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

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Appendix: Scope of the thesis

In this appendix I single out and discuss a few aspects of my methodology in more detail, so as to indicate the reach and limits of my research. These aspects are threefold: the first concerns the overwhelmingly discursive nature of the material; the second deals with categories and representativity in both my field sites; and the last is the role of gender in my fieldwork.

This is not an ethnography of great intimacy. I have not lived intensively with a small group of people and participated as much as possible in their daily activities. Instead I repeatedly visited a great number of people. I visited the events of the various NGOs I was interested in, I swam with the people of Ammar’s distribution company or dropped by for some coffee, and regularly ‘attended’ Abu Zalem’s tea group. In other words, I always caught distinctive glimpses of people’s lives. Yet, there is method to this madness: I systematically visited each or most of the occasions these people met. I visited Abu Zalem’s tea group nearly every day, swam and chatted with the guys a couple of times per week, and hardly missed any event of any of the NGOs or initiatives I was interested in. The result is an ethnography of publicity. Central in publicity is how words are produced, staged, shared and received. This is what I know and what I have analyzed. The interviews I did form a mere supplement to this. I’ve had recorded talks with the majority of the people involved in the organizations I’ve tracked; I’ve interviewed most of the people that I also saw regularly in Khandaq; and I’ve sought out organizations and individuals relevant to the issues that people – especially the civil society activists – were dealing with, notably politicians and bureaucrats. These interviews do provide a glimpse of people’s non-public sides, or what goes on backstage, but not too much more than that, actually.

There are two consequences: One is that I rely on words a lot. It’s about what people say they do, and how they say it, much less on what they then go on to do. While that constitutes a limitation, in many cases it is
a theoretical one – while, say, working at an NGO, participating in the
day-to-day life of a charity organization, or going on ‘field’ trips with Abu
Zalem would have undoubtedly enriched my understanding of many a
thing, it would not necessarily change my understanding of exercises in
political imagination. The second consequence may be, well, more conse-
quential: I don’t have a really good insight into where and how the public
things of this thesis are rooted in people’s lives. That could be a draw-
back if one wanted to understand what things political mean to people.
Instead, I can only say something about the public – i.e., shared in real-
time – forms of meaning-making.
A related dimension of the research is that it emphasizes cohesion over
conflict, which is typically the kind of thing that stays under covers in
public settings. I’ve shown the imagination of community, but much less
the fraught relations with people who for some would ideally actually
not be a part of that community. Take the people who looked down on
those living in the sloppy looking, irregular Khatib building (whom they
might lump together with the epithet “those refugees”), for example. But
even people who live inside the building, like Subhi and Bilal, might make
similar attempts at distinction (and distantiation) from others who live
there – who, for example, are not ‘trying to be correct’. Or take the rival-
ries between Amal and Hizbullah, which can run deep. On occasion, Abu
Zalem made quite derogatory remarks about Amal; and actually wanted
to build his own small mosque across from his office, rather than going
to the Shia mosque down the street, next to ‘the Amal guys’. Obviously,
there are tensions in the neighbourhood. Again, they may not be as ana-
lytically relevant for the purpose of this thesis: the exercise of imaging a
community serves a purpose that is to a good extent detached from the
really-existing community. It is primarily a political discourse, aimed at
the political field and a broader imagined public, not a communal dis-
course meant for each other. Still, one could imagine political and com-
munal discourses becoming embroiled with each other. The (‘political’) lan-
duage of community might deployed in conflict situations, like Abu
Ali who deployed the language of neighbourliness or kinship to smooth
over or hush conflict. Conversely, tensions might inform ‘community
speak’. My hunch is that the embroilment would be a weak one, but given
the nature of my research, I have no more than a hunch.
This last dimension takes me to the following point. I’m guilty of wilfully
homogenizing my two groupings to a certain degree. In Khandaq I have
neglected the Sunna somewhat and I have neglected what might be a
Sunni perspective entirely. I have talked about several Sunnis, but always
as ‘ordinary people’, never ‘as’ Sunnis, which is what I repeatedly have
done with my Shia informants. That is, I precisely tried to understand how Shia residents alternated between ‘sectarian’ and ‘popular’ perspectives on politics and society. Given that Sunna occupy today and have historically occupied a different position in the sectarian political economy, and because there are subsequently different communitarian stories about their place in the Lebanese nation, one may expect a different kind of alternation between ‘sectarian’ and ‘popular’ perspectives for Khandaq’s Sunna (and this holds all the more for the Kurds). To highlight one potential difference, Shia’s ‘popular’ perspective is backed up in a sense by political parties who have a discourse about ordinary folks (the dispossessed and the disempowered). ‘Ordinary’ Sunna in Khandaq do not have such an ideological ‘infrastructure’. That could have an impact on the way they discuss matters of “popular” interest that might well be relevant for my reflections in this thesis. However, I did not hang out long enough with enough of them to be able to say something sensible about that. As a consequence, they’ve become somewhat invisible. As regards my treatment of ‘civil society’, I have not discussed a subset of people who don’t quite fall neatly in the ‘civil society’ category, even if they share venues, networks and ambitions. We might call them ‘the activists’ (though “activist”, and its various Arabic equivalents, is deployed by a variety of participants in the field of ‘civil society’, albeit not without contestation). They are generally not tied to NGOs, they may be tied to left-wing or “secular” parties, or else operate ‘independently’, and do more political and topical ‘actions’, like demonstrations, rather than the more pacifying ‘dialogue’ type of activities. (Obviously, with the post-Arab Spring politicization – cf. Coda – that distinction becomes more muddled.) I mention both these analytical shortcuts, because I expect there is still a different story to tell there about political imagination, different from the two I have told. However, given that I did not make any real effort of integrating into events and activities of either ‘subset’, I did not feel confident discussing them in this thesis.

I can be quite brief about my last qualification. My account of Khandaq is rooted in male public sociality, period. I have no idea how a (perhaps more restricted) female publicity compares with this, nor have I any real clue about how these two worlds would intersect. In a conservative environment, women’s spaces were not open to me and I got to know very few of them. I have visited a few people in their homes, but usually though not always I would stay in the ‘public’ sections of the house, where sociality was yet again focused on men. I suspect that access to that world would have gotten me a much better insight into the material of Chapter 4 – social regulation and the organization of the neighbourhood – and it may have changed my ideas about how political imagination is (can be) exercised in public.