Of citizens and ordinary men: Political subjectivity and contestations of sectarianism in reconstruction-era Beirut

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Introduction

There were two women, residents of Achrafieh, who arrived, dressed as tourists, as if they were going to visit Yemen, arrived to discover the Zoqaq al-Blat neighbourhood, and I saw Zoqaq al-Blat merchants shocked and frightened by these ladies. [...] There was a certain clash of unknowns and I told myself, if this turns out ok, we’ll have accomplished something. And it turned out ok! These visitors (including my mother) are saying to themselves, we don’t know the neighbourhood, it’s on us now to get to know it. And these residents who were shocked, afraid they would be seen as monkeys or tourist attractions, they realized that these were Lebanese, Beirutis, like them, and they’ve opened their shops, and their arms, and started telling stories about their memories and tears were shed.

This story narrates events that occurred during a project in 2010 designed to draw attention to and preserve the architectural heritage of the Zoqaq al-Blat neighbourhood in Beirut and to “revitalize” the area through culture and leisure. The aims of the project were thus at once narrow and focused as they were expansive. As concerns the first aim, heritage buildings were under considerable pressure by developers’ ambitions to cash in on a real-estate boom and poorly protected by the state. Zoqaq al-Blat however was the seat of a relatively large amount of heritage architecture used by the administrative seats of religious dominations, charity organizations and schools. These building were therefore relatively well protected by institutional ownership and upkeep. Hence, this patrimonial ecology seemed the best possible foundation to start working effectively towards preserving heritage architecture. If it wouldn’t work here, then probably nowhere. The very fact that all these buildings were there in the first place also relates to the second aim. The area had been the geographical centre-point of the Lebanese contribution to the Arab Renaissance – or Nahda – in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Arab culture – education, literature, linguistics – thrived at the time. In the organizers’ historical understanding, Beirut – and especially Zoqaq al-Blat – was able to be that place because people transcended religious
difference to create a vibrant, oecumenical public life. That vibrant Beirut was also the kind of Beirut the organizers dreamed of now. The story above – a promotional story in one sense, an aspirational one in another – is meant to capture some of that potential. Bourgeois ladies from a Christian bourgeois neighbourhood (that would at least be the association with “Achrafieh”) came and met plain folk from a popular Muslim neighbourhood (as Zoqaq al-Blat was largely known). The stories that were shared then and the tears that were shed were icons of the organizers’ hope that people – as Lebanese! – would regain a sense of identification with, ownership of, and thus stewardship for the area. The phrase “they realized they were Lebanese, Beirutis like them” is somewhat baffling though. Could the differences between these two groups of people be so large that Zoqaq residents were unable to properly identify these visitors? Other examples seem to indicate this was indeed the case. Thus, the project organized walking tours along the various patrimonial sites. A friend who had joined one of these tours had had the impression people were quite surprised to suddenly these groups of people moving through the area, groups of people who were obviously not residents. ‘Obviously’, not merely because they formed a congregation of unfamiliar faces, but also because they adorned themselves with quite different styles of dress of what was usual in the area, with the public demeanour of visitors, and most likely they had used French as their main means of communication, mixed in with some Arabic. My friend characterized his entourage as tontāt (a Lebanese plural formed on the French word for aunt) from Achrafieh (that is to say, the bourgeois ladies from above), with their delicate heels and their luscious shawls draped over their elegant dresses. As a result, he felt they (including himself, by guilty association) were seen as a (foreign) tourists. And indeed, at several occurrences I heard residents refer to the visitors as “foreigners” (ajānib).

The mutual sense of bewilderment is indicative of a tension that is at the core of this thesis. It is a treatise about two worlds – a world of people who consider themselves members of ‘civil society’ and one of people who identify themselves as residents of a ‘popular’ neighbourhood. While there are many ways one could capture the differences between these two worlds - differences of class, education and in part religious community – this thesis focuses on the distinct ways people from each social and political universe conceive of the nation, the state and people’s own citizenship. Locally, especially from the perspective of civil society, these distinct ways were understood as almost antithetical. This had consequences for how far these two sides could really come together and share their stories, for instance in this heritage project. Let me go deeper
into the ideas that informed the project leaders’ understandings of who the residents were. These ideas will open up a path from which to set off the exploration of these two worlds.

In a retrospective presentation they gave at the chancellorship of the Lebanese University, the initiator of the project, Serge Yazigi, and his colleague from St. Joseph University, Liliane Barakat, were explicit about their desire for the local population to participate in the project, for their contributions would be essential in accomplishing the two aims of the initiative. However, from the way they both talked about it (both in this and other public meetings as well as in interviews with me), they identified three problems. The first problem is the ‘culture’ of the residents, that is, of the ‘newcomers’ to the area, who are at times explicitly identified as Shia. (These Shia had migrated to the area in large numbers mostly as displaced persons during the ‘civil war’, at the same time as most Christian residents left the neighbourhood.) While Yazigi seemed on one level to be rather agnostic about the kind of ‘urban culture’ necessary for a vibrant (peaceful and durably profitable) city – waxing poetic at some point about the virtues of the little corners stores and the street life they generate – still in response to questions during the conference that honed in on the ‘population question’, Yazigi elaborated on a different sense in which he might understand ‘urban culture’:

The question [of changes to the population since the 19th century] is very interesting. [We’ve gone] from a very urbanized population, bourgeois, notable and merchant families, who used to live in the old city, then left the centre to establish themselves in this [suburban] extension and so, despite the gardens [of their villa’s] etc., they already had an urban culture. The war has reversed the tendency completely: there’s a rural migration of [people] who, by the way, have a great defiance [défi-ance] vis-à-vis the city and who are there but do not want to maintain [entretenir], they are there, but they are very defiant towards the city. So a wholesale modification – so besides the modification of confessional community and social class.

The conclusion shared by members of the audience, Barakat and perhaps with some nuances, Yazigi as well, was that most of the current inhabitants lack a history with the city, and therefore a sensibility for urban culture, which didn’t predispose them to active participation in and appropriation of the project.

The second problem lay in the associational life in the neighbourhood. Or rather, that there was too much of a problematic kind and too little of
the right kind. Thus, Barakat told me that right from the first visit to the area it became clear to that “Hizbullah controlled the area”. No longer had she parked, as someone called Ali came up to her to inquire what she was doing there. She quickly concluded that there were territorial considerations that were going to supersed any concern over ‘heritage’. Fortunately, in the end, Hizbullah turned out to be quite discreet, albeit was eerily so, because “you don’t know who they are”. The other main Shia party, Amal, wasn’t discreet at all and quite cumbersome. “Every time we passed their local office, they badgered us [faisaient des histoires]”.

In other words, it was difficult building bridges to the parties. Conversely, the neighbourhood lacked the type of associational activity they could have depended on: civil society organizations. In terms of these secular, i.e. non-religious and non-politically affiliated NGOs, Yazigi could only identify one in the area: Ashghalouna, a “group of charitable ladies” who organize informal dinners of traditional (regional) Lebanese food prepared by ‘war widows’. They were well aware of other initiatives and organizational forms, like the boy scouts, the educational institutions, various charity organizations, as well as an orphanage. However, these were part of the sectarian world – tied to religious institutions and political parties – and they were perceived more as part of the problem than of the solution. In their experience, these organizations would not be able to create the kind of socially and politically transgressive connections that had made the Nahda possible and which would now allow a ‘regeneration of urban culture’ in Beirut.

The reason for this was tied to the third problem: the persisting animosity, fear and competition among the people. Yazigi: “The project presupposes every time an opening of space and mentality to the other, to receive others and [accept] that they enter their space. And that provokes fear and reticence, always”. In connection to this, one topic that came up a few times were the internal and internalized borders. Consider the following example Yazigi gave:

I will tell you an anecdote of the second time we did the tour. A lady arrives, very well dressed, even though most of the people who came were dressed more for tourism, with the hats and the shoes, and then she arrives and says ‘I’m a resident of Zoqaq al-Blat’. Ahuh, I say, what

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1 In Lebanon, Ali is the Shia name par excellence, because people hear the reference to Mohammad’s cousin Ali, the first ‘Shia’ rival for the throne of leader of the Muslims. The “obvious” connection between the name and Shia identity is not reproduced the whole Muslim (or even the whole Arab) world, however.
is it that you want to do? ‘Well, I admit that I don’t know the neighbour- 
hood. There are streets that I’m afraid to enter. And I want to take 
advantage of your presence now to dare and enter these neighbour-
hoods and discover them. Many of these institutions, their door is 
closed, I can’t enter, I want to explore thanks to you’. And at the end, 
she was completely flabbergasted at having discovered her neighbour-
hood – we don’t realize to what extent the war has, that we continue 
to live with the residues of the war that sometimes have no sense any-
more but have become the logic of our minds, we internalized them, 
and gave them an even bigger importance, and we continue to live 
with it.

Such mentalities also had wider repercussions. The important institu-
tions in the neighbourhood, such as the schools, had also internalized 
these borders – and rather acted as though they were each other’s com-
petitors.

How should we understand the gap between the intentions to involve 
the population as much as possible, and the subsequent realization that 
they can’t? Yazigi and Barakat situate their failure to engage the popu-
lation in the context of sectarianism. Sectarianism is for them the heart of 
the problem and the main obstacle in addressing that problem. It pre-
vented people from coming together in order to save the city’s history 
and create new history worthy of the name. It is unclear however how 
the residents of Zoqaq al-Blat perceived the problem, and whether they 
identified similar challenges. This thesis sets out to elaborate on why 
people in ‘civil society’ locate the problem in sectarianism as well as how 
that compares to how people in a ‘popular’ neighbourhood like Zoqaq 
al-Blat think about Lebanon’s challenges. In short, this thesis seeks to 
clarify what dreams people have for Lebanon, which shortcomings they 
identify, and what that means for how they relate to the country’s official 
political system and dominant political culture – sectarianism.

This then is a thesis about political imagination in Beirut. More particu-
larly, it is about how certain Beirutis imagine themselves to be a citizen 
of Lebanon. The term “imagination” does not of course connote fancy 
and fabrication, but rather, in the “anthropological spirit” of Anderson’s 
*Imagined Communities*, intends to draw attention to the “styles” with 
which people understand who they are (Anderson 2006: 6). ‘Citizenship’ 
is actually a notion that forms the discursive backbone of one of two 
styles that I discuss in this book. In order to avoid confusion with the emic 
use of such a notion, let me rephrase what is at stake conceptually: this
book is about the way people conceive of their membership of the political community. For most people in Lebanon, as for most people in most of the world, that political community is primarily the nation. In Lebanon specifically though, the relation to the nation is mediated by at least two other kinds of political community, a ‘larger’ pan-Arab community and/or a ‘smaller’ confessional or sectarian community (what Lebanese call ṭā’īfa in Arabic). While pan-Arabism has been reduced to a status that resembles one to which Gandhi reportedly relegated ‘European civilization’, sectarian communities are very real and structure people’s lives in pervasive ways. Unsurprisingly then, most of the ‘imaginative’ tension in this book occurs in and around the intersections of nation and sectarian community.

For the reader yet to be initiated in the multiverse that is Lebanese political life, ‘sectarianism’ (ṭā’īfiyya), at its most basic level, is the integration of religious communities – Lebanon recognizes eighteen of them – into the state. The distribution of political voting power as well as posts in the state’s bureaucracy occurs through the communities and is calculated on the basis of (a more or less fictional notion of) their relative sizes. Also, a considerable part of civil law is administered through community courts. In addition to these politico-juridical aspects, the term sectarianism is sometimes used to refer to a kind of culture that plagues the Lebanese, who always threaten to relapse into a rally around the religious flag, failing to recognize mutual interests and shared belonging. That particular ‘anthropology’ won’t be reproduced here, but it is clear that sectarianism is a primary reference point (and referent) in people’s understanding of who they are, what is possible, and what should be done. Sectarianism is both a political reality – a certain way resources and relations are distributed and organized – and a ‘language’ – a certain way of classifying and explaining things. My analytical contention for this thesis, then, is that a productive way to understand the differences in the way people perceive, and attempt to enact, their role in the political community is to understand how they relate to sectarianism.

While I do discuss how they engage the ‘sectarian’ system in its various instantiations, in order to get things done, ultimately I’m most interested in how they make sense of that organizational reality and of how they position themselves towards it. This is a puzzling question for the following reason. On the one hand, sectarianism is both an intractable political reality and the dominant political language of the country. Yet on the other it is also widely perceived as broken. Expressions of dissatisfaction about the state of the country and its politics are near universal. Several parties have the abolishment of sectarianism as a ‘policy objective’, while
the 1989 ‘peace treaty’ (the so-called Taif Accord) charged the country’s political leader with finding a way of accomplishing it. However, there is no real political force behind it and perhaps there never was (with the possible exception of the run-up to and the first years of civil war, when a strong Left alliance clamoured for structural change). Different people have different ideas about why or how it’s broken, though. Very roughly, positions vary from a principled and radical denial of all things sectarian and the call for a ‘civil’ state, to a denunciation of others’ abuse of power in the name of sectarian rights or privilege, while stopping short of calling the actual system into question. This tension between the ideological and institutional weight of sectarianism and people’s widespread condemnation produces an interesting paradox. Firstly, you would want to know, if it is broken, where exactly do people situate the fundamental issues that Lebanon has to deal with? What are needs or desires they identify that are not being addressed or met by the existing ‘system’. But then secondly you want to understand how people can formulate these needs or desires. How do people voice their political grievances, if the dominant categories of political analysis are supplied by ‘sectarianism’ itself? This goes to the core of what Rancière called the political. In his work (e.g., 2001; 2004) on political contention, the political consists of people bringing in concerns and ways of discerning that were not part of the (social or political) status quo. If we translate that to Lebanon, how are people able to evaluate political goings-on and take a stance on what is happening in sectarian Lebanon, given the hegemony of the sectarian frame? In other words, what political language do they need to develop, and which symbolic resources do they have at their disposal, that would allow them to take critical distance?

In order to start answering these questions we need to go back to the styles of imagination. A crucial element of people’s political imagination is the kind of moral community of which they consider themselves a part. Moral communities provide a moral baseline against which people can judge things, and provide a social horizon in relation to which people can situate themselves. Inscription in the moral community occurs via a set of discursive repertoires (i.e., ways of speaking that consist of words and their histories, tropes, conversational rules, etc.). One element of such a repertoire we may call framing devices. The term ‘device’ perhaps calls forth too voluntaristic or, well, too instrumental an understanding of the workings of the human mind, even though framing devices can certainly be reflexively and purposefully deployed (meta-pragmatically, in linguistic anthropological parlance). Political campaigns are well-known fields for such conscious deployment. Still, such devices allow
people to qualify things and people to be of a certain kind and they usually contain, or are intimately tied to, moral evaluations of these kinds of things and people. That means that they also say something about the relation of the individual deploying the framing device with – or her position on – the thing or person thus framed. Depending on the audience’s or interlocutor’s familiarity with the framing device, they will be able to understand its referent, its (moral) connotations and consequentially intuit where the speaker is coming from and where she wants to go, so to speak. One important device in this case is the name people assign to a moral community, which frames the speaker in a ‘we’. Another main device is the ‘stance’ from which one speaks, which frames the speaker as a particular, socially identifiable kind of speaker. These elements of the repertoire constitute the core of the two overarching styles of thinking about Lebanon and one’s part in it that I examine in this thesis. In one such style, people see themselves as part of “civil society” and take up the stance of “the citizen”, whereas in the other people consider themselves to be part of “the people” and identify with “the ordinary man”. In between the two, there is relatively little familiarity with – and thus understanding of – each other’s framing devices. My contention though is that both these frames offer people discursive opportunities to critically reflect on political realities.

The two styles of imagination have a meaningful geography and are in fact tied to my two main fieldwork sites. The first site is actually a diverse set of largely rotating sites, (temporarily) occupied by NGO activities, events organized by more topical and ephemeral collectivities and initiatives by various kinds of “activists”. Most protagonists are either in their twenties or thirties, usually come from middle or higher-class backgrounds and almost universally have attended higher education. They belong to all confessional communities, though Shia youth are probably underrepresented (which follows from a related underrepresentation among the higher classes). Their activities are mostly geared towards the creation of a new form and language of public debate, to bringing people from different backgrounds (sectarian communities) together and to develop platforms that would call for greater political transparency or more rigorous equality under the law. The bulk of them are organized in two sections of Beirut, namely Hamra to the west of the city centre, and Gemmayze to the east. Hamra is the site of two prominent Anglophone universities and has the reputation of being the ‘intellectual’ quarter ever since the 1960s or so. It also enjoys the reputation of being one of the ‘few remaining’ confessionally diverse neighbourhoods. At the time of my research, though, cafés were rapidly replac-
ing older agents and forms of confessional ‘co-existence’. Gemmayze enjoys no reputation of (residential) confessional diversity, but around 2000 it did become a focal point in the city’s nightlife; and all are equal – are they not – before the disco ball. Additionally, in the margins of Gemmayze’s bars and clubs, there were a few organizations and places that served as hosts for “civil society” activities. For most members of this ‘civil society’, these two neighbourhoods, because of their perceived insulation from sectarian overdetermination (as well as the fact they catered to activities associated primarily with most members’ age bracket) must have been a natural setting for their projects. (See map above.) However, the opposite is also possible, when initiatives would be organized in areas that were clearly the ‘domain’ of one sect, as a proactive intervention (or at least statement) that in itself intends (indexically, Peirce would say) to overcome those divisions in society that people in “civil society” tried to fight.

The second site is more stable: a neighbourhood of some 25,000 people just below the city centre called “Al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq”. It is a mostly working-class neighbourhood, while the entire socio-economic range extends from the near-destitute to the more comfortably middle-class. About 80% of its residents belong to the Shia community, the remaining 20% are Sunni, of whom most are Arabic speaking Kurds. Politically,
the map is a bit more complex. There are two Shia parties: Amal and Hizbullah. Visually, Amal has marked the neighbourhood as its ‘territory’, with flags, graffiti and slogans dominating most of the streetscape. While many in the neighbourhood are also ‘with Amal’, the party can make no hegemonic claim to the neighbourhood. Hizbullah enjoys near-universal appreciation and for a long time only Hizbullah ran for local elections in the district, on a joint ticket with the dominant Sunni party, the Future Movement. Yet, even though both Shia parties are institutionally present in the neighbourhood, there is only one small ‘island’ in the neighbourhood that has been marked visually as ‘Hizbullah’s’. The Kurds have loose, opportunistic ties to the Future Movement, whereas the latter’s ties to the neighbourhood’s ‘Arab’ Sunnis are much more tight. My research in this area is mostly that of street life – daily congregations of colleagues, friends and family over tea, coffee or food – and parallels in that way my research about ‘civil society’, which also concerns the public dimension of the participants’ lives. It is the nature of that publicity that is the object of this research project. As much as possible though, I’ve tried to find out how that publicity is rooted in relations and practices that extend beyond and behind it.

My argument is that each of these styles of political imagination – each public culture, you might say – constitute different political subjects. Or, to rephrase, political subjects are formed in the contention (freely after Rancière, again) that these styles allow. As people assert their politics, as they critically evaluate political goings-on on the basis of the fundamental needs or issues they posited, political subjectivity emerges. With Ortner (2005) we can say that subjectivity is made up of three dimensions: it is a kind of consciousness (a way of knowing), it is built up around certain affects (that Ortner circumscribes with Raymond Williams’ ‘structures of feeling’) and is tied to practice (embodied action-in-the-world). In respect to the first dimension, Ortner says we need to understand consciousness in two ways – as individuals who are reflexive about their place in the world and as shared ways of knowing (a ‘collective’ consciousness). In terms of affect, political subjectivity is formed through the cultivation of certain emotions (anger, excitement) and more broadly, certain affective states (like indignation, hope, or acquiescence). Finally, political subjectivity is meaningfully tied to and partially formed in practices that open up or consolidate spaces in the public sphere and its wider polity. These practices can be of the reflexive and pragmatic as well as of the habitus kind.

These are clearly complex matters that deserve holistic approaches. There are two things that at least need explication right from the get-go:
one, how the shared ways of knowing relate to individual reflexivity, and two, how individual reflexivity relates to affect. In one way, subjectivity is a shared or collective way of being, a way that a number of people engage the political field, a way that is tied to a certain sociological figuration. In this thesis, I analyse that kind of political subjectivity largely from a discursive perspective – the way people ‘know’ their political world through the discursive practices that they share. The aforementioned framing devices constitute one such practice I will be looking at. While shared ways of speaking, these specific master framing devices of the citizen and the ordinary man also offer a way of thinking about how they constitute individual subjectivities. What they offer people is a ‘stance’ from which to effectuate their evaluations. One may understand such stances as discursive subject positions. With this qualification, I loosely take inspiration from linguistic anthropological approaches to how (Goffmanian) interactional orders relate to subjectivity. For authors from this tradition, a subject position is an available ‘cultural category’ (Silverstein 2003) of personhood or a social actor, a category that people can align themselves with, for example by using the relevant framing devices. The devices are performative: those deploying the frame inhabit the position. Arguably, part of one’s subjectivity follows from recurrently inhabiting (or aligning with) such positions, as one makes it one’s own. This brings us to affect. In alignment, people rehearse and experience some of the characteristics of the subject position – how it feels to take a certain stand, explore (with others) what dreams may be possible, and determine what one can do. In part then, one can see subjectivity as the sediments of these alignments as they root themselves in a person’s “conscious and unconscious sense of self, emotions and desires” (Weedon 2005: 18). This thesis will therefore ask which kind of subjectivity people cultivate as they evaluate their world – which ways of knowing they develop, what their hopes and dreams are and what they think is possible for them and for Lebanon. While the emphasis in this thesis is initially on the discursive dimensions, towards the end of the thesis I shift that emphasis over onto these experiential matters of embodied subjectivity. Throughout, I remain attentive to how people’s notions about Lebanon are tied to the daily practices of finding one’s way, as well as their attempts to actualize them.

Whereas a subject position is a discursive ‘fact’, subjectivity is one of embodiment. Ortner precisely argues against such a discursive kind of understanding of subjectivity, arguing that part of the essence of what subjectivity is – a complex structure of feeling – is left out of these analyses. That may be a risk, but it’s not a necessary implication.
These questions and the focus on subjectivity more generally allow me to make a contribution to a body of literature that Paley (2002) reviewed and dubbed “the anthropology of democracy”, and in particular a strand that problematizes “qualities of citizenship” (Paley 2002: 479). In this strand, scholars posit that citizenship is not uniformly shared by all citizens but “unevenly enacted” over space and time. Hence we can distinguish between formal citizenship – being a recognized citizen of a nation – and the de facto insertion into the political order – the rights one can actually deduce from such citizenship, and under which conditions. This distinction, which Paley derives from a well-known piece by Holston & Caldeira (1998), is quite similar to other important interventions in the study of citizenship. Isin (2009: 370) distinguishes the ‘subject-position’ of the citizen from the subject (migrant, refugee, state) who enacts the position, but may or may not herself possess the status of ‘citizen’. Similarly, Bosniak (2006) has looked at aliens who are practically citizens of a political community despite not having any legal recognition of being so. Thus, both Holston & Caldeira, on the one hand, and Isin and Bosniak, on the other, look at what happens when people do not possess or cannot claim the full rights of citizen-hood – and what that implies about the nature of the polity. Both approaches lead to similar questions: what status positions are assigned in any given legal system, how do these positions translate practically in different social and political contexts, what claims to citizen status do people make in relation to that status and position, what citizen ‘practices’ are enacted when the status can’t be realized? In our case, how does Lebanon’s sectarian system distribute rights and duties among its citizens? How does it figure into their imagination of who they are? What are Lebanese able and willing to claim on its basis? In what political relations are such claims embedded?

Such questions lend themselves naturally to a scrutiny in terms of subjectivity. Arguably, it’s at the very core of such questions (subjectivity does matter for democracy, to respond to Wedeen’s [2004: 288] question). Yet, the way it has been discussed in – what may be broadly termed as – postcolonial scholarship has not always been in these terms. Rather, the logic of rule – predominantly conceived as mechanisms of differential access to the state – is central in these works (Partha Chatterjee’s ideas about “political society” stand out as a paradigmatic

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3 Please forgive the neologism. I will occasionally use it to emphasize the inhabited or subjective character of being a citizen (citizenship as a quale of subjects, as it were), in contrast to ‘citizenship’, which conjures up more standard images of something that people have or exercise.
example). With that focus on political logics, political subjects no longer come across as actual people of flesh and blood: as people who are swayed by the power of words and who are party to the exchange of ideas. In that move to logics, then, scholars (like Chatterjee) sometimes seem to forget the webs of meaning that the children of men suspend themselves in, reducing people’s lives instead to the materiality of their circumstances and tactics. By contrast, by taking seriously the terms that people use and the frames with which they align themselves, this thesis offers a vista on those intricate webs of meaning as well as their relevance for our understanding of “what people are up to” – in Geertz’ formulation of anthropology’s task – as ‘citizens’. When that vista opens ups, what stands out is that that people’s engagements with the political are also deeply moral in nature.

The thesis proceeds with Geertz’ task as follows. The book is divided into three sections and each section is divided into two chapters. In the first section I introduce the field. The first chapter serves to provide some necessary historical background and doubles as a review of the literature on Beirut. In the end I bring that literature to bear on the questions of this book. In the literature review, I focus on those works who in some way have addressed the question what the post-war reconstruction has been about. The emphasis is on the physical reconstruction of the city, but naturally physical reconstruction is inextricable from questions about political and social reconstruction (questions such as which state institutions should be (made) competent to regulate the process?; or what of the people who were displaced during the war?). Overwhelmingly, scholars have answered this question with “territoriality”: reconstruction would have been about securing and reclaiming territory, for one’s constituency or for one’s business or political network. My question therefore at the end of that chapter is how does ‘territoriality’ play out in my field sites and how would it factor into people’s political imagination?

I start off that exploration in Khandaq. Chapter 2 is a first ethnographic introduction to the neighbourhood and explores how it has fared in the ‘reconstruction era’. The focus is therefore on how the neighbourhood qua urban space has been made and how residents have dealt with the changes. Hence, I inquire into the intervention of political actors in the neighbourhood, I follow a number of real-estate developers who have been locally active over the past decade or so, and I show how residents are attempting to maintain their foothold in a quickly evolving real-estate market. These explorations reveal that while (confessional) territories
are certainly part of the social imaginary, actual competition over territory is not as central a dynamic as the cases treated in the literature about Beirut. Real-estate is a rather banal affair to most in Khandaq. From there I extend the discussion into an engagement with Marxist urban sociological literature. Given that banality of the production of space, the conception of urban politics that some of its main protagonists espouse is not very helpful. Counter to how Marxist sociologists and geographers have conceived it, and in contrast to the dominant trope of Beirut scholarship, the production of space or territory – while both subject to popular scrutiny and worry – does not appear form be a dominant frame through which people from Khandaq see themselves as part of the body politic. The question then arises, where do they situate themselves?

That question takes us into the second section, which stays in Khandaq, also considers the presence of the political party, as well as of the local state, but takes out the analytical prism of space and territory. I take two steps to answer the question above, where the first chapter sets up the second. Chapter 3 takes a second historical look at the neighbourhood, now focusing on ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ institutions of governance in the neighbourhood. In particular I look at elected ‘street level bureaucrats’ called mukhtars; at local strongmen; and at political leadership at the national level. Two questions guide the analysis: how is the power or authority of ‘the state’ and that of political leaders mediated through these local figures of the mukhtar and the strongman; and how does the balance of power between the different players evolve over time? Judging by the comments of the mukhtars and strongmen, that question of authority – or sovereignty – is a significant one.

It is in Chapter 4 that I examine that question of sovereignty from the residents’ perspective. It is actually a question that preoccupies people most consistently in their public talks. The kind of world that residents publically imagine themselves to be a part of, is the sectarian community that exists within the intersecting sovereignties of the state and the political party. My tack at understanding how they see these ‘entities’ is by positing that people’s experiences with the mukhtar and the strongmen provide occasions for them to elaborate their ideas about the state and the political party, respectively. These ideas are highly ambivalent. I show that such ambivalence draws on the discursive fodder that the notion of being but ordinary men provides: that notion is the basis for critical stances towards both entities. While residents are self-evidently part of the sectarian world, they are therefore not wholly subsumed by it. Meanwhile, the intersecting sovereignties themselves
also continually provide new material for shifting stances. The chapter ends by comparing the ways people navigate that local political field with recent theory about the postcolonial state that takes fractured or uneven sovereignty as its starting point, and which draws inspiration from Deleuze & Guattari’s ‘revolutionary’ theories of statecraft to think about how people in the margins ‘slip’ through the institutional ‘cracks’.

While I am able to close the second section with a first answer to my questions about political imagination, it is still only based on my first field site. In the last section we move into the second ‘case study’ in order to enrich our understanding of the Lebanese political universe. In particular it will throw in relief the kinds of ideas that people have about citizenhood. The differences between the two ‘worlds’ in turn allow me to take on a second but related strand of postcolonial theory, which has taken a differentiation between two forms of citizenship - one privileged and empowered, the other disinherit and marginal – as the basis for its understanding of the nature of postcolonial societies and politics. The section proceeds in the same manner as the previous two sections. The first of the two chapters provides the necessary empirical baseline, whereas the second devotes the greater share of its prodigious verbiage to a discussion of theory. Chapter 5, then, introduces the world of Beiruti civil society. It shows what ‘being part’ of civil society means to people and the work that goes into being a ‘citizen’. The main, overarching difference with the style of imagination in Khandaq is the relation to the sectarian world. Whereas being part of it was largely self-evident to people in Khandaq, in ‘civil society’, people take great pains of creating an alternative, neutral space, outside of the sectarian world.

Chapter 6 takes that difference and juxtaposes it to theories that have taken just such a difference as the basis for their thinking about (post-colonial) citizenship. It then addresses and ethnographically explicates a dual problem that emerges from that juxtaposition: the civil kind of citizenship can’t live up to its ideal type (get it?), whereas the popular kind amounts to much more than the strategic logic of making-do to which it denizens are often reduced. In order to resolve these two problems I return to an explicit attention to political subjectivity. If one considers people’s shared ways of knowing, their affects and practices, as tied to certain settings, one avoids risks of both hypostatizing and reducing people (in)to logical categories. It will also result in a ‘thicker’ understanding of what people are up as citizens, and what that means to them.
Following the conclusion, and an afterword in which I show a few glimpses the impact of the ‘Arab Spring’ (which took place after my main fieldwork period) on the understanding of the ideals and goals for many people in ‘civil society’, you will find an appendix in which I provide qualifications of my findings based on the research choices I have made.