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

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I set out this book to answer the question how (Beiruti) Lebanese relate to sectarianism, as the dominant political vocabulary and reality. In so doing, I sought to understand people’s political subjectivity, that is, how they understand and practice their membership of the political community. With Ortner (2005), I understood subjectivity to arise at the conflux of people’s imagination (or “consciousness”, as Ortner herself put it); the affective states at the root or conjured by that imagination; as well as practices, in particular those that relate people to other members and political institutions. I focused on two sets of people, two sets of practices: one rooted in civil society activities, another in neighbourly associations in a popular area. In what follows, I synthesize my findings into an overview of two overarching ways of relating to sectarianism and the subjectivities they allow people to cultivate.

Political imagination is a shared ‘way of knowing’ (Ortner) that is essentially evaluative in nature. Political subjectivity emerges in the process of formulating these evaluations. In these Lebanese cases, people’s evaluation of political actors, programmes and state performance ultimately comes down to an evaluation of the political system that undergirds all events and actions: ‘sectarianism’. Sectarianism can be characterized as a political philosophy that divides up the world into a state, religious communities and subjects, classifies these subjects as citizens to a large extent through their membership of said religious communities, and posits that certain political elites are expected to mediate state, community and subject-citizen. As I posited at the outset, and as has become clear, this philosophy has been deeply compromised. It had always been controversial, in a fundamental sort of way because of the rallying cry of Arab Nationalism, but also pragmatically because the particular divisions of power and privileges between the sects were always contested. The civil war and its ‘sectarian’ excesses made it morally suspect though. In addition, this “system” (niẓām) has become the primary obstacle imagined by those who entertain developmentist dreams for Lebanon (especially the youth). Yet, Lebanon is still a ‘sectarian’ country. Sectarianism is still the only widely shared vocabulary to talk about political issues and the
default set of practices to tackle them. That begs the question what alternative vocabularies people have at their disposal to take critical distance and formulate their contestation of this ‘system’.

As it turns out, each style of imagination offered its own way of relating to sectarianism. The people in ‘civil society’ seek to place themselves outside of sectarianism, both symbolically (for instance by framing themselves as ‘madani’ – a ‘secular’ kind of civil – which is different from ‘ahli’ – a confessional civil), as well as, to a certain extent, materially (in the religiously unmarked character of the spaces where they gather most). Framing themselves as ‘outside’ does not necessarily imply an adversarial stance, but primarily a neutral or autonomous space outside of the institutional nodes of power that are associated with the political status quo – that is, outside of the domain of political parties and beyond the confessional institutions. This is a space to meet other ‘citizens’ as well as a space from which to engage the state and pressure politicians to change the state, substantively. People from Khandaq, by contrast, place themselves squarely at the centre of these ‘sectarian’ relations. They are wary of, or simply do not understand, those who oppose sectarianism in a pure form, by advocating ‘secularism’. They regularly align themselves with the political parties of their confession, and express no need to distance themselves from their sectarian position and their confessional institutions per se. Such a stance is in part a corollary of where these interactions happen: in the neighbourhood, a confessionally marked space. Within this position in a sectarian world though, they do shift alignments between parties or negotiate the extent of that alignment with the party of their favour. They may also well have their doubts about the direction of religious leadership, as witnessed in the controversies over Ashura. Moreover, they are acutely attuned to politicians (or religious leaders) who abuse religious differences or seek to enlarge their confessional clout in the state. In other words, they display an ambivalent engagement with the representative institutions of the sectarian system. As to the state, they have an ambiguity that follows from that. They can at times be quite adversarial or oppositional, they can deplore it, but they do so because they believe in its idea. The ensemble of these alignments and stances is intimately tied up with the notion of (being part of) ‘the people’.

‘Civil society’ and ‘the people’ function as imagined moral communities to each grouping, respectively. They are master categories that anchor a number of other important values and ideas. For residents of Khandaq, being part of the people means that one tends to have a strong sense of (in)justice and looks toward strong leadership to set things right and straighten out those who profit over the backs of ordinary men and women. For partici-
pants of ‘civil society’, dialogue, openness (of people) or transparency (of governance), and ‘citizenship’ are important critical and mobilizing terms they often deploy. Each moral community thus supplies a vocabulary and ethical baseline with which people can take critical distance and evaluate what happens on the political stage, or how citizens relate to each other.

What does imagining oneself as part of such a community do for one’s political subjectivity? In imagining these moral communities, what hope do people express, where do people see their role in society, and what is it like to fulfil it? The answer to that question needs to start with the observation that, with post-war politicization of the country’s political system, people also call into question their membership of the political community. What kind of citizens people are, and how they relate to state and nation, are perennial subjects of their reflexivity. How people work out that question, and how it works out for them, so to speak, varies. In civil society, there is a recurrent sense of not achieving anything. I’ve heard many people express this feeling: it’s an uphill battle. Battles were won (the campaign for local elections in 1998; the extraordinary solidarity and organizational frenzy during the Israeli siege in 2006), and these wins have been energizing. But as an employee of Nahwa al-Muwatiniya once told me, it seems like recently, all we ever seem to do is score points on the side bets. All that really matters is entrenched too deeply, defended too staunchly by the powers that be for us to change it. This feeling does result in despondency and the even the occasional break-down among employees and activists. New blood concomitantly tends to mean new energy. The Yes to Dialogue sessions about three generations looking at the civil war (“it’s not just a hiwar, it’s an event…”), discussed in Chapter 5, was set up by a new coordinator of the program, who wanted to bring new flair to the initiative. Stamina is thus a requisite attribute; attrition is fact of civil life. A different complicating factor is that the fight is, by its very nature, fraught. The ‘vested interests’ in the state cannot be fought head on, for fear of losing what is most valuable – one’s own impartiality. Confessional society meanwhile is not to be fought at all. It is to be coaxed, convinced and to be cooperated with. However, common wisdom dictates that the more deeply people are steeped in confessional society, the more difficult this becomes. Still, despite these intrinsic obstacles, people do have energy. Or rather, there are constant calls to renew that energy – to mobilize one’s indignation or to channel one’s idealism. Fadi Shayya’s letter to address the potential destruction of the Sanayeh park may serve as an example (“every concerned citizen is urged” to participate in the “civil action” in order to “lobby” and “advocate green areas, open spaces, public spaces, heritage, and most importantly citizenship in Beirut”. It is significant, by
the way, that ‘citizenship’ is the language in which such calls are couched, in one way or another.) Indignation (and sometimes concomitant anger) is an affective state that often recurs, and one that is cultivated. (Yet not all is serious – many initiatives tend in fact to be ludic, such as the populous ‘secularism marches’: for the 2010 edition various people dressed up as if to go a wedding of the civil marriage that didn’t exist. A smaller initiative, ‘Critical Mass’ bike tours (Beirut edition) were meant to address environmental issues and cars’ suffocating hold on the city, but were equally about the pleasure of biking. There was therefore also a sense that positivism should be the engine of mobilization and protest.)

On the Khandaq side, collective mobilization is not a thing. That changes the affective dynamic considerably. However, passivity is not the alternative of mobilization. Their engagement with the world takes two forms. One is the kind of reflexivity they rehearse in daily conversations with neighbours, and the emotions that befit that. Indignation, at the failed state, at (morally) corrupted leaders is a central, recurring emotional state. For most though, that state isn’t paired with the attempt to affirm and strengthen one’s agency. (In fact, I would venture it is coupled with powerlessness more often than not; even as hope may be placed in the political party). The other forms of engagement are concrete interventions, whether that be on individual initiative or in concerted action. The Hizbullah recruits are a special example of this. They are definitely part of something bigger, something collective – they go to training sessions, religious schooling and on a more informal and somewhat ad hoc basis become part of pan-urban networks that promote security or civil peace. That creates a sense of a kind of agency perhaps absent for most people. That level and extent of ‘engagement’ is rather rare also. Many youth are involved with the party most present on the ground, Amal. From what it seems, that may not amount to much, structurally, but they can be called to do odd jobs as the occasion requires. (And senior party members from the neighbourhood will have greater (moral) authority for them.) People have other ways of engaging on a neighbourhood level as well. They might participate in the administration of a charity organization, or maintain public space out of pocket (and in one’s own time). The Hizbullah guys are also active in this space – especially as small big men who get to intervene in disturbances of the peace. What kind of disposition does this engender? Subhi phrased it quite aptly: it’s all about being ‘attentive’ or ‘alert’, that is, being on the lookout to enact one’s responsibility. Sometimes there is some ‘strongman’ component in taking up responsibility, when a man has to assert his street cred and authority. That requires its own kind of cultivation of affective states. Most of the people though practice smaller and per-
haps less spectacular forms of responsibility. They are good neighbours, and are alive to opportunities to perform little acts of kindness, which they understand as sticking together, out of duty or solidarity, as neighbourhood, as community, or as the disinherited people. While thus far I have stressed the differences between these two styles of imagination, I need to provide two qualifications of these differences. One is that these are not properties inherent to people, but in significant part properties of the settings in which these forms of knowledge are produced and shared. Thus, being in public fosters a ‘public’ type of talking about the state. The public culture of civility that precludes naming and identifying helps reproduce an imagination of the state and democracy in which a state weakened by generic forces of sectarianism and related nepotism may be coaxed into functioning as a generally responsive and representative body, with the help of smart campaigns, the right network and, of course, a bit of luck and a lot of persistence. Outside of this domain of civil activism, however, things might well look different for the same people. They may have to negotiate confessional realities in their private lives in a way that would not live up to their civil ideas elsewhere. Dealing with different allegiances in the family, especially come voting time (where the father or an uncle might pledge the family’s votes), financial support for one’s education, or even dealing with exigencies for marriage. It might also be that as soon as the norms of public civility cease to be contextually relevant, people, in situations they consider private, may be quite specific in the address of their incriminations of the political field. Such incrimination are well within the field of the possible and in fact quite common in Khandaq. There, public intimacy creates the image of a state weakened by specific forces and particular politicians. As above though, outside of this particular neighbourhood setting, especially in places that involve strangers or people from various confessional backgrounds, the very same people may well subscribe to some form of non-descript civility. At the same time, one should not expect discursive behaviour to be wholly determined by context. One of my main arguments is that ways of talking and participating in public (also publically intimate) interactions sediment over time into a political subjectivity. In other words, ‘subjectivity’ as shared ways of knowing also consolidate to various extents in embodied, ‘individual’ subjectivities. Thus the extent to which certain discursive practices ‘travel’ depends on how much someone has internalized these practices and the values they index as well as her judgment about how contextually appropriate or felicitous they would be. The second qualification is of a different nature. Besides the differentiations I’ve discussed in extenso, there is also an elementary resemblance
between the two, a semblance of which the differences are merely diverging elaborations. Through both styles of imagination, people expect more from the state. In fact, they expect something quite similar from the state. The difference in the way that residents in Khandaq talk about the state vis-à-vis people in ‘civil society’ derives from their different position on sectarianism – from whether they ‘stand’ outside or inside it. For ‘civil society’ folks, the state needs radical reform. For Khandaq residents, the state just needs to do what it is called to do (rather than being subverted by corrupt elites from its purpose (the purpose it is already endowed with). In civil society, people will emphasize the need to be treated as individuals, as ‘citizens’, equally across the board, whereas in Khandaq, people will sooner couch a language of economic justice in communitarian language, that the state should make sure none of the sects are left behind. In essence though, a similar desire emerges. Both expect the state to play fairly, to be a guarantor of the communitas of the nation, to ensure a fundamental equality between members of the political community – or, put differently, to uphold what was for Hegel (cf. Avineri 1974) the universally altruistic logic of the State (and which is perhaps the fundamental state idea that most people around most of the world cherish).

Obviously, it is also quite clear to Lebanese that the Lebanese state is not very successful in guaranteeing that universal logic. In part, it is unable to transcend particular interests – among them primarily sectarian interests – because it also incarnates those very religious differences: the entire political and bureaucratic system is premised on a division of the polity into sectarian factions. That sets up contradictions that provides fertile ground for the kinds of ambivalence towards and frustration with the state that people voice. (Hence people have a more fundamentally ambivalent attitude about the state than the one that Hansen [2013] identified in India. The corruption of its idea is endemic, not epiphenomenal.) For people in Khandaq the sectarian system provides a cover for politicians who act on behalf of particular interests, whether that be collective (sectarian) ones or their own selfish pursuits (of material gain, usually). Civil society folks will say it not only provides cover for, but encourages such actions. In addition, the power adjudicated to religious institutions (like courts for ‘civil’ law) limits personal freedom (it complicates cross-sectarian marriage), and the idea that the state differentiates between different kinds of citizens is fundamentally wrong and divisive. For this reason, in civil society most people have turned that frustration into a wholesale rejection of the current system that produces such ‘contradictions’. In Khandaq’s public discourse, ambivalence remains characteristic, as abolishment is generally perceived as (coming from actors who are) anti-religious and
as something that will weaken the confessional communities (and thus amplify the precarity of its members’ lives).

The common ground between the two styles does make clear that territoriality is not a helpful lens through which to look at Beirut’s social and political landscape, at least if one wants to understand the perspective of its residents. For many a commentator sectarianism and territoriality were basically the same thing: the territory is where people close themselves off in pure sectarian spaces. Clearly, that is not a helpful way of understanding the role of “sectarianism” in people’s lives. First of all, the ‘territory’ of the neighbourhood is a space in which the presence of both state and political parties precisely prompt questions about relations between community life, political leadership and state authority. Secondly, the commitment to the state – as incarnation and guarantor of the Lebanese nation – transcends any simple sectarian allegiance people might have. In other words, while people in Khandaq do situate their identities primarily vis-à-vis the political (and religious) leadership of the ‘sectarian’ community to which they are assigned from birth onwards, they also do so vis-à-vis that ‘overarching’ institution of the state, that ideally cross-cuts or stands ‘above’ the religious differences.

Casting this territorial-sectarian lens aside then, what does it mean to be a citizen of Lebanon? Based on this research, for many, it means to strive for something. In Khandaq, many strive to be a steward, whether to others (in the neighbourhood) or to their (confessional) community. In ‘civil society’, most strive for a more wholesome relationship between state and society as well as for greater unity in society. ‘Civil society’ is actually meant to cultivate this struggle, as a principle. Among ‘the people’, only some (like the Hizbullah guys) are engaged in relations that seek to purposefully enhance their agency, by providing tools to better oneself and one’s community. Others (Ragheb et al, Abu Ali) are less purposive and let the appel of others spring them into action. For many like them, but also for many of the more passive participants in civil society events, citizenship is more about longing than it is about striving, though. Longing for a Lebanon that – hope against all hope – may fulfil its (glorious) promise. One’s sense of citizenship, the ways one seeks to practice it, are obviously intimately connected to more daily struggles and deliberations. All this longing and/or striving happens while trying to make ends meet, or while trying figure out what future to build, especially for youth, who ask themselves whether or not to go abroad, and what career may be possible in Lebanon (including in civil society). In the context where the nature of the Lebanese polity is contentious, such questions are at once practical and fundamental.