

2 Community Organizing and the Limits of

Participatory Democracy in Lebanon

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Abstract

This chapter draws on two years of fieldwork with an activist-initiated community group in the East Beirut neighborhood of Mar Mikhael, a locale suffering the consequences of an aggressive process of gentrification. I argue that gentrification has served as both a sign and a facilitator of feelings of social abandonment. A bodily knowledge has brought the residents of Mar Mikhael to the conclusion that the Lebanese state very much exists and is more than capable of getting things done when it wants to, countering the common refrain that Lebanon is a failed state. I discuss a group of activists' attempts to "activate" the citizens of Mar Mikhael and help them lobby for their rights by asking them to appeal to the very state they believed had willfully abandoned them. I argue that these activists' progressive vision for the political potentiality of community organizing was limited by their dependence on a response to this grassroots work from the state, framed as the sole legitimate provider for city and citizenry. I explore the resurrection of state effect from below and the ability of the "idea" of the state to survive its own deconstruction by turning to theorizations of the state as fantasy.

In the year that followed Lebanon's "garbage protests," which unfolded during the summer of 2015, a diffuse urban social movement that had been developing for over a decade, subsuming a variety of campaigns, NGOs, collectives, and protests all aimed at the country's "centralized, fragmented and inefficient urban governance structure" (Harb 2016: 4), sedimented into what appeared to be a cohesive and organized force with the emergence of Beirut Madinati (Beirut,

My City), an independent electoral campaign that contested the country's 2016 municipal elections in the capital.¹

Beirut Madinati began as the initiative of professors based at the American University of Beirut, many of whom lacked a formal background in politics. It gradually expanded to include a diversity of middle- and upper-middle-class actors, some of whom had experience working with Lebanon's traditional political parties but had grown disenchanted with them over time. The architects of Beirut Madinati wanted to find a way to translate the anger made palpable in the streets of Beirut during the summer of 2015 "into hope and action" (Sharp 2016). They committed themselves to putting forward an affirmative campaign, devoid of hostile or negative discourse. Beirut Madinati adopted a "professional, and maybe even corporate tone ... [and] opaque political positionality," one which "reflected in its [candidate] list that placed real estate developers and engineers from multinational corporations alongside academics, activists, and artists" (ibid.).

Beirut Madinati's ten-point platform focused on making the capital more livable for all of its residents by addressing traffic congestion, the lack of parks and public transportation, the housing and waste crises, and other issues that pertained to the well-being of the city's inhabitants. In its campaign material, it emphasized the *achievability* of its program, isolating and delving into each issue sector by sector, introducing manageable solutions to targeted issues that could serve as catalysts for more ambitious interventions in the future. The campaign highlighted the proposed reforms that were most easily and immediately implementable.² Beirut Madinati's members and supporters, Cambanis writes (2017), "believe that political power requires small causes embedded in a grander vision."

Three months of campaigning, however, were not enough to move masses of people to action. While Beirut Madinati's 30 percent of the total vote (60 percent in the city's largest Christian district) is undoubtedly impressive, especially for a campaign of political unknowns who formally appeared on the scene a mere three months before election day, only 20 percent of registered voters actually participated in the Beirut election.³ In its aftermath, Beirut Madinati members who were veterans of Beirut's urban social movement insisted that what the city and country needed was to be introduced to the benefits of participatory democracy, through which a *mujtama' fā'el* (proactive society) could be cultivated. And so, Beirut Madinati's "neighborhood initiative" was born, one of three working groups established in the aftermath of the electoral loss.

In the written material they produced to explain the impetus behind the neighborhood initiative, the volunteers involved argued the need to establish direct communication with all segments of society, regardless of creed, social, or economic standing, political beliefs and educational backgrounds, and to activate residential communities that could "serve as sustainable political alternatives and work on shared issues."⁴ The civil war and what followed it, the authors argued, pulled neighborhoods apart and disintegrated the bonds between Beirutis. Through work at the neighborhood level, the initiative hoped to begin to stitch back together the social fabric, it argued, once animated neighborhood-based communities, to encourage communal work and debate, and to cultivate feelings of belonging to the neighborhood and through it the city. Its goal was to counter hopelessness and the fragmentation, individualism, and divisive forms of meaning-making and identification it is productive of.

The neighborhood initiative imagined a form of activism grounded in an ethics of *care*: in demonstrating what could become of Beirut if its residents looked out for and defended each

other and their city instead of simply trying to survive or cope with the day-to-day chaos of Lebanon on their own. Many hoped that this routine coming together could aid in the democratization of political life by helping people make sense of the conditions under which they lived and suffered as shared with others they might have previously perceived as alien to them (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

In what follows, I draw on two years of ethnographic fieldwork with one of the neighborhood initiative's two pilot projects, which unfolded in the East Beirut neighborhood of Mar Mikhael – a locale suffering the consequences of an aggressive process of gentrification. I argue that the initiative's progressive vision for the political potentiality of community organizing was limited by its dependence on a response to this grassroots work from the state, framed as the sole legitimate provider for city and citizenry. Pressured both by the communities it worked with and by Beirut Madinati's wider umbrella structure to generate fast results, the neighborhood initiative was unable to dedicate attention and energy to cultivating the structures of feeling it hoped for and which it believed were necessary components of imbuing this practice of community organizing with political potential.

Caring for one's neighborhood and fellow residents manifested as a routine, collective lobbying of local authorities to "do their job." Building on Hermez's (2011a: 44) work on the shortcomings of the anti-sectarian movement in Lebanon, I argue that, in a similar vein, despite recognizing that Lebanon's "power structures were farcical" and wanting to agitate against them and cultivate alternative loci of power, without the availability of substitute methods for challenging the status quo the activists associated with the neighborhood initiative in Mar Mikhael were forced to abide by the rules of engagement offered up by a system they knew would inevitably disappoint them.

How can we make sense of the enduring promise of the state as caregiver amongst activists, particularly those who acknowledge the limits of lobbying state institutions and politicians for redress and justice, but who continue to embrace this form of political praxis?

“The Opium of the Citizen”⁵

In their article “Wayn Al-Dawla?: Locating the Lebanese State in Social Theory,” Mouawad and Baumann (2017: 66) challenge the popular claim that the Lebanese state is “weak, broken down, irrelevant, or absent.” They point out the important ways in which scholars have challenged this narrative of weakness and absence by proposing hybridity as a means for making sense of power relations in Lebanon, that is, an approach to state and non-state actors that acknowledges the ways in which they “mutually constitute and feed on one another in order to operate” (2017: 70). Within this framework, the state is embedded in a “wider field of power with a large plurality of actors” rather than framed as incapacitated by non-state actors or foreign state intervention.

While acknowledging the importance of this body of work, Mouawad and Baumann argue that it cannot fully account for the conditions of possibility behind the “weak state” paradigm. To address this gap, they propose the adoption of a hybrid analytic, one that brings together Marxist and post-structuralist theories of the state (summarized below), to think through “the complexity of state-society relations” as well as “the discursive construction of state absence” (71).

There is much to be gained from this hybridized approach to the study of the state. I agree with Mouawad and Baumann that engaging the Lebanese state through both a Marxist and a post-structuralist lens allows us to, on the one hand, challenge the narrative of “weakness” by looking to the state’s role in capital accumulation and, on the other, to see this narrative as “an effect of state-society relations” (2017: 67). Contrary to the ways in which many Lebanese have come to

describe life in post-civil war Lebanon, the shape that the country's economy has taken over the last three decades was not the result of a frail or missing state, "fatally wounded by fifteen years of civil strife and content to remain a tired and old night watchman" (Arsan, 2018: 237). Rather, the country's economic trajectory was facilitated by calculated and substantial intervention on the part of the political elite. Like in most other contexts, neoliberal development in Lebanon has relied both on state involvement "in particular sectors of the economy through manipulation of interest rates and monetary tinkering" and simultaneously on the abdication of responsibility in other spheres of governance, "such as the administration of urban space or the provision of welfare and utilities" (Arsan 2018: 214). The latter bolstered the power of sectarian political parties in the country, as they used a variety of private initiatives to fill the gap left by the very state whose renunciation of culpability for the welfare of its general population they had a hand in enabling, as extensions of the ruling elite.

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

privilege operates increasingly through disavowal of potency, repudiation of responsibility, and diffusion of sites and operations of control.”

However, in what follows, I wish to argue that despite the demonstrable value of the above-described lenses, they leave something unaccounted for, namely the *endurance* of a particular abstraction of the state, its reproduction from below, even when those participating in its reification appear to see through it. Marxist and post-structuralist analyses reveal that “what is imagined to be a real and stable state,” or in Lebanon’s case, a “weak” state is actually the product of “unequal relations of power...Like the commodity, the state is not a thing with inherent value, but, in Abrams’ words, ‘an idea’” (Navaro 2002: 156). But, what I hope to show in this chapter, building on Navaro’s work, is that the state as abstraction has a tendency to survive its deconstruction (2002: 185). As Navaro puts it, “unlike former historical formations, the state, like capitalism (up to this point), has shown itself capable of surviving crisis, conveniently refashioning itself where necessary” (2002: 185).

I build on Navaro’s theorization of cynicism as the political culture involved in resurrecting the state in the aftermath of its deconstruction. I embrace her shift away from the state as “mask, fetish, image, or discourse” and toward state as “fantasy” (2002: 186), thinking through the material conditions that allow for the reinforcement from below of the idea of the Lebanese state as neutral caregiver crippled by corrupt bureaucrats, by subjects who otherwise recognized the farcical nature of this discursive construct.

In her work on Aarsal (see also Mouawad’s article in this book), a neglected and impoverished town in Lebanon’s northeast, Obeid (2010: 332) argues that despite “skepticism of ‘the state’, residents do believe in it as a project that fulfils citizenship.” She quotes Harvey to argue that, like in other contexts, the Lebanese state “has survived scandal and disruption, incapacity and

weakness...the notion of a potentially effective external power is kept alive” (Harvey as cited in Obeid 2010: 332). Drawing on Navaro’s (2002) work, Obeid (2010: 343) argues that in the context of Arsal, the state is presented as having many faces:

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

I would argue that the above extends beyond Arsal to encompass much of Lebanon’s large population of disenfranchised and/or disenchanting citizens. Harvey and Knox (2012: 525), in their work on infrastructure, argue that “it is not in spite of unruly processes that infrastructures emerge as a form of social promise, but rather that it is through the experiences of life within and alongside unstable forces that infrastructures gain their capacity to enchant.” In the Lebanese case, it is through absence and neglect that the *state* gains its capacity to enchant, inspiring its enactment and reproduction through what Hermez (2015) calls the subjunctive mood, a performative process to which, I argue, Beirut Madinati has contributed.⁶ The *materiality of neglect* – the experience of witnessing the state provide more than adequately, for example, to affluent residents of Downtown Beirut, while most other residents of the capital struggle through electricity and water cuts alongside myriad other everyday problems – paradoxically strengthens faith in the Weberian state as the locus of political change. What, I ask, are the consequences of this enchantment?

Organizing Mar Mikhael

Whenever she was asked about the importance of community organizing, Dana, an urban researcher and founding member of Beirut Madinati's neighborhood initiative, offered up the same hypothetical example, worth quoting at length⁷:

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

Thursdays at 3 pm. So, you see, it's all about the process, and how it creates political communities.

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

Dana framed the two approaches to neighborhood work she advocated for as different paths that could nevertheless both lead to the cultivation of progressive political communities. In Mar Mikhael, where I volunteered, we found ourselves walking the path of mobilizations directed at local authorities.

The Mar Mikhael neighborhood group, established in November 2016, was initiated and facilitated primarily by two volunteers from Beirut Madinati's neighborhood initiative, Alia and Ghazi. Alia, an architect and urban planner, was an influential figure within Beirut's urban social movement with an impressive history of work on a variety of issues, from public space to housing and more. She was one of the public faces of Beirut Madinati during its municipal campaign and a founding member of the neighborhood initiative. Ghazi, a product designer with an otherwise limited history of involvement in Lebanon's activist scene, was inspired by Beirut

Madinati's foray into politics and what he considered its novel offerings – what he referred to, in our conversations, as its “concreteness.” Disappointed by its electoral loss, he was eager to contribute to its development into a social and political movement in the aftermath of the election. The other two working groups Beirut Madinati set up – the alternative municipality, which monitored and critically commented upon the sitting municipal council's work, and a commission to study future electoral possibilities – were felt by Ghazi to be occupied primarily by “experts.” He did not think he had anything to offer those conversations as someone without much to say about the technicalities of waste management, transportation, etc., but in the neighborhood initiative, he felt he had something to contribute as a designer whose studio was located in one of the two neighborhoods selected for the initiative's pilot projects.

Mar Mikhael, a small, predominantly Christian neighborhood of East Beirut, had been suffering from an aggressive process of gentrification that began in 2008 and had continued to chip away at its socio-economic fabric. Mar Mikhael is distinguished by the fact that most of its residents were born and raised there and are over the age of 40. The neighborhood is made up of three parallel streets and bordered by Avenue Charles Helou, which guides drivers coming to and from the north of the country. Its beginning and end are marked by two iconic buildings – the headquarters of Electricité du Liban to the west, and the old train station to the east. Until 2008, it was a lower-middle-class quarter of residences and small industrial and artisanal businesses (Krijnen & De Beukelaer 2015).

The gentrification of Mar Mikhael followed the transformation into nightlife hot spots of nearby neighborhood Gemmayze and street Monnot, and their subsequent decline. Around 2006, artists, designers, and other creatives began moving their studios and homes to Mar Mikhael, attracted by the low cost of rent in the area. They were trailed by restaurants, pubs, bars, investors, and

real estate developers, who collectively transformed the quarter's physical, social, and economic characteristics (Gerbal, Hrycaj, Lavoipierre & Potasiak 2016).

The ground floors of the Mandate era (1920–1943) buildings that dotted the neighborhood (Krijnen & De Beukelaer 2015), which once housed car mechanics, grocery shops, and other small businesses, were taken over by bars and restaurants, flanked on secondary streets of the neighborhood by designer studios and art galleries (Fawaz, Krijnen & El Samad 2018). Narrow streets crammed with bars sent shockwaves upwards through the residential buildings they occupied (sometimes more than one bar to a single building), and scores of patrons nightly poured out of these relatively small establishments to occupy the sidewalk and enjoy cigarettes and the night air with their cocktails.

Alia and Ghazi drew both on research that urbanist researchers had carried out on developments in Mar Mikhael as well as data collected by Beirut Madinati volunteers prior to canvassing the neighborhood during the municipal elections to swiftly identify the problems plaguing long-term residents and business owners in the area: the effect of the high density of bars and restaurants as well as the valet parking businesses that followed them, on the quality of life and work, and the threat of expulsion facing many tenants living in rent-controlled apartments.

Alia and Ghazi suggested the group begin by focusing on the nightlife issue. While the crisis around rent seemed more urgent, Alia voiced concern about dedicating the group's energy to a problem that they were unlikely to solve, as it was a controversial national issue. The neighborhood initiative had suggestions for how to tackle the bars and valet parking companies that serviced them, but no substantial recommendations for how to tackle the new rent law set to end rent control – at least not yet. By working on nightlife, Alia explained, the group could make gains it otherwise would not be able to achieve by trying to address something as complex as

rent control. An exclusive focus on the nightlife scene did cause the group to lose a few members, especially those whose lives were consumed by fear of eviction. However, for those residents who remained and lived on Mar Mikhael's main road, Armenia street, which housed the bulk of the area's bars, there was nothing more urgent than ridding themselves of what they framed as "colonizers."

When Alia described Mar Mikhael, she drew on her training as an urbanist. She spoke of the structural changes to its social and economic infrastructure: the lack of public spaces; the difficulty of moving around on foot, especially at night along badly lit streets; the noise from construction work during the day and restaurants and bars at night; the lack of public parking facilities that hadn't been claimed by valet parking companies; and how these circumstances were particularly detrimental to elderly residents, most of whom still had to work to support themselves.⁸

Alia's analysis provided listeners with an almost bird's-eye view of the neighborhood, encapsulating the various factors that made it a difficult place to live through appeals to both logic and civic responsibility. When the residents of Mar Mikhael spoke of their plight, they aimed for the mirror neurons. They argued not merely that this was not what a well-ordered, modern city looked like, but that the situation was intolerable and would be to anyone who had to live through it every day. By doing so, they dragged the listener from the bird's-eye perspective into their own trembling bodies, speaking not so much from the heart as from the nerves.

None articulated the horror of living in cacophonous Mar Mikhael more poignantly than Rita – a horror that might have seemed exaggerated to those who did not share work days and bedrooms, drives or walks home, bills or chores with these residents. Rita was a fixture in the neighborhood

group, from the early days when 20–30 would gather, to two years into the collective’s work, when it had whittled down to around ten core members. Rita always looked defeated. She did not speak often in meetings, but when she did, she sucked the air out of the room; her soft, trembling voice reminding all those gathered that however miniscule this issue seemed to the outside world, for people like her it was desperate.

Rita had lived in Mar Mikhael for 35 years. She shared an apartment with her octogenarian mother and her fiery twin sister. The middle-aged twins awoke between 5:30 am and 6:00 am each day. Rita worked as a freelance manicurist and her sister worked in a factory run by Taghziah, a large manufacturer of processed meat. “I take as much work as I can get,” Rita told me. “You know what the economic situation in the country is like. I can’t tell a customer, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t sleep all night.’ They’ll say okay and go to someone else.” On most nights, the twins did not manage to fall asleep before 2:30 am, and much later on weekends. “My sister works in a factory, so there is noise where she works too. She comes home at 5:30 pm, wanting to relax after a whole day of noise, and she has to live this all over again.” Walking to Rita’s apartment building, located in a back alley along Armenia street where most of Mar Mikhael’s bars were concentrated, I was shocked by the proximity with which she lived to not one but three resto bars. During our interview, she took me out on the balcony to look down at what, in the afternoon, was an already bustling corner of an already bustling street. “Imagine what it’s like at night,” she said. Fewer than ten meters separated her apartment building from these establishments.

Rita had been pushing back against these bars for six years prior to the establishment of the neighborhood group – talking to bar managers and customers either on her own or with a group

of residents from her building, calling the police when promises to turn down the volume and minimize the noise were ignored, only to be told that it was out of their hands:

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

In his work on Americans who suffered from a gradual, long-term process of formaldehyde poisoning in their homes, Shapiro (2015: 369) argues that “the tracking of small changes to body and atmosphere across time and space can accumulate into a process I call the ‘chemical sublime,’ which elevates minor enfeebling encounters into events that stir ethical consideration and potential intervention.” Habitual exposure to “indistinct and distributed harms,” he writes, “are sublimated into an embodied apprehension of human vulnerability to and entanglements with ordinary toxicity, provoking reflection, disquiet, and contestation” (ibid.: 369). Bodies that are “chemically wounded, even minutely so,” he elaborates, “bear revelatory power” (ibid.: 370). Similarly, I argue that through an imposed sensorial engagement, residents like Rita gained a somatic understanding of themselves as people considered disposable by the Lebanese state. They could physically *feel* its neglect of their well-being. It was bodily knowledge that brought Rita to the conclusion that the Lebanese state very much exists and is more than capable of getting things done when it wants to; it was through bodily reason that she countered the

common refrain that it is a failed or non-existent state, not in control of the chaos unfolding in the streets it is meant to govern.

“I don’t say there is no state; it’s just *missing*. There is a state, we have a legal system, but they are *ignoring* the issue. When the state wants to impose its authority, it easily does so.” The idea of the failed or missing state was deconstructed for Rita by the speed and efficiency with which bar and restaurant owners were able to set up their businesses and evade penalties. For Rita, the state was a neutral structure with rules and regulations corrupted by bureaucrats and politicians, who applied these rules and regulations in a discriminatory manner, or ignored them based on their own personal interests, or because they were beholden to or in cahoots with non-state actors. The economic and political considerations underpinning state officials’ approach to Mar Mikhael and the malleability of the law were ignored, and the state’s approach to the neighborhood was understood as neglectful as a result of corrupt individuals rather than as calculated due to, for example, particular neoliberal considerations linked to the tourism industry. The state was perceived as not “doing its job” in Mar Mikhael as opposed to doing its job in a manner that contradicted the Weberian ideal of the state. Another resident active in the neighborhood group often spoke of how Mar Mikhael was “chosen” because “there is poverty and there are no strongmen, no *za’ran* [thugs]. These people have no connections. The social class is slightly below average. If they tried to open these pubs in Ain el-Remmaneh, they would get beaten up.”⁹ Rita and others were forced into an intimate attunement with their surroundings, which imposed on them “somatic modes of attention” (Csordas as cited in Shapiro 2015: 373) that, in turn, allowed them to *see* the state; see its workings in the granting of more and more licenses to bars, the waiving of fines, the smugness of bar owners with political cover; and to understand their relationship with this state as that of citizens whose lives and labor were not

considered valuable and useful. Through their bodies, electrified nightly by pulsating music, the state and its many faces became knowable (Obeid 2010).

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

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

Still, there was a tension between how the residents understood the situation in their neighborhood and the analyses and strategies promoted by Alia and Ghazi. The residents felt personally targeted. They wanted all the bars gone. They insisted on their illegality, referencing the prohibition on bars in residential areas, pointing out that most of the nightlife establishments in Mar Mikhael held licenses for cafes. They wanted to bypass the municipality and the governor’s office and appeal to higher authorities like the Ministry of Tourism, or even the office of the President of the Republic, or to influential, local political figures or parties, who could force the governor or municipal council’s hand. They understood that political rights in Lebanon

“seemed to be ‘determined less by rules and more by relationships’ ...that ‘Lebanese citizens needed brokerage, *wasta* [personal connections], to gain access to services and resources” (Obeid 2010: 340), and felt it necessary to activate this dynamic in Mar Mikhael – a mentality that Alia and Gazi were committed to countering.

In the residents’ approach to the state, we see echoes of Hermez’s theorization of political cynicism in Lebanon. People aim for and desire a “stronger, more accountable, and more bureaucratic and Weberian form” of the state (2015: 510), but negotiate with the state in ways that actually push this fantasy further from reality by, for example, taking advantage of clientelism and patronage in order to survive. He refers to this as a cynical relation to the state, wherein people recognize that their actions allow what they frame as the weak, failed, or corrupt state to persist, but are unable to remove themselves from this dynamic because these negotiations constitute their means of surviving. “The cynical reasoning,” he writes:

stems from people knowing how things are (they know their political engagement will not yield real change) but acting as if they don’t know. I contend that they do this to, among other things, survive and manage everyday life, and for self-preservation

(Ibid: 517)

Cynical relations emerge from “the absence of alternatives and an inability to imagine another horizon of possibility” (Ibid: 515).

I also understand the approaches favored by the residents of Mar Mikhael in relation to what Nucho (2016: 9) calls Lebanon’s “multiple overlapping jurisdictions.” Against portrayals of Lebanon as having a missing or frail sovereign state subordinated to influential religious organizations or sectarian political parties, Nucho argues that “whatever we can define as the

‘state’ cannot be separated from these very organizations that make up the formal and informal political institutions of governance” (2016: 110).

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

Alia and Ghazi were overwhelmed by the residents’ discourse, which often took on a moralizing bent, anxious to counter it but unsure how. They felt compelled to show the residents that there were other means of reclaiming their right to comfort and dignity besides recourse to sectarian-clientelism. They hoped this process would temper the scapegoating provoked by the residents’ anger, the demonization of bar employees and patrons, and reveal to them that what was needed was better city-planning, and not more policing or better access to patronage networks. Against the hegemonic belief that “the means for individuals and groups to live dignified lives does not lie squarely in the hands of the state, but rather with different individuals in the state who provide it to their own clients” (Hermez 2011b: 531), Alia and Ghazi insisted that the state and its formal institutions could be held accountable and forced to do their jobs if pressured sufficiently by citizens.

The residents believed that the state was willfully absent from Mar Mikhael, and that it had “withdrawn its hand,” as they would often say, and “taken sides.” They understood the state as

corrupt rather than failed, perceiving the situation in Mar Mikhael through the lenses of clientelism, bribery, and *wasta*. In response, they pushed to insert themselves within the intertwined systems of political sectarianism and sectarian-clientelism, which they recognized as having failed them and as being improper within a modern, “civilized” state, because they paradoxically saw no other means for securing their rights.

Alia and Ghazi affirmed the residents’ narratives of neglect and corruption. They worked to highlight what they framed as existing, legally authorized mechanisms for fighting this corruption and neglect – and they were successful, at first in encouraging residents to seek out and engage these mechanisms. But the practice of lobbying what were framed as legitimate local authorities to address the residents’ needs did not produce results, which came as no surprise to Alia, Ghazi, or the residents, all of whom knew that not much could be expected of the Lebanese authorities that wasn’t part of some kind of exchange, even when it was not only perfectly within their jurisdiction, but also legally incumbent on them to honor a demand. Why did Beirut Madinati’s volunteers in Mar Mikhael advocate a strategy they knew would likely lead them nowhere?

Activating the State

Building on work by Philip Abrams, Michael Taussig, and others, Navaro (2002: 155) argues that “the notion that there is such a thing as the state – real, neutral, and stable above governments, the army, political parties, bureaucrats, schools or the police – is the greatest ideological myth of modern times.” Contra Taussig and his framing of state as *fetish*, Navaro argues against the adoption of false consciousness as the analytical means of making sense of state-society relations. This analytic, she explains, cannot account for “the widespread everyday

habit of narrating stories of disgust and abhorrence vis-à-vis the state” (2002: 158). Instead of fetishism, following from Sloterdijk and Zizek, she proposes cynicism as an analytical lens through which to make sense of the habitual reification of a state that citizens appear to see through. Cynical subjects, writes Zizek, “know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (as cited in Navaro 2002: 159). This raises the question: “why persist as if the notion of the state were straightforward?” (ibid.: 161). If, in the case of the residents of Mar Mikhael, their cynical engagement with sectarian-clientelism and political sectarianism was a matter of survival, what was the impetus behind the Beirut Madinati volunteers’ reification of a particular abstraction of the state that they recognized as farcical?

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

In an article about what has been termed 2014’s mass eviction law, Public Works’ Nadine Bekdache (2015) presents a sophisticated analysis of what the law can tell us about how the state-citizen relationship in Lebanon has been redefined. A new rent law, drafted in 2014, invalidated rent control. The law gave building owners the right to incrementally increase the rent paid by occupants of rent-controlled apartments and to eventually evict them. Around 180,000 properties were subject to rent control under agreements drafted before 1992 (Marsi 2017). By ending rent control, Bekdache (2015: 321) argues, the state violated a “seventy-three-

year old social contract.” While the existence of rent control indicated a respect for the need for affordable housing, its demise, she argues, points to:

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

(2015: 321)

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

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

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

(2018a)

Public Works' research output provides an account of the "hollowed-out character of the state" (Aretxaga 2003: 294), the ways in which neoliberal capitalist globalization "has eroded those functions of the Weberian state that were once its defining feature" (2003: 294). Yet, its studies articulate "the desire for statehood" (ibid.).

Another Public Works piece published on the Lebanese NGO Legal Agenda's blog chronicles the evolution of master planning in Lebanon, describing the country as having been "service-producing" since its beginnings rather than a "welfare state" (2018b). The Lebanese Construction Law of 1940, conceived by a collective of architects who had studied in Europe and were influenced by the modernism that dominated approaches to architecture on the continent during the first half of the 20th century, designed a law that would serve as an "extension of the modernist-colonialist project," an "expression of the service and tourism-based orientation of the economy" (2018b). In the contemporary period, explain the authors elsewhere, the plans and regulations issued by the Directorate General of Urban Planning "serve the interest of the landowners and constitute a tool of political pressure for local *zuama*" (2018a). Is today's practice of master planning in Lebanon, they ask in Legal Agenda:

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

(2018b)

Public Works puts forward a description of modern urban planning in Lebanon as “a tool of the powerful, whether they be the central state, the wealthy, or the social elite” (2018b), but they then go on to decry a “complete *failure* [emphasis added] in handling the environment and urbanization” and diagnose “poor planning” as well as a “defective vision” as the causes behind this failure. They call for increased resident participation in the process of urban planning as a fundamental component of rectifying this failure. What they describe, however, is not so much failure, but as a particular intentional configuration of governance that has purposefully violated “the right to health, to dignified reconciliation, to housing, and to development” and which prioritized clientelism and private interests through an “intentional legislative vacuum,” honoring the vision originally set out for Lebanon, as they themselves write. One could easily envision ways in which the state could invite resident feedback on urban projects and find ways to address their concerns without affecting these projects’ abilities to generate profit, diverting their consequences onto another marginalized population, for example, or distracting from small-scale issues through recourse to national security concerns, as the Lebanese authorities are prone to do. There is a discrepancy then between the compelling, nuanced analyses of the ways in which political/sectarian and economic elites have effectively used state planning to implement a sectarian-neoliberal vision and the diagnosis of poor planning and neglect as the sources behind the decay of urban infrastructure in Lebanon among my interlocutors.

Aretxaga (2003: 394) explains this common paradoxical tendency, or what we could call the endurance of a certain fantasy of the state following from Navaro and Hermez, by drawing on Bourdieu to reference the state’s “meta-capital, its hallowed form commanding an imagery of power and a screen for political desire as well as fear.” But there is also, importantly, “real capital circulating through the elusive body of the state in the form of international aid,

development projects, and capitalist ventures of various kinds” (ibid., 394). It is this “aura of capital,” she argues, which generates a language of corruption in response to the dubious dealings of local bureaucrats as well as a discourse of abandonment by those whose access to this capital is said to be hindered by the corrupt practices of individuals in positions of power. This aura of capital, productive of the enchantment of the state, of the enduring desire for the state to play the role of primary provider in a contemporary context where analyses like those done by Public Works reveal it has no interest in doing so, results in the fetishization of the law and of participatory democracy by activists such as those I worked with, even when they realize, as evidenced by the discussion above, that the law today plays a role mainly as a tool for the powerful rather than as a distributor of justice, and that increased participation can reinforce rather than necessarily undermine the status quo.¹⁰ The narratives of failure and neglect of a lack of managerial skills and scientific expertise allow the social promise of the state as caregiver to endure, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that refutes its desire to fulfill this role – evidence put forward by the same activists clinging to this social promise.

“One’s theory of ‘the state’ does greatly matter in formulating strategies for political action” (1995: 394), writes Gupta. The discourse of corruption, he explains, enables “people to construct the state symbolically and to define themselves as citizens” (389). It makes sense, then, given the neighborhood initiative’s goal of “activating” the residents of Beirut, demonstrating to them what an engaged citizenship could look like and be productive of and that it would reproduce and rely on the hegemonic narrative of a state hindered by corrupt bureaucrats. Constructing the state through this narrative, in a context where the state is imagined as, because of its capture by corruption, having many faces – a brutal face, a generous face, in addition to its neglectful and weak faces – can be generative of the hope that “there *must* be government officials and

agencies...interested in helping people” (Gupta 1995: 391). The search for the ideal face of the state (Obeid 2010) in Mar Mikhael manifested as a search for the governmental figure who was loyal to the residents he was meant to represent and to an abstracted and reified legal system. What were the consequences of this search for the ideal, incorrupt face of the state in the context of neighborhood work in Mar Mikhael?

Co-opting Mar Mikhael

During its first year, the neighborhood group produced two petitions, one directed at the Ministry of Tourism and one directed at the municipal council and governor. The petition meant for local government was submitted to the governor by a delegation from the neighborhood on May 12, 2017, which pressed him to apply the law. The petition, signed by more than 200 residents, emphasized the right to comfort (*al-ḥaq bi al-rāḥa*) as well as a quiet and dignified life. It demanded the application of existing laws and regulations, in the absence of which, it was argued, the lives of residents in Mar Mikhael had become harrowing. The petition highlighted that the residents were merely asking that their most basic rights be respected: their right to be able to sleep in their homes and to have those violating the noise limit set in place by the Ministry of Environment and with it the sanctity of private, family life penalized. It called on the governor to “assume the powers granted to him by municipal law, and to impose necessary and preventive measures to ensure the welfare of residents and remedy what has been adversely affecting them.” It called on the municipal council to “assume its primary role in developing a comprehensive policy that will make Beirut a livable city, by issuing an integrated regulatory framework to manage bars and their clients, to safeguard and preserve the rights of neighborhood inhabitants.”

The residents felt satisfied and hopeful after their trip to the governor's office. "It was positive. He said the bars don't have licenses, and he told us where to go, to the Ministry of Tourism," one delegate reported to the group. But Alia and Ghazi were quick to point out that a discussion they had had with the NGO Legal Agenda had revealed that while bar licenses were initially issued by the Ministry of Tourism, the authority responsible for making sure bars adhered to the law and closing those that did not was the governor. The governor, the group concluded furiously, was trying to divert responsibility and dismiss the residents. Following the delegation's visit to his office, the governor made a superficial spectacle of a surprise visit to the neighborhood, to check in on the bars and visit a few residents in their homes. Subsequently, a particularly brazen establishment, London Bar, was shutdown, only to reopen again in a matter of days. The owner declared to inquiring residents that the municipality could not "touch him."

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

In the group's one-year self-evaluation, residents explained that they had begun to lose hope. They had dedicated a lot of effort to their cause but managed to achieve very little. One resident insisted that the group had not failed, because the bars had *wastas* that allowed them to reopen. "The circumstances are bigger than us. It's like swimming against a current." Another resident explained that if anything, the group's first year had revealed the importance of pursuing the legal avenue. "We're all tired," she said. "The whole country is exhausting. We didn't continue with the legal suit because we put our faith in the governor." Over the course of its second year, the Mar Mikhael neighborhood group began preparing to submit a collection of official

complaints to the public prosecutor and to sue those bars engaging in the most egregious violations of the law, a process that, at the time of writing, had stalled because of events that I will elaborate on.

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

Another resident called on the government to apply the law. "The point of having laws," he insisted, "is for everyone to be able to interact in a way that ensures equal access to their rights. Apply the laws that guarantee us our rights." A member of Beirut Madinati who introduced herself as hailing from the Sunni neighborhood of Tariq Jdeedeh took the mic next to emphasize that what was happening to the residents of Mar Mikhael was happening all over Beirut under different guises:

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

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

This event took place in April 2018, 16 months into the work of the Mar Mikhael neighborhood group. During those 16 months, the event made clear, the volunteers from Beirut Madinati’s neighborhood initiative had failed to introduce socio-economic context to the developments in the neighborhood, and so the residents continued to see themselves as victims of a neglectful state that had allowed them to come under, as Rita put it, an evil sorcerer’s spell. The law, the state, and the sorcerer continued to be discursively detached from one another. The residents called for state intervention, assuming that neglect meant absence. However, what feels like neglect can also be understood as a product of the state’s role in intricately organizing the lives of its citizens and denizens in ways that benefit the market on the one hand and the sectarian balance of power on the other.¹¹ My interlocutors knew this, as evidenced by their own research output but, as explained earlier, they did not know what to do with this discourse or analysis. Corruption and neglect were easier paradigms to work with, more generative of the sense that something could be done to reform the status quo in the short term and therefore of hopefulness.

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

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

It was as though, once the elections were over, Sehnaoui could only take an interest in Mar Mikhael based on good intentions and the desire to honor his promises; as though he were no longer a part of the traditional ruling class. The MP was framed as some kind of manifestation of

the benevolent paternal state finally come to resume its duties, masking over the dynamics that made this particular parliamentarian able and willing to take on such an issue – the motivations, electoral, economic, or otherwise that made Mar Mikhael a zone of interest for him and, perhaps most importantly, ignoring the very real possibility that, like so many others before him, he would renege on his word. A press conference between the residents and the MP took place shortly thereafter.

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

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

Watching the residents standing behind Sehnaoui, proud and elated, I understood better Hermez’s (2011b) argument about the intersections between dignity and clientelism. The residents of Mar Mikhael had long framed themselves as humiliated by bar owners, with the customers and the authorities enabling their behavior. To be recognized by this influential figure, long and deeply embedded within Lebanon’s system of political sectarianism, to co-organize a press conference with him, to be taken seriously by drawing on his authority were a source of pride, validation, and gratification, however temporary. Being supported by Beirut Madinati, a

group without any “real” power, with little to offer besides knowledge capital, did not bear the same kind of symbolic fruit or, as evidenced by two years of collective labor, promise the same kind of material rewards.

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

The neighborhood initiative criticized its inability to develop a political discourse around neighborhood work. Even within Beirut Madinati, its work was perceived as something akin to charity or NGO work. Its volunteers acknowledged that they had failed to politicize residents; that they had potentially created agents of change, but not of the kind of change they aspired to in the long term. Two years on, the initiative didn’t have models to replicate in other neighborhoods, which was one of the initial points of the pilot projects.

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

Instead of serving as a challenge to the authorities, the neighborhood became a potential new weapon in their arsenal. Capitalism, which in Lebanon's case manifests in a symbiotic relationship with sectarianism, has an astonishing ability to devour critique, to incorporate it into a mutated version of itself, drawing on it as a source of strength and, in so doing, "disarming" it (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). Beirut Madinati's neighborhood initiative, like many anti-status quo initiatives that came before it, was unable to provide not only material but also symbolic alternatives to the residents of Mar Mikhael, both of which they seemed, as my fieldwork came to a close, to have found the potential for in Sehnaoui. This, despite the fact that at the time of writing, nothing had come of Sehnaoui's grand proclamations, a reality that did not surprise the residents of Mar Mikhael, whose appeal to him, as discussed in this chapter, seemed to spring from a place of cynicism rather than earnest hope.¹²

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I asked how we could understand Lebanese activists' routine affirmation of an imagining of the state they knew to be false. In the introduction to this edited volume, Haugbolle and Levine highlight how what Timothy Mitchell called "state effect" does sometimes weaken, as demonstrated when the Arab Uprisings began in late 2010. I have concerned myself with the resurrection of state effect from below, with the ability of the "idea" of the state to survive its own deconstruction by turning to theorizations of the state as fantasy. I have focused on the endurance of the Weberian ideal of the state among activists in Lebanon who have themselves routinely demonstrated in their published work and public commentary the Lebanese state's deviation from this ideal from its very inception. I argued that this ideal inspires the diagnosis of bad governance and corruption and the promotion of good governance as

solutions to Lebanon's plight, obscuring what governance *is* and who it serves in our contemporary conjuncture. Within this framework, the ruling regime is positioned as not doing its job rather than uninterested in doing what opponents see as its job. This approach to activating the state rather than challenging it as the locus of power strengthened a particular fantasy of the state that, in turn, drove the residents of Mar Mikhael toward a cynical engagement with sectarian-clientelism when the fantasy failed to manifest as reality.

My interlocutors seemed consumed by an anxiety to act in the short term. Swyngedouw refers to this anxiety as a *temptation*. The "temptation to act out" (2014: 184), he writes, "is actually what is invited by the neoliberal state." It is, he explains, "an injunction to obey, to be able to answer to 'What have you done today?'" (ibid.: 184–195).

The anxiety to act, it seems, overwhelms even the most astute analyses of the contemporary Lebanese state. It is this anxiety to act that fashioned an optimistic commitment to state lobbying amongst my interlocutors, despite the evidence these activists themselves provided for its inherent limitations and likely pitfalls. The narrative of poor planning authorized managerialism amongst these activists, the belief that if only things were better ordered in the country, "collective goals can be achieved" (Parker 2009, p. 4), and that the only way to achieve this ordering is to make room for the state to do its job by lobbying it out of dormancy.

If, following from Scott, we call this rationality "seeing like a state," internalizing as "obvious and necessary" a certain form of activism despite the clear ways in which it appears "counterintuitive and socially engineered" (Halberstam 2011: 9), we can better understand, for example, Beirut Madinati volunteers' aversion to supporting the residents of Mar Mikhael in their repeat calls for a disruptive approach to demanding their rights (closing off and occupying the street, boycotting municipal taxes). Such practices, while appearing "less efficient" in the

short term and less productive of “marketable results,” might in the long term have been “more sustaining” of the kind of political community these activists were committed to cultivating (Halberstam 2011: 9) and of alternative sources of dignity and meaning-making that could sustain political and social movements invested in a disruptive approach to the state rather than one informed by accommodation and collaboration.

The fact that activists focused on the institutions of the state as the sole mechanisms capable of facilitating change, and that they divorced issues such as gentrification and privatization from the wider structures of power and oppression in which they are embedded, made it difficult for them to conceptualize neighborhood residents as agents of political transformation. Their preconceived notions also foreclosed the imagination of a bottom-up taking back of cities and public spaces as a strategic node in a wider, long-term project of societal transformation. Instead they introduced a practice of lobbying grounded in basic, skeletal needs, one that framed residents as victims who were making reasonable and easy-to-meet demands. This approach forced activists to make their case before the state and convince residents that there was something to be gained from instituting certain kinds of reforms or that no harm would come to their interests by meeting these fundamental, basic, and reasonable needs. The answer to the question “what is to be done?,” in relation to a given injustice, Ferguson (1990) explains, is conditioned by the initial question, “by whom?” To locate the possibility for change *solely* within state institutions, he writes, is to encourage more people to “stand in line and await rubber stamps to get what they want” (p. 274).

My interlocutors were reluctant to recognize how central corruption and inadequacy were to the workings of the Lebanese state when it came to designing and carrying out their strategies. I say a reluctant rather than failing to understand because, as I have shown, my interlocutors often

demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the workings of state power in Lebanon. We can, perhaps, further make sense of this reluctance by turning to Franz Kafka by way of Fisher (2009). Drawing on the novelist's masterful engagement with bureaucracy, Fisher argues that "at the level of the political unconscious, it is impossible to accept that there are no overall controllers, that the closest thing we have to ruling powers now are nebulous, unaccountable interests exercising corporate irresponsibility" (p. 63). And so, like Kafka's characters, in seeking redress for an injustice or a response to an unmet demand or need, many of us move from one bureaucrat to another, following their deferrals of responsibility like breadcrumbs, striving to reach "the ultimate authority" (p. 43) we know does not exist. In Mar Mikhael, residents and their supporters tried desperately to locate the authority capable of bandaging their wounds. Was it the governor? The Ministry of Tourism? The courts? An MP associated with a sectarian political party with vested interests in the district that housed their little quarter? The "supreme genius of Kafka," Fisher writes, "was to have explored the *negative atheology* proper to Capital: the centre is missing, but we cannot stop searching for it or positing it." It is not, he elaborates, "that there is nothing there – it is that what *is* there is not capable of exercising responsibility" (p. 65).

"The centerlessness of global capitalism," Fisher (2009) argues, "is radically unthinkable" (p. 63), and so this quest for authority can also be understood as a form of self-care, a therapeutic practice, a means of taking initiative over one's life and misery, and a practice of searching and seeking that, while deferring redress, also defers a succumbing to hopelessness, to the unthinkable.

In this chapter, I have attempted to emphasize the effects of an approach to change that cannot imagine a socio-political transformation facilitated by anyone or anything other than "the

paternal guiding hand of the state” (Ferguson 1990, p. 281), responding promptly and satisfactorily to the demands of its citizens. It is not only a certain understanding of the state that animates this approach, but of citizenship as well; the assumption being that if we know our rights, how to properly and formally lobby for them, and who to hold accountable when they are violated or denied, we will eventually get what is ours. These imaginaries erase alternative, existing tactics for not only coping with and adjusting to the order of things, but resisting it as well. Lebanon has a long history of a politics of refusal – voter abstention, strikes, boycotts, cultural productions that defy censorship laws, and more, to which the residents of Mar Mikhael attempted to contribute when they called for a disruptive approach to their demands. If the state is “the name of the coldest of all cold monsters” (Nietzsche as cited in Brown 1995:166) and “institutionalized protection is always a measure of dependence and agreement to abide by the protector’s rules” (Brown 1995: 169), what might the potentiality of a politics of refusing rather than appealing to the state be?

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¹ Lebanon's "garbage crisis" was sparked by the closure of the Naameh garbage landfill in southeast Beirut, to which the waste of Beirut and Mount Lebanon had been sent since 1998. The

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

² "Traffic, public transportation, parks and public space, affordable housing in the rampant new construction around the city, waste management, and more transparent and inclusive administration. These weren't necessarily the most important problems in people's lives, like health care and education, but they more easily addressed and fell under the prerogative of municipal authorities" (Cambanis 2017).

³ Citizens of Lebanon are not permitted to vote in their place of residence and must instead vote in their village, city, or town of origin, determined patrilineally. Many of Beirut's residents, therefore, are not eligible to vote in the city's municipal elections.

⁴ This quote was derived from written material produced by the neighborhood initiative for circulation amongst volunteers and Beirut Madinati's wider organization, to which I was granted access.

⁵ Abrams, P. (1988). "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977)." *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 58–89.

⁶ Hermez argues that in the imaginations of Lebanon's citizens, "the state exists in the subjunctive mood, as something that *would be* [emphasis added] rather than as something that is" (Hermez 2015: 509).

⁷ All of my interlocutors have been provided with pseudonyms.

⁸ Writing in 2016, Gerbal, Hrycaj, Lavoipierre, and Potasiak point out that around 47.7 percent of Mar Mikhael's population at that time was over the age of 55 (20).

⁹ Ain el-Remmaneh is a working-class, predominantly Christian-Maronite neighborhood and stronghold of the Lebanese Forces.

¹⁰ See, for example, Maya Mikdashi's work on the legal construction of sectarian and sexual difference in Lebanon as a "technology of biopolitical power," in *Sextarianism: Notes on Studying the Lebanese State*, which appeared in the edited volume *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle-Eastern and North African History*, edited by Amal Ghazal and Jens Hanssen and published by Oxford University Press in 2015.

¹¹ With regards to the latter, for example, in the case of Mar Mikhael it was widely known that the valet companies were associated with the speaker of parliament and head of the Shi'a Amal Movement Nabih Berri, and were not only a source of profit for him but part of the patronage network through which he secured employment for underprivileged Shi'a.

¹² A year after the press conference, Sehnaoui launched the project "My Colour is Rmeil" in collaboration with the committee of business owners in the neighborhood of Achrafieh, located close to Mar Mikhael. The project intended to renovate the facades of buildings in the area as a means of helping boost business in Beirut's first district. The residents of Mar Mikhael were appalled to see that after having heard nothing from the MP in the aftermath of his promise-filled press conference, he had launched this project. In Beirut Madinati's annual newsletter, the organization asked on behalf of the residents: "Is painting facades more important than giving

citizens their basic right to comfort, and applying the law? What of the promise of a peaceful sleep for residents burdened by the noise produced by touristic establishments?" In the statement, Beirut Madinati rearticulated its demand for the authorities to listen to the residents and fulfill their responsibilities. In a WhatsApp discussion about this development, the residents voiced disappointment and anger, but not surprise.