The Lebanese Elite and the Public Sphere: Phasing out Lebanese Nationalism

Lebanon is historically known as a labyrinth of various identities that paint the picture of a ruptured society. The issue of crosscutting identities in Lebanon has constantly been scrutinized and discussed in the typical narrative of struggle between pan-Arabists and Francophiles or the struggle between Christians and Muslims. While both narratives contribute to the understanding of Lebanese society and its various problematic, they still ignore a central part in the formation of identities. Much of the fashioned identities in Lebanon be it political or sectarian, two that are often conflated, are the result of an active participation of sociopolitical and sectarian elite that benefit from the creation of diverging identities. Such elite has been able to halt the production of an effective and permanent Lebanese nationalism that can enable citizens to transcend their political and sectarian identities.

This thesis will address the following question: Did a Lebanese socio-political and sectarian elite take over a public sphere as professed by Jurgen Habermas, and succeeded in utilizing such space to create fake and overemphasized sectarian and political identities? I seek to understand the extent to which the elite dominate the public sphere in Lebanon and the effect of their identity-fueled speeches and maneuvers on patriotic Lebanese nationalism. Have these elite succeeded in making sectarian and political identities absolute and narrow ones that disrupt the Lebanese state? Have the various sects and political followers who proudly acknowledge of belonging to a certain identity, become subconsciously immersed into this political and sectarian role, losing forms of active social and political reasoning? And Lastly, did this lead to the phasing out of a Lebanese nationalism and as such the phasing out of the idea of Lebanon as a successful state that is able to act as a functioning harbor for its citizens? With these questions in mind, I will compare the roles of Sunni, Maronite, Druze and Shiite leaders in Lebanon such as Hassan Nasrallah, Saad Al-Harriri, Bashir Gemayel, Samir Geagea, Waleed Jumblat and Michel ‘Oun. I want to explore to what extent has their control of the public sphere enabled them to engender a sense of absolute identity that actively controls their followers.

The issue of clientalism and political patronage by the elite in Lebanon is not new and is usually labeled as “Za’imism.” The consociational power-sharing model of Lebanon in which various sects are accorded ‘fair’ and ‘equal’ political representation is heavily revisited. While many critics talk about the advantages and disadvantages of this model, little literature is given to the strenuous effort the elite, exert in creating identities that are satisfied and are able to


about the rules of engagement in their privatized but made public sphere.⁷ I will argue that since the formation of a national pact, a Lebanese public sphere was taken over by political and sectarian elite. These elite through their personal news channels and control of communication have transformed the Lebanese public sphere into a private one that has the façade of being public. They are in full control of this sphere and use it in order to create the various identities that serve their causes.

Through the utilization of this public sphere, each elitist leader creates a habitus that is the identity in which their followers are confined. The Habitus as advocated by Pierre Bourdieu is the abstract representational space that is deliberately constructed.⁸ The question and the objective of this space is that of the elitist leader who carved it up. From this habitus the classifiable practices and works emerge and differentiate themselves from other practices.⁹ The followers of the elitist leaders each entered a habitus demarcated with a confessional and political identity that leads to a defected political cognition. They might realize that they are part of a political space or party, but they do not realize to the extent of which it controls their behavior and actions. Ergo, through the control of the public sphere and through the creation of a different identity-based habitus, the elite succeed in controlling their followers and convincing them that their habitus or identity is detrimental to their political and sectarian existence. While nationalism as espoused by Benedict Anderson usually leads to the relinquishing of kinship and familial ties of loyalty¹⁰, in Lebanon nationalism came to a halt and a tribal system based on identity was emphasized.

I am confident that I have the necessary background in order to do this research. On an academic level, I have taken intro classes such as Intro to CULP (Abusharaf), Comparative Political Systems (Farha), Mideast I (Sonbol), Mideast II (Sonbol), which provided ample literature on the situation of modern Lebanon. In addition, I am currently fulfilling Political Econ of the Gulf (Chaudhuri), Politics of North Africa (King) and Electoral Systems in MENA (Zaccara), with each class providing me with concepts that can be applied to Lebanon. I have passed the SFS-Q required proficiency in Arabic and I am capable of reading primary Arabic texts, which would be of benefit when reading the primary sources from the archives in Lebanon. It will also be of help when I will read the manifestos of the various political parties that I will be analyzing.

Being born and raised in Lebanon for fifteen years gives me an understanding of Lebanese society and its various identity crises. I saw first-hand the shock that hit the country upon the assassination of former Prime Minister, Rafik el Hariri in 2005 and the various

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⁹ Bourdieu, Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste, 165.


