

Organised chaos or induced disorder? Reading Beirut through its contradictions

This chapter proposes a three-level framework, which serves to identify some root-causes that have led to the currently apparent spatial disorder or chaos in Lebanon's capital city Beirut and its metropolitan area, and to examine its implications across various spatio-temporal scales, reaching to everyday life. Also, this framework serves to discern between what is a resultant of structural causes or what is a manifestation of the lack or failure of urban planning as countered by coping mechanisms, amidst an ongoing state of instability.

At the first level, the framework builds on Gramsci's (2005) southern question to explain contradictions in Beirut's context stemming from structural histories, but also highlight the value of what is perhaps limited in time and scale but impactful on the local everyday life scale, yet disregarded since it is not formally documented in official, 'grand' schemes (Fresu, 2021). At the second level, it borrows from Agamben's (2005) state of exception to explain the impact of the protracted Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990 and its repercussions to present. At the third level, it uses de Certeau's (1984) principles of strategy and tactics to reflect attempts of addressing chaos amidst a perpetual state of instability, and weak planning. Following the literature review and elaboration of this framework, the next sections correspond to the framework's three levels as examined in Beirut within three spatio-temporal scales. These correspond temporally to three periods: before the constitution of the Republic in 1943, during the civil war period 1975 to 1990, and the post-war period with panoply of turbulent events lasting to present in 2024. Spatially, three scales are considered: Beirut's positionality vis-à-vis the rest of the country, its relation to the metropolitan capital city region, and the relation between the historical city centre and its surroundings.

The first section explores the higher levels of urban planning defining Beirut's geopolitical role and relation with the rest of the country. Lebanon's planning, which started with the French mandate reflects "colonial subjection and passive modernization" (Fresu, 2021: p. 164), which has led to socio-economic differences, which were most accentuated in the contrast between the capital and the rest of the country. This section refers, for example, to the implications of the consociational government and rule of the 'elite', the capital's geopolitical dominance and neglect of the hinterland – as reflected in discrepancies between central and peripheral entities at the metropolitan, city and neighbourhood scales. Second, the impact of the civil war on Beirut and its surroundings is examined with socio-economic and spatial implications. These include demographic changes with the emergence of demarcation lines and population segregation, emergence of polycentres within the metropolitan area, the increase in informal settlements, and prevalence of real estate developers in shaping this area (Mady, 2023). This section serves to highlight 'abnormalities' that have been normalised and accepted as being common – for example, the alternative supply of usually public goods such as water, electricity, security, or transport. Third, the impact of the protracted state of exception is explained as manifested in a weak state, and weak planning institution, which succumb to a neoliberal economy in which real estate developers tap onto contingencies – these range from having the support of politico-sectarian entities to benefiting from lax laws and the ease of violating rules with impunity – and reign in shaping and defining Beirut's evolution to meet private needs rather than deliver public good at large. Here, the implications of the post-war reconstruction process and the relation between the capital and other municipalities within the metropolitan region are examined with disconnections or contrasts having

social, economic, and environmental implications. Nevertheless, this condition has been countered by forms of insurgent planning to mitigate some of these implications at the local, everyday life scale (Mady & Chettiparamb, 2017). Two case studies are presented in which tactics have been instrumental in mitigating the prevailing and hovering weakness that left many public needs unmet. The first refers to the continuously shrinking public open space, and efforts of one NGO to reinstate access to an existing urban park, the Beirut Pine Forest or Horsh Beirut. The second corresponds to the breakdown of the public transport system, the role of the private sector and one NGO, Riders Rights, to secure very basic mobility needs. Both cases have limitations leading to the inability to sustain these initiatives and extend tactics to strategies, and which could be interpreted in relation to the southern question and the state of exception.

The three sections serve to explain the intersectionality of various structural natural and manmade factors, which has led to manifestations of disorder and chaos at different spatio-temporal scales. This chapter brings forth the argument that enduring spatial implications due to deeply rooted structural situations or the prolonged state of exception are stubborn yet could be transformed over time and at specific scales, on condition that the individual initiatives are supported and formally integrated or institutionalised to change the course of determinants in urban everyday life. The preliminary findings – based on anecdotal cases – indicate that most of the current phenomena, which are considered resultants of the war’s state of exception have in fact existed before the war due to structural causes, while others have fully resulted from the anomalies of extended fighting, displacement, prolonged neglect, and the opportunism of real estate developers. The exploration in this chapter informs on implications for perpetuated imbalances from the past rather than struggling to learn from it and move forward include issues of exclusion related to social justice that manifest spatio-temporally.

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