking up of what should presumably be seamless urban civic space into militarised controllable zones, is strikingly similar to what has recently occurred in the streets of central Beirut, where the police and armed forces erected metal walls to fence off the protesters from the site of Parliament on Nejme Square and of the government in the Serail building on the overlooking hill.

Cities are spatial expressions of the mobilisation of surplus (Harvey 2008). In an era when most of the planet's population is urbanised, and where cities and regional metropolises are increasingly financially strategic, urban space constitutes a crucial physical and symbolic terrain for socio-political claims and change (Harvey 2012). Demanding a different right to the city and its resources - and the repression with which such demands are met - are becoming characteristics of protest in the urban global north and south, where building speculation, soaring housing prices, increasing inequality, and often government corruption, all contribute to the alienation of resources from the urban population (Harvey, 2012). A strong part of the current mobilisation and demand for radical systemic change in Lebanon, has been the reclaiming and re-purposing of specific urban spaces.

For the first time since the end of the civil war, for example, protesters gained access to a number of buildings inside *Solidere*¹³ - the central district reconstructed after the civil war – that had been idle and awaiting redevelopment since the early 1990s like the Grand Theatre, the Saint Vincent de Paul church, and the former Metropole Cinema. Resulting from a private/public capital venture managed by Solidere and mediated by the Council for Development and Reconstruction, the reconstruction of Beirut aimed at creating a ‘neutral zone’ symbolising a new Lebanon for all. However, due to high property prices, lack of public spaces and costly services, together with domestic and regional economic and geopolitical instabilities, The Beirut Central District (BCD) became more similar to a space for no-one. This point has been strongly made by Saree Makdisi in what remains one of the most radical critiques of the reconstruction process:

“What Solidere and Harirism seem to represent is precisely the withering away of the state, whatever one might have called a public sphere or civil society, and their final and decisive colonization by capital. And perhaps it is for this reason that the company avoids any discussion of Lebanese national identity except in terms of visual pastiche”. (S. Makdisi 1997, 693)

The takeover of city spaces by protesters is, then, not only a means of contestation, but a core message and demand: a spatial redesign of the neoliberal status quo, of a different right to the city. This is not only to contest the neoliberal economic system and its close imbrications with the sectarian political system (Bou Akar 2019), but also to re-imagine national collective memories and national spaces. These notions have been embodied performatively, for example, through a human chain stretching along the coast from Saida in the north to Tyre in the south; a ‘national picnic’ day reclaiming the coast from privatisation; and a civic parade by a number of professional and vocational groups which replaced the traditional military parade on Martyrs’ Square on November 22nd. These new ways of performing the nation beyond the sectarian status quo re-establish a different right to access the urban commons, in line with Harvey’s argument that the right to the city is more than the sum of individual rights of access “to the resources that the city embodies: it is [...] a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization.” (Harvey 2008, 1).

This collective exercise was severely hindered by the 1975-1990 civil war and its aftermath. In 1991, an Amnesty Law resulted in the absence of state-led initiatives to trace responsibilities for the violence and, more generally, created a state vacuum around issues of violence and the country’s relation with its past.

¹³ The city centre of Beirut had been a no man’s land for the duration of the war and access at the end of hostilities and before the start of the Solidere redevelopment was limited. Famously, the Hariri Foundation commissioned a documentary by a groups of world famous photographers in 1991, short after the end of the civil war. Gabriele Basilico, then one among the commissioned professionals, said in a following visit to the city: ““There were almost no street lamps and buildings looked like ghosts. The only noise was that of electricity generators. Space was perceptible but not matter. The atmosphere was heavy and intriguing.” He later concluded: “It seemed to me some people had just left and others were about to return. All in all, the situation seemed almost normal – the city had just entered a long period of waiting.”(Hopkinson 2013).

Elements of contestation

Lebanon's *thawra* has recently seen an intensification of violence in the streets in the run up to the formation of a new government in January, numerous accusations of violations by the police from Human Rights Watch (2019), and attempts to extinguish the protest especially by supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement. On February 11th 2020, an urban battle between protesters, police and counterprotest groups took place on and around the ring road that separates the reconstructed city centre (where Parliament and the Government palace are located) from the rest of the city, and caused more than 300 injured. Despite these developments, the core of the movement has remained non-sectarian, aimed at total change across the political and economic system, and has used urban space as a representational and performative terrain for socio-economic claims against the spatial expressions of the neoliberal/sectarian status quo.

However, At the crux of collective actions since October is not an urban event, but one regarding the Chouf mountainous region, extending from south of Beirut and into the Mount Lebanon area to the east. Here, a chain of about 100 wildfires among the worst in decades raged from 13 to 16 October, damaging 1,200 hectares (2,965 acres) of forest, according to one of Lebanon's most authoritative forest fire risk experts, George Mitri (Azhari 2019). The fires killed one person, saw residents evacuated from endangered houses, and threatened schools and businesses (Haddad 2019). If the fires were, at least partly, caused by natural events like higher temperatures (albeit linked to climate change) and strong winds, their destructiveness was political: while the fires raged and other countries including Italy, Cyprus and Jordan had to be called to the rescue, three crowdfunded firefighting aircrafts sat idle at Beirut's international airport, due to failure by the Ministry of Interior to fund their maintenance and repairs (Haddad 2019). Moreover, Lebanon had experienced a shortage of fire rangers in the previous year, as appointments of successful applicants were delayed, allegedly in an attempt to fill sectarian quotas in the sector, despite the Constitution not requiring sectarian balance for generic public service jobs (The Daily Star Lebanon 2018). In this context, traditional geopolitical interpretations of Lebanon as a country suffering chronic flare-ups of sectarian violence funnelled by regional geopolitical rivalries (notably between Saudi Arabia and Iran) with localised sectarian has become a limiting frame for analysis. Instead, where analysis is needed is at the intersection between sectarian politics, neoliberal economy, and environmental degradation. At this intersection, we find natural resources or even individual elements – such as wood, fire, water, sand, chemical particles – whose (mis)use at the service of neoliberal markets and sanctioned by government ineptitude and corruption imperils the residents' *right to life* and – in the case of the fires – *right to breathe* (Nieuwenhuis 2018).

Examples of misuse of resources/elements in Lebanon include the following:

- privatisation and urbanisation of much of the country's **coastline** (2.5m square metres, according to 2014 data by the Ministry of Public Works and Transport (cited in Faour, Verdeil, and Dictaphone Group 2019) often by illegal land occupation (mostly for tourism north of Beirut and residential south of Beirut) known to and tolerated and/or facilitated by the state (Faour, Verdeil, and Dictaphone Group 2019).
- **Sand, rocks and debris.** Human activity like illegal quarrying - nurturing the concrete and construction industry booming after the end of the war - urbanisation of mountain area, and



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- changes to irrigation routes, have increased the risks of lethal mass land movements like landslides, slides, and debris falling on inhabited areas (Abdallah and Gillette 2019).
- **Flood water:** despite scant government data, there is evidence of increase in the frequency of mudslides and flash floods. Some of them happened during the protests, prompting protesters to say that if they didn't block the roads, the floods would. Floods and flash floods are hazardous to infrastructure, agriculture, and have provoked displacement and isolation of communities. Floods are linked mostly to anthropogenic factors, first of all illegal construction and urbanisation, and the filling of waterways with debris and even waste (Abdallah 2019)
- **Air pollutants and hydrocarbons.** Hydrocarbons are present beyond international safe levels especially in correspondence of major motorways. Their increasing concentrations are linked to the government's move away from public transport since the end of the civil war in the 1990s, and the encouragement of credit purchase of cars which has doubled the quantity of imported vehicles (Verdeil 2019). Dangerous levels of other atmospheric pollutants from combustion – like Benzo(a)Pyrene – “are higher by 60%–99% than those in most cities around the world” (Baalbaki et al. 2018, 261).
- **Solid waste.** In 2015, a garbage crisis was provoked by landfill saturation and by the absence of alternative sites and of sustainable waste management strategies. This mobilised the population into a wide protest movement called #YouStink. Besides the short term landfill crises, at the crux of the problem were accumulated failure and inequality in municipal services and in public waste management, after the sector was disrupted in the civil war years. This led to widespread dumping of solid waste along the coast, illegal incineration, and – more rarely – in the delegation of sustainable waste management solutions to private actors and NGOs (Farah and Verdeil 2019).

It is ecological and elemental issues like the ones above that are currently replacing religious-political causes as factors of collective action in Lebanon. In this context, a political ecological approach is needed, which recognises the links between environmental governance (or lack thereof) and wider political and economic power assemblages, and which exposes the wider structural violence where these elements and resources are embedded (LeBillon and Duffy 2018). This structural violence, the overlapping socio-material crises it fosters, and their ramifications into political sectarianism and its civil war links, essentially blurs distinctions between the conflict and post-conflict phases in Lebanon. Political ecology “recognizes resources and the environment as complex socio-material objects reflecting a diverse range of practices and discourses, but also as subjects endowed with certain forms of agency” (LeBillon and Duffy 2018, 248). As the forest fires raged in October, new social partition lines developed, together with new ways of mobilising. On one side, stood a corrupted and ineffective state system sustained by sectarian rivalries, as well as sectarian favouritism since the end of the civil war – the emblematic representation of this was Lebanese MP Mario Aoun arguing live on tv that the fires were targeting Christian villages. On the other, was a movement of connected and organized citizens willing to mobilise in non-sectarian and creative ways in order to help the fire-damaged communities. What started to appear was a re-alignment of the axis of political contention: this no longer ran along supporters of political parties co-opting protest movements (like with the 2005 ‘Cedar Revolution’), but instead lined up lay citizens against a sectarian elite which has been, effectively, putting its own population at risk of death.

Political ecology obviates the limitations of geopolitical perspectives on Lebanon's revolution, as political ecology accounts “for a broader range of violence than geopolitical and mainstream political

perspectives [...] grasping a wider and more nuanced set of relations between conflict processes and forms of violence”- including forms of slow environmental violence like that caused by pollution (LeBillon and Duffy 2018, 246).

Lebanon’s political and economic life idealises sectarian identity and politics (supposedly at the service of the religious community) as an a-priori truth rather than as a socio-cultural construct (U. Makdisi 2000; Fregonese 2019). As such, sectarian identities are mobilised to silence the agency and responsibility for both physical violence in the war, and for structural violence after the war. Decolonising the sectarian dispositif (Fregonese 2019) cannot be limited to a ‘colour blind’ approach. Decolonising sectarianism must be accompanied by its recognition as a *system of extractive violence*, as a “quasi-hegemonic truth discourse[...] – that sustain and seek to legitimate resource-based processes of capitalist accumulation in the form of enclosure of the commons and other exclusive rights of access (Robbins 2012)” (LeBillon and Duffy 2018, 248).

Concluding points

In this light, the current Lebanese crisis can be approached as a crisis of extraction. War making and resource extraction are of course intimately entangled via the territorialisation of resources and the violent impacts on residing populations (Mbembe 2019), but in the case of Lebanon, following the *elements* of contention - water, sand, solid waste, micropollutants, among others – allows to draw deep linkages that connect Lebanon’s civil war and post conflict phase in the same sectarian political and economic dispositif. In Lebanon, what we are often used to see portrayed by mainstream geopolitical analysts as a ‘weak state’, is actually a solid sectarian sovereign system born out of modern western colonialism, radicalised during the civil war, and now increasingly exposing its own citizens to environmental and livelihood vulnerabilities.

Approaching the Lebanese crisis as a crisis of resource extraction through a political ecology approach, allows to break down divides between countryside – where resources are primarily extracted – and cities – where the surplus from those resource is redeployed. The eco-activism to protect the Bisri valley at the border with Lebanon’s Southern Governorate from a World Bank-funded dam construction is a case in point, as protesters in the urban squares and the Bisri eco-activists have expressed mutual support within the revolution. Political ecology allows to see the Lebanese revolution not as confined to the urban space, but with ramifications that overcome urban/rural binaries, as well as conflict/post-conflict ones, via the elements at the crux of state/protesters contention. In Lebanon, it is not only cities that become terrains for socio-political change, but rather “the complex, political and understudied physical elements that interact with the city and shape it spatially and politically [...]”(Fregonese 2019). More research is needed to understand forensically how, where, and why specific resources and elements become agents of collective action in the light of their (mis)use.

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Disclosing Reality: Daily Life of Palestinians in Contested East Jerusalem

Adel Ruished

On Tuesday 21/11/2019, Israeli occupation forces in East Jerusalem stuck closure orders for six months on doors of a school, mosque, medical clinic and Palestinian media outlet in the city. In the meantime, Israeli Minister of Interior Security who signed these orders stated that these institutions practiced activities that encouraged aspirations against Israeli political plans, and endangered sovereign rights of the State of Israel in the city. This Israeli minister also added that these institutions operated on behalf of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in East Jerusalem, in clear violation of Oslo peace agreement. Moreover, directors of these Palestinian institutions were interrogated by the Israeli intelligence officers, who threatened them to imprisonment. On its side, Palestinian Jerusalemites institutions protested these Israeli orders and considered it flagrant attack on their right to education, worship, medical treatment as well as on their right to freedom of expression in East Jerusalem. Simultaneously, many observers lamented concerning the lack of genuine political will of Palestinian leadership in protecting the right of these institutions to exist, operate and provide its services in the city. In addition, they expressed resentment of ineffectiveness and ineptitude of this leadership in providing proper support, and concluded that they abandoned them. Finally, these observers suggested that Oslo peace agreements resulted in derogation the rights of Palestinian Jerusalemites to welfare and health services (MEMO, 2019).

Between the Hammer and the Anvil

The outcome of Oslo peace process not only negatively impacted every aspect in their life, but also weakened the ability to preserve existence in the city. In this regard, the decline of numbers and services of Palestinian Jerusalemite civil society institutions in East Jerusalem demonstrated the loss of vital tool that covered some of their essential health, social and welfare services. This loss resulted from the subjection of Palestinian Jerusalemites and their institutions to two contesting political agendas post-Oslo. In pursuit to entrench its political role in the city, contesting Israeli and Palestinian governments situated these institutions in double state of exception. Thus, between the hammer of Israeli government's state of exception and the anvil of Palestinian leadership's state of exception, Palestinian Jerusalemite institutions deprived the right to function and provide services post-Oslo. Drawing on the academic literature of the state of exception theory, it emerges that for entrenching political authority and legitimacy, governments tend to exclude part of population and submit them to emergency and exceptional laws. This leads to suspending the functioning of normal laws, depriving people political and civil rights that laid them into bare life (Mabon, 2017: 1783-4). Accordingly, Palestinian Jerusalemites prevented their right to establish and manage their institutions in East Jerusalem. They also rendered derogated the right to freedom of expression, education, worshipping and medical treatment in the city.

The establishment of civil society institutions flourished in East Jerusalem throughout the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century. This was attributed to Israeli occupation discrimination policies in providing efficient social and welfare services to Palestinian Jerusalemites living in the city. Hence, Palestinian activists established these institutions and registered them as apolitical. The main purpose of these institutions crystallized around covering deficiencies and provision of essential welfare services to Palestinian Jerusalemites in health, education as well as cultural and humanitarian issues. Following the exclusion of the City of East Jerusalem from the Oslo peace agreement in 1993, that was signed between the State of Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), each party contested to prove its role and entrench its political legitimacy in East Jerusalem (Klein, 2008:64). Thus, the existence of independent Palestinian Jerusalemite institutions in East Jerusalem challenged both Israeli and Palestinian governments alike. Consequently, the political need for both Israeli and Palestinian governments emerged for contain and control over these nongovernmental institutions and to regulate its activities and services in the city post-Oslo (Sullivan, 1996 :98).

The Israeli Modes of Power

Concerning the Israeli government, the existence of Palestinian Jerusalemite institutions in the city challenged its political ambitions that considered East Jerusalem part of the undivided and eternal political capital of the State of Israel. Hence, successive Israeli governments intensified and pursued exclusion of these institutions from the city post-Oslo. This exclusion manifested with the imposition of various modes of power against functions and services of these institutions in East Jerusalem. Racial discrimination policy was the first mode of power that Israeli governments employed against these institutions, in the hope of pushing these institutions into closing and leaving the city. Unlike Israeli ones, Palestinian Jerusalemite institutions faced severe restrictions and coercive measures. According to Payes, this racial exclusion attributed to the fact that “Palestinian civil society organizations.....never constituted a part of the national Zionist-Jewish project”. He goes on to mention that, relevant Israeli authorities prohibited activities of some these institutions, withheld providing others with support, or specified the shape of offered resources to the rest (Payes, 2003: 67). Moreover, Israeli occupation authorities intensified the state of exclusion of the Palestinian institutions by imposing Israeli laws on them, unlike those in the rest of the Palestinian Territories where military occupation laws prevailed (Jubeh, 2019:18).

Adding to this discrimination, Israeli occupying authorities imposed disciplinary mode of power for regulating the services of these institutions. To begin with, Israeli relevant authorities imposed iniquitous regulations through the introduction of the Law of Associations. This law provided wide powers to Israeli Registrar wherein it enabled him not only to investigate registration these civil society institutions, but also to cancel their registration altogether according to his own discretion (Payes, 2003:68). Consequently, Israeli Registrar embarked on regulating the institutions through the requirement to provide their detailed services and financial budgets on annual basis. In many cases, this charged institutions with failure in abiding with Israeli bylaws and requirement criteria and blocked their Israeli bank accounts. Moreover, these authorities obliged many institutions to disclose funding sources for their activities and services.

Under the pretext of mobilising funds through Palestinian or hostile political sources, these authorities outlawed many of these institutions and suspended their activities and services in East Jerusalem. Furthermore, Nazmi Jubeh mentions that relevant Israeli occupying authorities imposed excessive and unfair commercial and property taxes on these institutions, in the hope to lead them to bankruptcy. He

continues by stressing that the Israeli authorities allegedly charged many of these institutions with illegal political activities and goals that violated the state of Israel's internal security and political hegemony in East Jerusalem (Jube, 2015:21). In combination with the imposition of the racial discrimination and disciplinary modes of power, many of these Palestinian Jerusalemite institutions



faciated bio-political mode of power. This was demonstrated through Israeli closure orders against these institutions, whereupon Israeli Minister of Internal Security perpetually issued many of these orders post-Oslo. Under the pretext of alleged political affiliation with the Palestinian Authority or alleged coordination of anti-Israeli political activities, this minister ordered closing many organizations without previous warning. This minister also threatened to imprison directors of these organizations, in an attempt to suppress the emergence of local Palestinian leadership in the city

(Jube, 2015:19). Therefore, These orders threatened existence and services of these nongovernmental organizations, rendering them losing legal protection and exposed to existential threat in East Jerusalem. More crucially, these orders represented collective punishment against Palestinian Jerusalemite beneficiaries, wherein it deprived them essential social, cultural, education and health services, and laid them into bare life in the city. It is important to mention that these closure orders also resulted in loss of job opportunities for Palestinians in the city which negatively affected economic conditions in the city.

The Palestinian Modes of Power

The establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (*the PNA*) resulted in the emergence of another political power in East Jerusalem post-Oslo. More fundamentally, the City of East Jerusalem represented the future political capital of the nascent Palestinian state, and accordingly the proliferation of independent Palestinian civil society institutions in the city endangered political influence of the PNA and weakened its bureaucratic role in the city post-Oslo. Hence, this authority excluded these institutions, in an attempt to contain and control them. Jube mentions that Palestinian civil society institutions in East Jerusalem faced PNA indifference attitudes and lack of interest towards their roles and services. In addition, he points out that this exclusion aimed to absorb many of employees of these institutions in the PNA offices rendering marginalized local leadership in East Jerusalem (Jube,2017:20).

The PNA policy of exclusion against these civil society institutions was implemented through several modes of power. Economic discrimination mode of power played instrumental role in neutralizing and marginalizing these institutions. According to Hamadan, many of these institutions felt that there was undeclared decision on the official level of the PNA departments of discarding and neglecting these institutions. She goes on to mention that, many PNA departments expressed reluctance in offering financial and administrative support to these institutions (Hamadan, 2017:163-5). Even when the PNA decided to provide small financial amounts for some of these institutions, they were required to open accounts at Palestinian banks. This paved the way for the imposition of disciplinary mode of power on



these institutions. In order to be eligible for opening Palestinian bank account, the Palestinian Ministry of Social Welfare and the Palestinian Ministry of Interior (*the PMoI*) obliged these institutions to register according to Palestinian civil associations bylaws. Consequently, these ministries required the institutions to provide detailed accounts of their activities and services in addition to their sources of funds (Sullivan, 1996: 96).

Moreover, the department Registrar at the PMoI was empowered according to the law, not only to register but also

to cancel licenses of these organization at his own discretion. According to Sullivan, these institutions have to provide responses for a series of questions asked by the Palestinian intelligence services that tended to eventually authorize or cancel registration applications (Sullivan,1996: 97). Therefore, these institutions were threatened to lose registration and to block their Palestinian bank accounts in case of alleged or suspicious activity or sources of funding. In addition, these institutions were obliged to dismiss Palestinian members who hold Israeli passport from their boards of directors in order to be eligible for renewing their registration at the ministry¹⁴.

In an interview at the Registrar department at the PMoI, senior official pointed out that “many of these institutions ignored our role and mandate, and we addressed Palestinian bank to withheld their accounts”¹⁵. As a result, these disciplinary regulation burdened the institutions and wasted their efforts and energy seeking abidance with governmental regulations. More importantly, many of these institutions opted to stop their services in the city, while others relocated their offices to West Bank cities outside East Jerusalem (Hamadan, 2017:166). This demonstrated the imposition of bio-political mode of power that the PNA exercised on these institutions. In other words, the PNA employment of these modes of power collectively deprived these institutions the right to operate in the city, and encroached on the right of Palestinian Jerusalemites the right to acquire health and social welfare services.

Conclusion

The ongoing deterioration of living conditions of Palestinian community resulted from the employment of double state of exception in East Jerusalem post-Oslo. Seeking to strengthen their control over the city, Palestinian and Israeli governments alike employed exclusionary policies against the right of Palestinian civil society organizations to provide welfare services. More importantly, these policies deprived Palestinian Jerusalemites the right to acquire such services, laid them into bare life, and left them to face their fate on their own. According to this understanding, these institutions insisted on their

¹⁴ This happened with the author in his capacity as board member of an institution in East Jerusalem.

¹⁵ interview with senior official at the Palestinian Ministry of Interior in Al-Ram on 28/11/2019.



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right to exist, function and provide services for their Palestinian Jerusalemites beneficiaries. In a report issued by Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network (PNGO), these institutions agreed to unite together for challenging Israeli policies, and suggested to expose the impact of these policies to global and regional partners and donors. Moreover, they called on the PNA, among other things, “to prioritize support, including financial aid and advocacy, for Palestinian CSOs and institutions in occupied East Jerusalem in development planning, and in the framework of humanitarian and development programs” (PNGO, 2018: 40-1).

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Caste and Caste Based Sectarianism in India

Anderson H. M. Jeremiah

The ancient Indian cultural practice of caste system forms the backbone of Hindu social order. It maps on to the geographical diversity of language, culture and religion, most importantly constructing a distinct system of repressive social stratification in the subcontinent. The concept of 'Hindu' or 'Hinduism' itself is highly contested because it cannot be perceived in the same order as other 'World Religions'. As an academic construct, Hinduism rather refers to a wide variety of theology, mythology, cultic practices and philosophies spread across India. Hinduism signifies the disparate religious practices across the Indian subcontinent. As the complexity of defining Hinduism illustrates, there could be differing opinions on the historicity of caste system. Interestingly the term *caste* is Portuguese in origin derived from Latin *castus* (chaste, the unadulterated, pure breed) and became part of common usage during the Portuguese colonial rule.

Caste, as an expression was used to designate the complex social system, as it did not fit into the early classifications of the European anthropologists and the designation became consolidated during the British colonial rule of Indian subcontinent. The practice of caste system can be found across South Asian countries, not restricted to the Hindu communities alone but permeating every other religious community in the region, as part of the cultural fabric of the subcontinent.

Caste, Varna and Jati

Over the years the understanding of caste system has evolved and become synonymous with the *varna* system and also considered identical with various other social classifications in Indian society. The term 'caste' needs to be used with caution as it carries several meaning and modern understanding, as the system of social stratification tends to be very complicated. One of the ideological sources of the caste social structure can be found in Hindu Dharma as outlined in *Manusmriti* or *Laws of Manu*, the law code of Manu. Various studies point to the fact that there is a possible merger of two social structures, the *varna* (colour/vocation) class divisions and the *jati* (birth) divisions. There are further divisions on the basis of *purity* and *pollution*, primarily at the religious ritual level and but has significant social consequences in the form of untouchability as well as occupational relations. *Varna* literally means colour and is not a social group, but a classificatory unit that can be used for people as well as gods, animals, plants, or other things.

Varna system of classification stems from the *vedic* period (*Rig Veda*) and was primarily a prescription outlining the obligations of every individual. Within the Hindu society, owing to its religious origin, it is perceived that the *varna* system facilitates a sense of order among people and prevents the society from disintegrating into chaos. In reference to society, it is essentially an order of birth class, *varnasramadharm*, and a division of social functions, but not a caste system, as we understand it today. Even more, the *Varna* system was perceived as a social system based on qualities (*guna*) and actions (*karma*), depending upon the nature of an individual.



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However, the *varna* system as articulated in the *Manusmriti* followed the principles of calcification on the basis of duty, character and birth. There are four different levels in the *varna* system: *Brahman* (Priest and teacher), *Kshatriya* (Warrior and Landowners), *Vaishya* (Merchants and businessmen), *Shudra* (Agriculturalists and labourers). According to *Rig Veda (Purushasukta)* the cosmic creation of humanity from the sacrifice of *Adi Purusha* (eternal being) came in this order, the *Brahman* was born from the mouth, *Kshatriya* from the shoulders, *Vaisya* from the thighs and *Shudra* from the feet. However it must be born in mind that *varna* system was not a closed system, which it later became. Within each of these categories are the actual *jatis*, within which people are born, marry, and die. *Jati* derives its root from the word *jan* (to be born), which is partially synonymous with *varna*. *Jati* as a social classificatory unit had an independent presence other than *varna*. It has many meanings: descent, birth, race, family, genre, species, type, clan, state, and nation. It is more commonly used as *subcastes* by social scientist.

Unlike *varna* system, *jait* calcification is by birth and a closed structural system. The *varna* system has been in use for more than two millennia and bound to interpretations and misinterpretations, albeit being strongly held even today. However, in the *vedic* Hindu system, punctuated by *jati* classifications, the Untouchables are the Outcastes, the *avarnas*, literally outside the *varna* system. This exclusion of *avarnas* are primarily due to the nature of their traditionally prescribed professions, which involved polluted things, making them polluted people and pollutants in turn. So, as mentioned earlier, caste system is a catchall term that attempts to capture the complex socio-religious stratifications and practices in the Indian subcontinent.

The caste system has far reaching impact and consequences in Indian society, much along the lines of a sectarian identity. It not only dictates the structure of cultural values but also becomes an effective channel for the distribution of power and wealth, effectively along the caste hierarchy. This social stratification and exclusion of outcaste is ordained, pursued, and perpetuated by dominant religious-political and socio-cultural forces, often with violent consequences. According to national crime statistics, the number of caste-based crimes has increased 25 percent since 2010, reaching nearly 41,000 cases in 2016, the last year on record. It is important to note that the observance of caste practice, as a sectarian identity is enforced through religious adherence, social violence and community exclusion.

The outcastes and Dalits

The significant aspect emerging from the discussions on the caste system is that a large section of people is left outside of the caste system and designated as ‘untouchables’. The outcastes were marginalised and pushed to the peripheries of Indian society. They were socially obligated to take up menial jobs, such as manual scavenging and burying the dead. They were also expected to clean after themselves, in order for them not to pollute anyone else. At one stage they even have to carry an earthen pot around their neck to spit, as they were not allowed spit in public places. Against this background, in the last two centuries various Self-Respect movements under leaders like Joythirao Pule and B.R. Ambedkar mobilised the outcaste communities to rename themselves as ‘Dalits’, instead of being called ‘untouchables’ or ‘harijans’. ‘Harijan’ was a term coined by Gandhi, meaning ‘children of God’ referring to the children of temple prostitutes.

As an affirmative term ‘Dalit’, means ‘broken’, ‘split-open’ and ‘oppressed’, which captures their wretchedness of life. Significantly, it must be born in mind that Dalit, as an expression is not a caste label. Rather Dalit is a symbol of change, mobilisation and progress. The term ‘Dalit’ is also an



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overarching and rallying term to represent more than 450 ‘Untouchable’ communities in India. While it may initially seem counterintuitive to appropriate such bleak terminology, it did and does continue to raise awareness and to potentially empower those living in such a repressive social system. The distinction and classification based on caste and occupation continues even today in most aspect of Indian society. Dalits continue to be the most disadvantaged community in the country. They are backward in education, employment, social wellbeing and even the most exploited in the unorganised labour market. Dalit living conditions are synonymous with dehumanisation and degradation.

According to the 2011 India census, the Dalit population constitutes about 16.6% of the total Indian population, i.e. 201.4 million people experience different kinds of discrimination in their life every day. Majority of Dalits make a living by working as daily labourers and landless agricultural workers in the unorganised sectors of Indian economy, resulting in extreme poverty. Further, Dalit communities are the most violated, both, physically and psychologically within the Indian society. Dalits are considered ritually impure and physically polluting in the religious realm, which has serious implications for socio-cultural relations. Dalits in general are not allowed to enter many Hindu temples, nor are they permitted to eat in or even enter the houses of the non-Dalits.

It must be noted that caste based discrimination in India is prohibited under the constitution article 15 and 17. The official position of the constitution clearly states that there cannot be any discrimination by the state or a citizen on the grounds of caste. It goes further by abolishing caste based untouchability and even making such practice a punishable offence under the law. The constitutional prohibition on caste based discrimination and untouchability remains, but the social practice of caste identity continues to be relevant across the country.

Spatial mapping Caste

In the Indian society caste hierarchy does not exist only in the mind but crucially mapped on to the geographical location. Spatial representation or geographical locatedness in Indian communities has a direct impact on an individual’s conception of self-identity. This social reality is nowhere obvious than in rural villages. The spatial nature of a village in India is structured with a centre and a margin framework. The centre of a village is occupied by the so-called high caste, and the farther you move from the centre, the lower your caste status is. Those who live in the margin would be the lowest of the caste calcification. Crucially, the outcaste and untouchables will be outside this margin/periphery, literally living outside the village, due to their polluted status. People belonging to different caste groups internalise their physical location, which in turn determines their social stature and identity.

The demarcations existing within a village define the nature and status of its inhabitants. Settlements for different caste and outcaste communities are well demarcated from each other, avoiding physical interaction between individuals and possible cross-pollution. In other words, the physical location, whether one lives in the *Cherie* (the Untouchable settlement, also known as the *basti* or *colony*) or in the *Oor* (the high Caste village, *gaon*), determines who that person is and what his or her status is in the village. Even within the *cherie*, if a person’s house is situated on a particular side of the main street, it is clear as to whether that household is Christian or Hindu; if the house happens to be near the church building or the Hindu temple it has its own understood status within that groups ranking system.

Each Caste group is obliged to respect their prescribed boundaries and abide by the rules laid down by the local high caste community, who often turn out to be the landowners, therefore control the

local economy. The very idea of the *cherie* represents the physical alienation, exclusion and isolation of the Untouchable communities from the hub of village life. The location of the *cherie* and its dependence on the *Oor* (village) contributes to their self-understanding. It is vital to note that spatial caste boundaries are the means through which social norms and identities are reproduced.

Caste Sectarianism: competition, ideology and politics

As indicated earlier caste system consolidated itself through private property in India. Although the high caste community constitutes a small percentage of the Indian population, they control the majority of the wealth and resources. Until recently it was even illegal for Dalits to own land. The caste based Indian society is sustained through inheritance of private property and privileges preserved through birth status. This social reality is evident among the rich and powerful, who are mostly from high caste communities. It had significant impact on how civil service, social organisations and the government itself were run in the country, mirroring caste-based hierarchy. In this context in order to redress the inequality experienced by the outcaste and disenfranchised communities, the government introduced reservation policy (*Mandal Commission*) that would benefit the socially and economically backward communities. The fact that majority of the poor and backward communities happen to be low caste communities is a reflection on how the higher caste communities disproportionately control the wealth of the country. On the other hand, the introduction of reservation policy was an open acknowledgement of the fallout of caste based discrimination and wealth making that resulted in large sections of the society pushed to the margins. It also signals the desperate need to restructure the disabilities imposed by millennia of oppression. But reservation had another interesting twist, it generated competition between different caste communities, vying for the limited resources and benefits from the government. The complicated reservation policy that ensured positive discrimination to help the underprivileged communities was restricted to Hindus. If any low caste and Dalit communities have changed their religion they are not included in this policy. Therefore, particularly Dalits from Christian and Muslim background are excluded from the benefits of reservation policies.

Caste Sectarianism in Neo-liberal Urban India

In spite of the rapid changes overtaking Indian socio-cultural landscape, be it economic advancement or technological revolution, the role of caste in everyday life of an Indian remains largely unchanged. The pervasive and adaptable nature of caste system is such that it becomes an indispensable social template for Indians to conduct their life. Social commensality is strictly marked and controlled by caste adherence. Key life stages are governed by caste belonging, i.e marriages are always seen as affirming the caste belonging and allowing interaction between two caste groups. Modernity may have challenged its reach but caste system remains relevant for the grassroots. Observing this it could be argued that the development of modernity in India has certainly shaped how caste system functions, but crucially it has made the need to assert it more vehemently. So it is interesting to note that the discourse about caste is not about its disappearance but its resilience.

The current veracity of caste is due to its fluid and dynamic nature as well its integral necessity in the field of socio-economic, ritual and politics in India. The possibility of social mobility accessible under caste patronage and reservation policies makes reasserting caste identities inevitable. However the harsh reality of exclusion and discrimination endured by Dalits in the organised and unorganised labour sector remains. The rapid technological advancement has only resulted in reinforcing traditional boundaries, furthering fractures and deepening fissures along caste lines. Caste has found a new role



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within the Neo-liberal economy. According to the 2011-12 NSSO statistics, the share of wage labourers among SCs was 63%. This is significantly higher than the values for other social groups. These figures were 44% for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), 42% for upper castes and 46% for the rest. Even among wage labourers, SCs have a much greater share of casual wage workers, which signifies higher job insecurity and poor earnings. The share of casual wage labour was 47 percent for SCs compared with one third for OBC/higher caste /rest, and all India average. In fact, of the total casual labourers in the country, about 32 percent are SC, which is double their population share of 16 percent.

Over the years the caste mechanism has evolved in adapting to the significant social changes, accommodating political initiatives and subverting economic policies to serve its purpose. Although in the rapid urbanisation of Indian context, untouchability might seem out of place, but it has found interesting ways to manifest itself. Caste system may have had its roots in the ancient Vedic scriptures or sociological practices, but its relevance and potency in shaping contemporary socio-cultural moorings has not diminished. Instead, the Indian populace continue to find new purpose and value in identifying and utilising caste identities. The tenacity of caste system is such that, it becomes indispensable even among urban geography.

According to 2011 census, Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes collectively form only 11.25% of the population of the six biggest cities, New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Hyderabad and Bengaluru, much below the share of SCs and STs in the country's population at 25.6%. Hence, urban space is mostly occupied by upper caste communities. However, there are clear clustering of SC/ST population in six major cities. Caste belonging also significantly manifest in the residential areas within an urban landscape. Interestingly according recent ordinal survey's in the six major cities in India, majority of people belonging to SC and ST do end up in clusters of dwellings that has distinct caste character. Many of the Dalit communities, who migrate from rural communities to cities, find space only in sprawling slums within the cities. These early observations suggest that there is certainly caste-based segregation taking shape in urban India.

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Bottling up Urban Space: Unpacking Contesting Sovereign Power and Environmental Insecurity in the Greater Beirut Area (GBA)

Ana Maria Kumarasamy

Since the civil war, the inhabitants in the Greater Beirut Area (GBA) has routinely been exposed to waste management issues and efforts to regulate them. In the summer of 2015, protesters took to the street after rubbish started accumulating in the streets of Beirut. The protests started after residents in Naameh in the Mount Lebanon Governate blocked access to the landfill, which collected almost 90 per cent of the garbage in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, excluding Jbeil (SWEEP-NET, 2014). The “You Stink” movement represented not just a waste management problem, but also wider issues related to the *zu’ama* – the political leadership (Arsan, 2018; Najeem, 2012). The Naameh landfill had been a temporarily solution for waste management in the region since 1997 but continued to be used and expanded beyond its capacity until its closure in 2015. Subsequently, in attempt to solve the crisis the regime relocated the landfills to Costa Brava and Bourj Hammoud, now situated directly by the coast and adjacent to Beirut, in the eastern and southern suburbs, respectively. Consequently, this article seeks to unpack the impact the *zu’ama* has on urban space and the environment.

By considering formal and informal power structures (Mabon, 2019), I argue that the failure to tackle the underlying dysfunctions in governance has led to the manifestation of political exclusion and environmental deterioration. This article starts by considering the theoretical implications of spaces of exception (Agamben, 2005) and its relation to the environment in urban space. Thereupon, critically examining the role of the *zu’ama* and political structures in Lebanon that has led to the establishment of a malfunctional waste management system by considering Costa Brava and Bourj Hammoud Landfills.

Conceptualising Spaces of Exception in Urban Spaces and Implications for the Environment

At the centre of this analysis lies ideas around sovereignty and spaces of control, but these structures in Lebanon are often seen as weak domestically. According to Sarah Fregonese; however, this understanding of sovereignty in Lebanon “misleading and even obstructive of peace in Lebanon” (2013). Furthermore, that engagement with the idea of ‘hybrid sovereignty’ is more productive in understanding the interactions between state and non-state actors (ibid), and the formal and informal (Mabon, 2019). This approach to sovereignty leads to an understanding of sovereignty as a complex space forged by a myriad of actors working within the state, which in this case is the *zu’ama* – the political leadership in Lebanon.

In the GBA, which holds more than 50 per cent of Lebanon’s population (Human Rights Watch, 2017), sovereignty has several implications for inhabitants in urban space and the environment. As such, this section seeks to explore how the regulation of the environment have prompted exceptional spaces of control, thus entering the realms of biopolitics, which for Giorgio Agamben signals the inclusion of human life into the political realm (1998). Drawing on this, Agamben utilises the idea of the state of exception is the most extreme judicial order and the suspension of its rule. The state of exception is shortly defined as the ability of the sovereign to include the exception into the judicial order and make

it appear as ‘true’ state law’ (Agamben, 2015). Consequently, the state of exception can be understood as a masked state of emergency – hidden in plain sight. In the GBA, this mechanism is translated into spaces of exceptions which is found on two levels that will be discussed further in the following sections.

Firstly, through on a regime level, defined by the *zu’ama*, through the implementation of the Taef Agreement which restored power sharing after the civil war ended in 1990. Briefly, with the inclusion of the Taef Agreement into law, it now appears as the only ‘true state law’ – a state of exception – embedded in the legal framework, the law that above everything else decides on the life of the inhabitants in Lebanon. Including, as John Nagle argues, a state of exception that was deployed by former warlords through Law 84 (passed in 1991), thus enabling a system of state amnesia where 8000 militia fighters were integrated into the state apparatus (2019: 10). Secondly, at a local level through the manifestation of emergency measures set in place by the *zu’ama* as a means of dealing with waste management in GBA. The spaces of exception on this level includes regulation of the environment that in turn has ramification for inclusion and exclusion in urban spaces. As Mick Smith (2011) argues in his deployment of Agamben:

“Isn’t there now a real, and devastatingly ironic, possibility that the idea of an ecological crisis, so long and so vehemently denied by every state, will find itself recuperated, by the very powers implicated in bringing that crisis about, as the latest and the most comprehensive justification for a political state of emergency.”(xvi [Italics in original])

In short, environmental factors becomes the newest justification for spaces of exception. Furthermore, Smith argues what is at stake is “nothing less than the ecological future of the natural world and the ethnopolitical future of humanity (ibid). In the case of GBA’s landfills, as this article looks at, the exception at regime level of the *zu’ama* is one based on the Taef Agreement; and the local levels within the landfills is an exception based on ‘environmental emergency’.

Sovereignty, the *Zu’ama* and Public Goods

Through the utilisation of ‘hybrid sovereignty’, this intervention bases its understanding of sovereignty in Lebanon is a large and comprehensive system that evolves around the *zu’ama* - the political leadership. The *zu’ama* in Lebanon consists of many individual *za’im* – leaders. Distinctively, the individual *za’im* can possess, individually or collectively, capabilities of creating and embedding exceptional systems that enables regulation in the everyday life of groups of people. As Andrew Arsan’s argues “the *za’im*’s political power is built, in large part, out of his ability to act – for good or bad – in the everyday lives of his followers, to intercede on their behalf, to procure work and provide food or medication, as well to punish, to take away and exclude” (Arsan, 2018: 154). As such, the *zu’ama* represent contesting sovereign power that competes in order to ‘survive’ as a part of the state, but that also colludes in order to prevent the state from becoming too powerful (Najeem, 2012). As such, it is the *zu’ama* that decides on the exception in Lebanon – the sovereign that belongs both inside and outside the law.

The exception within the judicial order emerges from Taef Agreement through the constitution; thus, reflecting ‘true state law’, or the law that above any other law decides the quality life of the constituents. The result, as commented by Salamely and Payne, is that the different “blocks tend to focus less on addressing national needs and reform than on safeguarding their perspective share of the

public pie with regard to one another” (Salamey and Payne, 2008: 467. The power of the troika, which includes the president (Maronite), the prime minister(Sunni) and the speaker of assembly (Shi’ite), enables actors to bypass the parliament and negotiations in order to avoid deadlock, thus making it possible for the *zu’ama* to evade legal checks on power (Ragab, 2011: 28). As such, the *zu’ama* operates both inside and outside the law – as the entity that can decide on the exceptions.

The inclusion of the *zu’ama* within law is parallel to their capabilities to work outside the law. This is illustrated through the failure to implement new laws that are well written but that does not translate into action. In 2018, laws were introduced simultaneously with the implementation of the CEDRE Programme, which is backed by foreign investors, aimed at improving sectors such as transportation, water, wastewater, electricity and solid waste management (Atallah, *et al*, 2019). Due to the influence of foreign benefactors, legal frameworks were established in different sectors that directly related to the sectors, including water, food and solid waste management, but also laws designed at tackling corruption (Legal Agenda). This includes the new solid waste management law that was ratified by parliament on the 24th of September 2018 but has since not been integrated into practice (Human Rights Watch, 2018). One of the reasons for this is that these laws go against the *nomos* – the law of the *zu’ama* - as they are often the main benefactor of some of these sectors.

The *nomos* of the *zu’ama* has implications for state resources and the division of public goods. After Taif, Lebanon changed from a *laissez-faire* economy that was dominated by the private sector into a *zu’ama* led ‘neoliberal’ economy that is based on patron-client networks. (Baumann, 2019; Leenders, 2004). As such, the Taif agreement created a system in which the *troika* is working cross-purpose and vetoing each other while seeking to maximise their economic potential. The outcome of this system has two main outcomes. Firstly, the use of government contracts as a means of maintaining political power. This is played out through *wasta* – mediation, “if I help you then you are obliged to help me later” (Deets, 2018). which has an important role as an ‘informal contract’ in achieving economic and entrepreneurial goals, as well as political, as a way of facilitating “sweetheart deals among befriended or connected businessmen and politicians” (Leenders, 2004: 177). Exemplified when the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) Micael Aoun negotiated the position of the Ministry of Energy and Water for his son-in-law Gebran Bassil in 2009 (Eid-Sabbagh, 2015: 65). Another common example, being when Hariri gave, Sukleen, owned by one of his Saudi business partners the contract to collect and dispose GBA garbage in 1994 (Deets, 2018). These are some examples that demonstrate the mechanisms of *wasta* and the importance of networks.

Secondly, the political structures also distribute public goods into excludable and non-excludable goods, either benefiting one particular network (religion, sect, class) or all inhabitants, respectively. Excludable goods are used to maintain patron-client relationships, between the *za’im* and their network, including goods like security, health and education, thus entrenching social inequalities between groups (Cammett, 2015). Consequently, non-excludable goods, such as electricity, water, infrastructure and waste management, are important in relation to *wasta*, but its effectiveness has a low priority (Deets, 2018: 143). Furthermore, accountability for non-excludable goods is diminished as the *zu’ama* can easily shift responsibility among themselves. As Stephen Deets points out; “*wasta* does not collect city garbage, reduce traffic, or create urban green spaces” (ibid). As will be discussed in the next section, these mechanisms have ramifications on waste management in GBA.

Waste management in the GBA

Waste management in Lebanon includes a history of crisis since the end of the civil war in 1990. It has never had a national plan covering the whole country, and as such, the central government have largely focused on waste management in Beirut and Mount Lebanon Governate, which is home to more than 50 per cent of the population and 50 percent of its waste (Human Rights Watch, 2018). As this section will explore, waste management in Beirut display the implications of the *zu'ama* and non-excludable goods, and subsequently deep-rooted inequalities in the region.

Waste management has historically not been based on an environmental or a health basis, but decisions are rather made last minute and in order to prevent emergencies. One example of this is the countless emergency plans, first set in place in 1997 for solid waste management in Beirut and Mount Lebanon (excluding Jbeil), that lasted until 2016. This plan according to UNDP contracted the “Sukkar Engineering Group (today Averda Group) to collect, treat, and landfill solid waste from an area serving about 2 million people. The plan was partially implemented despite controversies linked to (1) system costs, and (2) the effectiveness of sorting and composting plants” (UNDP, 2010: 170-172). Two decades after its implementation of the initial emergency plan waste had increased from 2000 tons/day in 1999 to 2850 tones/day in 2013, with over 2500 tones/day going to Naameh landfill (SWEEP-NET). Thus, stretching the very limits of the landfill which continued to be expanded until its closure on July 17th 2015 when local residents were aided by activists and reporters. (Geha, 2019). As such, the inability to manage waste in Lebanon is the direct result of last-minute decisions made by the *zu'ama* in order to avert a crisis – ultimately creating spaces of exceptions.

In the summer of 2015, the closure of Naameh landfill came at a time were the parliamentary elections had been illegally postponed twice and the presidential post was yet to be filled. While the smell and the threat of disease was looming, it became clear that the regime had little accountability towards their inhabitants (Deets, 2018). Furthermore, what made the crisis exceptional was the fact that all parts of GBA was affected by piles of garbage, including the middle- and upper-classes (Atwood, 2019). However, that does not mean that the crisis and following mobilisation was not also an exclusionary process. The exposure of the hazards posed by the garbage was unequal; “garbage has been removed from certain upper-class areas and dumped in lower-class areas” (Naeff, 2018). Consequently, the waste crisis fleshed out deep rooted problems of exclusion in Beirut.

However, while the protests in Beirut showed solidarity towards the Naameh residents, it has fallen short of protecting the Costa Brava and Bourj Hammoud landfills from reopening, even though they had both previously been closed due to environmental crisis and local activism (Atwood, 2019). In the case of Bourj Hammoud, activism surrounded ‘garbage mountain’ go back to the 1980s and reopening it was seen as an assault on local activism and their rights (Atwood, 2019). For some activists, the political support behind Naameh and the ‘you stink’ movement was more about cleaning up the political structures as reflected in the next election and the inclusion of *Beirut Madinati* in the following election seeking to challenge the confessional politics (Geha, 2019). Therefore, the same political structures that defined the lives of Naameh residents are now reproduced and effect the residents adjacent to Costa Brava and Bourj Hammoud landfills. As such, sovereign power – the *zu'ama* – infringe upon the agency of the inhabitants in these areas.

Moreover, as non-excludable goods the contracts for the landfills was negotiated through *wasta* in 2016. The contract for the Costa Brava landfill was allocated to the brother of Saad Hariri’s Head of

Personal Security for 288 million dollars (Yee and Saad, 2019). However, the landfill has been closed several times due to local activism and airport security as the birds attracted to the garbage may pose a hazard to the plane (BBC, 2017). In addition, the company has been accused of adding water to the trash in order to get larger pay-outs, and yet the company got an additional 161 million dollars to upgrade and expand the operation (Yee and Saad, 2019). Similarly, the contract for Bourj Hammoud was given to businessman Dany Khoury who has close ties to President Michel Aoun for 142 million dollars (ibid). However, the company has been accused of dumping waste directly into the sea stemming from the lack of a functional brakewater – the mechanism that stops the waste from going directly into the sea. As a result, it was reported that storm surges had sucked rubbish out into the sea from Bourj Hammoud (Haddad, 2009). As a result, there was demonstrations by fishermen and eco-organisations in 2017, the outcome being that fishermen were promised compensation (ibid). Another problem with Bourj Hammoud landfill is toxic waste. In 1987 Italian toxic waste was dumped in several places in Lebanon, including this site, however, the amount is unknown. Yet, without testing the site the company levelled the 5-storey garbage mountain, possibly pushing toxic waste into the ocean posing a threat to oceanic life (Atwood, 2019; Haddad, 2009). These contracts, the companies holding little accountability, are the production of the current political structure that is implemented by the *zu'ama*. Moreover, they pose considerable pollution and a treat to the health of the inhabitants.

Furthermore, in Blake Atwood's analysis, it is argued that the Costa Brava and Bourj Hammoud landfills were "already socially polluted" as a result of decades of war and neglect from Beirut's *zu'ama* that had created these spaces as inferior (Atwood, 2019). As such, these urban spaces have become places of exception and exclusion. For example, Bourj Hammoud landfill started as a result of informal duping at the beginning of the beginning of the civil war. The area has a large Armenian community, stemming from the Armenian genocide in the 20th century, but also a smaller Shi'ite community, and the area hosted internally displaced persons during the Civil War. Despite recent activism aiming to close the landfill, Human Rights Watch reported that the site was set to reach its limit in the summer of 2019, but the landfill has continued to be expanded (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Furthermore, the regime has provided no alternative for waste management and considering the most recent protests against the regime alternative plans related to waste management remain unsolved.

Conclusions

Through the exploration of waste management in GBA, this article has unpacked structures around 'hybrid sovereignty' – the *zu'ama* – and their manifestation of use of public goods as a way of maintaining power. These structures are explained through spaces of exception; one shows how the *zu'ama* established themselves at sovereign through the Taef Agreement, and the other exemplifies how landfills and the adjacent areas are ruled by exceptions. This article has shown that public goods are used in two ways by the *zu'ama*. Firstly, through the use of *wasta* and allocating contracts as a means of maintaining networks. Secondly, through the distinction between excludable and non-excludable goods, as a way of maintaining patron-client relationships.

Furthermore, the political structures in the GBA and in turn Lebanon, has created spaces of environmental insecurity and political exclusion of the inhabitants adjacent to the landfills. At present, the landfills in GBA continue to be expanded, creating spaces of exclusion, despite local activism, thus continuing to pose a hazard to people's life, the oceanic life and fishermen's livelihoods. Concluding, that the political structures surrounding waste management in the GBA are transgressing on the agency

of the local inhabitants and contributing to the manifestation of inequalities and environmental insecurity.

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Concluding Remarks

Cities are laboratories in which sectarian divisions are dialectically constructed and contested in constant tension. The premise that sectarian identities are the result of ancient hatreds - primordial expressions of group-based belonging - has long been dismissed. Yet, when it is said that sectarianism is constructed, we need to look at urban environments as a core matrix through which sectarian practices are (re)imagined into life and constituted. It is the city where urban planning strategies are deliberately devised to produce and embed long term sectarian divisions, evident particularly in residential segregation. Sectarianism is renewed on a daily basis in the city through the sectarianized provision of essential services and infrastructure, encompassing electricity, medical care, and microcredit, but reinforced through security practices. Such clientelistic processes are used to create cultures of dependency, tightly binding communities with elites. Cities, furthermore, often contain key public spaces, such as city centres, which are symbolically charged areas that evoke state power and hegemony.

While the urban is constitutive of sectarian identities and practices, it is also the place where they are challenged. Groups that transcend sectarian divisions can come together, temporarily or even for sustained periods of time, to engender alternative forms of politics and living that do not cohere to simple sectarian formulas. They take to the streets to demand an end to corruption, declining public services and for the human rights of women and LGBTQ populations, amongst others marginalised from political life. Symbolic spaces in the city, such as public parks and squares, are often the focus of non-sectarian movements, who appropriate these sites and creatively reimagine their meaning and usage as part of right to the city claims. In so doing, these non-sectarian groups are challenging the very grammar the sustains sectarian power and hegemony, engaging in acts of desectarianization.

In recognizing these dynamics new issues arise that require further consideration and analysis as part of a future research agenda. First, as many of the various articles in this report indicate, the construction of the sectarian city is bound up with neoliberal forms of urban planning, governance and reconstruction. Sectarian elites and regimes have increasingly devolved public services and goods to the market, and this has often had disastrous consequences for citizens left without a safety net. In one sense, this makes ordinary people even more reliant on sectarian factions for welfare and social assistance, thus potentially strengthening the hold such sectarian groups have on their constituency. On the other hand, the weakening of the state leads to excessive inequality and mobilization of considerable sections of the public demanding change. Second, reflections as to the outcomes of popular expressions of non-sectarian action and protest are required. The articles in this report have highlighted the complex and multifaceted ways in which these groups challenge the sectarian order. But, does this lead to any change or transformation? If so, how do we isolate and measure the changes that have been wrought? While these groups may not always bring about policy change, we should consider how they foment attitudinal transformation amongst the public, the ways in which they form new ways of imagining a political community, and in eroding the hegemony of sectarianism.



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